

A Dictionary of Literary Symbols

Michael Ferber



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A Dictionary of Literary Symbols

A

Absinthe *see* **Wormwood**

Adder *see* **Serpent**

Aeolian harp The aeolian harp (or lyre) or wind harp was invented by the German Jesuit Athanasius Kircher and described by him in 1650. It is a long, narrow wooden box with a thin belly and with eight to twelve strings stretched over two bridges and tuned in unison; it is to be placed in a window (or a grotto) where the wind will draw out a harmonious sound. (Aeolus is the Greek king in charge of the winds; he first appears in Homer's *Odyssey* 10.) In the next century James Oswald, a Scots composer and cellist, made one, and it soon became well known.

It just as soon became an irresistible poetic symbol, first in English, then in French and German. James Thomson described the harp in *The Castle of Indolence*: "A certain Musick, never known before, / Here sooth'd the pensive melancholy Mind; / Full easily obtain'd. Behoves no more, / But sidelong, to the gently-waving Wind, / To lay the well-tun'd Instrument reclin'd; / From which, with airy flying Fingers light, / Beyond each mortal Touch the most refin'd, / The God of Winds drew Sounds of deep Delight: / Whence, with just Cause, *The Harp of Aeolus* it hight" (1.352–60). Thomson also wrote an "Ode on Aeolus's Harp." It was already so well known by the 1750s that the opening line of Gray's "Progress of Poetry" – "Awake, Aeolian lyre, awake" – was misconstrued; Gray added a note quoting Pindar's "Aeolian song" and "Aeolian strings" to make clear that he was referring to a mode of Greek music, not the wind harp. (To the ancients, however, "Aeolian lyre" might refer to Sappho and Alcaeus, whose lyrics were in the Aeolian dialect of Greek.)

In poetry any harp can become an aeolian harp if suspended in the open air. Alluding to Psalm 137, where the exiled Jews "hanged our harps upon the willows" by the rivers of Babylon, William Cowper ends his long poem "Expostulation" by calling on his muse to "hang this harp upon yon aged beech, / Still murm'ring with the solemn truths I teach" (718–19).

Among the English Romantics the wind harp became a favorite image, capable of many extensions. In "The Eolian Harp," perhaps the most extended poetic treatment of the subject, Coleridge is prompted by the harp's "soft floating witchery of sound" (20) to consider "the one Life within us and abroad, / Which meets all motion and becomes its soul" (26–27), and then speculates: "And what if all of animated nature / Be but organic Harps diversely fram'd, / That tremble into thought, as

o'er them sweeps / Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze, / At once the Soul of each, and God of all?" (44–48). Coleridge may have been influenced by the associationist psychology of David Hartley, according to whom sensation depends on "vibrations" carried by the nerves to the brain, where new but fainter vibrations are created. Diderot, in *D'Alembert's Dream*, has a similar but more explicitly musical model of sensation and memory, as does Herder, in *Kalligone*.

Both Wordsworth and Coleridge used the metaphor of the internal breeze or breath responding to the inspiration of a natural wind. So Wordsworth begins the 1805 *Prelude*, "Oh there is blessing in this gentle breeze," where the breeze serves as a kind of epic muse; a little later he reflects, "For I, methought, while the sweet breath of Heaven / Was blowing on my body, felt within / A corresponding mild creative breeze, / A vital breeze . . ." (41–44) and then likens himself to an aeolian harp (103–07). In "Dejection," Coleridge compares himself to an "AEolian lute, / Which better far were mute" (7–8).

Shelley has frequent recourse to the image (e.g., *Queen Mab* 1.52–53, *Alastor* 42–45, 667–68) and extends it in interesting ways. It is quietly implicit in *Queen Mab* 8.19–20: "The dulcet music swelled / Concordant with the life-strings of the soul." He develops an idea in Coleridge's "Dejection," where the raving wind is told that a crag or tree or grove would make fitter instruments than the lute, by imagining that the winds come to the pines to hear the harmony of their swinging ("Mont Blanc" 20–24); in his "Ode to the West Wind" he implores the wind to "Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is" (57). In his "Defence of Poetry," Shelley explicitly likens man to an aeolian lyre, but adds "there is a principle within the human being . . . which acts otherwise than in the lyre, and produces not melody, alone, but harmony, by an internal adjustment of the sounds or motions thus excited to the impressions which excite them."

The aeolian harp enters French poetry with André Chénier's *Elégies* (no. 22): "I am the absolute owner of my memory; / I lend it a voice, powerful magician, / Like an aeolian harp in the evening breezes, / And each of my senses resounds to this voice." It appears as similes in the influential romantic novels *Les Natchez* by Chateaubriand and *Corinne* by Germaine de Staël.

In Germany, Hölderlin in "Die Wanderung" ("The Migration") makes the link Shelley makes: "and the forests / All rustled, every lyre / In unison / At heaven's gentle touch" (trans. Sieburth). Goethe stages a brief "Conversation" between two Aeolian harps, male and female, and Schiller alludes to the harp in "The Dignity of Women." The song of Ariel that opens Goethe's *Faust, Part II* is accompanied by aeolian harps. Half a century later Mörike writes "To an Aeolian Harp," where the wind blows from the green tomb of "the youth I loved so much": "As the wind gusts more briskly, / A lovely cry of the harp / Repeats, to my sweet dismay, / The sudden emotion of my soul." The Russian poet Tyutchev hears a harp at midnight grieving like a fallen angel; for a moment we feel faith and joy, "as if the sky flowed through our veins," but it cannot last, and we sink back into "wearisome dreams" ("The Gleam", trans. Bidney).

In America, Emerson praises the one sure musician whose wisdom will not fail, the Aeolian harp, which “trembles to the cosmic breath” and which alone of all poets can utter “These syllables that Nature spoke” (“The Harp”). Thoreau wrote “Rumors from an Aeolian Harp,” a song *from* a harp, not about one, and in *Walden* he employs the metaphor several times. As a theme or allusion, the harp seems to have lingered longer in America than elsewhere, appearing as late as 1888 in a poem by Melville, “The Aeolian Harp at the Surf Inn.”

Kircher noted that several sounds may be produced by one string, suggesting that the string is to the wind as a prism to light, breaking up a unified motion or essence into its component parts. William Jones developed the theory that “the Aeolian harp may be considered as an air-prism.” That idea may account for the connection between the Aeolian harp and the “Harp of Memnon,” which was thought to be concealed within a colossal statue of an Egyptian pharaoh and would sound when the first ray of sunlight struck it each morning. “For as old Memnon’s image,” Akenside writes, “long renown’d / By fabling Nilus, to the quivering touch / Of Titan’s ray, with each repulsive string / Consenting, sounded through the warbling air / Unbidden strains; even so did Nature’s hand / To certain species of external things, / Attune the finer organs of the mind” (*Pleasures of Imagination* 109–15). Amelia Opie mentions Memnon’s harp in her “Stanzas Written under Aeolus’ Harp.” Byron lightly alludes to Memnon, “the Ethiop king / Whose statue turns a harper once a day” (*Deformed Transformed* 1.531–32).

At least two composers have written music “for” an Aeolian harp: the Romantics Berlioz, in his *Lélio* (opus 14b), and Chopin, in his Etude opus 25, no. 1.

Air *see* **Breath, Wind**

Albatross The albatross, of which there are several species, is a large web-footed bird with a hooked beak and narrow wings, found mainly in the southern oceans. The white Wandering Albatross, with a wing span of thirteen feet, is the best known; when it follows a ship it is a striking sight, and sailors have long considered it a bird of good omen.

The first half of the name seems to derive from Latin *albus*, “white,” but the b was inserted into “alcatras,” from Portuguese *alcatraz*, used of the albatross, cormorant, frigate bird, or pelican, from Arabic *al-ghattas*, the white-tailed sea-eagle.

As early as the sixth century there are records of the bird following ships. The most famous albatross in literature is the one in Coleridge’s *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*; since then “albatross” has come to mean a burden of guilt or sin. Melville, in *Moby-Dick*, chapter 42, has a memorable description of an albatross. Baudelaire, in *L’Albatros*, likens a poet, “exiled on the ground,” his wings clipped, to an albatross captured by sailors.

Almond The almond tree blooms earlier than any other – as early as January in Palestine, March in England; it is *prima omnium*, “first of all,” according

to Pliny (*Natural History* 16.103). It can thus symbolize spring's arrival, or more precisely a prophecy of its arrival.

The Lord asks Jeremiah what he sees, and he replies, "I see a rod of an almond tree." The Lord says, "Thou hast well seen: for I will hasten my word to perform it" (Jer. 1.11–12). Rather mysterious in English, this passage depends on a Hebrew pun on "almond" (*shaqed*) and "hasten" (or "watch," "be diligent") (*shoqed*): almonds are watchful, hastening to blossom. "'Tis a fair tree, the almond-tree: there Spring / Shews the first promise of her rosy wreath," as Letitia Landon writes ("Death in the Flower" 1–2). Shelley makes a "lightning-blasted almond-tree" which nonetheless scatters blossoms stand for the renewal of hope after the defeat of the prophetic French Revolution (*PU* 2.1.134–35).

Calderón brings out the notion of premature blossoming. Segismund wants no more false displays "that one gust / Can scatter like the almond tree in flower, / Whose rosy buds, without advice or warning, / Dawn in the air too soon" (*Life is a Dream* 3.3.2330–33; trans. Campbell).

The rod of Aaron is made from an almond tree; when it alone among all the other rods flowers and yields almonds, it is a sign of the Lord's favor: Aaron is chosen to be priest (Num. 17.1–10). This passage lies behind artists' use of an almond-shaped aureole, the mandorla (Italian for "almond"), behind representations of Christ and Mary, the chosen ones.

The white blossoms of the almond tree suggested hair to the author of Ecclesiastes: "the almond tree shall flourish" means "their hair shall turn white" as they grow old (12.5). In the last part of "Of the Four Ages of Man," Anne Bradstreet explains, "Mine Almond tree, grey hairs, doe flourish now" (417).

Amaranth The amaranth or amaranthus is an eternal flower. The word is a "correction" of the Greek participle *amarantos*, "unfading"; taken as a noun naming a flower the ending was respelled as if it were *anthos*, "flower." Lucian describes a fresco painting of a flowery meadow in spring which, as a painting, is thus "eternal spring and unfading (*amarantos*) meadow" ("The Hall" 9). Peter uses it twice in his first letter: through the resurrection we are begotten again to an inheritance "that fadeth not away" (1.4), and we shall receive "a crown of glory that fadeth not away" (5.4). Milton's angels wear crowns woven with amaranth, "Immortal Amarant, a Flow'r which once / In Paradise, fast by the tree of life / Began to bloom, but soon for man's offence / To heaven removed" (*PL* 3.353–56). Milton made it so distinctively the flower of Paradise (lost) that Tennyson has a painter describe a flower that "only blooms in heaven / With Milton's amaranth" ("Romney's Remorse" 106).

In English poetry, then, it became symbolic of Paradise or eternity and of the Christian hope of salvation. So Cowper writes "Hope . . . / On steady wings sails through th'immense abyss, / Plucks amarantine joys from bow'rs of bliss" ("Hope" 161–64). Wordsworth claims that the imagination has the power "to pluck the amarantine flower / Of Faith" (sonnet: "Weak is the will of Man"). The Prometheus of the non-Christian Shelley "waked the legioned hopes / Which sleep within

folded Elysian flowers, / Nepenthe, Moly, Amaranth, fadeless blooms” (PU 2.4.59–61). So when Coleridge, in his poignant “Work without Hope,” writes, “Well I ken the banks where amaranths blow, / . . . / Bloom, O ye amaranths! bloom for whom ye may, / For me ye bloom not,” we know it is not an earthly meadow he has lost; he is in spiritual despair.

Sainte-Beuve gives it a somewhat different meaning, as the “symbol of virtue that never fades” (*Causeries du lundi*, vol. 8 [1851–62], p. 142).

Amphisbaena *see* **Serpent**

Anchor Any use of a ship as a symbol or metaphor may include the anchor as the sign of safety. In a Christian context, the anchor has become a symbol of hope, especially the hope of salvation. The source is a passage in the Epistle to the Hebrews concerning “the hope set before us” in the sworn promise of God: “Which hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and stedfast” (6.18–19). The cruciform shape of many anchors seconded their connection with the Savior.

Spenser’s character Speranza (Hope) has a silver anchor on her arm, upon which she teaches the Redcross Knight “to take assured hold” (FQ 1.10.14, 22). Cowper’s poem “Hope” includes the anchor among many metaphors: “Hope, as an anchor firm and sure, holds fast / the Christian vessel, and defies the blast” (167–68). The Alpine peasant, according to Wordsworth, is unmoved by perils, “Fixed on the anchor left by Him who saves / Alike in whelming snows and roaring waves” (*Descriptive Sketches* 206–07). Tennyson’s Enoch Arden, a sailor, tells his wife, as he departs, “Cast all your cares on God; that anchor holds” (222).

See **Ship**.

Animal *see* **Beast**

Anointing *see* **Oil**

Ant (or Emmet) The ant is known for its wisdom, prudence, or foresight. “Go to the ant, thou sluggard,” the Book of Proverbs advises; “consider her ways, and be wise” (6.6). “The ants are a people not strong, yet they prepare their meat in the summer” (30.25).

Hesiod calls the ant the “wise one” for “gathering stores” (*Works and Days* 778). Virgil says the “ant fears a lean old age” (*Georgics* 1.186). Horace expands: “the tiny ant with immense industry . . . / hauls whatever he can with his mouth and adds it to the heap / he is building, thus making conscious and careful provision for the future” (*Satires* 1.1.33–35, trans. Rudd). In a double simile Ovid cites a column of ants carrying grain and a swarm of bees hovering over thyme (*Ars Amatoria* 1.93–96). Among the gifts each animal gave to man, according to Sidney, the ant gave “industry” (*Third Eclogues* 66.93). Milton names “The parsimonious emmet, provident / Of future, . . . / . . . joined in her popular tribes / Of commonalty” (PL 7.485–89). Wild nature, says Wordsworth, “to the emmet gives / Her foresight, and intelligence that makes / The tiny creatures strong by

social league” (*Excursion* 4.430–32). The fable of the industrious ant and the improvident grasshopper goes back to Aesop.

The social side of the ant noted by Milton and Wordsworth has a repellent side exploited by Wordsworth himself when he describes London as a “monstrous ant-hill on the plain / Of a too busy world!” (1850 *Prelude* 7.149–50). Baudelaire calls Paris *Fourmillante cité*, “swarming city” (from *fourmi*, “ant”) (“Les Sept Vieillards”), in a line T. S. Eliot footnotes in *The Waste Land* (60).

The word “ant” comes from Old English *aemette*, akin to “emmet.”

Ape The Greeks and the Romans considered apes ridiculous, strange, ugly, and somewhat dangerous, and “ape” was a common term of abuse. A passage from Heraclitus, who stressed the superiority of the gods, rests on this contemptuous view of apes: “The handsomest ape is ugly compared with humankind; the wisest man appears as an ape when compared with a god” (in Plato, *Hippias Major* 289a, trans. Wheelwright). In this may lie the germ of the notion that apes imitate people; in any case they resemble us. “The ape [Latin *simia*], that most repulsive animal,” said Ennius, “how much it is like [*similis*] ourselves!” (*Saturae*, quoted in Cicero, *De Natura Deorum* 1.35). Horace refers to “that ape of yours who knows nothing but how to imitate Calvus and Catullus” (*Sermones* 1.10.18–19). The word *simia* is not related to *similis* but the connection seemed natural: apes are simulators, imitators. In English and other languages “to ape” is to imitate: “monkey see, monkey do.”

An alchemist in Dante’s *Inferno*, that is, a counterfeiter, proudly calls himself “a fine ape of nature” (29.139). In Chaucer some musicians begin to watch others and “countrefete hem [them] as an ape” (*House of Fame* 1212). The painter Julio Romano is praised in Shakespeare’s *Winter’s Tale* as capable of depriving nature of her trade, “so perfectly he is her ape” (5.2.98). Cowper looks forward to a world where “smooth good-breeding” will no longer “With lean performance ape the work of love!” (*Task* 6.853–54).

Not all languages distinguish “ape” and “monkey,” but in English literature monkeys as opposed to apes are often taken as lecherous. Shakespeare, for instance, has “lecherous as a monkey” and “hot as monkeys” (2*H4* 3.2.293, *Othello* 3.3.409).

Apple The most famous apple in western culture, the one from the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden, has a slender basis in the Bible. In Genesis 3.3 it is simply “the fruit”; perhaps it is a fig, for right after Adam and Eve eat it they stitch together fig leaves for clothing (3.7). It is not certain, in any case, that apples were known in ancient Israel. How the fateful fruit got to be an apple is a long story, complicated by the fact that the Greek word for it (*melon*, or *malon*) meant any sort of tree-fruit; thus the “Armenian *melon*” was an apricot, the “Cydonian *melon*” was a quince, the “Median *melon*” was a citron, and the “Persian *melon*” was a peach; in modern Cyprus a “golden apple” is an apricot; and in English a “melon” is not much like an apple. Latin *pomum* had a similar range, as we see in its daughter languages: French *pomme de terre* (“apple of earth”)

is a potato, *pomme d'amour* ("apple of love") is a tomato, Italian *pomodoro* ("apple of gold") is a tomato; "pomegranate" comes from Old French *pome grenate*, "seedy apple." When Latin borrowed the Greek word (becoming *malum*), a pun on the common word for "evil" may have influenced Christian speculation. In Milton's influential version of the Fall it is an "apple" (PL 9.585, 10.487), though we cannot be sure if he means the common crab-apple or the generic tree-fruit.

It would be enough to suit the biblical story that the "apple" is alluring and tasty, but in both Hebrew and classical tradition the fruit is associated with sexual love, which Adam and Eve discover, in some interpretations, after eating it. Apples are mentioned three times with erotic senses in the Song of Solomon; e.g., "As the apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among the sons [young men]" (2.3; cf. 7.8, 8.5) (the Hebrew word *tappuah* also has a broad sense). This passage resembles one in Sappho – "As the sweet-apple reddens on the top of the bough, the top of the topmost; the apple-gatherers have forgotten it – no, not forgotten it but were unable to reach it" – which we are told by Himerius is a simile for a girl (frag. 105 Campbell). Throwing an apple or similar tree-fruit was a signal of readiness to be seduced (e.g., Aristophanes, *Clouds* 997; Virgil, *Eclogues* 3.64). Echoing Sappho, Yeats imagines that Dante became a great poet out of "A hunger for the apple on the bough, / Most out of reach," which must mean his Beatrice ("Ego Dominus Tuus" 24–25). Frost's "After Apple-Picking," with its ladder "Toward heaven," the worthlessness of apples that have fallen, and the coming of winter and sleep, stirs echoes of biblical meanings.

In classical myth another famous apple is the Apple of Discord (or Eris), which she tosses among the three goddesses Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite at the wedding of Peleus and Thetis; it is labeled "For the fairest," and each goddess claims it. The ultimate result is the Trojan War. There are also the golden apples of the Hesperides, guarded by a dragon, whom Heracles slays.

One of the women in Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* recalls that Menelaus, bent on killing Helen, took one look at her "apples" and threw away his sword (155). A girl in Theocritus asks her wooer why he has put his hand on her breasts; he replies, "I will give your downy apples their first lesson" (27.49–50). The breasts of Ariosto's Alcina are "unripe apples" (*Orlando Furioso* 7.14). According to Tasso, in the Golden Age before shame took effect a virgin would reveal "the apples of her breast" ("O bella età de l'oro"). Spenser compares his beloved's breasts to two golden apples, which surpass those that Hercules found (in the Hesperides) and those that enticed Atalanta (*Amoretti* 77). These latter, Ovid tells us, were picked by Venus herself (*Met.* 10.647–52). In the Walpurgisnight, Faust tells a young witch he had a dream that he climbed a tree to reach two fine apples; she answers that men have wanted apples ever since Paradise, and happily she has some in her garden (*Faust I* 4128–35).

Josephus describes a fruit near the Dead Sea that looks like an apple but is filled with dry, hairy seeds; later it was called a Sodom apple and thought to be filled with the ashes of that sinful city. As fit punishment for leading Eve to eat the forbidden apple, Milton has Satan's legions

climb trees to eat fruit “like that which grew / Near that bituminous lake where Sodom flamed,” but they “instead of fruit / Chewed bitter ashes” (PL 10.561–66). The chorus of women accompanying Helen to Faust’s castle finds the boys there attractive, with cheeks like peaches: “I would gladly have a bite, but I shudder before it; / for in a similar case, the mouth was filled, / horrible to say, with ashes!” (Faust II 9162–64).

The “apple of the eye” is the pupil, and by extension any intimate or cherished object. The Lord guarded Jacob “as the apple of his eye” (Deut. 32.10). Shakespeare’s Oberon, squeezing the love-juice on Demetrius’ eyelids, asks it to “Sink in apple of his eye. / When his love he doth espy, / Let her shine as gloriously / As the Venus of the sky” (MND 3.2.104–07).

In some accounts of the Crucifixion, Christ, as the antitype of Adam (1 Cor. 15.22), restores the apple Eve plucked. In a witty variant Byron claims that Isaac Newton was “the sole mortal who could grapple, / Since Adam, with a fall, or with an apple.” Since Newton’s theories, he predicts, will some day show us how to fly to the moon, it can be said that “Man fell with apples, and with apples rose” (Don Juan 10.1–16).

April April is the quintessential month of spring – “Aperil . . . of lusty Veer [Spring] the pryme,” according to Chaucer (*Troilus* 1.156–57) – and most of the traditional imagery of the season has been given to the month.

Ovid gives two etymologies of the month’s name. (1) From Latin *aperio* “open”: “They say that April was named from the open season, because spring then opens (*aperit*) all things, and the sharp frost-bound cold departs, and earth unlocks her teeming soil” (*Fasti* 4.87–89, trans. Frazer). (2) From Greek *aphros*, the foam of the sea from which Aphrodite was born (*Fasti* 4.61–62). The latter may well be on the right track, for April is the month of Venus (*Fasti* 4.85ff., Horace 4.11.15–16), and the name may derive from Etruscan *apru*, a shortening of *Aphrodite* (as March comes from *Mars* and May from *Maia*, mother of Mercury, god of spring).

The most famous description of April in English literature is the opening of the Prologue to Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*: “Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote / The droghte of March hath perced to the roote, / And bathed every veyne in swich licour / Of which vertu engendred is the flour . . .” (1–4). The month’s “sweet showers” are a commonplace. The proverb “April showers bring May flowers” has been current at least since 1560; Shakespeare’s Iris sings of “spongy April” (*Tempest* 4.1.65); Wordsworth has a character invoke “Ye rains of April” (*Excursion* 7.701).

As the month of Venus it is the month of love. Spenser begins a stanza on the month by calling it “fresh Aprill, full of lustyhed” (FQ 7.7.33). Of Octavia weeping at her parting from Caesar, Shakespeare’s Antony says, “The April’s in her eyes: it is love’s spring, / And these the showers to bring it on” (*Antony* 3.2.43–44). Shelley describes a beautiful woman as “A vision like incarnate April, warning, / With smiles and tears, Frost the Anatomy [skeleton] / Into his summer grave” (*Epipsychidion* 121–23). The spring or prime of one’s life might be called one’s April: “I lived free in the April of my life, / Exempt from care” (Scève, *Délie*, “Dizains” 1).

The other famous description of April begins T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste*

Land: “April is the cruelest month, breeding / Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing / Memory and desire, stirring / Dull roots with spring rain” (1–4). It is a measure of how far modern life has lost its traditional foundation, in Eliot’s view, that we now shrink from the renewal of life and love that April once brought.

See **Spring**.

Armor In medieval chivalric romances, the armor of the hero, and especially his shield or “escutcheon,” is often lovingly described and invested with great significance. The elaborate language of heraldry or armorial bearings – the points, tinctures, bends, chevrons, fesses, pales, piles, and lions couchant, rampant, regardant, or salient – enters the literature, too, but it is beyond the scope of this dictionary. Less technical symbolic meanings of armor, or changes of armor, are usually unique to each work. It is of great significance, for instance, that Achilles’ first set of armor belonged to his father Peleus, is then lent to his friend Patroclus, who is killed in it by Hector, and is then worn by Hector, who is killed in it by Achilles, who now wears a new set made by the god Hephaestus. Achilles’ shield, extensively described in Book 18 of the *Iliad*, carries a complex set of typical scenes (such as wedding, legal dispute, and siege) in a cosmic setting. The parallel description of Aeneas’ shield in book 8 of the *Aeneid* is not typical and cosmic but historical, as if Aeneas shoulders the future history of Rome. In Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*, Arthur’s “glitterand armour” was made by Merlin (1.7.29–36), while Britomart’s once belonged to Angela, the Saxon Queen (3.3.58); both express the virtues of their bearers.

Central to the language of Christianity is the metaphor of “spiritual warfare” and its accompanying armor. It is fully expressed in Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians. Since Christians do not fight against flesh and blood but against spiritual wickedness, “Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. / Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness; / And your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace; / Above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked. / And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (6.13–17; cf. 2 Cor. 10.3–4). Clement of Alexandria wrote, “If the loud trumpet summons soldiers to war, shall not Christ with a strain of peace to the ends of the earth gather up his soldiers of peace? A bloodless army he has assembled by blood and by the word, to give to them the Kingdom of Heaven. The trumpet of Christ is his Gospel. He has sounded, we have heard. Let us then put on the armor of peace” (*Protrepticus* 11.116). Erasmus continues the tradition: “If we wish to conquer for Christ, let us gird on the sword of the word of the Gospel, let us put on the helmet of salvation and take the shield of faith, and the rest of the truly Apostolic panoply. Then it will come about that, when we are conquered, we are conquerors all the more” (*Dulce Bellum Inexpertis*, in *Adagia*).

Beatrice tells Dante that, “to battle to enkindle faith, / the Gospels

served them [the Apostles] as both shield and lance” (*Paradiso* 29.113–14). Milton’s Michael tells Adam that God will send a Comforter to the people, “To guide them in all truth, and also arm / With spiritual armour, able to resist / Satan’s assaults” (*PL* 12.490–92). Even the atheist Shelley uses these terms: “And from that hour did I with earnest thought / Heap knowledge from forbidden mines of lore, / Yet nothing that my tyrant knew or taught / I cared to learn, but from that secret store / Wrought linked armour for my soul, before / It might walk forth to war among mankind” (“Dedication” of *Laon and Cythna*, 37–42).

Asp *see* **Serpent**

Asphodel The asphodel is the flower of Hades. After speaking with Odysseus, the shade of Achilles “stalked away in long strides across the meadow of asphodel” (*Odyssey* 11.539 trans. Lattimore, cf. 11.573). It is a lean, spiky plant with small, pale flowers and gray leaves; it blooms throughout the winter in Mediterranean regions. Pliny says it is planted on graves (*Natural History* 21.68).

Milton names asphodel beside nectar and ambrosia as having the power to confer immortality (“Comus” 838). Pope invokes “those happy souls who dwell / In yellow meads of Asphodel” (“Ode for Music” 74–75). Tennyson more or less translates Homer in his “Demeter and Persephone”: “the shadowy warrior glide / Along the silent field of Asphodel” (150–51); in “The Lotos-Eaters” he imagines “others in Elysian valleys dwell, / Resting weary limbs at last on beds of asphodel” (169–70). W. C. Williams takes “asphodel, that greeny flower,” as a symbol, or recurring occasion, of memory, poetry, and love in a bleak world. “I was cheered,” he says near the opening, “when I came first to know / that there were flowers also / in hell”; he ends: “Asphodel / has no odor / save to the imagination / but it too / celebrates the light. / It is late / but an odor / as from our wedding / has revived for me / and begun again to penetrate / into all crevices / of my world” (“Asphodel, that greeny flower”).

Ass As the preeminent beast of burden and the poor man’s horse, the ass deserves a better literary reputation, but since the Greeks at least it has stood for stupidity. A string of insults in Terence gives a handy list of synonyms: *stulto, caudex, stipes, asinus, plumbeus* (“fool, blockhead, stump-wit, ass, leadbrain”) (*Self-Tormentor* 877). A shorter list is Shakespeare’s “Asses, fools, dolts” (*Troilus* 1.2.241). “What a thrice-double ass / Was I,” says Caliban, after his foolish rebellion against Prospero (*Tempest* 5.1.295). When thick-witted King Midas judges Pan’s pipes superior to Apollo’s lyre, Apollo gives him ass’s ears (Ovid, *Met.* 11.144–93); asses are proverbially deaf to music, as to all intellectual things.

As the horse could represent the willful or irrational part of the soul, so the ass, in a humbler way, could stand for the merely physical or bodily side of life. The allegorical dimension of Apuleius’ *Golden Ass* (or *Metamorphoses*), in which Lucius is punished for his foolish curiosity and sexual indulgence by being transformed into an ass and made to suffer

enormous torments, comes to a climax in his transformation back into the human as he becomes a chaste initiate into the religion of Isis. St. Francis famously calls the body “Brother Ass.” Shakespeare reweaves motifs from Apuleius in his “translation” of Bottom into an ass in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*; Bottom is the “shallowest thickskin” of the workers (3.2.13), but like Lucius, to whom Isis comes in a dream, he alone meets the queen of the fairies. So it was that Balaam’s ass saw the angel that Balaam himself was blind to (Num. 22.22–35). The satirical side of Apuleius’s novel inspired Renaissance satire on the theme of asininity, such as Erasmus’ *Praise of Folly*, but something of the emblematic character of the ass as the redeemable lower dimension of life may be found in the braying of the ass that reconciles Prince Myshkin to life in Dostoyevsky’s *The Idiot*. Lawrence hears in the braying an agonized cry of love: “He fell into the rut of love, / Poor ass, like man, always in rut” (“The Ass”).

See **Horse**.

Attic bird see **Nightingale**

Autumn Though not as popular as spring, autumn has been a frequent subject of poetry since the classical Roman era, when certain conventions were established. Autumn, of course, has two aspects: it completes summer and it anticipates winter, it celebrates the harvest of the summer’s crops and it mourns the death of the year; it is, in Dickinson’s words, “A little this side of the snow / And that side of the Haze” (no. 131). Latin poetry usually dwells on its summery side, associating it with harvest and vintage, wealth and cornucopias. So Virgil calls autumn “vine-leafed” (*Georgics* 2.5), Horace imagines his head decked with ripe fruit (*Epodes* 2.17–18), Lucretius has Bacchus arrive with him (5.743), Ovid describes a nymph bearing “The horn with all its wealth” (*Met.* 9.88, trans. Melville). Descriptions of “perpetual spring” equally describe perpetual autumn, for as Homer puts it in his account of the garden of Alcinous, “Pear matures on pear in that place, apple upon apple, / grape cluster on grape cluster, fig upon fig” (*Odyssey* 7.120–21, trans. Lattimore). In Eden, according to Milton, “spring and autumn here / Danced hand in hand” (*PL* 5.394–95). (For more examples see under **Spring**.)

Spenser describes Autumn as “Laden with fruits that made him laugh,” while he bore “Upon his head a wreath, that was enrold / With ears of corne of every sort” and carried a sickle in his hand (*FQ* 7.7.30). Shakespeare calls it “childing autumn” (*MND* 2.1.112) and “teeming autumn, big with rich increase” (*Sonnets* 97). In his long section on “Autumn” in *The Seasons*, Thomson describes the joyous harvest at length.

Some of the most delicate and convincing of modern descriptions of the season hold both facets of autumn in balance, the fullness and satisfaction of the harvest with the coming on of winter and death. So Goethe calls on the vine and berries to turn greener and swell plumper, as the sun and the moon bring them to fulfillment – and his own tears of love bedew them (“Herbstgefühl”). Keats (“To Autumn”) serenely

describes autumn's moment of "mellow fruitfulness" when all seems ready and ripe; he ends with an evening scene where the day is "soft-dying," the "small gnats mourn," and "gathering swallows twitter in the skies" as if preparing to fly south. Pushkin welcomes autumn alone of all the seasons: "How can I explain this? She pleases me / As sometimes, perhaps, you have been drawn to / A consumptive girl. . . / She is alive today – tomorrow, not" ("Autumn" 41–48, trans. Thomas). After a brief tableau of November, Pascoli writes, "in the distance you hear / a fragile falling of leaves. It is the summer, / Cold, of the dead" ("Novembre"). After asking God to "Command the fruits to swell on tree and vine," Rilke concludes, "Whoever is alone will long remain so, / will stay awake, read, write long letters / and in the streets up and down / will wander restlessly while leaves are blowing" ("Herbsttag"). Hopkins asks, "Margaret, are you grieving / Over Goldengrove unleaving?" and answers for her, "It is Margaret you mourn for." The title of that poem, "Spring and Fall," reminds us that when the English largely replaced "fall" with the latinized "autumn" they broke up a poetically perfect pair; the original sense of "spring" is now less evident.

Autumn, of course, is a metaphor for the phase of maturity or middle age in a human life. "Then autumn follows," says Ovid, "youth's fine fervour spent, / Mellow and ripe, a temperate time between / Youth and old age, his temples flecked with grey" (*Met.* 15.209–11, trans. Melville). "Nor spring, nor summer beauty hath such grace," Donne writes, "As I have seen in one autumnal face" (*Elegies* 9.1–2). After several stanzas of scenic description, Baratynsky stops to ask, "And you, when in the autumn of your days, / O plowman of the fields of living, / And your own harvest lies before your gaze, / . . . / Can you, then, like the farmer, count your hoard?" ("Autumn" 60–71, trans. Myers). Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" is an ode to autumn; he implores the wind to "Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is: / What if my leaves are falling like its own!" (57–58).

See **Seasons, Spring, Summer, Winter.**

Azure see **Blue**

B

Basilisk The basilisk is a mythical reptile whose stare is lethal. It is described by Pliny as native to Cyrenaica (Libya), about a foot long, and adorned with a bright mark on its head like a diadem – whence the name *basiliscus*, from Greek *basilikos*, "little king." It routs all serpents with its hiss; its touch or breath is fatal to all creatures but the weasel, which kills it with the weasel's stench (8.78). In his catalog of snakes Lucan describes "the basilisk which pours forth hisses terrifying all / the beasts, which harms before its poison and orders the entire crowd / far out of its way and on the empty sand is king" (9.724–26, trans. Braund); later he tells how the

poison of a dead basilisk traveled up the spear of a soldier and penetrated his hand, which had to be cut off (9.828–33).

The Septuagint (Greek Old Testament) used *basiliskos* for several snakes in the Hebrew, including the well-known messianic passage of Isaiah 11, where the wolf shall live with the sheep, etc., and “the infant shall play over the hole of the asp, and the young child dance over the nest of the *basiliskos*” (11.8). Jerome translated *basiliskos* here and in most other passages into the Vulgate as *regulus*, “little king,” but Wyclif and his followers translated it into English as “cockatrice.” Blendings of various fabulous reptiles and birds make the history of the cockatrice extremely complex. The word seems to derive from Latin **calcatrix*, from *calcare*, “tread” or “track,” translating another Greek lizard, the *ichneumon*, meaning “tracker” or “hunter.” The French version of “basilisk” was *basilicoc*, the form also used by Chaucer – “the basilicok sleeth folk by the venym of his sighte” (*Parson’s Tale* 853) – and so the idea got round that the reptile was generated from an egg laid by a cock but hatched by a toad or snake.

Spenser uses both names to make the same point. A terrible man on a dromedary “secretly his enemies did slay: / Like as the Basiliske, of serpents seede, / From powerfull eyes close venom doth convey / Into the lookers hart, and killeth farre away” (*FQ* 4.8.39); while in a sonnet Spenser begs his mistress to turn elsewhere her cruel eyes “and kill with looks, as Cockatrices doo” (*Amoretti* 49). Shakespeare also uses both. Polixenes demands, “Make me not sighted like the basilisk. / I have look’d on thousands, who have sped the better / By my regard, but kill’d none so” (*WT* 1.2.388–90; see also *Cymbeline* 3.4.107); Juliet fears the possible news of Romeo’s death “shall poison more / Than the death-darting eye of cockatrice” (*RJ* 3.2.46–47; see also *12N* 3.4.196–98).

The Isaiah passage in the Authorized Version reads: “And the sucking child shall play on the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the cockatrice’s den.” In his paraphrase of this passage Pope restores “basilisk”: “The smiling Infant in his Hand shall take / The crested Basilisk and speckled Snake: / Pleas’d, the green Lustre of the scales survey, / And with their forky Tongue shall innocently play” (*Messiah* 81–84). Shelley also draws on Isaiah in his description of the future, which includes “a babe before his mother’s door, / Sharing his morning’s meal / With the green and golden basilisk / That comes to lick his feet” (*Queen Mab* 8.84–87).

Thomas Browne, in *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, has a chapter on the basilisk (3.7), in which he denies that it is the product of a cock’s egg and a reptile’s incubation, but credits its existence and most of its other attributes. He also distinguishes it from the cockatrice, which has legs and wings and a comb like a cock!

A secondary sense of “basilisk,” as the name of a large cannon, arose in the sixteenth century. Marlowe evokes its roaring noise in *Tamburlaine I* 4.1.2, while Shakespeare puns on the two senses when he has Queen Isabel tell the conquering King Henry V that she is “glad to behold your eyes; / Your eyes, which hitherto hath borne in them, / Against the French, that met them in their bent, / The fatal balls of murdering basilisks” (*H5* 5.2.14–17).

Bat Until they are examined closely, the most notable features of bats are that they fly at night (though they are visible only at twilight), utter a thin squeak, and often dwell in caves. Though Aristotle knew they were mammals, most ancients took them as a kind of bird. On the Isle of Dreams, according to Lucian, “bats are the only birds to be found” (“A True Story” 2.33), Milton lists “owls, bats, and such fatal birds” (*Eikonoklastes*, sec. 15), and as late as Saint-Pierre we find “birds of prey, such as the bat, the owl, the eagle owl” (*Harmonies de la Nature* [1814], p. 268).

In both Greek and Latin their name has an element meaning “night” or “evening”: Greek *nukteris* comes from *nukt-*, “night,” and Latin *vesper-tilio*, as Ovid tells us, comes from *vesper*, “evening” (*Met.* 4.415).

As caves were evidently entrances into the underworld, bats were thought to be the spirits of the dead. The oldest and most influential literary passage in this respect is the simile in the *Odyssey* (24.6–9), where the souls of the dead suitors, recently killed by Odysseus, are likened to a chain of gibbering bats in a dreadful cave. Plato cites this passage as one that must be expunged so that boys will not learn to be afraid of death (*Republic* 387a).

Homer’s verb for the bats’ cry, *trizēin*, is imitative of the sound, as is the cognate *stridere* in Latin. Ovid describes bats as crying *levi stridore*, “in thin squeaks” (*Met.* 4.413); Virgil gives them a *vocem / exiguam*, “a wispy cry” (*Aeneid* 6.492–93). Hence ghosts, whether or not they are likened to bats in other respects, make batlike cries. In the *Iliad* the ghost of Patroclus goes underground “with a squeak” (23.101). The spirits in Horace’s *Satires* 1.8.41 make a similar sound. Shakespeare’s Horatio remembers that “the sheeted dead / Did squeak and gibber in the Roman streets” (*Hamlet* 1.1.118–19) and Calphurnia warns Caesar that “ghosts did shriek and squeal about the streets” (*JC* 2.2.24); all four of Shakespeare’s verbs imitate the cry.

From their connection with the underworld, features of bats were attributed to the devil. In Dante’s *Inferno*, Satan’s giant wings “had no feathers but were like those of a bat (*vispistrello*)” (34.49–50). Its infernal and nocturnal character was thus well established before the nineteenth-century vampire stories, notably Polidori’s *The Vampyre* and Stoker’s *Dracula*.

It became a standard epithet or tag phrase about bats that they were night creatures. Lydgate writes, “No bakke [bat] of kynde [by nature] may looke ageyn the sunne” (*Cock* 43). Among the “fatall birds” Spenser lists is “The lether-winged Batt, dayes enemy” (*FQ* 2.12.36), while Drayton calls it “the Watch-Man of the Night” (*Owl* 502). Only in the early seventeenth century, in English at least, do we find such phrases as “bat-blind” or “blind as a bat” – blind, presumably, in the daylight.

Bay *see* **Laurel**

Beast The animal kingdom has been a lavish source of metaphors, similes, and symbols from the earliest literature to the present. Since beasts come in such great variety, their literary uses are usually specific to the species:

lions mean certain things, wolves others things, dogs still others. Even where “beast” or “brute” is used as a general term, there is often an implicit distinction between wild (dangerous) and domestic (tame), a beast of prey or beast of burden.

If the human being is the rational animal, as Aristotle and other ancients defined it, then beasts are “lacking in reason” (Ovid, *Amores* 1.10.25). Yet even “a beast that wants discourse of reason,” Hamlet insists, might have acted in more human fashion than his mother (1.2.150). People can be reproached for bestial or brutal behavior, and animals held up as examples for people to follow. Prospero calls Caliban a “beast” (*Tempest* 4.1.140) after his rebellion, but his role has been that of a beast of burden all along; Prince Ferdinand, to prove he is worthy of Miranda, must play a similar part, as if he must sound the depths of his animal or physical nature in order to become fully human, or kingly.

A frequent opposite to beast is god or angel, as when Hamlet contrasts his father to his uncle as “Hyperion to a satyr” (1.2.140); it was a commonplace among Renaissance writers that man occupies a space between beast and angel, sharing traits of both, and liable to sink to the one though capable of rising to the other. The dual nature of humans is a widespread literary theme, perhaps most literally embodied Stevenson’s *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*.

The most famous “beasts” in the Bible are the highly symbolic monsters in Revelation, such as the beast from the sea, with seven heads and ten horns (13.1); the seven heads stand for seven kings (17.9–10) and the ten horns for ten more kings (17.12).

Beast entries in this dictionary: **Ape, Ass, Basilisk, Bat, Deer, Dog, Dolphin, Fox, Goat, Horse, Leopard, Lion, Lynx, Mole, Pig, Serpent, Sheep, Tiger, Whale, Wolf, Worm.**

Bee Bees have been highly prized for their honey and wax for as long as we have record, and much beekeeping lore can be found in ancient literature, notably in book 4 of Virgil’s *Georgics*. They are social insects with a highly organized hive “government,” they cull nectar from many kinds of flowers, and they are both useful and dangerous to people. These obvious characteristics and others less obvious have made them frequent emblems or analogues in literature.

The Greeks considered the bee (Greek *melissa* or *melitta*, from *meli-*, “honey,” and perhaps **lich-*, “lick”) a sign of eloquence or poetic gifts, partly perhaps because of its buzzing or murmuring but mainly as a natural extension of idioms still common in English and other modern languages such as “honey-voiced,” “sweet-lipped,” and “mellifluous.” Homer calls the Sirens *meligerus*, “honey-voiced” (*Odyssey* 12.187). There were legends that bees hovered around the mouth of the infant Sophocles, as if to gather the honey he was born with, or perhaps to feed him the honey he will need as the great playwright; the same tale was told of Pindar, Plato, and others who were thought to have a divine gift. A sixth-century AD poem from the *Greek Anthology* is about statues of the great poets; one of them is Homer, and “a Pierian bee wandered around his divine mouth, / producing a dripping honeycomb” (2.343–44).

(Pieria, on the slope of Mt. Olympus, was the birthplace of the Muses.) In the opening of his “Elegy on the Death of Ronsard,” Garnier wishes that “the bee may always make its honey in your tomb.”

Alternatively the poet himself or herself might be called a bee. Aristophanes’ birds tell us that Phrynichus, another playwright, resembled a bee who “always sipped from the fruit of our ambrosial song [*ambrosion meleon*], bearing away the sweet ode” (*Birds* 749–51), perhaps punning on *melitta* (“bee”) and *melos* (“song”). Pindar makes the same pun in likening his song to honey in *Olymp.* 10.97. Plato writes, “the poets tell us, don’t they, that the melodies they bring us are gathered from rills that run with honey, out of glens and gardens of the Muses, and they bring them as the bees do honey, flying like the bees” (*Ion* 534b, trans. Cooper). The *Greek Anthology* poem just cited calls Sappho “the Pierian bee,” and also mentions *melos* in the next line (69–70). Theocritus tells the story of Comatas, the goatherd-poet, who was shut alive in a chest but was fed by bees “drawn by the Muses’ nectar about his lips” (*Idylls* 7.78–83); Wordsworth retells the tale in the 1805 *Prelude* 10.1021–26. Lucretius opens the third book of *De Rerum Natura* by comparing Epicurus’ writings to flowery lawns and his readers to bees (Latin *apis*). Horace turns this tradition to gentle self-deprecation by contrasting Pindar the high-flying swan with himself the hard-working bee (*Odes* 4.2.27–32). The metaphor is found in such modern poets as Foscolo, who calls a musician a “nurse of the bees” (“Spesso per l’altre età”); Dickinson, who identifies with a bee: “We – Bee and I – live by the quaffing” (no. 230); Darío: “my rhymes go / all around the vast forest / to gather honey and aromas / in the half-opened flowers” (“Primaveral”); and Rilke: “We are the bees of the invisible. We wildly collect the honey of the visible, to store it in the great golden hive of the invisible” (letter to Hulewicz, 13 November 1925).

How a hive governed itself was the subject of much ancient speculation. Aristotle writes about bees in *De Generatione Animalium* (3.10) and *Historiae Animalium* (5.21–23, 9.40); the chief Latin authorities are Varro (3.16) and Pliny, *Natural History* (11.11–70). Virgil draws from these sources in *Georgics*, book 4, which is largely devoted to beekeeping and bee lore. These authors almost invariably used masculine terms – Greek *basileus* and *hegemon*, Latin *rex*, *dux*, and *imperator* – for the “king” bee, to whom the hive is absolutely devoted. The Greeks knew that the Egyptians used the bee as a hieroglyph for the pharaoh, and several modern states, such as France, have used the bee as a symbol of their king. It caused some embarrassment in France and elsewhere when Swammerdam (1637–80) established that the “ruler” bee was really female. In the *Georgics* Virgil goes on at length about bee patriotism, providence, and division of labor, though he also describes a bee civil war. In a famous simile of the *Aeneid*, Virgil likens the building of the city of Carthage, where some lay out streets, others build walls, and still others pass laws, to the activity of bees, who “Hum at their work, and bring along the young / Full-grown to beehood; as they cram their combs / With honey, brimming all the cells with nectar, / Or take newcomers’ plunder, or like troops / Alerted, drive away the lazy drones”

(1.430–36, trans. Fitzgerald). Shakespeare draws largely from the *Georgics* in Canterbury's speech about the division of human labor: "for so work the honey-bees, / Creatures that by a rule in nature teach / The act of order to a peopled kingdom. / They have a king and officers of sorts; / Where some, like magistrates, correct at home, / Others, like merchants, venture trade abroad, / Others like soldiers, armed in the stings, / Make boot upon the summer's velvet buds;" there are also "civil citizens kneading up the honey" (*H5*, 1.2.187–204). After the evacuation of Moscow, as Tolstoy tells it, the city was empty, "empty as a queenless, dying hive is empty"; then follows a lengthy, detailed description of the behavior of bees when a hive has lost its queen (*War and Peace* 3.3.20).

Bees were often thought of as particularly warlike and their hive as organized like an army. The first simile of Homer's *Iliad* likens soldiers to bees (2.87–90), as does another simile in Aeschylus' *Persians* (126–30). Three of the four times bees are mentioned in the Old Testament, they are associated with armies of enemies (Deut. 1.44, Ps. 118.12, Isa. 7.18), and it may be significant that the name of the warrior-leader Deborah means "bee" in Hebrew.

Virgil and other ancients believed that bees had no sexual intercourse but gathered their young from among the flowers. This idea may account for Plutarch's claim that "bees are thought to be irritable and bellicose towards men who have been with women" (*Advice to Bride and Groom* 44). Others, however, associated bees with love. "O Love . . . the Muses' bee" begins a song in Aristophanes' *Ecclesiazusae* (973–74). Theocritus said Eros is like a bee, so small yet able to make so great a wound (*Idylls* 19). The two-sidedness of bees, producers of honey and stings, made them good symbols of love. That Melissa or similar terms were common girls' names made the symbol almost inevitable. A fragment of Sappho reads: "[I want] neither honey nor honeybee" (frag. 146 Campbell); it is the oldest trace of the common proverb "Who licks honey will get stung" or "No honey without a bee." Lyly's *Euphues* has "The bee that hath honey in her mouth, hath a sting in her tail" (79).

Valéry's sonnet "L'Abeille" ("The Bee") subtly evokes many classical bee contexts as the female speaker invites a bee to sting her breast so "my sense may be illuminated / by that tiny golden alarm / without which Love dies or falls asleep." It is erotic, but also aesthetic: the bee is also the Muses' bee.

A swarm of bees was considered an unlucky omen. When a swarm settles in the sacred laurel of Latium, in the *Aeneid* (7.65–70), it is a sign that the Trojans will occupy the citadel.

Virgil and others believed that bees generate spontaneously from the carcass of a cow or other animal (*Georgics* 4.285–314), a belief the Hebrews shared, for it underlies the famous riddle of Samson in Judges 14.8–18.

In Latin literature the bee's preferred food or source of nectar is thyme (or wild thyme): *Georgics* 4.31, 112ff., 170, 180; *Aeneid* 1.436; etc. It was so well established that Martial could refer to honey as "Hyblaeian thyme," Hybla (in Sicily) being famous for its bees (5.39.3). Theocritus had already written that thyme belongs to the Muses (Epigram 1), no doubt

because poets are like bees. By his date Spenser could make “bees-alluring” a routine epithet for thyme (*Muiopotmos* 191). When Marvell in “The Garden” writes, “the industrious bee / Computes its time as well as we” (69–70), he is punning on the plant, which Shenstone called “pun-provoking thyme” (*The Schoolmistress* st. 11).

It has been proverbial since ancient times that bees are busy. Ovid calls them *sedula* (whence English “sedulous”) at *Metamorphoses* 13.928. “Busy as a bee” is found in Chaucer (*Merchant’s Tale*, Epilogue, 2422, “as bisy as bees”). Marvell calls them “industrious” (“Garden” 69), Thomson “fervent” (*Spring* 508), and so on.

The bee produces honey and wax, that is, “sweetness and light,” the famous title of a chapter of Arnold’s *Culture and Anarchy* (drawn from Swift’s *Battle of the Books*): these are his touchstones of culture.

See **Spider**.

Beech Medieval commentators on Virgil defined a scheme called “Virgil’s wheel” (*rota Virgilio*), which linked the three genres established by Virgil (pastoral, georgic, and epic) with sets of three styles, social ranks, locales, animals, plants, etc. The beech was the tree appropriate to pastoral poetry (eclogues or bucolics). Indeed the beech (*fagus*) is mentioned in the first line of the first Eclogue, and early in the next two; it is prized for its shade, the right place to sit and “meditate the sylvan Muse” (1.2). In his pastoral “Summer” Pope addresses “Ye shady beeches, and ye cooling Streams, / Defence from *Phoebus*, not from *Cupid’s* beams” (13–14). Shelley called the beech “to lovers dear” (*Orpheus* 111).

The Greek *phagos* (or *phegos*), though cognate with Latin *fagus*, refers to the oak, also welcome for its shade; cf. Theocritus, *Idylls* 12.8. The word “beech” itself is also cognate with *fagus*.

In his catalogue of trees (*FQ* 1.1.9) Spenser lists the “warlike Beech,” perhaps because beechwood is hard and useful for weapons. It is not listed in his main source, the catalogue of trees in Chaucer’s *Parliament of Fowls* 176–82. Spenser may have been misled by Chapman’s translation of Homer’s *Iliad* 5.838, where the axle of a chariot is made of “the Beechen tree”; the Greek *pheginos axon* should read “axle of oak.”

Bile, Choler, Gall, Spleen In Homer the commonest word for “anger” (*cholos*) is the same except for gender as the common Greek word for “bile” or “gall” (*chole*); once in Homer it seems to have a physiological sense: “Your mother nursed you on *cholos!*” (*Iliad* 16.203). The liver, which secretes bile, was thought to be the seat of deep emotions, perhaps of life itself, though *cholos* and its kindred terms nearly always had the narrower sense of bitter wrath.

Black bile (*chole melaina*) had more or less the same sense at first as bile alone; later, under the term *melancholia*, it was distinguished from it. Another synonym is “choler,” from Latin *cholera*, from Greek *cholera*, the disease (which expels bile and other fluids from the body); it came to mean “anger” when its sense was replaced by that of *chole*. A “choleric” person is irascible. Chaucer’s Reeve is introduced as “a sclendre colerik man” of whom everyone is afraid (*CT Pro.* 587).

In Latin literature “bile” (*bilis*) also means “anger.” Martial speaks of

the “heat of my anger” (*bilis . . . ardor*) (6.64.24); Horace writes, “often your uproar has moved my bile, often my mirth” (*Epistles* 1.19.20). In English “bilious” also means “irascible.” Of a woman’s brief stormy rage, Byron writes, “Nought’s more sublime than energetic bile” (*Don Juan* 5.1076).

More common in English literature than “bile” is “gall” (from Old English, related to “yellow” and *chole*); it tended to mean a bitter, grudging anger rather than a hot, fiery one, and then anything bitter. Chaucer’s Criseyde sees her pleasure and joy “al torned into galle” (*TC* 5.732). To Spenser’s Envie, “whose nature is to grieve and grudge at all,” the sight of something praiseworthy “makes her eat her gall” (*FQ* 5.12.31). Gall and honey are often paired as contrasts. Duessa speaks “With fowle words tempring faire, soure gall with hony sweet” (*FQ* 1.7.3); Raleigh’s nymph argues “A honey tongue, a heart of gall, / Is fancy’s spring, but sorrow’s fall” (“The Nymph’s Reply” 11–12).

Even more common is “spleen” (from Greek and Latin *splen*), which by Shakespeare’s day could mean violent ill-humor or irascible temper. Spenser’s allegorical character Wrath suffers from “swelling Splene” (*FQ* 1.4.35). Shakespeare’s Talbot tells how “leaden age” was “Quickened with youthful spleen and warlike rage” (*1H6* 4.6.12–13); “the unruly spleen / Of Tybalt” leads to the fatal fight with Romeo (*RJ* 3.1.155–56). But its earlier and nearly opposite sense of “merriment” or “gaiety” is also found in Shakespeare, as in the phrase “over-merry spleen” (*Shrew* Ind. 136). Its modern sense is much the same as “bile,” and the adjective “splenetic” is yet another near-synonym for “choleric.”

In the seventeenth and eighteenth century “spleen” tended to mean “dejection” or “melancholy,” but with a connotation of oversensitivity or deliberate posturing. Gulliver observes that spleen afflicts only the lazy, luxurious, and rich (Swift, *Gulliver’s Travels*, 4.7). It soon seemed to afflict the English more than anyone else. Boswell introduces *The Hypochondriack* to an “England, where the malady known by the denomination of melancholy, hypochondria, spleen, or vapours, has long been supposed almost universal.” The French equivalent was *ennui*, borrowed by English, though it is less intense than spleen, closer to boredom or world-weariness. Byron seems to equate the two, and is thus misleading in denying there is a comparable English word: “For *ennui* is a growth of English root, / Though nameless in our language: – we retort / The fact for words, and let the French translate / That awful yawn which sleep can not abate” (*Don Juan* 13.805–08). French for its part borrowed “spleen,” which is most notable in the titles of several poems by Baudelaire (e.g., “Le Spleen”). Pushkin’s Eugene Onegin suffers from it, as many Russians did: “A malady, the cause of which / ’tis high time were discovered, / similar to the English ‘spleen’ – / in short, the Russian ‘chondria’ – / possessed him by degrees” (1.38.1–5).

See **Humor, Melancholy, Yellow.**

Bird The symbolism of birds is sometimes metonymical in origin, as when larks represent dawn and nightingales night, or swallows and cuckoos stand for the arrival of spring, because the birds belong to these

phenomena. More often it is metaphorical, as when cuckoos stand for cuckoldry, or nightingales and swans symbolize poets, because the birds resemble them. Claude Lévi-Stauss claims that “Birds are given human christian names” (e.g., Polly, Robin, Bob) “because they can be permitted to resemble men for the very reason that they are so different. . . . they form a community which is independent of our own but, precisely because of this independence, appears to us like another society, homologous to that in which we live: birds love freedom; they build themselves homes in which they live a family life and nurture their young; they often engage in social relations with other members of their species; and they communicate with them by acoustic means recalling articulated language. Consequently everything objective conspires to make us think of the bird world as a metaphorical human society.” Dogs, by contrast, being domesticated and therefore metonymical with human life, are typically given special dog names (Fido, Rover, Flush) to set them apart. (See *Savage Mind* 204–05.) Since at least Aristophanes’ *The Birds*, western literature has been rich with metaphorical bird-communities; one allegorical variety common in the Middle Ages was the bird conclave, such as Chaucer’s *Parliament of Fowls*.

Because they can fly, and seem to link the sky with the earth and sea, birds also resemble gods, so the ancients often considered birds either incarnations of gods or their messengers. In Homer’s *Odyssey* Athena is disguised as a “bird” (1.320), a vulture (3.372), and a swallow (22.240); Hermes as a gull or tern (5.51); Leucothea as a shearwater or gannet (5.337). Zeus famously descended as a swan to Leda. Many gods, moreover, had heraldic or familiar birds: Zeus the eagle, Athena the owl, Apollo the swan or raven, Aphrodite the dove, and so on. In Christian myth it was a heavenly dove that filled Mary with the Holy Spirit; it is usually depicted as speaking (the Word) into her ear. As messengers of the gods birds spoke sometimes through their flight patterns, and so arose the immemorial art of bird-augury, where an *auspex* (Latin, from *auis*-“bird” + *spek*-“watch”) decided whether or not the patterns were “auspicious.”

Homer and other Greeks imagined the dead in Hades as birdlike (*Odyssey* 11.605); sometimes souls (*psychai*) are batlike (24.6–9); or the soul (*thymos*) is said to fly (*Iliad* 16.469). Christians likened the rebirth of the soul to that of the phoenix. Visitations of birds were felt to be reappearances of the dead, a thought lying behind Poe’s “The Raven.” At the same time birds seem to have souls themselves, and to pour them forth when they sing. Thomson imagines that birds in spring “in courtship to their mates / Pour forth their little souls” (“Spring” 619–20) while in autumn they sit “Robbed of their tuneful souls” (“Autumn” 979). Keats tells his nightingale, “thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad / In such an ecstasy!” (57–58). Hardy hears a bird on a winter afternoon: it “Had chosen thus to fling his soul / Upon the growing gloom” (“The Darkling Thrush” 23–24). Contributing to this notion may be the use of “soul” in some dialects of English to mean the lungs of a bird.

In Homer a frequent formula is “winged words,” as if speech flies from the mouth like birds. When Penelope does not reply to