



The Facts On File

Dictionary
of Classical,
Biblical,
& Literary
Allusions

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Ruth M. Goldstein

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INTRODUCTION

Not long ago, a *New York Times* drama critic, D.J.R. Bruckner, reviewed a new play, *The Sovereign State of Boogedy Boogedy*. Here are some lines from the opening paragraph of the review:

Nebuchadnezzar is on trial in “The Sovereign State of Boogedy Boogedy” at the new Federal Theatre; his judges are Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego and his lawyer is Danielle. But . . . this court room is no place of order and decorum. The judges have all dabbled in petty crime, the angel who rescues the three men from the fiery furnace is a fireman of dubious morals; the king, possibly on the principle that the sins of the sons will be visited on their fathers, is shackled with a charge he threw Danielle into the lion’s den and doomed by the handwriting on the wall that spelled the downfall of Belshazzar in the Bible. . . . (July 22, 1986)

What is especially striking about these lines is that they manage to crowd no fewer than eight Biblical allusions into 111 words:

Nebuchadnezzar
Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego
Danielle
Lion’s den
Fiery furnace
Sins of the sons will be visited on their fathers
The handwriting on the wall
Belshazzar

Unless the reader has read his Bible and remembers precisely who these Biblical characters are and what events are being alluded to, he won’t be able to make much sense out of this passage. For what he is faced with here, in highly concentrated form, is a set of *allusions*. An *allusion* is a figure of speech that compares aspects

or qualities of counterparts in history, mythology, scripture, literature, popular or contemporary culture.

The English language abounds with such allusions. They have, in many instances, become an integral part of the substance and fabric of our language—so much so, that we often use them unaware that they are allusions but fully aware of what they mean in present context.

But the reader who knows neither the original meaning nor contemporary application of the allusion won't understand what he is reading. And he or she will get no help from the writer, who must assume that the reader will have no problem making the necessary connections, and that the original meaning of the allusion, its source, and its specific application in this context are known.

The following sentences are a case in point. Each one contains a fairly common allusion:

If Congress passes this law, it will open up a Pandora's box.

When the Governor recommended that drug traffickers be sentenced to life imprisonment, he said that he did not consider this a draconian law.

In joining the opposition, Farley had crossed his Rubicon.

Horton and James were a modern Damon and Pythias.

Parkinson, all agreed, had a Dr. Jekyll-Mr. Hyde personality.

The prosecutor, pointing to Lily Jones, yelled "You are a Delilah!"

Actually, many modern readers have had little or no firsthand contact with the original events, characters, or ideas being referred to in any given allusion. A limited education may have cut them off from their literary and cultural roots as these are expressed in the allusiveness of our language. Ironically, as writers continue to enrich their writing with these allusions, they

simultaneously obscure their message for their uninitiated readers—whose name, to use the Biblical allusion, is legion.

Now back to our *New York Times* drama review. Suppose that our reader has not read or studied the Bible or encountered it as part of his religious experience. He will, of course, be baffled by this passage. And suppose that he wants to find out what these allusions mean. Where can he seek out the original meaning and contemporary point of comparison for each of these allusions? A good desk dictionary? There are several available, but they don't, by any means, list all of these allusions. When they do, they generally tend to provide terse, truncated explanations.

How about an unabridged dictionary? It will usually contain a fuller account than the desk dictionaries. But there is one drawback. Very, very few people own one. Practically every library owns one. But that isn't going to be very helpful to the reader who needs the information quickly and conveniently.

So for the common—and the uncommon—reader, we have put together this dictionary of allusions. It is designed to help him or her track down the source, original meaning, and relevance of more than 1,300 allusions drawn from Greek, Roman, and Norse mythology, Medieval and Arthurian legend, and the Bible. To these sources of allusions central to Western tradition, we have added another: literary characters who have become a part of our language: such as Pecksniff, Falstaff, Faust, Fagin, Macbeth, Hamlet, Tom Sawyer, Huck Finn, Candide, Sydney Carton.

We have confined our list of allusions to the Judaeo-Christian and European literary and cultural traditions because it is simply not possible to read anything of consequence without encountering them. (Some allusions from Eastern literatures, when such allusions have become "Westernized" and absorbed into our discourse, have also found their way onto the list.)

We have avoided most contemporary allusions except where they clearly have become a part of the fabric of our culture. We have also avoided allusions we felt would be of interest only to scholars and specialists.

In choosing each allusion for this book, we have applied a very simple criterion. If it “rang a bell” with us, if we had encountered it in our reading, we included it. If, after a lifetime of reading, none of us had run across it, we did not include it. We are aware that this method of selection may leave us open to the charges of subjectivity or failure to be inclusive, but since there does not now exist any objective means by which to ascertain how often each allusion occurs in our literature, we have relied upon our cumulative reading experiences to provide you with what we believe is a reliable, workable guide.

A word about the format of the *Dictionary*. It is designed for easy access:

- The entries are alphabetically arranged—as in a dictionary.
- The source and original meaning of each allusion are set down simply and clearly.
- The contemporary meaning in a given context is indicated for each allusion. Where possible, illustrations are supplied.
- Cross-references to variants or related terms are indicated where necessary.

We expect that some readers will tell us, “We like your *Dictionary*. It is very useful. But *why did* you ever include _____ and _____?” We also expect that some of our readers are going to tell us, “We like your book. It is very useful. But *why didn’t* you include _____ and _____

To all our readers: We hope you like the book. We hope you find it useful and reader-friendly. And we hope that you will regard this book as an earnest, if imperfect, attempt to do something we felt needed doing in this imperfect world of ours.

A.H.L.
D.K.
R.M.G.

A

Aaron. Son of Amram the Levite, brother of **Moses** and **Miriam**, and head of the Levite priesthood (Numbers 18:1-7). He was Moses' spokesman and helper during the Ten Plagues; his rod turned into a serpent, in the presence of Pharaoh, and swallowed the Egyptians' rods that had also turned into serpents (Exodus 7:8-12). While Moses was away on Mount Sinai, he made the **Golden Calf**. The Lord refused to allow Aaron and Moses to enter the Promised Land because they had rebelled against His word; on His order, Moses stripped Aaron of his garments and put them on Aaron's son Eleazar. See also: **Plagues of Egypt**. Walt Whitman, in *Democratic Vistas*, indicates the type of reference in modern times: "The magician's serpent in the fable ate up all the other serpents, and money-making is our magician's serpent, remaining sole master of the field."

Abaddon. Hebrew for "abyss" or "destruction." As "the angel of the bottomless pit," he was king over a swarm of tormenting locusts similar to scorpions (Revelations 9:1, 2, 11).

Abednego. See **Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego**.

Abel. See **Cain and Abel**.

Abelard and Heloise. Pierre Abelard (1079-1142) was a brilliant French philosopher and scholastic theologian, and a very popular lecturer at St. Genevieve and Notre Dame. He emphasized

rational inquiry in theology, and espoused Aristotelian logic over Platonic theory. But his popular fame rests in his tragic love affair with Heloise (1101-1164), niece of the Canon Fulbert of Notre Dame and his pupil until he seduced her in 1118. They were secretly married, over Heloise's objections, after the birth of their son Astrolabe. When the affair became known, Heloise became a nun and Abelard a monk—after Fulbert had him castrated. Their correspondence survives. Centuries after, in 1817, the lovers were buried in a single tomb. They are included today in references to immortal, tragic lovers.

Abigail. The beautiful and understanding wife of Nabal, whose shepherds **David** had protected (I Samuel 25:3). When Nabal refused David supplies, David sought revenge, but was intercepted by Abigail, who thus saved her husband from his fury. After Nabal's death, Abigail became David's wife. She has given her name to any loyal and resourceful handmaiden. In Joseph Heller's *Ob God*, David remembers her more fondly than any of his other wives.

Abraham's bosom. Paradise, symbolically. Abraham is the first of the great Old Testament patriarchs, the founder of the Hebrew nations, to whom God revealed the tenets of the Jewish religion. When Lazarus the beggar died he "was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom" (Luke 16:22-23). The contemporary reference is to heavenly rest and peace. See also: **Lazarus and Dives**.

Absalom, o my son. "And the King (David) said, Is the young man Absalom safe? And Cushie answered, The enemies of my lord the king . . . be as that young man is. And the king . . . wept: and as he wept, thus he said, O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom. Would God I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son" (II Samuel 18:24-33). Absalom, the ambitious son of King **David**, rebelled against his father and was killed by Joab. His loss symbolizes the loss to a father of a favorite, handsome, popular but rebellious son.

Aceldama. The apostle Peter identifies Aceldama as the field in Jerusalem purchased by Judas with the blood money he got for betraying **Christ**: "Now this man purchased a field with the reward of iniquity; and falling headlong, he burst asunder in the midst, and all his bowels gushed out. . . . That field is called . . . Aceldama, that is

to say, The field of blood” (Acts 1:18-19). According to Matthew, the chief priests used Judas’s blood money to buy a “potter’s field, to bury strangers in” (Matthew 27:7-8). Today the word signifies a bloody battlefield. See also: **Judas Iscariot**; **Matthew, Saint**; **Peter, Saint**.

Achates. In Vergil’s *Aeneid*, the friend of **Aeneas** whose steadfast loyalty has become a byword for friendship. He is often called “*fidus Achates*”—faithful Achates.

Acheron. One of the four rivers in **Hades**, the Greek world of the dead. “Acheron” means the river of woe or the river of pain.

Achilles. Son of Peleus and Thetis; the leading Greek hero in the **Trojan War**, whose story is related in Homer’s *Iliad*. His feud with **Agamemnon** and its resolution form the central theme of that epic. He was killed, in the last days of the siege of **Troy**, by an arrow wound in his only vulnerable spot, his heel: in his infancy his mother sought to make him immortal by dipping him in the river Styx, but since she held him by the heel, it was the one part of him vulnerable to death. Hence an “Achilles heel” is any point of particular vulnerability. Violent in his anger, prone to lose his temper, impetuous in his hate, merciless to a foe (**Priam’s** sons), Achilles also was capable of tender love (Briseis, **Patroclus**). Though he “sulked in his tent” at one point, he had unquestioned courage and strength—the earliest type of tragic hero, who made a choice from which tragic events followed for himself and for his people.

Actaeon. A hunter in Greek legend who accidentally saw **Artemis**, the chaste goddess of the hunt, in her bath. The goddess transformed him into a stag and he was then ripped to pieces by his own hounds.

Actium. The promontory on the western coast of Greece where the navy of Octavian, later the first Roman emperor **Augustus**, defeated the forces of **Mark Antony** and **Cleopatra**, September 2, 31 B.C. A climactic, decisive defeat.

Adam. In the Bible, the first man, created by God out of the dust of the earth. Adam and Eve, who was formed from **Adam’s rib**

while he slept, lived in innocence in the **Garden of Eden** until the serpent tempted Eve to eat the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge and Eve convinced Adam to eat, too. In punishment, God decreed that henceforth Adam must earn his bread “in the sweat of thy face,” and that Eve must bear children in sorrow. He banished them from Eden. Allusions to Adam usually refer to his fall from innocence or to the “original sin” he committed with Eve. See also: **In the Sweat of Thy Face; Tree of Life, Tree of Knowledge.**

Adam's curse. See **In the sweat of thy face.**

Adam's rib. “And the Lord caused a deep sleep to fall upon **Adam** and he slept: and He took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof; And the rib which the Lord God had taken from the man, made He a woman, and brought her unto the man. And Adam said, This is now the bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of man” (Genesis 2:21-23). Hebrew: *ishshah*, woman; *ish*, man. This story is the origin of the false notion that men have one rib fewer than women. Today, a lightly ironic term for woman.

Add a cubit to his stature. “Which of you by taking thought can add one cubit unto his stature?” (Matthew 6:27). The cubit was an ancient measurement, variously given as from 18 to 22 inches. Supposedly the distance from the elbow to the fingertips (from the Latin *cubitus*, “elbow”). By a natural extension and generalization of meaning, to add a cubit to one's stature now means “to go beyond one's natural limitations.”

Adonis. The surpassingly handsome youth, Adonis, was loved by **Aphrodite**, Greek goddess of love, while still quite young, and was killed by a wild boar (perhaps Aphrodite's lover **Ares** in disguise). After his death the anemone flower grew up from his blood. An “Adonis is a young man of godlike beauty.

Aeneas. Son of Anchises and Aphrodite, a Trojan warrior who appears in Homer's *Iliad* but is better known as the hero of **Vergil's** epic, the *Aeneid*. As Vergil tells the story, he is destined to escape from burning Troy, and after many years of wandering and hardship, to land in Italy where his descendants will found a new city and an empire that will hold sway over the nations. Aeneas, like

Odysseus, is an archetypal hero. The traits most closely associated with him are piety and faithfulness to family and tradition.

Aeneid. Vergil's epic poem, in Latin hexameter verse. In 12 books, the *Aeneid* recounts the adventures of **Aeneas** from the time he fled the sack of Troy until the fight in which he killed Turnus, the chief warrior of the Latins, in a duel recalling the battle between **Achilles** and **Hector**. Vergil aimed to show the fulfillment of a destiny, that a great empire was eventually to be established by Rome after many hardships were encountered and overcome. Though Aeneas never reaches Rome (founded by his descendants, **Romulus and Remus**) nor even Alba Longa (founded, according to tradition, by his son, Ascanius), he prepared the way. The *Aeneid* furnished Rome and her burgeoning empire with a kind of "national" myth.

Aeolus. A god of the winds, ruler of a floating island, who extends hospitality to **Odysseus** and his men on their long trip home following the **Trojan war**. "Aeolian" refers to storms or winds. An aeolian harp is an instrument that makes music by the action of the wind on stretched strings.

Aeschylus. Earliest (525-456 B.C.) of the three great Greek writers of tragedies (the other two are **Sophocles** and Euripides). Out of approximately 90 plays by Aeschylus, seven have survived, including *The Suppliants*, *The Persians*, *Seven Against Thebes*, and *Prometheus Bound*, and the only trilogy that has come down to us, the *Oresteia*, consisting of the *Agamemnon*, *The Libation Bearers* (*Choephoroe*), and *Eumenides*. *The Persians* was on the contemporary theme of the Persian War, in which Aeschylus took part; the others dealt with mythological themes. Aeschylus tried to reconcile the ways of the gods with human justice and morality; to teach that excessive pride (*hubris*) brings destruction, and that a criminal taint endures for generations. His style is one of primitive grandeur; he has been likened to the Hebrew prophets.

Aesop. Traditionally the famous writer of fables, mainly about animals. Aesop's fables were not actually written by him: He either collected existing fables or else wrote them in prose. Today Aesopian fables like that of the fox and the sour grapes are referred to in order to illustrate a universal truth.

Agamemnon. Son of **Atrous**, husband of **Clytemnestra**, father of **Orestes**, **Electra** and **Iphigenia**, brother of **Menelaus**. As king of Mycenae, the most powerful city of the Achaeans, Agamemnon was chosen leader of the expedition against Troy (when Helen, the wife of Menelaus, was taken by Paris to that city). At Aulis he was compelled to offer his daughter Iphigenia as a sacrifice to **Artemis**, thereby incurring the hatred of Clytemnestra. Upon returning home, he was murdered in his bath by Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, her lover. His death was avenged by Electra and Orestes. Agamemnon is the subject of the *Agamemnon* by **Aeschylus**, part of the *Oresteia*, and of the *Agamemnon* by Seneca. Today Agamemnon is most remembered for his military prowess and his tragic death. See also: **Trojan War**.

Aglaia. One of the three **graces** or charities.

Aguecheek, Sir Andrew. In Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* (1599), the silly and cowardly companion of **Sir Toby Belch**, and Olivia's suitor. He is wounded in a duel with Sebastian. One of Shakespeare's memorable comic characters.

Ahab. The king of Israel (I Kings 16-22) who married **Jezebel** and converted to the pagan worship of **Baal**. Later Ahab was killed in battle "and the dogs licked up his blood." In Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851), Ahab is the name of the captain of the whaling ship *Pequod* who obsessively hunts the white whale. Because he betrayed the god of his people and supported the worship of the pagan gods, Ahab's name became a byword for wickedness.

Ahasuerus. See **Esther**.

Ajax (or Aias). Greek warrior in **Trojan War** and described in the *Iliad* as being of colossal stature, second only to **Achilles** in courage and strength. He was, however, comparatively slow-witted and excessively proud. After losing a contest with **Odysseus** for Achilles' armor, he went mad and killed a flock of sheep. After coming to his senses, he killed himself in shame.

Aladdin. The hero of one of the tales of the *Arabian Nights*. Aladdin gets hold of a magic lamp that contains a genie (a spirit in Islamic mythology, also known as a jinn) who will do Aladdin's bid-

ding. Through the genie Aladdin amasses great wealth and in the end marries the sultan's daughter. Aladdin's lamp is symbolic of any vehicle that will bring instant power and fortune.

Alastor. One of the epithets of **Zeus**, meaning "avenger," or an epithet for any avenging god or spirit.

Alcestis. The daughter of Pelias and bride of Admetus. **Apollo** offers to allow Admetus to escape death if someone will die for him. Alcestis offers herself as sacrifice, but is rescued from **Hades** by **Heracles** (Hercules). The death and resurrection of Alcestis are the subject of Euripides' tragedy *Alcestis*, produced in 438 B.C. Her name is symbolic of self-sacrifice.

Ali Baba. Hero of the tale *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* in *Arabian Nights*. He overhears the magic words "Open Sesame," which give him entrance to a cave of riches.

Alice. The heroine of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* (1865), an imaginative and strong-willed little girl who experiences a series of fantastic adventures among strange animals and stranger people. No matter how bizarre her surroundings or the behavior of the characters she encounters, Alice always manages to maintain her composure and insist upon finding the rational explanation, logical solution and literal meaning of the surreal phenomena of Wonderland.

All is vanity. "Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity . . . and vexation of spirit" (Ecclesiastes 1:2; 2:11,17,26; 4:4,16; 6:9, etc.). "Vanity" in this context does not mean "conceit" so much as "folly" or "emptiness." "I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labour that I had laboured to do: and, behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit" (Ecclesiastes 2:11,26; 4:4,16; 6:9).

All things in common. The early Christians lived a communal life, sharing wealth and goods as necessary: "And all that believed were together, and had all things in common" (Acts 2:44-45).

All things to all men. "I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some" (I Corinthians 9:22). Paul means that

to make converts he approaches Jews as a Jew, Gentiles as a Gentile, and so forth. Today the phrase may suggest a calculating and not wholly admirable adaptability. See also: **Paul, Saint**.

Alpha and Omega. The first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, used metaphorically by Christ to signify He was all things: "I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last" (Revelations 22:13). In modern reference, "the first and the last" of any concept or philosophy.

Alpheus and Arethusa. Arethusa, a young, beautiful and chaste huntress in the service of the virgin goddess **Artemis**, was pursued by the river god Alpheus. When she could no longer escape him, she called to Artemis for help. The goddess changed her into a sacred spring on the island of Ortygia off Sicily. The fountain of Arethusa, noted for its beauty, may still be seen today, and a story is still told, that a wooden cup thrown into the Alpheus River in Greece will reappear in the fountain of Arethusa.

Amazons. A mythical race of women warriors who lived somewhere in Asia Minor or perhaps in Scythia, north of the Black Sea. They customarily removed the right breast so as not to hamper use of the bow, admitted men to their company only for breeding, and exiled or killed male offspring. They appear in various legends: for example, **Achilles** defeated their leader Penthesilea in single combat during the **Trojan War**; **Theseus** fought them successfully and married **Hippolyta** (some sources say Antiope) who bore him **Hippolytus**; **Heracles** succeeded in capturing the girdle worn by the Amazon queen by claiming it as ransom for the captured Melanippe. Generally, an "Amazon" today is a particularly robust, masculine and belligerent woman.

Ambrosia. The nourishment of the Greek gods which conferred immortality upon them. Hence any food especially delicious or fragrant.

Am I my brother's keeper? See **Cain and Abel**.

Amphitrite. A goddess of the sea; daughter of **Nereus** and **Doris**, wife of **Poseidon**, and mother of **Triton**. Symbolically, a sea-loving woman.

Ananias. In Acts 5:1-10, Ananias retained for himself part of a sum, from a sale of land, meant for the church; when accused by Peter of lying to God, Ananias dropped down dead, as did his wife Sapphira when she persisted in the deception. Ananias now refers to any liar or deceiver. See also: **Peter, Saint**.

Anathema. “If any man love not the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be Anathema Maranatha” (I Corinthians 16:22). Anathema: Originally, “dedicated to God.” Since the ancient Hebrews dedicated their defeated enemies to God by sacrificing them (I Samuel 15), the word came to mean something hateful and to be destroyed. In the New Testament, it means “accursed” (Romans 9:3); thence it passed into Christian usage in formulas of imprecation (e.g., in the Athanasian Creed). In English, it is a noun meaning (1) the thing accursed or (2) the act of cursing; also a quasi-adjective used only in the predicate (not the attributive) position. “Maranatha” is actually two Aramaic words meaning “the Lord has come” (cf. Philippians 4:5). It should be read as a separate sentence, which Paul uses in Corinthians 17 as a concluding benediction for his epistle. Most Christians, not knowing any Aramaic, erroneously took Paul’s formula as a solemn intensification of “anathema,” and read the two words as a double curse.

Anchises. Member of royal family of Troy. The goddess **Aphrodite** was so enamored of Anchises’ beauty that she bore him a child, **Aeneas**. In the *Aeneid*, Vergil describes how Aeneas carries the aging Anchises on his shoulders from Troy after its defeat by the Greeks in the **Trojan War**.

Andromache. The wife of the Trojan warrior **Hector**, and mother of Astyanax. The parting of these three in Book VI of the *Iliad* is one of the most moving passages in that epic. After the fall of Troy, her further destiny is told by Euripides in *The Trojan Women* and *Andromache*. See also: **Trojan War**.

Andromeda. Daughter of Cepheus, king of Ethiopia, and Cassiopeia, who boasted that she was more beautiful than the **Nereids**. **Poseidon** promptly retaliated by sending a sea monster to terrorize the countryside. Andromeda was offered as a sacrifice to appease the monster. Chained to a rock, she was rescued by the hero **Perseus**, just returning from his adventure against the