
Introduction

Personification, or prosopopeia, has enjoyed serious attention only in recent critical and literary theory. The readily spotted figure – through which a human identity or “face” is given to something not human – was for years automatically equated with “allegory.”¹ Moreover, personificational allegory was thought of as wooden, tedious, obvious, simple, and juvenile.² But a recrudescence in allegory theory, founded largely on more incisive readings of the classical rhetoricians and the Church Fathers, rehabilitated the mysterious narrative mode called allegory and in turn removed personification from its purview.³ Next, poststructuralist thinkers re-evaluated, along with allegory, the highly complex nature and key value of personification in literary discourse. Of late, prosopopeia has even come to enjoy theoretical primacy over irony and metaphor. Paul de Man has proclaimed it “the master trope of poetic discourse” (*Resistance* 48).

The present book aims to extend and enrich the current theoretical rehabilitation of personification begun by de Man, J. Hillis Miller, and others. Granted, the deconstructive theory of personification (like the deconstructive theory of “allegory”) seems to expand to the point where it encompasses *all* narrative or lyric. This book tries to reach a theoretical line of mediation between the poststructural posture wherein all kinds of poetic knowledge register an “allegorical” and “prosopopoetic” cognition, and the traditional critical posture that attends to canonically received (and for the most part pre-modern) allegorical texts. The first step in such a rethinking of personification must thus be a careful investigation of its formal nature, for topological *poetics* is certainly the methodological common ground shared by poststructural deconstruction and traditional grammatical or rhetorical theory and praxis. I contend that the trope, especially in the works of certain major authors, is sufficiently complex – as are irony, metaphor, metonymy, or catachresis – to warrant minute structural description. Such a description should provide the ar-

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-44539-9 - The Poetics of Personification

James J. Paxson

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The poetics of personification*

ticulation of a formal system or a set of laws that govern the creation and functions of personified characters – in short, a “poetics” of personification.

Ideally, this projected poetics should entail treating examples of literary personification from many different periods and national traditions, including an analysis of the historical fountainhead of Western literary personification: the personified abstractions seen on Achilles’ shield in the *Iliad* or those that people Hesiod’s imaginative genealogies in his *Theogony*. In this line of works stand Aeschylus’ *Prometheus Bound*, Book vi of Vergil’s *Aeneid*, the works of Martianus Capella, Boethius, Allan of Lille, Bernardus Silvestris, Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, and so on. For practical purposes it should suffice to establish the preliminary grounds for such a poetics upon the detailed examination of four canonically major authors who use a variety of methods in the invention of personification characters. The texts under study are Prudentius’ *Psychomachia*, two of Chaucer’s long allegorical dream poems as well as *The Nun’s Priest’s Tale*, Langland’s *Piers Plowman*, and Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*. The selection of texts and authors is not intended to posit a chronologically chartable, genetic line of evolution. Nor does it imply that the works of the four authors under discussion are, by necessity, superior to other examples from the allegorical tradition in a formally qualitative sense. That is, canonically “great” authors do not always employ tropes in cleverer, more profound ways. Texts of minor authors, works of popular culture (like modern cinematic cartoons), or bits of everyday speech for that matter, can contain personification figures of a complex nature. The texts in this book’s selection reveal paradigmatic employments of personification that best dramatize the formal codes which constitute the trope and that in turn advertise the limits of tropological formalization.

The first chapter of this study isolates the theoretical problem in terms of an historical survey of ideas about personification. Here, I consider the opinions of Aristotle and the classical rhetoricians Demetrius, Cicero, the *Rhetorica Ad Herennium* author, and Quintilian. I mention the work of major medieval writers on the subject, such as Bede and Geoffrey of Vinsauf. And I include theories offered by certain Renaissance thinkers, such as Erasmus, Henry Peacham, George Puttenham, or Richard Sherry. I also treat Enlightenment and Romantic theorists like Fontanier, Lord Kames, and Coleridge. The considerations of personification by twentieth-century theorists caps the

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-44539-9 - The Poetics of Personification

James J. Paxson

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

historical survey in chapter 1 but also punctuates the whole study. My intention here is to trace and compare the ways in which ideas about personification evolve through time, and to highlight theoretical treatments that *do* handle personification as a complex device. As a sideline, this comparative program supplies brief etymological points regarding the successive connotations of terms like “prosopopeia,” “conformatio,” or “personification.”

In line with the spirit of the diachronic sketch in chapter 1, the second chapter of the book reassesses the conventional terminology associated with personification. The subject cries out for rigorous taxonomy. Many literary characters who appear in personification narratives are automatically and decisively labeled “personifications.” Such a general type-label makes no distinction among the textual and ontological statuses of what might be radically different fictional entities. For example, the mute and blank characters whom Aeneas encounters at the gate of the underworld in Book Six of Vergil’s epic are poetically or formally different from the outspoken and minutely described figures who converse with and instruct the dreamer in *Piers Plowman*. Yet, conventional criticism treats these quite different categories of figural character invention as though they were the same. As the example shows, the *speaking* aspect of a prosopopeia is essential in describing a personification character’s essential status. Thus, a primary taxonomic point must be the presence, absence, or varieties of speech produced by such characters. Another primary point has to do with labels or names of personification figures: *are* they named? How fully? In what languages? Taxonomy is crucial to any effective formal poetics. The taxonomic tactic in this chapter centers, of course, on the structural distinction of personification used as a component of narrative *discourse* and as a component of narrative *story* or fabular, material event.

This distinction, in turn, shapes much of the book’s theoretical framework, which in some way addresses the thematization of or focalization on the coded structures of personification evinced in the works of four principal authors. Chapter 3 deals with the *Psychomachia*, and centers upon a narratological program analyzing “layers” or levels of diegesis in Prudentius’ narrative. This program of analysis also tries to account for the relationship, from the Apologetic and Patristic periods on, between personification and the traditional medieval four-level paradigm of literal and extra-literal signification.

From the topic of diegetic structuration in Prudentius’ poem, I move

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-44539-9 - The Poetics of Personification

James J. Paxson

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The poetics of personification*

in chapter 4 to the sketch of a phenomenological model that explains the textual “generation” of personification figures. (Rather than an apology for phenomenology as an epistemological mode, the chapter provides the framework for showing how personificational thinking in medieval literature presages modern philosophical or critical phenomenology.) Such characters, I will show, are figural indices of a psychically or spiritually diminished narrator. This argument involves a brief excursus into medieval notions of psychology and sin. I also show its application to problems of narrative structure and the thematic foregrounding, specifically in *The House of Fame* and *The Parliament of Fowls*, of images and ideas of pictorial art. Via a consequent discussion of narratorial “diminution” and a review of the philosophical notion of *acedia* or “sloth,” I take up a discussion of personification in chapter 5 of Langland’s *Piers Plowman*. In this chapter, I shall argue that the embedded dreams of this peculiar and complex Middle English poem correspond to layered diegetic registers. Taking the cue from the second chapter of my study, I also map out the variety of denominational methods Langland employs for naming the species of his figural characters. The chapter focuses on the uncovering and articulation of a precise proairetic code that programs the means by which Langland’s narrator, Will, recognizes, names, and interacts with various personification figures. This code is determined, of course, by the poem’s complex narratological structure.

Chapter 6 devotes itself to what tradition has undoubtedly cast as the grandest of personification narratives in English letters – *The Faerie Queene*. Clearly the fields of personification theory and Renaissance studies require a multi-volume study of the personification figures, their variety and variability, in Spenser’s poem. No doubt, my confined look at personification in two or so Books of *The Faerie Queene* will feel too brief given the vast scale of the poem. But my focal interest in this chapter falls upon several sites in the poem where Spenser, like his two innovative predecessors, self-consciously plays with and foregrounds the features of personification understood as an artificial, complex, literary trope. I first examine the final cantos of Book II, where Sir Guyon encounters such figures as Eumnestes (“Memory”) in Alma’s House of Temperance. In this section of his poem, Spenser constantly foregrounds and examines ideas and images of language, writing, texts, and textualized entities to which he gives human or other substantial form. I also examine cantos 11 and 12 of Book IV, in which we meet the peculiar pageant-procession of the

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-44539-9 - The Poetics of Personification

James J. Paxson

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

personified Rivers. This site in Spenser's poem offers a sustained examination of types of figural character invention and the problem of narrative temporality. I demonstrate the process by which Spenser's passages on the personified Rivers of the world deconstruct traditional formal notions of literary character, description, and narration. In addition, my discussions of characters including Error, Duessa, Orgoglio, Malbecco (Jealousy) and Death disclose how Spenser's text narrates the literalized moment of the "making" or "unmaking" of a personification figure.

By these examinations of Prudentius, Chaucer, Langland, and Spenser, I seek to show how these texts embody art that is far more sophisticated than the simple visual or functional verbal personification that had nearly turned serious critical inspection away from the face of the trope.⁴ Indeed, fewer and fewer thinkers today believe in the old "axiomatic association" between personification and allegory. But even misdirected wisdom finds its basis in *some* truth. Is there a direct and sometimes *necessary* connection between personification and allegory? Basing my conception of allegory on the most current, complex, insightful, and convincing theoretical models of this mysterious narrative mode, I attempt in my Conclusion to show how and why the use of personification figuration by Prudentius, Chaucer, Langland, and Spenser might well operate as the basis of narrative allegory. Because these authors handle the trope in elaborately self-reflexive and metafictional ways, their creative methods are crucial to the kind of genuine allegory described in current literary theory.⁵

Although the object of this study is to establish a formal poetics of personification based in part on the readings of four canonical Western authors, I end with a sketch of plausible theoretical models, not yet established, of the essential or ontological status of the trope as a master or key trope, a "metafigure." In this sketch, I consider personification as the trope or figure of several principles – from narration to characterization, from figuration itself to Derrida's concept of *relever* as a possible concomitant of the process he calls "metaphorization." Many of these ideas I develop as proposals or prospectuses for future directions in a total theory of personification. Chief among these proposals is the potential historical materialist implication of a long-range historical survey of literary personification. Such a historical program could explore how, when, and why, certain of the major features of personification figuration and fabulation arise when they do. For instance, what characteristics of the ideological

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-44539-9 - The Poetics of Personification

James J. Paxson

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The poetics of personification*

superstructure of late Rome inform the advent of literary *paysage moralisé* or the *bellum intestinum*? What characteristics of medieval ideology inform the debate or the pageant-procession topos? What, aside from grammatical gender, was responsible for the fact that *all* personification figures prior to the sixth century A.D. were exclusively and necessarily female? The primary aim of these concluding propositions is to show that a formal poetics is still far from being exhaustively descriptive of the nature of literary personification, one of the most curious and compelling effects in Western art and literature.

One more foundational assumption that underlies the interests of this study needs clarification at the outset. In examining personification figures that appear in Prudentius, Chaucer, Langland, and Spenser, I shall avoid those fantastic characters who are termed “gods.” The Olympian deities of Homer’s *Iliad* or Hesiod’s *Theogony* indeed seem to be embodied abstract concepts named in Greek that were adopted as the objects of ancient Achaean veneration. However, describing the historical origin of the gods who constitute an animistic or totemistic pantheon is an anthropological problem, not a literary or poetic one. At the close of his brilliant study of allegory and personification, Jon Whitman aptly identifies this special scholarly project:

In short, it is necessary to distinguish two meanings of the term “personification.” One refers to the practice of giving an *actual* personality to an abstraction. This practice has its origins in animism and ancient religion, and is called “personification” by modern theorists of religion and anthropology. (271)

For instance, when Joseph Campbell, in any one of his popular books on mythology, calls Isis a “personification” of procreative energy, he invokes this anthropological understanding of the term.⁶ Whitman goes on to distinguish this understanding from its more proper and familiar literary and rhetorical use:

The other meaning of “personification,” the one used throughout this study, is the historical sense of *prosopopoeia*. This refers to the practice of giving a consciously *fictional* personality to an abstraction, “impersonating” it. This rhetorical practice requires a separation between the literary pretense of a personality, and the actual state of affairs. Thus, we cannot properly speak of literary “personification” when Homer calls “fire” by the name of “Hephaestus” ... who is also described as a personal god. (271–72)

Even with this formal distinction in mind, Whitman still attends (14–20) to the appearance of deific, embodied abstractions in the *Iliad*,

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-44539-9 - The Poetics of Personification

James J. Paxson

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

perhaps because his study is structured as a historical genealogy of personification allegories that must have a chronological starting place. The present study closely adheres at least to Whitman's theoretical distinction. The move forecloses the need to look at pre-Christian literary texts that contain fantastic characters and embodiments that are most likely animistic entities. (Consequently, chapter 1 of this book bypasses theoretical discussions like Vico's analysis in *The New Science* [129 ff.] of the animistic and "personificational" origins of the gods.) It also forecloses the need to become absorbed in the gods or other mythical characters who frequently inhabit the works of Chaucer or Spenser. This is not to say that the study ignores a character like Venus in Chaucer's *The House of Fame*. Rather, she is examined only in structural relation to genuine personification characters – to those "embodied abstractions" which, as Whitman notes, had only a "fictional" and never an "actual" basis in reality. Characters designated as "gods," incidentally, might be more properly considered "numinous" figures. These constitute a category which I attempt, in chapter 2, to define in comparison to true personifications.

Still, the distinctions among gods, ghosts, genii, fantastic creatures, and personification characters were not always clear even to the principal theorists of classical, medieval, or Renaissance rhetoric. The historical discussion that follows will bear this out. It will also provide this study with a minimum currency of taxonomic insights and methodological departure points.

I

A history of personification theory

I

The sensible starting place for a theoretical investigation into personification would be a comprehensive historical survey of writings that discuss the trope. The *modern* critical voices placed in the Introduction of this study are, for the most part, theoretical devaluations of personification. These voices also represent the major positions in a critical dialogue that has emerged mainly in the service of the theoretical “rescue” of allegory as a privileged, superior, mysterious narrative mode. But a coordinate critical dialogue that treats personification as a valuable and sophisticated commodity must also be articulated as a history. This dialogue also has its inception in the rhetorical treatises of antiquity, and culminates in a collection of occasionally offbeat documents produced by a handful of contemporary literary and rhetorical theorists. Ideally, mapping this second dialogue would entail treating every recorded mention of the trope personification, however brief or matter-of-fact, from the era of Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* and forward through the history of Western grammatical and rhetorical theory. But such a compendious historical survey would not really serve to elucidate the true nature of personification; it might, on the contrary, support the theoretical camps that devalue the trope. This is because we would be faced with a mountain of summary, formulaic, aphoristic utterances about prosopopeia and its relatives. The uniformity and sheer mass of these utterances would defuse the ostensibly delicate and powerful virtue of the trope. Most “histories” of what is commonly conceived of as “rhetoric” themselves suffer from just such an obsession with the pathology of the compendium. The conception of rhetoric as a mountain of data that involves the sheer naming and identification of all conceivable tropes, schemes, figures, and topics of invention is the degenerative legacy of classical

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-44539-9 - The Poetics of Personification

James J. Paxson

Excerpt

[More information](#)*History of personification theory*

logic and rhetoric in the Middle Ages and after. As Richard McKeon explains:

The history of rhetoric as it has been written since the Renaissance is ... in part the distressing record of the obtuseness of writers who failed to study the classics and to apply rhetoric to literature, and in part the monotonous enumeration of doctrines, or preferably *sentences*, repeated from Cicero or commentators on Cicero. (260)

In the Middle Ages, rhetoric failed to hold as its primary interest the discovery, invention, and implication of topics and arguments; rather, it pursued the taxonomic obsession best suited to the *compilatio* or the *scholia* formats of treatise composition. Medieval, Renaissance, and Neoclassical rhetorics provided collections of sentences and terse passages that named any conceivable number of tropes and figures. These collections were supplemented with literary examples originally conceived by Cicero or Quintilian. The two great Roman rhetoricians, in fact, are the seminal sources for medieval rhetoricians. McKeon continues:

Scholarly labors have reconstructed only a brief and equivocal history for rhetoric during the Middle Ages. The development consists of slight and original increments of erudition in the compendia composed from the fourth to the ninth century – derived largely from the *De Inventione* of Cicero and the *Ad Herennium* – and in later commentaries and treatises to the elaboration of coherent and complex doctrines in the twelfth century based on Quintilian and the later rhetorical works of Cicero, the *Orator*, the *De oratore*, and the *Topica*. (260)

Most of the entries, then, in a tentative history of the trope personification would repeat the original musings of Demetrius, Cicero, the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* author, and Quintilian. Only after “rhetoric disappears when knowledge of it is at a maximum” (McKeon 260), would we find the possibility of entirely fresh and original theoretical considerations of personification. Historically, this point of maximization is located by Paul Ricoeur and Tzvetan Todorov in the writings of the “last rhetorician in Europe,” Pierre Fontanier (*Rule 4; Symbol 69–70*). The rigorously formal and aesthetic appraisal of tropes and figures is coterminous only with the rise of modern literary criticism. (Earlier, of course, the description and appraisal of tropes was often deferred from rhetoric to grammar; see Copeland 13–17.) Nonetheless, a selective historical survey of theories and ideas about

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-44539-9 - The Poetics of Personification

James J. Paxson

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The poetics of personification*

personification should prove illuminating. The project, however, requires acknowledgement of some problems involved in writing *any* kind of history, whether of forms, ideas, topoi, or texts.

Writing a history of the trope personification might automatically assume the tactic of *literary history* as it has been conceived during much of the twentieth century. Tropes and figures, as discreet formal entities, can be likened to texts. The temptation to see them as precursors or successors in a lengthy chronological chain is always present. We could fall prey to the impulse of seeing the history of a given trope as a *genetic* order in which earlier, literary implementations or theoretical conceptions of the trope evolve into richer, more complex and mature, later versions – versions made possible by the more highly evolved temperaments of creative men and women in chronologically later periods. A genetic history of tropes would parallel the genetic or organic history of literary texts of the kind criticized by R. S. Crane (*History* 32–33). Yet, in abandoning the organic models of literary history offered by, say, Taine or Cazamian, Crane inadvertently articulates the design of a history of figures which valorizes the function of the formally internal properties of texts. He indeed understands an evolution, through history, of modes, genres, forms, and by extension, formal figures and tropes (Sprinker 126–33, 145). In fact, Crane specifically mentions the chronological evolution of figures: “We may thus say theoretically ... that there is a tendency in the literary arts to move from ... simple metaphors to complex and difficult ones” (*History* 33). Even though Crane admits that “in any given situation in history the [evolutionary] order may be reversed,” he has programmed his history of forms and figures as a genealogy. Crane’s genealogy, directed to a perfective telos and self-generating, is not unlike the pervasive phylogenetic image of history identified by de Man, in “Literary History and Literary Modernity,” as a “temporal hierarchy that resembles a parental structure” (*Blindness* 164). But the advents and implementations of tropes like personification, through history, hardly conform to a phylogenetic model.

Not only are individual figures resistant to an evolutionary model, so are any historically successive conceptions of *figuration* in general. The successive and historically determined statuses of figuration or tropology are impossible to calculate according to a linear calendar of Western intellectual history. That is, the ethical and axiological valorization of figures that are conceived either as poetic forms or as affective vehicles cannot be made parallel to sequentially successive