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James J. Paxson

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Literary personification has long been taken for granted as an important aspect of Western narrative; Paul de Man has given it still greater prominence as 'the master trope of poetic discourse.' James Paxson here offers a much-needed critical and theoretical appraisal of personification in the light of poststructuralist thought and theory. *The poetics of personification* provides a historical reassessment of early theories, together with a sustained account of how literary personification works through an examination of narratological and semiotic codes and structures in the allegorical texts of Prudentius, Chaucer, Langland and Spenser. The device turns out to be anything but an aberration, oddity, or barbarism, from ancient, medieval, or early modern literature. Rather, it works as a complex artistic tool for revealing and advertizing the problems and limits inherent in narration in particular and poetic or verbal creation in general.

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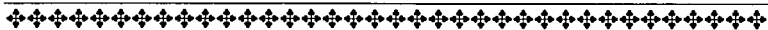
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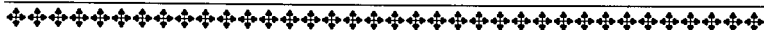
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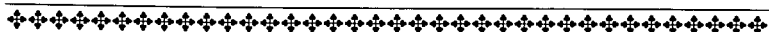
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# The poetics of personification



JAMES J. PAXSON

*Iona College, New Rochelle*



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*For my parents,  
Marge and Bud Paxson*

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## Preface

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As I completed the final revisions of *The Poetics of Personification*, I saw more and more the need to continue work on this strange device in a range of purviews only touched on in this study. I especially care to persist in examining the cultural and public constructions of personification or rhetorical embodiment in our own political and popular culture. Although I argue in this book that we have moved past a historical era when personificational literature was powerful and esteemed, I have looked suspiciously and curiously at governmental rhetoric of late: no one could miss the significance of President George Bush's charges against the One Evil Man, Saddam Hussein, who personified *all* the miseries of the 1990 Persian Gulf War and all the ills of contemporary Iraq. I therefore hope that this specialized book, which largely addresses a readership interested in literary theory (and in the stakes of deconstruction, in particular) and medieval allegorical literature, will prompt further interest in the continuing global implications of figural language and thought in a decisively post-modern era.

The essential frame of this book began as my doctoral dissertation which I completed while holding a State University of New York Dissertation Fellowship during 1988–89. I thank, first and foremost, my wife Tammy for helping me find the time to read, write, and revise during that year and over the subsequent three years, while we were more than busy – both working and trying to raise our two babies, Maggie and John. I give special thanks to Rose A. Zimbaro, Martin Stevens, Michael Sprinker, and Thomas E. Maresca for reading and commenting on the three or so drafts that this thing has been through. I am indebted to Tom Maresca for our numerous discussions on allegory and personification; indeed, he prompted my strong interest in allegory theory in general. To my friend Jeffrey Williams I also give a special thank you. Jeff and I have had many talks – often long distance – on the current state of theory and the profession, on



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narratology, and on deconstruction. I wish also to extend thanks to an informal – and sempiternal, so it seems – study group I join regularly at Columbia University: Christopher Baswell, Sealy Gilles, Joan Haahr, Robert W. Hanning, Sandra Pierson Prior, Nancy Reale, Anne Schotter, Robert Stein, and Sylvia Tomasch. These generous and supportive persons have heard and read bits and pieces of this project as it came together. I am likewise grateful to my colleague at Iona College, Thomas Pendleton, with whom I endlessly discuss the problems of personification in Shakespeare – a peculiar critical problem that will warrant its own study as fast as I can get into it! Like the shimmering Body Politic of medieval political theory, this study offers a Face for the help from a legion of friends, colleagues, and teachers.