

Rethinking the Dancing Mania

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While medieval dance frenzies have long been regarded as a classic example of stress-induced mental disorder affecting mostly women, there is much evidence to the contrary.

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Pick up a textbook on abnormal psychology and in the first chapter you are likely to find a discussion of the dance manias. Also known as St. Vitus's dance, between the eleventh and seventeenth centuries, manias swept across Europe as tens of thousands of people participated in frenzied public orgies and wild dances lasting for days and sometimes weeks. It is little wonder why psychiatrists and medical historians classify such episodes as group mental disorder affecting those overwhelmed by the stresses of the period. During outbreaks many immodestly tore off their clothing and pranced naked through the streets. Some screamed and beckoned to be tossed into the air; others danced furiously in what observers described as strange,



Religious fanatics dancing amid graves in a churchyard. From a German engraving, about 1600.

colorful attire. A few reportedly laughed or wept to the point of death. Women howled and made obscene gestures while others squealed like animals. Some rolled themselves in the dirt or relished being struck on the soles of their feet. An Italian variant was known as tarantism, as victims were believed to have been bitten by the tarantula spider, for which the only cure was thought to be frenetic dancing to certain music which supposedly dissipated the "poison" from their blood (Hecker 1844; Rosen 1968; Sirois 1982).

The term "dancing mania" is derived from the Greek word *choros*, a dance, and *mania*, madness. The literal translation of *choros mania* is dancing madness. The name was adopted after a group of about 200 people danced so spiritedly on a bridge above the Maas River in Germany during 1278 that it collapsed, killing many participants. Survivors were treated in a nearby chapel dedicated to St. Vitus, and many were reportedly restored to full health. Prior to the twentieth century it was commonly referred to as epidemic chorea or choreomania. The word *chorea* was erroneously evoked to describe these behaviors, as participants were often thought to be exhibiting symptoms of chorea, a central nervous system disorder characterized by brief irregular jerking movements which can resemble dancing.

The terms *tarantism* and *dancing mania* are often used

interchangeably as they share overlapping features. Tarantism was mainly confined to southern Italy. Gloyne (1950, 29) describes it as the "mass hysterical reaction" to perceived bites of the tarantula spider. The first recorded episodes appeared during the thirteenth century and persisted on a widespread scale in southern Europe for 400 years, reaching a peak in the seventeenth century, after which it virtually disappeared. Small annual episodes have persisted in southern Italy well into the twentieth century. Hans Schadowaldt (1971) investigated an outbreak in Wardo during 1957. Italian religious history professor Ernesto de Martino (1966) identifies thirty-five cases of tarantism near Galatina in 1959. De Martino conducted his survey between June 28 and 30, as June 29 is the festival day of St. Peter and St. Paul. On that day it is customary for the "victims" to travel from regional villages to the chapel of St. Paul to obtain a cure for various ailments. More recently, it has been observed near Sardinia, Italy (Gallini 1988).

Medieval tarantism was reported almost exclusively during the height of the hot, dry summer months of July and August:

People, asleep or awake, would suddenly jump up, feeling an

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acute pain like the sting of a bee. Some saw the spider, others did not, but they knew that it must be the tarantula. They ran out of the house into the street, to the market place dancing in great excitement. Soon they were joined by others who like them had just been bitten, or by people who had been stung in previous years, for the disease was never quite cured. The poison remained in the body and was reactivated every year by the heat of summer. . . .

. . . Music and dancing were the only effective remedies, and people were known to have died within an hour or in a few days because music was not available (Sigerist 1943, 218–219).

Symptoms included headache, giddiness, breathlessness, fainting, trembling, twitching, appetite loss, general soreness, and delusions. Sometimes it was claimed that a sore or swelling was caused by a tarantula bite, but such assertions were difficult to verify because the bite resembled those of insects. The dance frenzy symptoms resemble typical modern episodes of epidemic hysteria, in addition to expected reactions from exhaustive physical activity and excessive alcohol consumption.

Psychiatrists classify tarantism as a form of epidemic hysteria due to its psychological character and claims that most of those affected were females (Sigerist 1943, 218; Rosen 1968, 204). Early medical observers theorized that a venomous species of tarantula found only near the Italian state of Apulia was capable of producing sporadic tarantism symptoms each summer, but tests on spiders of the region have failed to substantiate these suspicions (Gloyne 1950, 35). *Latrodectus tarantula* is a nonaggressive, slow-moving spider common in Apulia that can produce psychoactive effects in people it bites. In severe cases, it may temporarily mimic many tarantism symptoms, including twitching and shaking of limbs, weakness, nausea, and muscular pain (Lewis 1991, 514). Ironically, *Lycosa tarantula* was typically blamed for tarantism symptoms, as it is larger, more aggressive, ferocious in appearance and has a painful bite. Yet neither spider can account for the predominantly symbolic and psychogenic character of tarantism attacks. *Latrodectus tarantula* is also found in other countries where tarantism does not occur (Russell 1979, 416), including the United States (Lewis 1991, 517). There is no evidence that a venomous species of tarantula, native only to Apulia, may have existed during this period and later died out. As Sigerist (1943, 221) remarks: "The same tarantula shipped to other parts of the country seemed to lose most of its venom, and what remained acted differently." It is also doubtful that some insect or other agent was responsible for causing "attacks," as most participants did not even claim to have been bitten, and would only participate in tarantism episodes at designated times.

Clearly most cases were unrelated to spider bites. Other psychological aspects include the only reliable cure: dancing to certain types of music. "Victims" would typically perform one of numerous versions of the tarantella, a rapid tempo score characterized by brief, repetitive phrases which escalate in intensity. Such performances also allowed "victims" to exhibit social behavior that is prohibited at any other time. Dancing persisted intermittently for hours and days, sometimes lasting

weeks. Participants would eventually proclaim themselves "cured" for the remainder of the summer, only to relapse in subsequent summers. Many "victims" believed they had been infected from those who had been bitten, or from simply brushing against a spider. All that was needed to "reactivate" the venom was to hear the strains of certain music being played to cure those who had already been bitten.

Dancing Manias

A variation of tarantism spread throughout much of Europe between the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries, where it was known as the dancing mania or St. Vitus's dance, on account that participants often ended their processions in the vicinity of chapels and shrines dedicated to this saint. Like its Italian counterpart, outbreaks seized groups of people who engaged in frenzied dancing that lasted intermittently for days or weeks. Social scientists typify victims as females who were maladjusted, deviant, irrational, or mentally disturbed. These activities were typically accompanied by symptoms similar to tarantism, including screaming, hallucinations, convulsive movements, chest pains, hyperventilation, crude sexual gestures and outright intercourse. Instead of spider bites as the cause, participants usually claimed that they were possessed by demons who had induced an uncontrollable urge to dance. Like tarantism, however, music was typically played during episodes and was considered to be an effective remedy. Detailed accounts of many episodes appear in a classic book by German physician Justus Hecker, *Epidemics of the Middle Ages* (1844). He considered the origin of these "epidemics" as due to "morbid sympathy" since they often coincided with periods of severe disease, such as widespread pessimism and despair after the Black Death (Hecker 1844, 87). This epic disease plague, which by some estimates killed half of the population of Europe, subsided about twenty years prior to 1374, the year that most scholars identify with the onset of the dance mania. Benjamin Gordon, in *Medieval and Renaissance Medicine* (1959, 562) describes the onset of the dance mania:

From Italy it spread to . . . Prussia, and one morning, without warning, the streets were filled. . . . They danced together, ceaselessly, for hours or days, and in wild delirium, the dancers collapsed and fell to the ground exhausted, groaning and sighing as if in the agonies of death. When recuperated, they swathed themselves tightly with cloth around their waists and resumed their convulsive movements. They contorted their bodies, writhing, screaming and jumping in a mad frenzy. One by one they fell from exhaustion. . . .

. . . Many later claimed that they had seen the walls of heaven split open and that Jesus and the Virgin Mary had appeared before them.

As with tarantism, dance manias are considered to have occurred spontaneously, with participants unable to control their actions, and being exhibited primarily by mentally disturbed females. Influential New York University psychiatrists Harold Kaplan and Benjamin Sadock (1985, 1227) state that they represent "collective mental disorder"; Carson et al. (1998, 37) view St. Vitus's dance and tarantism as collective hysterical disorders; while abnormal psychologist

Ronald Comer of Princeton University uses the term "mass madness" (1996, 9).

Let us examine these claims based on several dozen period chronicles translated by E. Louis Backman (1952) in his seminal study of religious dances. Few if any modern textbooks on psychiatry and abnormal psychology cite these early chronicles. Instead they rely on a handful of oft-cited influential medical historians of the early twentieth century, using their assessments and well-worn quotations. Medical historians such as Henry Sigerist, George Mora, and George Rosen were giants in their field and astute enough to acknowledge Greek or Roman ritualistic elements in the dance manias, but each assumes that the participants used these rites to work themselves into frenzied states of physical and mental disturbance in order to experience cathartic reactions to intolerable social conditions. They also assume that most participants were hysterics.

Mora (1963, 436-438) writes that tarantism and dance manias used rituals as psychotherapeutic attempts to cope with either individual or societal maladjustments which fostered mental disturbances. Sigerist held a similar view. An abnormal psychology text written by Robert Carson of Duke University and his colleagues (1998, 37) cites Sigerist to support the view that St. Vitus's dance and tarantism were similar to ancient Greek orgiastic rites which had been outlawed by Christian authorities, but were secretly practiced anyway. The authors assume that these "secret gatherings . . . probably led to considerable guilt and conflict" which triggered collective hysterical disorders. Dance frenzies appeared most often during periods of crop failures, famine, epidemics, and social upheaval, leading Rosen (1968) to conclude that this stress triggered widespread hysteria. Yet these same disasters prompted attempts at divine intervention through ritualized dancing, and often produced trance and possession states. Consistent with this latter view, many symptoms associated with tarantism and dancing mania are consistent with sleep deprivation, excessive alcohol consumption, emotional excitement and vigorous, prolonged physical activity. A German chronicle reports that during a dance frenzy at Strasbourg in 1418, "many of them went without food for days and nights" (Rust 1969, 20).

The European "dancing manias" and its Italian variant tarantism are portrayed within the psychiatric literature as spontaneous, stress-induced outbursts of psychological disturbance that primarily affected females. This depiction is based on the selective

use of period quotations by medical historians such as George Rosen and Henry Sigerist, who were reflecting popular stereotypes of female susceptibility to mental disorders. However, based on a series of translations of medieval European chronicles describing these events, many of them first-hand, and by scrutinizing other historical sources which provide a degree of social, cultural, historical and political perspective, it is evident that contemporary depictions of "dancing manias" have been misrepresented. Contrary to popular psychiatric portrayals, females were not overrepresented among participants, episodes were not spontaneous but highly structured, and they involved unfamiliar religious sects engaging in strange or foreign customs that were redefined as a behavioral abnormality (Bartholomew 1998). Let us examine the evidence.

Fallacy #1: Most "Dancers" Were Crazy

Period chronicles reveal that most participants did not reside in the municipalities where they occurred, but hailed from other regions, traveling through communities as they sought out shrines and churchyards to perform in. As a result, they would naturally have had unfamiliar customs. The largest and best documented dance plague, that of 1374 involving throngs of "dancers" in Germany and Holland, were "pilgrims" who traveled, "according to Beka's chronicle, from Bohemia, but also from Hungary, Poland, Carinthia, Austria, and Germany. Great hosts from the Netherlands and France joined them" (Backman 1952, 331).

The behavior of these dancers was described as strange, because while exhibiting actions that were part of the Christian tradition, and paying homage to Jesus, Mary, and various saints at chapels and shrines, other elements were foreign. Radulphus de Rivo's chronicle *Decani Tongrensis* states that "in their songs they uttered the names of devils never before heard of . . . this strange sect." Petrus de Herenthal writes in *Vita Gregorii XI*: "There came to Aachen . . . a curious sect." The *Chronicon Bellicum Magnum* describes the participants as "a sect of dancers."

The actions of dancers



were often depicted as immoral, as there was much uninhibited sexual intercourse. The chronicle of C. Browerus (*Abtiquitatum et Annalium Trevirensium*) states: "They indulged in disgraceful immodesty, for many women, during this shameless dance and mock-bridal singing, bared their bosoms, while others of their own accord offered their virtue." In *A Chronicle of Early Roman Kings and Emperors*, it states that a number of participants engaged in "loose living with the women and young girls who shamelessly wandered about in remote places under the cover of night." If most of the participants were pilgrims of Bohemian and Czech origin as Backman asserts, during this period Czechs and Bohemians were noted for a high incidence of perceived immorality, especially sexual, including prostitution and annual festivals involving the free partaking of sex (Backman 1952, 290).

Fallacy #2: There Was a Spontaneous, Uncontrollable Urge to Dance

Period chronicles reveal that dance manias were mainly composed of pilgrims engaging in emotionally charged, highly structured displays of worship that occasionally attracted locals. This social patterning is evident in a first-hand account on September 11, 1374, by Jean d'Outremeuse in his chronicle *La Geste de Liege*, who states that "there came from the north to Liege . . . a company of persons who all danced continually. They were linked with clothes, and they jumped and leaped. . . . They called loudly on St. John the Baptist and fiercely clapped their hands." Slichtenhorst (cited in Backman 1952, 210), in describing the dance frenzy of 1375 and 1376 in France, Germany, and Gelderland (now southwestern Holland), notes that participants "went in couples, and with every couple was another single person . . . they danced, leaped and sang, and embraced each other in friendly fashion."

A similar pattern is evident in tarantism. While *taranti* (as victims were known) are typically described as participating in uncontrollable behaviors in chaotic, frenzied throngs, adherents worshiped in a set pattern, much like modern-day ecstatic religious sects. Australian medical historian and tarantism expert Jean Russell states that *taranti* would typically commence dancing at sunrise, stop during midday to sleep and sweat, then bathe before the resumption of dancing until evening, when they would again sleep and sweat, consume a light meal, then sleep until sunrise. This ritual was usually repeated over four or five days, and sometimes for weeks (Russell 1979, 413).

Clearly tarantism episodes were not spontaneous, and the same is true of dance manias. German magistrates even contracted musicians to play for participants and serve as dancing companions. The latter was intended to reduce injuries and mischief during the procession to the St. Vitus chapel (Hecker 1970 [1837], 4). Hecker states that the dancing mania was a "half-heathen, half-Christian festival" which incorporated into the festival of St. John's day as early as the fourth century, "the kindling of the 'Nodfyr,' which was forbidden them by St. Boniface." This ritual involved the leaping through smoke or flames, which was believed to protect participants from vari-

ous diseases over the ensuing year. A central feature of the dance frenzy was leaping or jumping continuously for up to several hours through what they claimed were invisible fires, until collapsing in exhaustion.

Not only were episodes scripted, but dance processions were swollen by spectators (Hecker 1970 [1837], 4), including children searching for parents who were among the dancers, and vice versa (Haggard 1934, 187). Some onlookers were threatened with harm for refusing to dance (Backman 1952, 147). Many took part out of loneliness and carnal pleasures; others were curious or sought exhilaration (Rust 1969, 22). Hecker remarks that "numerous beggars, stimulated by vice and misery, availed themselves of this new complaint to gain a temporary livelihood," while gangs of vagabonds imitated the dance, roving "from place to place seeking maintenance and adventures." Similar observations have been noted of tarantism episodes.

Fallacy #3: Most "Dancers" Were Hysterical Females

A revisiting of the descriptions of dancing manias based on early chronicles of these events shows that both men and women were equally affected. Where the gender of the participants was noted, the following comments are representative: Petrus de Herenthal's chronicle *Vita Gregorii XI* remarks that "Persons of both sexes . . . danced"; Radulpho de Rivo's *Decani Tongrensis* states, "persons of both sexes, possessed by devils and half naked, set wreathes on their heads, and began their dances"; Johannes de Beka's *Canonicus Ultrajectinus et Heda, Wilhelmus, Praepositus Arnhemensis: De Episcopis Ultraiectinis, Recogniti*, states that in 1385, "there spread along the Rhine . . . a strange plague . . . whereby persons of both sexes, in great crowds . . . danced and sang, both inside and outside of churches, till they were so weary that they fell to the ground"; according to Koelhoff's *Chronicle* published in 1499, "Many people, men and women, old and young, had the disease [of dancing mania]"; Casper Hedion in *Ein Ausserlesene Chronik von Anfang der Welt bis auff das iar nach Christi unsers Eynigen Heylands Geyurt M.D.* writes that in 1374 "a terrible disease, called St. John's dance . . . attacked many women and girls, men and boys"; A. Slichtenhorst's *Gelsersee Geschiedenissen* states that "men and women were smitten by the fantastic frenzy." This gender mixture is also reflected in more recent tarantism reports such as episodes in the vicinity of Sardinia, Italy, studied by Gallini (1988) which found that the vast majority of "victims" were male, while de Martino (1966) reported that most participants that he investigated near Apulia were female.

What Caused the Dancing Manias?

Ergot poisoning (pronounced "er-get") has been blamed for hallucinations and convulsions accompanying the dance mania. Nicknamed St. Anthony's Fire, ergotism coincided with floods and wet growing seasons which fostered the growth of the fungus *claviceps purpurea* which thrives in damp conditions and forms on cultivated grains, especially

rye. While this could account for some symptoms, many outbreaks did not coincide with floods or wet growing or harvest periods. Convulsive ergotism could cause bizarre behavior and hallucinations, but chronic ergotism was more common and typically resulted in the loss of fingers and toes from gangrene, a feature that is distinctly not associated with dance manias (Donaldson et al. 1997, 203). As for tarantism, most episodes occurred only during July and August and were triggered by real or imaginary spider bites, hearing music, or seeing others dance, and involved structured annual rituals. Also, while rye was a key crop in central and northern Europe, it was uncommon in Italy. Surely a few participants were hysterics, epileptics, mentally disturbed, or even delusional from ergot, but the large percentage of the populations affected, and the circumstances and timing of outbreaks, suggests otherwise. Episodes were pandemic, meaning that they occurred across a wide area and affected a very high proportion of the population (Lidz 1963, 822; Millon and Millon 1974, 22).

So what is the most likely explanation for dance manias? Based on an examination of a representative sample of medieval chronicles, it is evident that these episodes are best explained as deviant religious sects who gained adherents as they made pilgrimages through Europe during years of turmoil in order to receive divine favor. Their symptoms (visions, fainting, tremor) are predictable for any large population engaging in prolonged dancing, emotional worship, and fasting. Their actions have been "mistranslated" by contemporary scholars evaluating the participants' behaviors *per se*, removed from their regional context and meaning. Tarantism was a regional variant of dancing mania that developed into a local tradition, primarily in southern Italy.

In reviewing the dance frenzies, it is important to consult original sources and realize that we are all to some extent products of our social, cultural, and historical milieu. When assessing the normality of a particular act, it is vital not to focus solely on the behaviors *per se*, but on the context of the participants and those making the evaluations. It is not that these prominent historians were trying to deceive, but their social and cultural milieu was different from our own. They had different assumptions and worldviews, and were writing at a time when it was taken for granted that women were innately susceptible to hysteria and were both physically and emotionally frail (Smith-Rosenberg 1972; Ehrenreich and English 1978; Micale 1995). This situation affected their selective readings of medieval chronicles despite their scholarly backgrounds and evidence to the contrary in the very texts they translated.

That a person's milieu affects their scholarship is not surprising. Of concern is the persistence of several fallacies about dance manias into the last decade of the twentieth century, and the reliance on secondary sources by the authors of many textbooks on abnormal psychology and psychiatry. In their defense, unless they are specialists in medieval manuscripts, most of these authors would lack the time or resources to consult original, obscure texts. This underlines the importance of

consulting original sources whenever possible, and not relying solely on the interpretation of others.

Scientific progress and understanding is achieved by standing on the shoulders of giants. But occasionally those shoulders unwittingly face in the wrong direction. It is time to correct that mistake. One cannot help wondering how many more "facts" of today are based on the prejudices of yesterday, and will eventually be exposed by revisiting original sources as the fallacies of tomorrow.

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