

Greek in English

Kron

To the Ancient Greeks, philosophy (from *philos* “loving” and *sophia* “skill, wisdom”) encompassed logic, science, ethics, politics, psychology, and even poetics. Like their art and architecture, Greek thought is concerned with order and harmony; it has provided the rational foundations of Western civilization. Indeed, the concept of democracy is Greek (from *demos* “people, population” and *kratos* “rule, strength, might”). Under the great statesman Pericles (c. 495–429 B.C.E.), the people of Athens instituted the first constitution, an assembly of 500 senators, and a system of trial by jury. In addition, Greek festivals in honor of the wine and fertility god Dionysus gave birth to the theater of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. The very words “theater,” “drama,” “comedy,” and “tragedy” are all gifts of the Greeks.

Though we have already seen the influence of Ancient Greek on the English language in some earlier chapters, there are still a number of terms that are so pungent and precise that they survive in our vocabulary to this day. In many cases, Greek terms embody abstract concepts that are otherwise hard to describe in English. Studying these lists will give you some insight into the Greek mind and perhaps help you to understand the roots of European culture, while also greatly enhancing your ability to express your own ideas.

acedia (ə sē'dē ə) listlessness, sloth; indifference; apathy.

alpha and omega (al'fə and ō mā'gə, ō mē'gə) the beginning and the end; the basic or essential elements.

anathema (ə nath'ə mə) detested or loathed thing or person; curse.

anomie (an'ə mē') a sense of dislocation; alienation; despair.

catharsis (kə thär'sis) a purging of emotion or release of emotional tensions.

charisma (kə riz'mə) personal magnetism; the capacity to lead or inspire others.

despot (des'pət, -pot) absolute ruler; tyrant or oppressor.

diatribe (dī'ə trīb') a bitter denunciation; abusive criticism.

enigma (ə nig'mə) puzzle, riddle; a person or thing of a confusing and contradictory nature.

ephemera (i fem'ər ə) short-lived or transitory things.

epiphany (i pif'ə nē) revelation; sudden, intuitive insight into reality.

epitome (i pit'ə mē) embodiment; a person or thing that is typical of a whole class.

ethos (ē'thos, ē'thōs) the fundamental character or spirit of a culture; distinguishing character or disposition of a group.

euphoria (yōō fôr'ē ə) elation; strong feeling of happiness, confidence, or well-being.

exegesis (ek'si jē'sis) a critical explanation or interpretation, especially of a text.

halcyon (hal'sē ən) happy, joyful, or carefree; prosperous; calm, peaceful, or tranquil.

hedonist (hēd'n ist) a person who is devoted to self-gratification as a way of life; pleasure-seeker.

hoi polloi (hoi' pə loi') the common people; the masses.

hubris (hyōō'bris, hōō'-) excessive pride or self-confidence; arrogance.

iota (ī ō'tə) a very small quantity; jot; whit.

metamorphosis (met'ə mōr'fə sis) transformation; profound or complete change.

miasma (mī az'mə) noxious fumes; poisonous effluvia; a dangerous, foreboding, or deathlike influence or atmosphere.

myriad (mir'ē əd) of an indefinitely great number; innumerable.

omphalos (om'fə ləs) navel; central point.

panacea (pan'ə sē'ə) cure-all; a solution for all difficulties.

paradigm (par'ə dīm') an example serving as a model; pattern.

pantheon (pan'thē on') the realm of the heroes or idols of any group; illustrious leaders.

pathos (pā'thos, -thōs) pity; compassion; suffering.

pedagogue (ped'ə gog', -gôg') a teacher; a person who is pedantic, dogmatic, and formal.

plethora (pleth'ər ə) overabundance; excess; a great number.

protagonist (prō tag'ə nist) an actor who plays the main role; the chief proponent or leader of a movement or cause.

psyche (sī'kē) the human soul, spirit, or mind.

stigma (stig'mə) a stain or reproach on one's reputation; a mark or defect of a disease.

stasis (stā'sis) equilibrium or inactivity; stagnation.

trauma (trou'mə, trô'-) wound or shock; a wrenching or distressing experience.

troglydite (trog'lə dīt') cave dweller or Neanderthal; brutal or degraded person; reactionary.

WORDS FROM CLASSICAL MYTHOLOGY AND LITERATURE

Classical mythology and literature have inspired many common English words. Hector, the hero of Homer's *ILLAD*, for instance, was the champion of the Trojans in their war against the Greeks. The embodiment of every virtue both on and off the battlefield, *Hector* was first used in Middle English to personify 'a valiant warrior'. His reputation remained intact until the second half of the seventeenth century when his name was uncharacteristically applied to well-off jobs who, for amusement, intimidated folk as they went about their business on the streets of London. How the Greek hero fell to these depths is a mystery, but his name lives on in English in the form of the verb *to hector*, 'to behave in a blustering and intimidating fashion', which was coined at this time.

Panic finds its source in a divine bully. As the dangerous brooding god of forests and shepherds, Pan roamed the valleys and mountains. Travellers were terrified of him and believed him to be the source of any eerie sound issuing from remote regions of the countryside. The Greeks accordingly described an attack of fear where there was no obvious reason for it as *pānikos*, 'of Pan'. The adjective *panic* (as in *panic groan*) came into English at the beginning of the seventeenth century by way of French *panique* and Modern Latin *pānicus*, and was used as a noun in the modern sense from the early eighteenth century.

Pan was also a fertility god who forced his attentions upon either sex. On one occasion the beautiful nymph Syrinx escaped his lustful advances when she was changed into a bed of reeds. It was from these reeds that the god made his pan-pipes, traditionally played by shepherds. The instrument was known as *surigx* in

Greek, a word which also denoted 'tube'. This was borrowed into Latin as *syrinx* and the altered Late Latin form *syringa* ultimately became English *syringe*. The nymph's name is also perpetuated in the Latin term for the lilac and mock-orange bushes, *syringa*, since shepherds' pipes were once made from them.

In spite of Pan's high libido, it was the Greek god Eros who was the personification of sexual love. Said to be the son of Ares, god of war, and Aphrodite, goddess of love, his nature reflected that of both parents. Early classical literature emphasises both his power over people and his cruelty towards them. In early visual art, his facial features and athletic physique are physical perfection. From *erōs*, 'sexual desire', the Greeks derived *erōtikos*, 'pertaining to sexual love', and this adjective came into English in the mid-seventeenth century as *erotic*. The derivatives *erotica* and *eroticise* date from the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries respectively.

Aphrodite was a faithless wife and a bad example to her son. She had the power of making others as sexually irresistible as herself. From her name, Greek derived the adjective *aphrodisiakos*, 'lustful', from which English derived *aphrodisiac* in the early eighteenth century.

Eros was, in fact, born of illegitimate passion, for Aphrodite was married to Hephaestos, the god of fire and smelting, whom the Romans knew as *Volcānus* or *Vulcan*. Italian borrowed his Latin name as *volcano* to denote a 'mountain which discharges fire and molten matter', and this term was taken into English in the early seventeenth century.