

FEMININITY AND MADNESS: ANCIENT GREEK RITUAL MANIA AND ITS MODERNISATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an examination of how ritual madness and gender interact within ancient Greek society. Examining how and why sacred ritual practices contrast with gender roles and sexual ideals, to reveal a hidden history of the true importance of women and mania in ancient religion. Women were considered susceptible to mania in religious contexts - the resulting frenzy was looked down upon, despite its influence within Greek society. Contrastingly, men would also engage in similar rituals however the manic aspect is hidden under illusions of strength. This can be seen in the religious roles of the Pythia and the ritual practices of the Bacchantes and Korymbants. It shows that although the Greeks feared madness, they could not escape it. They instead created a space for it in their religious practices, hiding it within the feminine sphere, away from the masculine parts of society.

The conclusions highlight some interesting parallels between modern and ancient conceptions of mentality and gender. In both modern and ancient worlds there is a fear around mental divergence, and the gender dynamics involved also mirror each other. The difference is that modern Western society does not have a god nor ritual through which to understand mental disturbances, therefore they seem to be abstracted from our society and are expressed through art. Through these ancient practices we can see how our Western society has been shaped, and hopefully learn how best to deal with the growing issue of mental health and gender disparity in our society.

INTRODUCTION

Ritual mania was an ancient religious practice through which humans would try and connect or communicate with their chosen gods. They would alter their consciousness, using dance, meditation and sometimes chemicals, becoming what we would call 'mad' in the process; Making them seem stronger and inhuman, allowing them to see the future and transcend human pettiness and thoughts (Strabo Geography, 567-468). It is interesting that, historically, these figures are mostly women: despite the patriarchal society, women assumed this important religious role. This article seeks to explain the complexities of the irrational in society, specifically gender and ancient madness, it will also highlight how these same gender dynamics have become modernised in our current society and the way we view mental health.

WHAT IS RELIGIOUS MANIA?

In ancient Greek culture, ritual mania was often accompanied by divine possession, or *enthousiasmos*. The ancient words used to describe ritual mania are *entheos* and *enthousiasmos*, they imply that there was an external force working to alter the individual's internal consciousness (Ustinova 2015,8). On one hand the Ancient Greeks considered this mania to be positive; Strabo an ancient philosopher and historian claims that madness "draws the mind away from human occupations and turns the real mind towards that which is divine." (Strabo Geography, 468-567). It had many societal benefits, and its functions were incredibly important. Through ritual madness advice from gods could be passed on, social catharsis was had, and the Greeks considered these rituals to be examples of purification (Dodds 1973;76: Dillion 2008;98). However, it is evident that the ancients did not fully accept mania as part of their religious culture, and it is also written about negatively, especially in regard to the women that would participate (Plato, *On the Obsolescence of Oracles*, 437: Iamblichus *The Mysteries*, 141). Women that were possessed such as Queen Agave were often portrayed as doing abhorrent things such as murdering their children (Euripides *Bacchae*, 1124-1125). This act would be

shocking as it is a subversion of motherhood, yet also part of a religious practice. This discrepancy reveals an interesting hypocrisy in regard to gender dynamics. Also, a parallel is revealed between ancient times and our modern society.

SEXUALITY IN ANCIENT GREECE

In general, madness seemed to be a form of worship that prominently featured women more so than men. The reason for this may be complex, yet by looking at the gender roles and sexual ideologies in ancient Greek thought, the cause of the bias can be formulated.

What follows is an in-depth analysis on gender and how it interacts with mania. We examine the connection between sexuality and the Greek concept of *enthousiasmos* (divine possession). The notion of sexuality in ancient Greece is extremely intricate and fluid, made more so by hierarchy and the structure of society. It is often thought that in ancient sexuality there is a passive and active role in regard to sex. The masculine is active and the penetrator, the feminine is passive and penetrated – this is known as the penetrative model. (Davidson 2001;28). This model is critiqued as it is influenced heavily by Roman society, and recent scholarship prefers to understand Greek sexual morality in terms of personal self-mastery and control (Davidson 2001; 48). Yet, both models probably had an effect on the way sexuality was perceived at the time. Combined, these two models, the penetrative model and the model of self-control give us the cause of the bias. If one equates *entheos* and *enthousiasmos*, the terms for divine possession, with the sexual models we can see how madness could be seen as something feminine, submissive, and weak. The act of a god invading the body during a ritual would be penetrative and invasive, as well as causing a loss of control over mind and body. Therefore, the ensuing madness is an act revered in philosophical thought, yet it contrasts with the sexual morals of a civilisation.

This ancient ideal of sexuality implies that the male body and mind is hard and impenetrable, whereas the female body and mind is susceptible and penetrable. Arguably, these sexual

models are similar to the way our current global civilisation understands sexuality, the body, and the mind. This is evident in modern rape culture and the current debates surrounding consent; in this current discussion, women are sometimes viewed objectively, as penetrable, and weak (Angel, 2021;30). It is also present in regard to the modern masculine ideal, the increasing research and awareness of mental illness and the stigma surrounding it (Bradbury 2020, 933). According to a pamphlet published by the World Health Organisation, there is a difference in the healthcare seeking behaviours of men and women. With women being more likely to recognise having an emotional or mental health related problem than men who have the same symptoms (World Health Organisation). It seems that femininity and emotionality are intrinsically linked in our collective consciousness, and masculinity is associated with stoicism both mentally and physically. A discussion of specific rituals and vase images from ancient times will follow, the Maenadic rituals, the Korybantic rites and the Priestess of Apollo all emphasise this link towards femininity, madness, past and present to become even more defined.

MADNESS OF DIONYSUS

Dionysus is a complex god; he was a deific representation of wine, intoxication, ritual madness, and freedom (Oxford Classical Dictionary Dionysus; 230). He was known to inspire madness in his followers. They were known as Bacchantes or Maenads and are often represented as a group of women who embodied a sense of wildness and chaos, by subverting the gender roles and engaging in physically violent activities.

Female followers of Dionysus would experience *enthousiasmos* during ritual worship. In the case of the maenads their madness is seen as predominantly violent and subversive, despite it being part of a recognised ritual. The aggressive aspects of the maenads are found in the myths surrounding the cult. Two of the most renowned actions are known as *sparamagos* and *omophagy*. The act of *sparamagos* is considered to be the ripping of a victim's flesh and is depicted in Euripides play 'Bacchae' when the aforementioned Queen Agave, under the influence of religious mania, kills her son by 'tearing and ripping his head off' (Euripides Bacchae, 1135,1125-1128).

This violent mutilation of flesh is often accompanied by *omophagy* (the eating of raw meat). It is a barbaric act that prevailed in Dionysian myth and was regularly associated with women as a sign they had lost their humanity. *Omophagy* is an unusual Greek custom, however there is an inscription found in Miletus, dated to 276 BC, which list the ritual proceeding for many festivals. It mentions the public priestesses of Dionysus as being permitted a "raw bite" (Parker 2011; 166). Again, these acts of madness are performed by a priestess— a female figure. It is interesting how these acts, despite their unseemly nature, are given a place in Greek society; one could argue that this is an example of social catharsis (Seaford 1996; 8). Social catharsis is the loosening of social conventions for a time so that the stability of society could be maintained, as seen in modern carnivals, sometimes referred to as bacchanal.

THE MAENADS AND THE BODY

Violence and mania are interwoven through the ritual and mythological acts related to Dionysus. Moreover, the violent acts and dancing have become physical expressions of Bacchic mania, causing ritual mania to become visualised through the female body and its movements. The artistic depictions of the maenads often show them in action; the body movements help the viewer differentiate and identify the mental state of the participants. Those possessed are often seen as contorted in strange positions. One example is the skyphos attributed to the

Brygos painter, dated at around the late 5th century (see figure 1).



Figure 1. Archaic, Attic, 490-480BC Terracotta Skyphos attributed to the Brygos Painter, Gallery 157
<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/253031>

The figure is bent over in an extreme position, she is grasping the skin of a leopard in such a way that it distorts her body. The action combines both human and animal features merging them to create violent and contorted image of a woman in the throes of ecstasy. This depiction of the violent maenads adheres to the idea that women were more easily possessed due to their penetrable nature, their bodies easily manipulated and their minds susceptible to base, animal acts. In this image the maenad's body is being manipulated and contorted by the external force of Dionysus, an act which would be considered abhorrent for a male figure to experience.

Other examples of the maenads can be seen on a red-figure crater dated between 475 – 425 BC (see Figure 2).

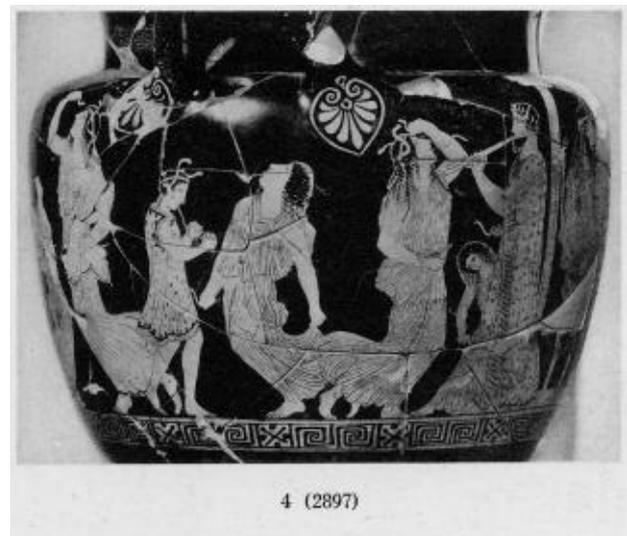


Figure 2. Athenian. Red-Figure, Krater (Volute) Italy Spina Ferrara Museo Nazionale di Spina. T128.
<https://www.beazley.ox.ac.uk/xdb/ASP/recordDetails.asp?recordCount=63&start=0>

The women here are wearing snakes around their heads and are seen to be dancing and cavorting, the drapery of their peplos, seemingly light and fluid, emphasising the constant motion of the votaries. Contrastingly, there is a male figure, standing straight-up playing the flute, portraying a serene and composed form. Not only does this figure frame the picture, but it also

shows the contrast between masculine and feminine elements in the ritual. The masculine element remains upright and stoic, despite the surrounding madness.

The female body is a canvas for many things that occur within a society. This image (fig.2) brings up the notion of hysteria, popularised in the sixteenth century as a female malady caused by the movement of the womb and expressed in the “patient” as outlandish and unusual behaviour (Dymtiw 2014; 45). This connection between lack of control over body, and subsequent loss of mind is evidently something runs throughout Western culture.

REALITY OR MYTH?

Classical scholars often debate as to whether the female participants in these acts in which the female participants literally lost their rational capacity, or whether it was a performance. Even some ancient texts have suggested that during the ritual women pretended to be in a manic state (Diodorus Sicilius Library IV 3.3). However, more recently modern psychological studies theorise that imitation of this type is a driving factor to cause actual trance-like qualities (Ustinova 2015;181). Scientific inquiry argues that mirror neurons in the brain blur the border between the self and others, meaning that a communal event such as this with lots of women acting manic could in fact cause altered states of consciousness in some individuals (Ustinova 2015;181). The fact that the patriarchal and reason-focussed society of ancient Greece allowed these sort of rituals shows that feminine madness was a necessary and unavoidable part of existence, whether it was approved of or not.

A TYPE OF MASCULINE MADNESS

For comparisons sake, one must also examine a male equivalent of ritual madness – the Korybantic rites: a Phrygian (c.1200-700 BC, located in what is now Turkey) phenomenon in which male dancers would exert themselves by dancing around in a manic state in honour of Cybele, so much so that they would enter a frenzied state - akin to the maenads of Dionysus (Strabo Geography, X.III 469-470, cited by Harrison 1912; 26). Interestingly, there is no negativity attached to this example of ritual mania, despite the glaring similarities. Strabo, an ancient scholar, when describing the Korybantic rites, emphasises the resemblance, stating “that [there is a] common relationship between the rites exhibited in the worship of Dionysus ...and those in the worship of the Mother of the gods [Cybele]” (Strabo, Geography X.III 467). He is referring to the rites which were meant to provide a sense of catharsis for the participants, and they both used madness as a method of connecting with the god (Harrison 1912; 25-26). Even with such similarities, their representations differ – some ancients even refer to the male dancers as gods themselves, claiming that they are lovers of sport and dancing (Harrison 1912; 26). The etymology of the name korybantēs (Κορύβαντες) is martial and masculine: (κόρυς) korus meaning helmet and bantes (βαντες) can be translated as walk or step, thus suggesting marching soldier. Even the name of the ritual project’s masculinity and prowess, with the association of battle evident from the name.

The representation of the Korybants - we can see this in the 1st century BC relief (fig.3) - differs to the image of chaotic maenads. As seen in the image, the figures are organised and uniform, seeming to move with synchronicity. Although it is a Roman relief, it is most likely copied from an Athenian original. Furthermore, in the writings of Plato, there are frequent connections made between logos and reason and the Korybantic rites, showing that despite the madness involved, the masculinity of the participants means that it is considered to be reasonable, and is channelled into positive physicality and

control (Wasmuth 2015;84). Furthermore, there is little mention of entousiasmos or divine possession, implying that mania achieved without direct possession- is acceptable in the masculine sphere as their bodies would not be invaded.



Figure 3. Neo-attic marble relief, after an 4th century Athenian original. Rome Vatican Museum, Pius-Clementine Museum, Room of the Muses, 66 <http://ancientrome.ru/art/artworken/img.htm?id=5378>

The closest the masculine element gets to ritual madness is satyr-play – a theatrical performance. There is one difference, however, mentioned by Guy Hedreen (1994). He states that the object of the rituals differs; in satyr-play the purpose was mimesis (self-aware mimicry or play), yet in maenadic ritual the purpose was an authentic loss of self (Hedreen 1994; 84). This difference is essential as it implies that there was no divine possession during satyr-play, rather an imitation of ritual mania. Again, we have an interesting take on the contrast between masculine and feminine aspects of divine mania; the masculine aspect remains in the realm of control and sophrosyne – a normal state of mind. There is a difference in the way that gender interplays with ritual madness. The male worshippers are celebrated for their prowess and symbolic altered states of consciousness, whereas the women are seen as violent and inhumane when performing this type of worship as they subvert gender roles.

MADNESS OF APOLLO

On the topic of female madness, none is as allusive or mysterious than the priestess of Apollo. This woman would have been known as the Pythia, and her role as oracle was to be possessed by Apollo and answer the questions of those who came to her. The god Apollo is an Olympian, his central functions are healing, purification, and prophecy (Oxford Classical Dictionary, Apollo ;153). His priestess was allusive both in speech and in the historical evidence surrounding her and her role. The only image we have of the Pythia depicts a goddess in the role (Figure 4).

The figure on the left sits serenely on a tripod, holding a laurel leaf, both symbols of the office. There is a contrast between this image and the maenads who were perceived as wild. The absence of historical evidence and this calm image creates an impression of secrecy which serves to emphasise the position’s power and import. It is this power and import and the associated madness that make the Pythia’s significant contribution to warfare and politics so interesting (Dillion 2008; 98), as she was known to influence wars and kings with her words.

REALITY OR MYTH?

Despite this lack of ancient scholarship, it can be assumed that there was some physical or mental manifestation of entousiasmos, as it is thought that the Pythia would be invaded by Apollo and possessed – producing prophecies in a state of altered consciousness. It has been discussed by scholars such as



Figure 4. Attic Red-Figure Kylix. c.440-430, Berlin Museum, inv.2538
https://www.researchgate.net/figure/The-only-surviving-image-of-the-Delphic-Pythia-Aegeus-the-mythical-king-of-Athens_fig1_262091264

Peter Green (2009), that her trance-like state was induced by some form of hallucinogen: possibly a type of gas (Green 2009; 37). This notion of *pneuma enthousiastikon*, a Greek phrase used to describe hallucinogenic gases, has been further researched, utilising modern biological and archaeological skills in an effort to validate ancient tradition. The evidence is as follows: chemical analysis of bituminous limestone found in the area give credibility to these theories (Green 2009; 39). Furthermore, Ustinova (2015) argues that someone susceptible to hypnosis, combined with a genuine and strong belief, could easily fall into a trance-like state assisted by the ethylene in the fumes (Ustinova 2015, 26; Green 2009;40). It was through this vulnerable mental state that the Pythia would enter her trance and speak the words of Apollo. It seems that the *pneuma* (hallucinogen) would open the mind and increase the likelihood or illusion of inspired prophecy. It makes sense that this religious role was a feminine one, as the Pythia would be mentally vulnerable and susceptible to invasion. Contrastingly, the Pythia gave advice on warfare and politics, topics that are firmly in the masculine sphere of ancient understanding. It shows that despite the binary sexual ideals the divide between masculine and feminine spheres could be crossed.

THE BODY AND THE PRIESTESS

Furthermore, there are some scholars that perceive the Pythia's possession as a sexual act and that the prophecies and advice produced were the children of this union. (Flower 2007;9). In order to allow a female figure this much power over political decision, the ancients had to fit the role into an institution they understood – in this case, marriage. Therefore, sexualising the priestesses and Apollo's connection made it more acceptable for a woman and even less so for a man. Giulia Sissa's (1992) argument for the sexualisation of the Pythia follows this notion of the porous and penetrable feminine. She mentions the idea that the Pythia had two mouths, her genitals through which she would absorb the *pneuma* and the mouth through which she would speak the words of Apollo (Burian 1990;642). This shows that the ancients understood Apollo's possession as an impregnation of the Pythia, and her words the divine offspring (Maurizio 2001; 47-48). This idea that the female body was an instrument is something that became apparent in the role of the

priestess, and represents a lack of autonomy that we still see today - the recent change in abortion laws in Texas are a good example (BBC News, 2021). Sissa's theory is interesting, and links to the idea of entheos being a penetrative act and takes it further by making such an explicit connection. It also explains the reason for a woman being granted religious authority in such a significant position of power. This sexualisation removes the true import of the individuals who were assigned this role, giving it all to Apollo. During drafting and reviewing stages, your manuscript can be prepared and submitted in a standard single-column document.

THE POWER OF MADNESS

It is thought that this removal of the Pythia's importance was simply part of a rhetoric that served to centre Apollo as the ultimate power (Flower 2007;13). Yet, there have been arguments made against this in modern anthropological views of the role. It has been thought, that similar to modern day shamans the Pythia would require training to achieve such a mental state of importance (Flower 2007; 10). This argument is interesting as it gives more autonomy to the individual of the Pythia and expresses the patriarchal structure of ancient society, as giving power to a woman publicly would have lessened the importance of the oracle.

Another central and topical debate is on whether the Pythia delivered the oracles herself and if they were actually spoken in hexameters - a rhythmic scheme in literature (Maurizio 2001; 70). It is thought to be a randomising device employed at Delphi to ensure an element of ambiguity in the oracles (Flowers 2007;7). The disputes stem from the distinction between the prophetai as those who interpret the oracle and the *manteis* as those who experience inspired divinations (Maurizio 1995; 70). It is thought that the Pythia, or *manteis*, would deliver unintelligible words that were then made coherent by a prophetai, the attendant male priests. It also develops from the notion that the Pythia was but an instrument of Apollo, rather than individual with prophetic skills. Recent scholars, such as Lisa Maurizio (1995), refute this notion and give autonomy to the Pythia, arguing vehemently stating that no ancient sources suggest "anyone other than the Pythia issued oracular responses." (Maurizio 2001; 69). The figures of the prophetai are an example of the need for masculine control, they represent the containment of feminine madness and power in this religious context. As it would be unseemly for a man to surrender control of his mind and body as the Pythia does, the prophetai satisfy the necessity for masculine control of the politics of Delphi (Maurizio 2001; 70).

For example, if we look at the depiction of Themis as the Pythia (Figure 4) and compare her to the previous images of the maenads (Figure 2) the figure is sat serenely in communication with Apollo. There is no similarity to the depictions of the maenads. It is evident that women participated in organised madness more so than men, and that ritual mania whether it was violent and shown externally, or serene and internal, madness in religion was something essentially feminine. This likely stems from the sexual moralities of the society and the penetrative nature of *enthousiasmos*. This sexual bias also means that the maenads are abhorrent as they project wildness and violence- traits often attributed to men, whereas in male ecstatic rituals the focus is diverted from the notion of possession, and physical strength and control is highlighted instead. Thereby, averting the invasive nature of ritual mania. The Pythia a female in a position of power is considered to be a bride of Apollo and nothing but a mouthpiece, therefore is symbolically controlled by the male prophetai. Overall, a pattern develops; madness and femininity are connected, whereas madness is separated from the masculine.

MODERNISATION OF MADNESS

It seems that both ancient and modern societies are conflicted by the irrationality of madness, both striving to understand and embrace through art and theatre yet struggling to come to an agreement with the constraints of civilisation. The Pythia's inspired prophecy becomes an elusive secret akin to the marriage bed and the maenads became violent legends. The hiding of mania within feminine, meant it could be separated from the public sphere, leaving the masculine spheres of logic and politics untouched by mania.

It is evident that madness was something feared by the Greeks, despite its natural place in society. Therefore, these roles and rituals were a way for society to contain and understand the idea of altered states of consciousness developed to contain the wildness and uncertainty that comes with madness. Our modern society does not have such religious methods for expressing insanity. Modern institutions, such as schools, are in the process of destigmatising mental health issues, however these campaigns are new (Bradbury 2020;934). However, similarly to the ancients, modern art and theatre allow mental illness to be incorporated into the narrative of society. Artists such as Francis Bacon, incorporate madness and religion into allegorical images and Phil Wall an artist who creates frank illustrations depicting modern mental health.

Despite this openness in art, the gendered nature of Greek religious madness has become ingrained in our modern society. It is the same in regard to some modern men: the so-called toxic masculinity which involves the socialisation of men to not

express their emotions (World Health Organisation), bears similarities to the stoic masculinity found in ancient Greece, resulting in the associated abuse of alcohol and violence often seen in men. (World Health Organisation). This is not due to the nature of masculinity but rather the stigma, which prevents men from receiving the treatment they need (Weitch 2003;27-40).

On the other hand, femininity, as in the past, holds a place of extreme emotionality and physical vulnerability. A duality develops through the contrasting images of femininity: the wise- woman and the rape victim. This duality is seen echoed in the role of the Pythia as well as in current media. For example, the idolisation of women such as Oprah a maternal figure, and the fact that the burden of care often falls on women is contrasted by domestic violence (World Health Organisation), and victim-blaming that is often seen in court cases. This ancient, gendered idea of sex and madness that forces both care and causation upon the feminine, whilst isolating the masculine from emotive expression is both outdated and unhelpful. Yet it is something that has somehow permeated through millennia. It is interesting to see how our society is still similar to an ancient culture that often seems alien and distant. It is important that these topics are researched through the interdisciplinary lens, of art history cultural studies, social and physical sciences. This wide perspective shows how we can better understand the issues we face currently and how we can better engage with the evolution of human society

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