

Star Words

Bob Hayward

Astronomer/Educator

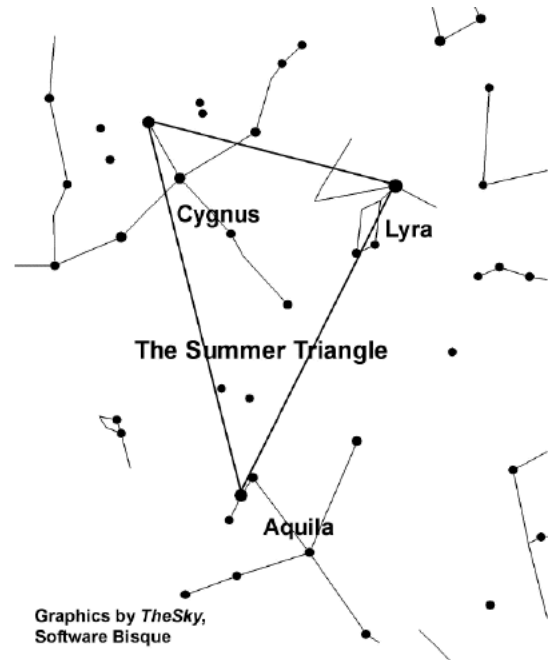
Pisgah Astronomical Research Institute

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It's now late summer moving quickly into early fall. At this time of the year one of the most prominent patterns in the sky is the Summer Triangle. Note that I didn't call it a constellation for good reason; each corner of the Summer Triangle is marked by a star in a different constellation. There is Vega in Lyra the lyre or harp, Altair in Aquila the eagle and Deneb in the tail of Cygnus the swan. Astronomers would call the Summer Triangle an *asterism*, not a constellation.

Whenever I look at the Summer Triangle, I can't help but think of the variety of words in the English language that come from the names of stars, constellations or other celestial objects. The most obvious here, one you've probably seen come up on the television game show "Jeopardy" or in a scrabble game, is "What do we call a baby swan?" The answer is *cygnet* and this, of course, comes from the constellation of Cygnus. Another word derived from the Summer Triangle is the term *aquiline* as in "aquiline nose." A quick check of the dictionary reveals that in addition to meaning "of, relating to, or having the characteristics of an eagle,"¹ *aquiline* also means "of or curved like an eagle's beak, as *aquiline nose*."¹



One of my favorite words that derive their origins from the sky is the word *panic*. It seems the god Pan was resting by the river playing his pipes when suddenly the monster Typhon appeared. To escape, Pan dove into the river and tried to change himself into a fish and swim away. But in his rush to escape he got the magic spell all wrong and ended up with the front half of a goat and only the tail of a fish. This so-called seagoat or goat-fish is in the summer skies as the constellation of Capricorn. In other words, Pan panicked and ever since we use the term *panic* to describe "a sudden overpowering fright."¹ Incidentally, Capricorn is known to astronomers as the celestial joke.

Speaking of monsters, there is the constellation of Cetus in the autumn skies. Cetus was sent by Neptune to the land of Ethiopia to punish Queen Cassiopeia for being so vain as to claim she was more beautiful than the sea nymphs, the lovely daughters of the king of the sea. King Cepheus, on advice from an oracle, chained his daughter Andromeda to the seashore as a sacrifice to Cetus; she was, however, rescued by the hero Perseus. Cetus is sometimes pictured on constellation charts as a sea monster but often as a whale. And what do we call the sea-going, air-breathing mammals like the whale and the porpoise? Why, *cetaceans*, of course!

Some of the constellations have names that tie in more obviously with terms in English. The tiny constellation of Triangulum obviously consists of three stars. Serpens snakes its way across the summer skies above the scorpion. This constellation is unique in that it is the only constellation that is divided by another; the tail of the serpent, Serpens Cauda, is to the east of Ophiuchus the doctor while the head, Serpens Caput (*decapitate*), is to the west. After all, the symbol for a doctor is the caduceus, a snake entwined around a pole. The disease *cancer* derives its name from the constellation of the crab since its tumors often expand locally with extensions resembling its namesake. Another snake in the sky is Hydra the water snake. Many words using hydra refer to water, e.g., *hydrofoil*, *hydroplane*, *dehydrated*. Similarly, Aquarius the water bearer lends its name to *aquatic*, *aquarium*, *aquaculture*, etc.

And talk about hard jobs. What do we mean by a *herculean* task? A job that can be handled only by the likes of Hercules. I don't know whether Queen Berenice had a Herculean task ahead of her to prepare her hair for appearances in the Egyptian court. But her hair is represented in the constellation Coma Berenices from which we get words such as *comb* and *comet* as well as *coma*, the outer fuzzy part of a comet. (However, the medical term *coma* has a different origin.) And name the first element discovered on the Sun – why, *helium*, of course; the simplest of the elements is named after Helios the ancient god of the Sun. Speaking of the Sun, it is surrounded by a *corona* or crown. There are two crowns in the sky, Corona Borealis the northern crown and Corona Australis the southern crown. Anyone who will wear a crown must have a *coronation*. And then there is the constellation of Virgo who represents Ceres the goddess of the harvest. We find the roots of several English words and even proper names in this constellation: *virgin*, *Virginia*, *cereal*.

Last, but not least, is that most spectacular of nighttime celestial bodies, the Moon or the goddess Luna. Besides the day of the week *Monday* being named after the Moon, the adjective *lunar* refers to the Moon as in lunar eclipse, etc. We also find here the derivation of *lunatic* since in former times that condition was sometimes thought to be related to the phase of the Moon. And who can forget the old comic books and cartoons, *Looney Tunes*?

So the next time you go out to view the sky at night, take your high school English teacher with you. The two of you can have a great time together under the stars.

¹Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary

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[Elizabeth Snoke Harris](#), Editor