THE PLATONIC FRENZIES IN MARSILIO FICINO

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In several publications, Jan Bremmer has—thoroughly and, in my opinion, convincingly—deconstructed Karl Meuli’s and E.R. Dodds’ idea of an ancient Greek shamanism.1 In so doing, he has contributed considerably to critical revision of a concept which, while originally derived from a specific Siberian context, was promoted as a universal complex of presumably archetypal patterns in a bestselling book by Mircea Eliade in 1964,2 and got considerably out of hand ever since.3 However, if we follow Bremmer and discard the concept of an ancient Greek ‘shamanism’, this does not mean that we have gotten rid of the ‘archaic techniques of ecstasy’ of Eliade’s subtitle: Bremmer’s discussions and references leave no doubt about the fact that ecstatic or trance-like states, experiences and techniques were frequently reported in ancient Greece as they have been in many other parts of the world; and we might add that they were often valued highly, as necessary conditions for, or means of access to, superior or even absolute knowledge.

In short, to study and interpret the references to ecstatic or trance-like states we need no grand cross-cultural framework of shamanism: on the contrary, we may be better off without it. In the present article I hope to demonstrate this at the example of Plato’s concept of mania, and the way it was interpreted by the great Florentine Neoplatonist Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499) as a means of ecstatic access to superior knowledge.

Introduction: The Meaning of Mania

It is well known that in Plato’s *Phaedrus*, we find not only the famous ‘mythical hymn’ of the Charioteer, but also a brief and tantalizing description of four ‘frenzies’, ‘furies’, or ‘madnesses’. The considerable problems of interpretation which these passages pose for the modern reader begin with the very term: *mania* in Greek, later translated as *furor* in Latin. Plato himself begins by explaining to Phaedrus that the concept of ‘madness’ could easily be misunderstood, pointing out that what he has in mind is not the madness of insanity, but on the contrary, a ‘heaven-sent’ state that is in fact superior to normal sanity.⁴

That a supposedly superior state of divine inspiration therefore does not have a technical terminology of its own, but must be explained indirectly by turning a negatively connotated term like ‘madness’ into a positive one, is highly significant. As formulated elsewhere in the *Phaedrus*, it reflects a notion of ‘esoteric’ truth that will be understood only by the elite of true philosophers, who are believed to be out of their minds by the common man:

Standing aside from the busy doings of mankind, and drawing night to the divine, (the true philosopher) is rebuked by the multitude as being deranged, for they do not realize that he is full of God (ἐν ΥΑΘΩΥΑΩΤΩΝ).⁵

For modern scholars intent on explaining the concept of *mania* to the ‘multitude’ of their colleagues—not to mention the general public—, the problem is still the same: all the available options for translating the term *mania* have pejorative or at least doubtful and hence misleading connotations, and we simply do not have an English word that directly conveys what Plato had in mind.

It is peculiar that this fact has not been a greater cause of concern for scholars. How can we justify a situation in which the most influential philosopher of our intellectual tradition tells us that knowledge superior to that of ‘sane’ reason is given to us in a state of divine inspiration, but after more than two and a half thousand years we still have not come up with a word for it? For in the *Phaedrus* at least, Plato leaves no doubt about the priority of ‘frenzied’ insight over merely profane, rational argumentation. His previous argument, in which he had coolly defended the ‘sanity’ of the non-lover, turns out to have been a lie and

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⁴ Plato, *Phdr.* 244a–d.
⁵ Plato, *Phdr.* 249d.