



Eros.

PERSONIFIED ABSTRACTIONS

Concepts treated as living, supernatural beings.

Greek culture is replete with abstract notions that are personified and treated as divine beings. Some are emotions or forces such as Atê (Mental Blindness), Eros (Erotic Love), Himeros (Longing), Metis (Cleverness), Nemesis (Indignation), Peitho (Persuasion), Phobos (Fear), and Tychê (Fortune). Others are conditions such as Eirenê (Peace), Eris (Strife), Nikê (Victory), Nyx (Night), and Thanatos (Death). And still others are institutions such as Horkos (Oath) and Themis (Divine Law/Custom). The gender of the being is determined by

the grammatical gender of the noun; for example, *eros* is a masculine noun so that Eros is a male deity, and *eris* is a feminine noun so that Eris is a female deity. Since most abstract nouns in Greek are feminine, most personified abstractions are feminine.

Personified abstractions are especially frequent in mythic cosmogonies, in which a number of concepts may be placed in genealogical relationships with one another. Thus a large number of the characters in Hesiod's *Theogony* are personified abstractions grouped into families. Hesiod assigns most of the constituents of the universe to one of two descent-groups, the Chaos group and the Gaia (Earth) group, the descendants of Chaos being for the most part impalpable things that we regard as forces or conditions; that is, they are abstractions. Thus Chaos gave birth to Erebus and Nyx (Darkness and Night), who in turn begot Aither and Hemera (Brightness and Day). Night herself then produced many offspring including Moros (Doom), Thanatos (Death), Hypnos (Sleep), Oneiroi (Dreams), Momos (Blame), Moirai (Fates), Nemesis (Indignation), Geras (Old Age), and Eris (Strife), and Eris likewise had many children, among them Lethê (Forgetfulness), Limos (Famine), Phonoï (Killings), and Horkos (Oath).

Some personified abstractions do no more than fill a slot in a mythic genealogy or receive a passing mention by an author, whereas others play a role in a story and so are more personalized. For example, the goddess Eris (Strife) stirred up strife among the immortals by casting among them an apple that was to be given to the most beautiful goddess, an exquisitely destabilizing gesture that led ultimately to the Trojan War. The Moirai (Fates) came to Meleager's house several days after his birth and declared that he would live until a particular stick should be consumed by fire, a motif of central importance in the Meleager legend. In several stories, Thanatos (Death) stalks living beings in his eagerness to acquire additional souls for the realm of the dead, as when he came

to carry Sisyphos away. In this respect Thanatos and Hades are interchangeable. Indeed, when Alkestis was about to die, the particular deity who came to fetch her was Thanatos in one source (Euripides's *Alkestis*) and Hades in another (Apollodoros's *Library*). The same redundancy is found among the divine inciters of love; functionally, Thanatos is to Hades as Eros is to Aphroditê.

The role of certain personified abstractions is to accompany a major deity. Thus the entourage of the goddess Aphroditê may include Eros (Erotic Love) and Himeros (Longing), and the god Ares has his assistants Phobos (Fear) and Deimos (Terror). The satellites serve not only to signal the importance of the deity but also to externalize attributes of the deity and his or her sphere of influence. Aphroditê is the cause of love and longing in living creatures, just as fear and terror are inevitably present in warfare.

Not all the personified abstractions found in classical mythology received worship, nor do all deified abstractions honored in cult appear as characters in story. Thus the personified abstraction Freedom was a deity, had temples, and was represented on coins. She was conceived as being female, since the word for the concept "freedom" is grammatically feminine in both Greek (*eleutheria*) and Latin (*libertas*). The ultimate inspiration for the Statue of Liberty created by the French sculptor Frédéric-Auguste Bartholdi in 1886, she is familiar to every American today. But she appears in no ancient myth or legend.

See also Divine Guilds

Suggested reading:

Walter Burkert. *Greek Religion*, trans. John Raffan. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985, 184–186.

K. J. Dover. *Greek Popular Morality in the Time of Plato and Aristotle*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1994, 141–144.

Stewart Guthrie. *Faces in the Clouds: A New Theory of Religion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.

Kurt Heinemann. *Thanatos in Poesie und Kunst der Griechen*. Munich: Kastner and Callwey, 1913.



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