As the title of this impressive book indicates, we are here dealing with two features of ancient Greek culture, which very seldom are treated together: oracles and curses. But in her ‘Introduction’ (p. 1–9), Esther Eidinow claims that these two activities «were both strategies by which ordinary ancient Greek men and women (...) expressed and managed aspects of the uncertainty and risk of everyday life» (4). Thus they are worth studying together. ‘Risk’ is the central concept used in the book to unite the broader implications of oracles and curses into a single socio-cultural framework and so make them amenable to a single set of historical explanations. Moreover, the study will draw on insights from anthropology, especially Mary Douglas’ view that risks are socially constructed, that is to say that different societies, and different groups within a society, perceive, explain, and tackle uncertainty about the future – specifically future dangers or risk – quite differently (5).

E. deserves credit for taking very seriously her proclaimed aim of reaching an understanding of what was going on in the minds of ordinary ancient Greek men and women. This has a great impact on her choice of source material and on the way the concept risk is operationalized throughout the book.

One might have expected the study to take as its point of departure an exploration of the ancient Greek conception of ‘risk’ by tracing the use of the Greek word kindunos (‘risk’, ‘threat’, or ‘danger’) through the sources. But E. deliberately refuses to employ this approach. The reason appears to be her interest «more fully [to understand] the day-to-day experiences of risk and uncertainty among Greek men and women», and these matters, she maintains, are not captured in our literary sources. Instead, she finds it more rewarding to concentrate on two bodies of texts: the published question tablets composed by individuals for use at the oracle at Dodona,¹ and the corpus of katadesmoi, or curse tablets, that date from the sixth to the first centuries BCE (5).

With the risk-angle E. wants to open up the use of especially the curse tablets, and draw them away from current interpretations, e.g. that of C. Faraone, who sees these tablets act as ‘pre-emptive’ strikes in competitive contexts, where the curser (the weaker party) fears imminent defeat. E. finds this interpretation too narrow: «I question both existing interpretations of particular tablets and the boundaries and/or current descriptions of these categories of cursing. In particular I examine those curses for which no context is immediately apparent or for which the current popular explanation of competition as the motivation for composition does not work. Instead, with some support from comparative studies of witchcraft in other cultures, I suggest that in many cases phthonos, or envy, often lies behind the creation of such katadesmoi» (7).

Apart from the anthropological approach, E. also draws on literary theory, here E. M. Forster’s points on the difference between plot and story. This latter will guide E. in her attempt to reconstruct the individual stories that lay behind the oracle questions and the curse tablets.

¹ The material also contains some unpublished texts placed at E.’s disposal by the late Professor A. Ph. Christidis, who was at the University of Thessaloniki, cf. p. 24.
After this introduction, the book is organized into twelve chapters, of which chapter 1, ‘Exploring Uncertainty’ (16–24) digs deeper into the concept of risk. The purpose of this theoretical discussion is to find a position from where it is possible to study the source material without allowing anachronistic terms to enter the interpretation. Here E. links to Mary Douglas’ ‘cultural symbolic’ approach to risk in communities, distinguishing two risk-groups: 1) those legitimating moral principles; and 2) those explaining misfortune (21). Furthermore, it appears that E. draws yet more inspiration from literary theory. For hidden away in note 57 of chapter 1 (248) is her announcement to the reader that the way she intends to use the two collections of epigraphic material «is informed by the theories of New Historicism». One is full of excitement to see how this unusual combination of some rivalling, indeed, in some respects, mutually exclusive theoretical positions – a social science approach, classic theories about the novel, and contemporary literary theorist’s conception of textuality and representations – are going to be realized here.

The rest of the book is divided into two parts. Chapters 2 through 6 concentrate on oracles, while chapters 7 through 12 treat the curses. Chapter 2, ‘A Lapse into Unreason’ (26–41) gives a fine introduction to the institutions of divination among the ancient Greeks. The large panhellenic oracular shrines are described alongside local, more humble ways of consulting oracles. While chapters 3, ‘Individuals and Oracles’ (42–55), E. commences the investigation properly by looking generally at why individuals attended oracles. The first part of the chapter deals with instances of individuals seeking oracular guidance that are reported in the works of ancient authors, especially those of Herodotus and Xenophon. One problem here, though, is that in the more or less famous stories they report about oracle consultations, the ancient authors focus on the answer from the oracle, while the exact question often has to be guessed at by the reader. E. concludes, nevertheless, that the references to oracles in literature provide some idea about the topics which individuals brought to oracles, in contrast to the questions brought by communities. The questions of individuals, it is argued, were focused on situations in which the questioner was facing specific decisions or actions. In addition, E. presents those few pieces of epigraphical evidence from Delphi and Didyma which relate to questions to these oracles from individuals.

Chapter 4, ‘The Dwelling of the Spirit’ (56–71), is a general introduction to the sanctuary of Dodona and an introduction to the modes of consultation at that sanctuary. Again this contains references first to the literary sources, then to the epigraphic sources. The conclusion drawn, cited here also to illustrate E.’s fresh style, is as follows: «Talking doves and rustling oaks, erratic springs and men with dirty feet, women who may or not twitter like birds, echoing vessels and crowing demons, and finally tokens picked from a jar, possibly guided by dreams: in the end, as we said at the beginning, all that we know for certain is that consultants wrote their questions down on lead tablets, which they rolled up» (71).

The long chapter 5 is ‘A Catalogue and Summary of Published Questions by Individuals and Responses from the Dodona Oracle’ (72–124). The catalogue contains 155 inscriptions that are grouped according to such categories as ‘travel’, ‘women’, ‘children’, ‘work’, ‘slavery’, ‘health/disease’, ‘property’, ‘prosperity/safety’, ‘ritual activity’, ‘military campaigns’, ‘judicial activity’, ‘city affairs and politics’. The summaries of the contents of the inscriptions within each of the categories are clear and extensive, but one generally misses text-critical discussions of the most fragmentary – and thus most reconstructed – of the inscriptions (this is also the case when we reach the curses). That all Greek texts printed in the book are followed by translations is one of the great achievements of E.’s work, especially because translations of these tablets are often very uncertain, and often one has to make difficult choices. But those readers who are not familiar with inscriptions, not to mention the Greek language, and only read the translations will get an impression of clear meaning, when sometimes the fact is that the text is almost entirely the work of the modern editor.

Accordingly, chapter 6, ‘Oracles and Daily Life’ (125–138), treats the rich material presented in chapter 5, and stands moreover as the preliminary conclusion of the part about...
E. recapitulates the construction of the categories from chapter 5, and discusses the identities of the consultants – most of whom were men – as well as the language of the questions. What she gains from this analysis is expressed on p. 137–138: «Exploring this evidence can help us to move beyond the broad descriptions found in ancient and modern literature that ascribe to oracles a simple role of resolving uncertainty and offering general reassurance to consultants.» This material not only provides further information about the place and role of oracles in Greek society, but also gives a rare view of ancient Greek culture from the level of ordinary individuals, as they confront an unknown future and deal with the risks they perceive (...). Examining and cataloguing these tablets has illuminated how people used the oracle in different ways to frame and manage the uncertainty inherent in everyday life (...). They might ask for instructions about how to do better, and thus gain a sort of blanket coverage for future action or, if they had embarked on a course comprising a number of key decisions, they might use the oracle serially, to check each decision as it came up.

This is of course a fine insight to gain, yet the question still remains whether it is an original and new insight. The problem, according to this reviewer, is that E. uses relatively much space presenting texts, categorizing them and summarizing their contents, all at the expense of an analysis of what the texts are able to say about the concepts of risk and uncertainty among the ancient Greeks. The anthropological approach that we have been promised in the introduction is never brought into play. Here, in chapter 6, just as in any other chapter, the only social anthropology we get is a vignette citation offered at the beginning of the chapter. It is as usual a very funny citation, but what the deeper meaning of it is, you have to figure out yourself.

Chapter 7, ‘Curses!’ (139–155) introduces the second part of the book. In this chapter, E. presents the curse inscriptions and describes the focus of her investigation. Having dealt thoroughly with the language of the curses, E. asks the question: what role did cursing play for people in ancient society? (154). In trying to answer this question, E. wants to challenge the traditional scholarly categorization of the tablets, which she finds for a large part to rely on anachronistic preconceptions of the sentiments they express (154–155). Instead of relying on these categories, E. wants to examine each individual tablet in order to «explore the circumstances in which men and women created curses; what or whom they selected as targets of their curses, and why» (155). She promises that the texts will reveal «a darker, more vicious, side of ancient daily life: the unspoken resentment that smouldered beneath the surfaces, which the Greeks themselves explicitly recognized as threatening the harmony of their city» (155).

This promised challenge of the traditional categorization of the curse tablets takes nevertheless its starting point in exactly these categories. For each of the next four chapters, which constitute the core of the investigation of the curses, is structured around one of these categories. The first, chapter 8, ‘Urban Drama’ (156–164), treats the curses related to the theatre, even though the preserved curse tables relating to this category number only four. E. justifies her choice to begin with this category as follows: «because its texts provide a usefully succinct introduction to the kinds of problems and questions raised by the corpus as a whole: from the basic difficulty of reading highly fragmentary texts, to the frustrations of trying to piece together the stories of their writers or targets» (156). The short chapter is for the most part used to discuss two different translations – one in French, the other in English – of an inscription found near Gela in Sicily. The inscription contains a curse against «all the choregoi» in a context in which also competitions are mentioned, and E. treats the text by undertaking a comparison with the Athenian institution of the choregia in order «to suggest a context» for the creation of the Gela curse. This comparison yielding negative results, she finds that «the ultimate aim of the curse was probably to disrupt the theatrical performances. The focus of the curse was thus not on binding an individual holding office, but on disabling the service he rendered to the people – the source of his power» (164).

Chapter 9, ‘The Best Defence’ (165–190), treats those curse tablets that are traditionally linked to litigation. After identifying these texts, E. concludes that people could use curses
in order to handle risk situations when called to court, or if they made a bad appearance in court, e.g. if they fumbled in speech. Moreover she points out that not all the texts placed in this category can be explained as litigation curses.

In chapter 10, ‘Business as Usual’ (191–205), E. challenges the category of curses that have been linked to business competition, and she argues convincingly that situations of competition far from always constituted the reason for cursing. Instead we have to look at the curse tablets more generally, as a way of ‘managing risk of some sorts’, and they give us «a vivid glimpse into the breakdown of local relationships» (204–205).

Chapter 11, ‘Love and Curses’ (206–224), goes through the curses that have been linked to erotic circumstances. The main conclusion E. offers here can be summed up with this citation: «As with tablets in other categories, the creation of these texts [about love matters] appears to have been motivated by the need of their agents to exert some kind of control over others. The choice to use curses suggest that those who wrote them could not be sure of acquiring, or lacked the capacity to exercise control in any other ways (220). In this chapter, E. attempts also to link the emergence of love curses with a change in the views on women in early fourth century. This theory of change is based on changes said to have occurred in vase iconography from late archaic through classical times, which show that female eroticism was acquiring a new significance, or from a masculine point of view «express an idealization of respectable females, in contrast with sex-workers» (222).

In the last chapter (ch. 12), ‘Curses and Risk’ (225–232), the results from the second part of the book are seen in connection with the overall theme of the analysis, risk. And here we finally get an explanation of why the ancients cursed: «Curse-writers wrote their texts because they wanted to direct future events in their favour by managing sources of risk: they aimed to weaken and incapacitate their targets and thus neutralize the threat that they presented» (227). To place this insight in context, E. employs her understanding of ancient society and changes in this society over time. The curses were used «to manage the dangers inherent in a breakdown of social relations». The practice of cursing, she asserts, started around the end of the fifth century and was spurred by the calamity of The Peloponnesian War and the consequences the war had for Athens (231–232).

The book ends with a ‘Conclusion’ (233–237) in which E. brings together all the results of her investigation. Basing her study on the theory that ‘risk’ is socially constructed, E. has tried to focus on the stories contained within the texts in order to identify «when, how and why ordinary Greek men and women used these technologies to seek supernatural aid». Thus oracles and curses function as different expressions of and responses to risk and uncertainty in everyday life. In the oracle questions we find men and women in the middle of making decisions with serious private or public consequences. In the curses we find ourselves exploring situations of more immediate danger, whose protagonists seem to have had little control over events (233). The risk-angle has encouraged E. to focus on the targets of each curse and explore the reasons and circumstances for the selection of the target (233–234). E. sees the evidence explored in the book as a lens through which we can see ordinary Greek men and women from every walk of life, dealing with everyday fears and uncertainty, in an atmosphere that was sometimes gripped by gossip, prickling with accusations (237).

Ester Eidinow is a very good writer, as I hope some of the citations have shown. Her language is fresh and never dull, and she is not afraid of using fictive pictures to start out her investigation (1–2; 139). Her carrier as a freelance writer specialized in writing scenarios and strategies for various organisations gives the best to this publication of her Oxford dissertation. Moreover it is very important to stress that apart from the 237 pages of text proper, the book contains not only over 100 pages of often very informative notes with many side discussions, but
also a large amount of source material both in chapter 5 with the oracle questions from Dodona and especially in the large catalogue of binding curses (352–454). With all the Greek texts presented in translation, the book is a very useful instrument for introducing undergraduate students and others with an interest in the subject into these often very difficult texts.

Looking at the analysis from a methodological point of view, I am much less impressed. E. has very good intentions, and her attempt to draw the oracle questions and curse tablets out of anachronistic interpretations is sound and laudable. However, the problem is that her theoretical approach remains too unclear and not really integrated in the analysis. E. wants to explore the conception of risk and uncertainty among ordinary ancient Greek men and women. Yet the oracle questions and the curse tablets in themselves do not provide answers to this question. Instead of offering a profound discussion of relevant Greek concepts – such as e.g. kindunos – based on all relevant source material, literary as well as epigraphical, E. prefers to «read» the oracle questions and the curse tablets by using E. M. Forsters theory of «story» versus «plot». Her aim in using such an approach is to reconstruct the plot behind each oracle question and each curse tablet. But this operation takes care of only half of the issue concerning the text as a source to the question she asks, namely, the half relating to the circumstances which prompted the writer to act. There seem to be at least two reasons for this. First, many of the results of this investigation are very uncertain because these plots often must be reconstructed from very short and fragmentary texts. Second, what we can say about the causes does not really bring any new insights. Of course, E. is right in pointing out that travelling, marriage, cases at court, deceases etc. were all cases of risk and created uncertainty. But this is a commonplace which can be said about any people in any culture at any time. Unless it is shown empirically when and how they impinge on concrete historical phenomena or situations, ‘risk’, ‘uncertainty’ etc. remain too vague analytical categories, explaining almost everything and nothing. One could say that the project ends in a lot of talk about texts themselves and very little historical reconstruction of the past.

Copenhagen

Anders Holm Rasmussen
