



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

[Review of: Y. Ustinova (2018) Divine Mania : Alterations of Consciousness in Ancient Greece]

Hanegraaff, W.J.

DOI

[10.1163/15700593-02001008](https://doi.org/10.1163/15700593-02001008)

Publication date

2020

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Aries

License

Article 25fa Dutch Copyright Act

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Hanegraaff, W. J. (2020). [Review of: Y. Ustinova (2018) Divine Mania : Alterations of Consciousness in Ancient Greece]. *Aries*, 20(1), 153-155. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15700593-02001008>

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

UvA-DARE is a service provided by the library of the University of Amsterdam (<https://dare.uva.nl>)

Yulia Ustinova, *Divine Mania: Alterations of Consciousness in Ancient Greece*, Routledge: London & New York 2018.

Plato's two great dialogues about love (*eros*) are at the very heart of the religious or spiritual types of Platonism rediscovered and revived in Renaissance Florence during the second half of the fifteenth century. As such, they are crucial foundation texts for the study of esotericism since the early modern period, and indispensable for understanding its ultimate roots in antiquity. Marsilio Ficino saw the *Phaedrus* as the "protodialogue" from which Plato's entire oeuvre had emerged and that potentially contained the whole of it; and significantly, after having finished his complete Latin translation of Plato's dialogues, his attempt to summarize the essence of Platonic wisdom took the form of a commentary on the *Symposium*. In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates had famously introduced a distinction between four types of *mania* (divine madness, also often translated as "divine frenzy"): the "Prophetic" type allowed people to transcend temporality and see into the future, the "telestic" was induced by ritual, the "poetic" by poetry and music, and the "erotic" by the passionate desire known as love. Plato gave special prominence to the erotic type, which is central to the *Symposium* and indeed to the entire Platonic quest for supreme knowledge of the good, the beautiful, and the true.

In modern terminology, states of *mania* are best understood as "alterations of consciousness" that lift the human mind from its normal everyday state of restricted perception and limited understanding while opening it up—according to ancient Greek perspectives—to divine inspiration. To the embarrassment of overly rationalist Plato scholars ever since, Socrates states that true philosophical knowledge of transcendent realities depends precisely on such "altered" conditions that take the mind beyond reason but are likely to be dismissed by the common crowd as silly or crazy insanity (*Phdr.* 249d). He was referring to practices and experiences that were widespread in Greek antiquity and must have been familiar to him and to Plato from oral tradition and personal experience—that is to say, they must both have observed the effects of consciousness alteration in others and quite possibly in themselves as well. All of this might seem somewhat surprising in "monophasic" post-industrial cultures such as our own, which tend to marginalize or even criminalize such states, but was perfectly normal in "polyphasic" cultures such as ancient Greece (14).

Yulia Ustinova's *Divine Mania* is the first comprehensive overview of the source evidence for alterations of consciousness in ancient Greece. The book begins with Socrates' foundational account in the *Phaedrus* and devotes separate chapters to each of his four major categories (prophetic, telestic, poetic,

erotic); three more chapters are added about the famous Dionysian madness known as *bakcheia*, the mad fury induced by conditions of life-or-death combat on the battlefield, and states of possession by the nymphs and the god Pan (“nympholepsy” and “panolepsy”); and a final chapter discusses alterations of consciousness in Socrates and Plato as well as their predecessors Epimenides, Aethalides, Hermodotimus, Pythagoras, Parmenides, Empedocles, and Democritus. Of course, all this makes it impossible to avoid discussing the well-known thesis of an early Greek “shamanism,” about which more ink has been spilt than would perhaps have been necessary. Ustinova’s simple conclusion dispenses with much of the confusion by putting the finger exactly on the right spot: “Tagging Greek thinkers as ‘shamans’ or ‘mystics’ is a simple way to call attention to their engagement in alterations of consciousness, but it is imprecise and may be misleading, prompting associations with clusters of characteristics absent in Greece” (339). The logical solution is to forego the “shamanism” terminology and speak of alterations of consciousness instead.

Ustinova’s command of the ancient Greek source materials is impressive by any standard. To each of her seven main categories she devotes a chapter of encyclopedic breadth and detail that collects and presents all the relevant information, backed up by extensive explanatory footnotes and quotations in ancient Greek. Readers who would like to read a gripping narrative account may perhaps prefer Ustinova’s excellent previous monograph *Caves and the Ancient Greek Mind: Descending Underground in the Search for Ultimate Truth* (Oxford University Press 2009), which argued that the frequently attested practice of withdrawing into underground caves for reasons of solitary spiritual contemplation or consulting the gods would predictably expose practitioners to extreme conditions of sensory deprivation, to which the human brain is known to respond by producing vivid visual and auditory hallucinations. While the contents of such visions and voices would be based on cultural materials such as stories about the gods, practitioners would naturally be left convinced that those gods themselves had visited them in their solitude. Whereas Ustinova’s earlier monograph provided the basic argument for alterations of consciousness as an important and even crucial dimension of religion and philosophy in ancient Greece, *Divine Mania* is conceived rather as a comprehensive reference work. Its main concern is to collect and present all the factual data that support such an argument, but now on a much wider scale, moving far beyond the cave experience to cover all dimensions of alterations of consciousness.

Divine Mania is an excellent example of how advanced research in neuroscience, cognitive science and psychology can be used within a framework of text-based scholarship on solid empirical and historical foundations. Ustinova

is acutely aware of the theoretical and methodological issues that come with such a combination, and emphasizes that projects such as hers require a precarious balance “between Scylla of ascribing absolute cultural specificity to states of mind and Charybdis of seeing the ancients and us as sharing basically the same emotions, states of mind, and attitudes towards mental activity” (13). She does succeed admirably in maintaining such a balance. Her discussions throughout the book reflect expert familiarity with the current state of research into neurocognitive mechanisms responsible for alterations of consciousness, but her ultimate focus is on analyzing the phenomenology of *mania* experiences situated in their specific temporal and cultural framework. Ustinova’s chief concern is with “[d]isclosing how objectivity is elaborated out of finite and transient episodes of phenomenal consciousness” rather than with “asking, reciprocally, how phenomenal consciousness arises from certain objective processes” (17, formulation by M. Bitbol).

It should be obvious that this study presents a major challenge to dogmatic forms of rationalism in classical studies and mainstream academic research more generally. In a rare polemical passage that goes to the heart of academic identity politics and its traditional marginalization of rejected knowledge, Ustinova states in no uncertain terms that “Dame Folly rules the modern Western world in multiple ways. The unreasonable believe that they are guarded by pure reason, and those who are endowed with moments of illumination usually either keep silent or compare them to madness. We misunderstand our own culture, and attempt to apply the yardstick of our illusions to other cultures” (x). Ustinova’s antidote might be described as historical empiricism, that is to say, the attempt to bracket our cultural prejudices about reason and unreason while reading the sources as precisely and as literally as possible. That this requires an acute hermeneutic sensitivity should go without saying, for a project like this can only be guided by the researcher’s own questions and intuitions about what to look for in the first place and how to recognize its presence or absence. Whereas earlier generations often fell into the trap of cherry-picking “rational consciousness” in ancient Greece, Ustinova succeeds admirably in avoiding that temptation in this splendid overview of its counterpart, alterations of consciousness. *Divine Mania* recovers a treasure trove of rejected knowledge that gives access to some of the most important esoteric origins of Western culture.

Wouter J. Hanegraaff
 University of Amsterdam
 w.j.hanegraaff@uva.nl