

Greek mythology and medical and psychiatric terminology

Loukas Athanasiadis

A great number of terms in modern psychiatry, medicine and related disciplines originate from the Greek, including pathology, schizophrenia, ophthalmology, gynaecology, anatomy, pharmacology, biology, hepatology, homeopathy, allopathy and many others. There are also many terms that originate from figures from ancient Greek mythology (or the Greek words related to those figures) and I think that it might be interesting to take a look at some of them.

Psyche means 'soul' in Greek and she gave her names to terms like psychiatry (medicine of the soul), psychology, etc. *Psyche* was a mortal girl with whom *Eros* ('love', he gave his name to erotomania, etc.) fell in love. *Eros's* mother *Aphrodite* had forbidden him to see mortal girls. He defied her order and started seeing *Psyche* in the dark, while she was not allowed to ask his name or look at his face. When she disobeyed him and lit a lamp, *Eros* fled away. *Psyche* then wandered long in search of him, they were eventually united and, even better, she became immortal.

Aphrodite was the goddess of beauty, daughter of *Diane* and *Jupiter*, and sprang from the foam of the sea at *Cyprus*. She was married to the ugly god *Hephaestus* and had numerous affairs. She gave her name to the aphrodisiacs and as *Venus* (her Latin name) to the venereal diseases.

Phobos ('fear' in Greek), from whose name the phobias derive, was another son of *Aphrodite*. Officially he was the son of *Hephaestus*, however his real father was *Ares* the god of war, whom he used to accompany into battle.

Hygeia (health) gave her name to terms like hygiene and hygienic. She was the daughter of the famous physician *Asclepius*, god of medicine.

The piece of the elastic membrane to the entrance to the vagina is called after *Hymen* or *Hymenaeus*. He was the son of *Dionysus* and *Aphrodite* and the god of marriage.

Syrinx was a beautiful nymph who was turned to a tuft of reeds when the satyr *Pan* tried to rape her. The air sounding through the reeds produced a plaintive melody and a musical instrument was named after her. The syringe used in injections might bear a connection.

Narcissus gave his name to narcissism (extreme self-love based on an idealised self-image). He was a young man extremely proud of his beauty and indifferent to the emotions of those who fell in love with him. A goddess cursed him to feel what it is to love and get nothing in return. He subsequently fell in love with his own image when he saw his reflection in the water of a fountain, and believed that this image belonged to a spirit. Every time he tried to embrace the image it disappeared and appeared without saying a word. At the end the desperate *Narcissus* died and was turned into a flower that still bears his name.

Echo was a very attractive young nymph who always wanted to have the last word. One day she deceived the goddess *Juno*, who then passed a sentence upon her not to be able to speak but only to reply by repeating the last words of the person talking to her. When *Echo* fell in love with *Narcissus* she was unable to express her feelings and she could only repeat his last words – the affair was of course very short-lived! *Echo* gave her name to *echolalia* (almost automatic repetition of words or phrases heard) and *echopraxia* (involuntary mimicking of another's movements).

Priapism is named after *Priapus*. He was the god of reproductive power and fertility and was later regarded as the chief deity of lasciviousness and obscenity.

Sappho was a (real person), a poetess who wrote lyrical poems about sex and love, probably between women. She lived on the island of *Lesbos* (*Mitilini*) which was named after the mythical *Lesbos* the son of *Lapithes*. From *Lesbos* and *Sappho* are derived the words *lesbianism* and *sapphism*.

Hypnus was probably the son of *Nyx* (*Night*) and *Erebus* and twin brother of *Thanatos* (*Death*). His name in Greek means 'sleep'. *Hypnosis*, *hypnagogic* phenomena, etc. have the same root.

Nyx was also the mother of *Geras* (*old age*) from whose name terms such as *geriatric medicine* originate.

Morpheus was one of *Hypnus's* 1000 children. The drug *morphine* was named after him.

Mania was the personification of madness.

Lethe (oblivion) was the daughter of Eris and she gave her name to the river of oblivion in the underworld. Her name has the same root as the terms lethargy and lethargic.

Mnemosyne was a Titaness, daughter of Uranus and Gaia and the personification of memory. Amnesia, amnesic, etc. are related terms.

The word *hebe* (adolescence) is the root of the term hebephrenic. *Hebe* was the daughter of the goddess Hera, wife of Heracles and personification of youth.

Another son of Aphrodite was *Hermaphroditus*. He was a very handsome young man with whom the nymph Salmacis fell in love. One day he got undressed and plunged into the lake of Salmacis. When she tried to embrace him Hermaphroditus did not like it and tried to push her away. She then prayed to the gods to cause their bodies never to be separated. That eventually happened and an hermaphrodite was born.

The *Satyrs* gave their name to satyriasis (obsessive insatiable desire for sexual gratification). They were half men (upper part) and half goats (lower part) and became infamous for their lasciviousness and sexual appetite.

King Laius of Thebes ordered his newborn son *Oedipus* to be put to death following an oracle's pronouncement that Oedipus would finally kill

him. However, Oedipus survived and years later met, had an argument with and killed his father (without knowing his identity). He then solved the riddle of the Sphinx and married his mother Jocasta. When he found out what happened (and his mother killed herself) he put out his eyes. His story has been told in *Oedipus the King*, *Antigone*, and *Oedipus in Colonus* by Sophocles and *Seven against Thebes* by Aeschylus. Sigmund Freud named his famous complex after Oedipus.

The *Electra* complex refers to the erotic attachment of a daughter to her father and is named after the daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra. Electra persuaded her brother Orestes to kill their mother and her lover Aegisthus, who had previously killed Agamemnon.

As you can see there is usually a remarkable resonance between the characteristics of the figures in Greek mythology and the conditions and behaviours that were named after them in the later years.

Further reading

- GRIMAL, P. (1990) *A Concise Dictionary of Classical Mythology*, London: Blackwell.
LASS, A., KIREMIDJIAN, D. & GOLDSTEIN, R. (1987) *Dictionary of Classical and Literary Allusion*, Ware: Wordsworth.