

Percy Bysshe Shelley
Ode to the West Wind



Contents

Ode to the West Wind	3
West Wind captured by Aeolian harps	4
Red notes	5
Commentary by Ian Lancashire, 9 September 2002	7
Bibliography	11
When the wind blows from the west a new world comes into being	12



Ode to the West Wind

- 1 O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being,
2 Thou, from whose unseen presence the leaves dead
3 Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing,
4 Yellow, and black, and pale, and hectic red,
5 Pestilence-stricken multitudes: O thou,
6 Who chariotest to their dark wintry bed
7 The winged seeds, where they lie cold and low,
8 Each like a corpse within its grave, until
9 Thine azure sister of the Spring shall blow
10 Her clarion o'er the dreaming earth, and fill
11 (Driving sweet buds like flocks to feed in air)
12 With living hues and odours plain and hill:
13 Wild Spirit, which art moving everywhere;
14 Destroyer and preserver; hear, oh hear!
- 15 Thou on whose stream, mid the steep sky's commotion,
16 Loose clouds like earth's decaying leaves are shed,
17 Shook from the tangled boughs of Heaven and Ocean,
18 Angels of rain and lightning: there are spread
19 On the blue surface of thine aëry surge,
20 Like the bright hair uplifted from the head
21 Of some fierce Maenad, even from the dim verge
22 Of the horizon to the zenith's height,
23 The locks of the approaching storm. Thou dirge
24 Of the dying year, to which this closing night
25 Will be the dome of a vast sepulchre,
26 Vaulted with all thy congregated might
27 Of vapours, from whose solid atmosphere
28 Black rain, and fire, and hail will burst: oh hear!
- 29 Thou who didst waken from his summer dreams
30 The blue Mediterranean, where he lay,
31 Lull'd by the coil of his crystalline streams,
32 Beside a pumice isle in Baiae's bay,
33 And saw in sleep old palaces and towers
34 Quivering within the wave's intenser day,
35 All overgrown with azure moss and flowers
36 So sweet, the sense faints picturing them! Thou
37 For whose path the Atlantic's level powers
38 Cleave themselves into chasms, while far below
39 The sea-blooms and the oozy woods which wear
40 The sapless foliage of the ocean, know
41 Thy voice, and suddenly grow gray with fear,
42 And tremble and despoil themselves: oh hear!

II

III

43 If I were a dead leaf thou mightest bear;
44 If I were a swift cloud to fly with thee;
45 A wave to pant beneath thy power, and share
46 The impulse of thy strength, only less free
47 Than thou, O uncontrollable! If even
48 I were as in my boyhood, and could be
49 The comrade of thy wanderings over Heaven,
50 As then, when to outstrip thy skiey speed
51 Scarce seem'd a vision; I would ne'er have striven
52 As thus with thee in prayer in my sore need.
53 Oh, lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud!
54 I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!
55 A heavy weight of hours has chain'd and bow'd
56 One too like thee: tameless, and swift, and proud.

57 Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is:
58 What if my leaves are falling like its own!
59 The tumult of thy mighty harmonies
60 Will take from both a deep, autumnal tone,
61 Sweet though in sadness. Be thou, Spirit fierce,
62 My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!
63 Drive my dead thoughts over the universe
64 Like wither'd leaves to quicken a new birth!
65 And, by the incantation of this verse,
66 Scatter, as from an unextinguish'd hearth
67 Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!
68 Be through my lips to unawaken'd earth
69 The trumpet of a prophecy! O Wind,
70 If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?

West Wind captured by Aeolian harps

An awesome recording of the West Wind is available from the *Saydisc Records* label, England, under the title "Windsongs." This unparalleled album was recorded and produced by Roger Winfield near La Manga and Sierra Nevada, Spain, and Bristol, England, in 1989, using an orchestra of eight Aeolian Harps.

Red notes

1. According to Shelley's note, "this poem was conceived and chiefly written in a wood that skirts the Arno, near Florence, and on a day when that tempestuous wind, whose temperature is at once mild and animating, was collecting the vapours which pour down the autumnal rains. They began, as I foresaw, at sunset with a violent tempest of hail and rain, attended by that magnificent thunder and lightning peculiar to the Cisalpine regions." (188) Florence was the home of Dante Alighieri, creator of *terza rima*, the form of his *Divine Comedy*. Zephyrus was the west wind, son of Astræus and Aurora.
4. The four colours of man. *hectic red*: the complexion of those suffering from consumption, tuberculosis.
9. *Thine azure sister of the spring*: Latin *ver*, but not a formal mythological figure.
10. *clarion*: piercing, war-like trumpet.
14. *Destroyer and preserver*: Perhaps like the Hindu gods Siva the destroyer and Vishnu the preserver, known to Shelley from Edward Moor's *Hindu Pantheon*, introduction by Burton Feldman (London: J. Johnson by T. Bensley, 1810; reprinted New York: Garland, 1984) and the works of Sir William Jones (1746–1794).
21. *Maenad*: a participant in the rites of Bacchus or Dionysus, Greek god of wine and fertility; a Bacchante.
23. *locks*: cirrus clouds take their name from their likeness to curls of hair.
31. *coil*: encircling cables, or perhaps confused murmuring or noise.
- 32-36. Having taken a boat trip from Naples west to the Bay of Baiae on December 8, 1818, Shelley wrote to T.L. Peacock about sailing over a sea "so translucent that you could see the hollow caverns clothed with glaucous sea-moss, and the leaves and branches of those delicate weeds that pave the unequal bottom of the water," and about "passing the Bay of Baiae, and observing the ruins of its antique grandeur standing like rocks in the transparent sea under our boat" (*Letters*, II, 61). Baiae is the site of ruined underwater Roman villas. pumice: lava cooled into a porous, foam-like stone.
- 39-42. "The phenomenon alluded to at the conclusion of the third stanza is well known to naturalists. The vegetation at the bottom of the sea, of rivers, and of lakes, sympathises with that of the land in the change of seasons, and is consequently influenced by the winds which announce it." (188; Shelley's note)
57. *lyre*: Aeolian or wind harp.
69. *trumpet of a prophecy*: Shelley alludes to the opening of the Book of Revelation of St. John the Divine in the Bible, 1.3-18:
 - 3 Blessed is hee that readeth, and they that heare *the words of this prophesie*, and keepe those things which are written therein: for the time is at hand.
 - 4 Iohn to the seuen Churches in Asia, Grace be vnto you, & peace, from him which is, and which was, and which is to come, and from the seuen spirits which are before his throne:

5 And from Iesus Christ, who is the faithful witsesse, and the first begotten of the dead, and the Prince of the kings of the earth: vnto him that loued vs, and washed vs from our sinnes in his owne blood,

6 And hath made vs Kings and Priests vnto God and his Father: to him be glory and dominion for euer and euer, Amen.

7 *Behold he commeth with clouds*, and euery eye shal see him, and they also which pearced him: and all kinreds of the earth shall waile because of him: euen so. Amen.

8 I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending, saith the Lord, which is, and which was, and which is to come, the Almighty.

9 I Iohn, who also am your brother, and companion in tribulation, and in the kingdome and patience of Iesus Christ, was in the Isle that is called Patmos, for the word of God, and for the testimonie of Iesus Christ.

10 *I was in the spirit* on the Lords day, and heard behind me *a great voice, as of a trumpet*,

11 Saying, I am Alpha and Omega, the first and the last: and *what thou seest, write in a booke*, and send it vnto the seuen Churches which are in Asia, vnto Ephesus, and vnto Smyrna, and vnto Pergamos, and vnto Thyatira, and vnto Sardis, and Philadelphia, and vnto Laodicea.

12 And I turned to see *the voice that spake with mee*. And being turned, I saw seuen golden Candlesticks,

13 And in the midst of the seuen candlestickes, *one like vnto the Sonne of man*, clothed with a garment downe to the foot, and girt about the paps with a golden girdle.

14 His head, and his haire were white like wooll as white as snow, and his eyes were as a flame of fire,

15 And his feet like vnto fine brasse, as if they burned in a furnace: and his voice as the sound of many waters.

16 And hee had in his right hand seuen starres: and out of his mouth went a sharpe two edged sword: and his countenance was as the Sunne shineth in his strength.

17 And when I sawe him, I fell at his feete as dead: and hee laid his right hand vpon me, saying vnto mee, Feare not, I am the first, and the last.

18 I am hee that liueth, and was dead: and behold, I am aliue for euermore, Amen, and haue the keyes of hell and of death.

Commentary by Ian Lancashire, 9 September 2002

In “Ode to the West Wind,” Shelley invokes Zephyrus, the west wind, to free his “dead thoughts” and words, “as from an unextinguished hearth / Ashes and sparks” (63, 66-67), in order to prophesy a renaissance among humanity, “to quicken a new birth.” (64) This ode, one of a few personal lyrics published with his great verse drama, “Prometheus Unbound,” identifies Shelley with his heroic, tormented Titan. By stealing fire from heaven, Prometheus enabled humanity to found civilization. In punishment, according to Hesiod’s account, Zeus chained Prometheus on a mountain and gave him unending torment, as an eagle fed from his constantly restored liver. Shelley completed both his dramatic poem and “Ode to the West Wind” in autumn 1819 in Florence, home of the great Italian medieval poet, Dante. The autumn wind Shelley celebrates in this ode came on him, standing in the Arno forest near Florence, just as he was finishing “Prometheus Unbound.” Dante’s *Divine Comedy* had told an epic story of his ascent from Hell into Heaven to find his lost love Beatrice. Shelley’s ode invokes a like ascent from death to life for his own spark-like, potentially fiery thoughts and words. Like Prometheus, Shelley hopes that his fire, a free-thinking, reformist philosophy, will enlighten humanity and liberate it from intellectual and moral imprisonment. He writes about his hopes for the future.

A revolutionary, Shelley believed that poets exercise the same creative mental powers that make civilization itself. The close of his “Defence of Poetry” underlies the thought of “Ode to the West Wind”:

Poets are the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration, the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present, the words which express what they understand not, the *trumpets* which sing to battle and feel not what they inspire: the influence which is moved not, but moves. Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the World.

The trumpeting poetic imagination, inspired by sources — spirits — unknown to the poet himself, actually reverses time. Poets prophesy, not by consciously extrapolating from past to present, and from present to future, with instrumental reason, but by capitulating to the mind’s intuition, by freeing the imagination. Poets influence what the future will bring by unknowingly reflecting or “mirroring” future’s “shadows” on the present. For Shelley, a living entity or spirit, not a mechanism, drives the world. By surrendering to the creative powers of the mind, the poet unites his spirit with the world’s spirit across time. The west wind, Zephyrus, represents that animate universe in Shelley’s ode.

Shelley implores the West Wind to make him its “lyre” (57), that is, its wind-harp. “The Defence of Poetry” begins with this same metaphor: Shelley writes that “Man is an instrument over which a series of external and internal impressions are driven, like the alternations of an ever-changing wind over an Æolian lyre; which move it, by their motion, to ever-changing melody.” (§ 7) This is not just a pretty figure of speech from nature. We now recognize that poetic inspiration itself arises from a “wild,” “uncontrollable,” and “tameless” source like the wind, buffeting the mind’s unconscious. Long before cognitive psychology taught us this fact, Shelley clearly saw that no one could watch her or his own language process as it worked. Like all procedural memo-

ries, it is recalled only in the doing. We are unconscious of its workings, what contributes both content and form, semantics and syntax, to our utterances. He writes that “the mind in creation is as a fading coal which some invisible influence, *like an inconstant wind*, awakens to transitory brightness; this power arises from within, like the colour of a flower which fades and changes as it is developed, and the *conscious portions of our natures are unprophetic* either of its approach or its departure.” (§ 285) This epic metaphor goes beyond the action of the wind on the lyre, the world on the mind. The wind’s tumultuous “mighty harmonies” (59) imprint their power and patterns on the “leaves” they drive, both ones that fall from trees, and ones we call ‘pages,’ the leaves on which poems are written. Inspiration gives the poet a melody, a sequence of simple notes, resembling the wind’s “stream” (15), but his creative mind imposes a new harmony of this melody, by adding chords and by repeating and varying the main motifs. The human imagination actively works with this “wind” to impose “harmony” on its melody. The lyre “accommodate[s] its chords to the motions of that which strikes them, in a determined proportion of sound; even as the musician can accommodate his voice to the sound of the lyre.” (§ 8) In this way, the poet’s mind and the inspiration it receives co-create the poem.

In “Ode on the West Wind,” the ‘melody’ delivered to Shelley is unconsciously expressed in the poem’s epic metaphor, and the chords that his mind generates in response are, first, the repetitions and variations of that melody — for example, the variation of the “leaves” metaphor — and secondly, the formal order: the sonnet sequence imposed on terza rima, as if the tradition of Western sonneteering were imposed on Dante’s transcendental vision. That Shelley echoes the metaphor-melody’s points of comparison throughout “The Defence of Poetry” shows how deeply ingrained it was in his mind. To Shelley, metaphors like this, comparing a human being and the universe, characterize the prophetic powers of all poets. Their conscious, rational mind, in routine deliberation, observes and describes, taking care not to impose on the things under scrutiny anything from the observer, but comparisons, fusing different things, depart from observation. They impose on experience something that the mind supplies or that is in turn supplied to it by inspiration. In “The Defence of Poetry,” Shelley explains that poets’ “language is vitally metaphorical; that is it marks the before unapprehended relations of things.” (§ 22) Shelley builds “Ode to the West Wind” on “unapprehended relations” between the poetic mind and the west wind. The experience in the Arno forest, presumably (why else would he have foot-noted the incident?), awoke his mind to these relations.

If we believe that the unselfconscious mind is susceptible to the same chaotic forces as the weather, and if we trust those forces as fundamentally good, then Shelley’s ode will ring true. Trusting instead in man-made categories like honour, fame, and friendship, Thomas Gray would have been bewildered by Shelley’s faith. The country graveyard has spirits, to be sure, but they are ghosts of dead friends. No natural power inspires elegies or epitaphs. These writings reflect the traditional order by which melancholy, sentimental minds put order to nature. Gray quotes from many poets, as if asserting humanity’s strength in numbers. Like Wordsworth’s solitary reaper, Shelley stands alone, singing in a strange voice that inspires but perplexes traditional listeners. He cries out to a wind-storm, “Be thou, Spirit fierce,/My spirit!” Eighteenth-century poets like Pope would have laughed this audaciousness to scorn,

but then they would never have had the courage to go out into the storm and, like Shakespeare's *Lear* in the mad scene, shout down the elements.

Even should we not empathize with Shelley, his ode has a good claim to being one of the very greatest works of art in the Romantic period. Its heroic grandeur attains a crescendo in the fifth and last part with a hope that English speakers everywhere for nearly two centuries have committed to memory and still utter, often unaware of its source: "If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?" Annotating editors have looked in vain for signs that Shelley resuscitated old phrases and other men's flowers in this ode. What he writes is his own. It emerges, not in Gray's often quoted end-stopped phrases, lines, and couplets, but in passionate, flowing sentences. The first part, all 14 lines, invokes the West Wind's attention in one magnificent sentence. Five lines in the first part, two of which come at the end of a stanza, enjamb with the following lines. Few poets have fused such diverging poetic forms as *terza rima*, built on triplets with interwoven rhymes, and the sonnet, contrived with couplets, quatrains, sestets, and octaves. Yet even this compelling utterance, unifying so much complexity in an onward rush, can be summarized and analyzed.

The opening three stanzas invoke the West Wind (in order) as a driving force over land, in the sky, and under the ocean, and beg it to "hear" the poet. (14, 28, 42) In the first stanza, the wind as "Destroyer and preserver" (14) drives "dead leaves" and "winged seeds" to the former's burial and the latter's spring rebirth. The second and third stanzas extend the leaf image. The sky's clouds in the second stanza are like "earth's decaying leaves" (17) and "Angels of rain and lightning" (18), a phrase that fuses the guardian and the killer. In the third stanza, the wind penetrates to the Atlantic's depths and causes the sea flowers and "oozy woods" to "despoil themselves" (40, 42), that is, to shed the "sapless foliage of the ocean," sea-leaves. The forests implicit in the opening stanza, in this way, become "the tangled boughs of Heaven and Ocean" in the second, and "oozy woods" in the third. The last two stanzas shift from nature's forests to Shelley's. In the fourth stanza, he identifies himself with the leaves of the first three stanzas: "dead leaf," "swift cloud," and "wave." If the wind can lift these things into flight, why can it not also lift Shelley "as a wave, a leaf, a cloud"? (43-45, 53) The fifth stanza completes the metaphor by identifying Shelley's "falling" and "withered" leaves (58, 64) as his "dead thoughts" and "words." (63, 67) At last Shelley — in longing to be the West Wind's lyre — becomes one with "the forest." (57) The last two stanzas also bring Shelley's commands to the invoked West Wind to a climax. The fourth, transitional stanza converts the threefold command "hear" to "lift" (53), and the last multiplies the commands six fold: "Make me thy lyre" (57), "Be thou, Spirit fierce,/My Spirit" and "Be thou me" (61-62), "Drive my dead thoughts" (63), "Scatter . . . / Ashes and sparks" (66), and "Be . . . / The trumpet of a prophecy." (68)

Reading fine poems and listening attentively to classical music both give pleasure, but it comes for several reasons. We carry away a piece of music's theme or "melody," rehearse it silently, and recognize the piece from that brief tune. One or more lines from a poem give a like pleasure. Some are first lines: young lovers recall Elizabeth Barrett's "How do I love thee. Let me count the ways"; and older married couples her husband Robert Browning's "Grow old with me./The best is yet to be" (from "Rabbi Ben Ezra"). Some are last lines: John Milton's "They also serve who only stand and

wait,” Dorothy Parker’s “You might as well live,” and Shelley’s “If Winter comes . . . ” As often, lines from the middle of poems persist, detached: where do

The heights by great men reached and kept
Were not attained by sudden flight,
But they, while their companions slept,
Were toiling upward in the night.

“Home is the sailor, home from sea,” and “Under the bludgeonings of chance / My head is bloody, but unbowed” come from? (Longfellow’s “The Ladder of St. Augustine,” Stevenson’s “Requiem,” and Henley’s “Invictus.”) Yet a pleasure just as keen comes from appreciating how a piece of music or a poem harmonizes its melodies. The longer we read a poem, the more perfected become its variations of those lines that live in our memory. “If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?,” in this way, perfects what came before.

The West Wind is the breath of personified Autumn. When Shelley invokes this breath, “dirge” (21), and “voice” (41), he has in mind a fellow traveller, a “comrade” (49) like himself, no less a human being for being a season of the year, no less an individual than the “close bosom-friend” in Keats’ “To Autumn.” Two other figures recur to Shelley in the Arno forest that day. The stormy cirrus clouds driven by the wind remind him of the “bright hair” and “locks” of “some fierce Mænad.” (20-23) He imagines the wind waking a male and dreaming “blue Mediterranean.” (29-30) Like Shelley the boy, these minor fellow travellers help humanize Autumn and his speaking power. In the first section, Shelley characterizes him as “an enchanter” (3) and a chariot-eer (6) to make that personification vivid. Then, by repeatedly addressing the West Wind in the second person as “thou” and “thee,” Shelley works towards achieving his purpose, his “sore need.” (52) That would identify himself, not just with the leaves of the forest, the wind’s victims, but as “One too like thee” (56), like Autumn, music maker, composer of “mighty harmonies.” Shelley imagines himself first as Autumn’s lyre but, made bolder by the moment, claims the composer’s own voice with “Be thou me, impetuous one!” (62) He associates himself with Autumn, the “enchanter,” in the phrase, “by the incantation of this verse.” (65) “Ode to the West Wind,” in Shelley’s mind, possesses the wind’s own driving power at its close.

Shelley’s overreaching is not quite done. The Autumn wind does not create, but only destroys and preserves. It drives ghosts and “Pestilence-stricken multitudes” (5), causes “Angels of rain and lightning” (18) to fall from heaven, releases “Black rain, and fire, and hail” (28), and brings fear to the oceans. It is not enough to be “a wave, a leaf, a cloud,” at the mercy of Autumn’s means in the “dying year.” (24) The last stanza disregards Autumn and its successor season, Winter, for the last of the poem’s characters, Autumn’s “azure sister of the spring.” (9) Shelley anticipates that spring will “blow / Her clarion” (8-10) for a good reason. At the most poignant moment of recognition of the poem, in the last two lines we all remember and do not know why, Spring’s life-giving clarion becomes “The trumpet of a prophecy” Shelley determines to blow. Though “dead” and “withered,” though reduced to scattered “Ashes,” he will return, his “lips” blowing the trumpet, *like the voice of the Spring*. In shifting from clarion to trumpet, he brings the poem’s harmonies to a climax. “Ode to the West Wind” ends with faith in a poet’s resurrection, not with a weather forecast.

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Primavera (c 1482) Sandro Botticelli, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence

When the wind blows from the west a new world comes into being

Primavera is a painting announcing the arrival of spring (Primavera in Italian) by Italian Renaissance painter Sandro Botticelli, c. 1482. It is housed in the Uffizi Gallery of Florence.

Primavera is significantly illustrative of Renaissance classicistic iconography and form, depicting classical gods almost naked and life-size and a complex philosophical symbolism requiring deep knowledge of Renaissance literature and syncretism to interpret. While some of the figures were inspired by ancient sculptures, these were not direct copies but translated into Botticelli's own, idiosyncratic formal language: slender, highly-idealized figures whose bodies at times seem slightly too attenuated and presage the elegant, courtly style of 16th century Mannerism.

Venus is standing in the centre of the picture, set slightly back from the other figures. Above her, Cupid is aiming one of his arrows of love at the Charites (Three Graces), who are elegantly dancing a rondel. The Grace on the right side has the face of Caterina Sforza, also painted by Botticelli in a famous portrait in the Lindenau Museum as Catherine of Alexandria. The garden of Venus, the goddess of love, is guarded on the left by Mercury, who stretches out his hand to touch the clouds. Mercury, who is lightly clad in a red cloak covered with flames, is wearing a helmet and carrying a sword, clearly characterizing him as the guardian of the garden. The messenger of the gods is also identified by means of his winged shoes and the caduceus staff which he used to drive two snakes apart and make peace; Botticelli has depicted the snakes as winged dragons. From the right, Zephyrus, the god of the

winds, is forcefully pushing his way in, in pursuit of the nymph Chloris. Next to her walks Flora, the goddess of spring, who is scattering flowers.

One source for this scene is Ovid's *Fasti*, a poetic calendar describing Roman festivals. For the month of May, Flora tells how she was once the nymph Chloris, and breathes out flowers as she does so. Aroused to a fiery passion by her beauty, Zephyr, the god of the wind, follows her and forcefully takes her as his wife. Regretting his violence, he transforms her into Flora, his gift gives her a beautiful garden in which eternal spring reigns. Botticelli is depicting two separate moments in Ovid's narrative, the erotic pursuit of Chloris by Zephyr and her subsequent transformation into Flora. This is why the clothes of the two women, who also do not appear to notice each other, are being blown in different directions. Flora is standing next to Venus and scattering roses, the flowers of the goddess of love. In his philosophical didactic poem *De Rerum Natura* the classical writer Lucretius celebrated both goddesses in a single spring scene. As the passage also contains other figures in Botticelli's group, it is probably one of the main sources for the painting:

Spring-time and Venus come,
And Venus' boy, the winged harbinger, steps on before,
And hard on Zephyr's foot-prints Mother Flora,
Sprinkling the ways before them, filleth all
With colours and with odours excellent.

Ernst Gombrich disputed the relevance of the Lucretius passage on the basis that it is part of a philosophical work otherwise of little interest to visual artists as source material, and in favour of a passage from *The Golden Ass* by Apuleius, which is much closer in style to classical *Ecphrasis*, texts describing lost paintings in detail, that were a popular source of inspiration for renaissance artists. Apuleius' passage represents the choice of Venus as the most beautiful goddess by Paris, a choice leading to *The Trojan War* described in Homer's *Iliad*. To the young Lorenzo's tutor, Ficino, Venus represented *Humanitas*, so that the painting becomes an invitation to choose the values of Renaissance Humanism.

Kathryn Lindskoog, in an introduction to her English retelling of Dante's *Purgatorio*, maintains that *Primavera* is an illustration of the Garden of Eden as described in *Purgatorio Cantos 28-31*, with the Venus figure representing Beatrice.¹



¹ Cf. Wikipedia