Abstract: What is a Muse?

The Muses play a central role in Greek culture as deities of poetry, song, music and dance, who preside over the realm of *mousike*. In this paper I will look at their mythology, their role in the Olympian pantheon, their connection with nymphs, their birth from Mnemosyne, and the traditions concerning their genealogy, names and number. A key text will be the proem to Hesiod’s *Theogony* in which the nine Muses are given individual names. But despite the individuality of their names, we cannot at this stage speak of single Muses having individual spheres of competence; rather they exist as a plurality, as like-minded sisters, one implying all the others. Like many other female collectives, such as the Graces, they are envisaged as a group whose qualities and attributes are interchangeable. One of the characteristics of the Muses in general is their flexibility, for they remain somewhat shadowy figures, and the traditions that surround them are unusually varied. They are goddesses who, like all other Greek divinities, are jealous of their powers (witness the savage punishment of Thamyris who dared to challenge their superiority). And yet at the same time one of their main functions is to inspire poets, to act as a channel of communication between the human world and that of the gods. The question of how far poets and their audiences continued to believe in the Muses as religious entities is much debated, and discussions of the Muses in Hellenistic and Roman poetry generally speak in terms of decline, of the Muse becoming a literary convention. But the complexity and sophistication of Muse imagery in ancient poetry should make us hesitate to speak of ‘mere literary convention’, of emptiness and cliché in relation to the figure of the Muse: to assume that the Muses lose their meaning because their religious significance declines is to underestimate the power of metaphor. Even today when we no longer believe in the divine chorus of the Muses, the image of the Muse lives on as a metaphor for inspiration and artistic creativity whose processes are essentially mysterious.

It is important to remember, however, that the Muses were not only goddesses of poetry. Their sphere was *mousike*, the basis of culture in the early period, and since education or *paideia* was based on *mousike* the Muses rapidly became associated with education. With the demise of the song culture and the rise of prose forms (oratory, philosophy and history) in the classical period, the function of the Muses changed: they continued to inspire poets, and Plato appropriated them for the new discipline of philosophy, but rhetoric and history dispensed with them. Nevertheless the Muses’ association with education persisted, and in the Hellenistic world we see a development of their role as goddesses who preside over education, scholarship and learning. This is exemplified in the founding of the Museum at Alexandria, which was organised as a centre for the cultivation and worship of the Muses, with a so-called ‘priest of the Muses’ at its head. It was also during the Hellenistic period that the functions of the nine Muses began to be differentiated one from another. We can see the beginnings of this process already in Plato (in the *Phaedrus* where Terpsichore, Erato, Calliope and Urania are assigned specific provinces) but it really gets under way with Alexandrian scholarship and its penchant for categorisation and order. Hesiod’s naming of the nine Muses in the *Theogony* played a key role here.
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