

On First Looking Into Chapman's Homer

Much have I travelled in the realms of gold,
And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;
Round many western islands have I been
Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold.
Oft of one wide expanse had I been told
That deep-browed Homer ruled as his demesne;
Yet did I never breathe its pure serene
Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:
Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
When a new planet swims into his ken;
Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes
He stared at the Pacific, and all his men
Looked at each other with a wild surmise —
Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

Background

Keats did not read Greek so would have been unable to read Homer's *Odyssey* in its original form. Other translations of these works were widely available but Chapman's version was the one which really brought the epic works to life for Keats when read to him by his old school friend, Charles Cowden Clarke. Clarke commented later that at several points Keats actually shouted aloud in excitement and was clearly much moved by the experience. The pair had stayed up all night reading but nonetheless, Keats went straight home to pen this sonnet and he presented it to his friend at ten the next morning.

The 'Darien' referred to in the sestet is in the Isthmus of Panama. It was not Cortés who first saw the Pacific Ocean but Balboa. Before writing this poem, Keats had read William Robertson's *History of America* and it seems that he confused Cortés' sighting of the Valley of Mexico with Balboa's discovery of the Pacific. However, we can easily forgive him this error. He is, after all, a poet rather than a geographer. (Let us not forget that Shakespeare was equally lax when writing *Macbeth* as neither Glamis nor Cawdor castles were built at the time the play was set and Duncan was most probably killed near Elgin, some one hundred miles away from Glamis.)

Here is the extract from the book which inspired Keats to compare his discovery of Chapman's Homer with such a significant moment in the explorer's life:

‘At length the Indians assured them, that from the top of the next mountain they should discover the ocean which was the object of their wishes. When, with infinite toil, they had climbed up the greater part of the steep ascent, Balboa commanded his men to halt, and advanced alone to the summit, that he might be the first who should enjoy a spectacle which he had so long desired. As soon as he beheld the South Sea stretching in endless prospect below him, he fell on his knees, and lifting up his hands to Heaven, returned thanks to God, who had conducted him to a discovery so beneficial to his country, and so honourable to himself. His followers, observing his transports of joy, rushed forward to join in his wonder, exultation, and gratitude’ (Vol. III). John Keats simply remembered the image, rather than the actual historical facts.

Clarke noticed the error and pointed it out to Keats but Keats decided not to correct it, possibly because the rhythm of the poem would have been upset by the extra syllable in the name 'Balboa'.

Note the words 'wonder', 'exultation' and 'gratitude'. Keats chose this image of the explorer because that is how he felt on first reading Chapman's Homer. If you are ever moved to read Chapman's Homer, you can find it online at <http://www.bartleby.com/111/>

Summary

In the first eight lines (octet), Keats tells us about his travel through the world of literature. He compares his reading of various works to voyages of discovery. There is a strong link between the world of the imagination, the world of poetry and the ancient Greek world as described by Homer.

Much have I travelled in the realms of gold

I have read many works of literature and valued them greatly

And many goodly states and kingdoms seen:

I have enjoyed reading these epic poems

Round many western islands have I been

I have read poems about the Greek islands

Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold

Which are sacred to Apollo, the God of poetry and music

Oft of one wide expanse had I been told

I had often heard of one particular epic work

That deep-browed Homer ruled as his demense

That Homer, the intellectual, wrote

Yet did I never breathe its pure serene

But I never read it, I never metaphorically breathed the clean fresh air of Homer's world,

Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold

Until I heard Chapman's marvellous, stirring translation read aloud for the first time.

(Note the change here from a description of his experience of literature in general to his feelings on hearing Chapman's Homer. The change is signalled by the use of the word 'Then' at the start of the sestet.)

Then I felt like some watcher of the skies

Then I felt like an astronomer

When a new planet swims into his ken;

When he discovers a new planet

Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes

Or like Cortez when he gazed keenly

He stared at the Pacific, and all his men

Looked at each other with a wild surmise-

He saw the Pacific for the first time and all his men, amazed and astonished at the expression on his face, guessed that he had discovered something monumental

Silent upon a peak in Darien

Awed and silent on a hill in Panama.

In the sestet, Keats tells us how he felt when he 'discovered' Chapman's Homer. He draws an analogy between his excitement on discovering Chapman's Homer and the excitement felt by an explorer seeing a new land for the first time or an astronomer who realises he has found a new planet. It is worth noting that the astronomer worked alone but the explorer travelled with companions. Keats believed he was joining a group of people who had already read Homer's work.

Theme

The theme of this poem is the poet's great love of poetry and the excitement of reading new literature which is like being an explorer discovering new oceans or an astronomer discovering a new planet.

Imagery

In the octet, Keats uses a metaphor to compare literature, and poetry in particular, to travel. In the sestet he uses two similes, that of the astronomer and the explorer to explain how he felt on hearing Chapman's translation for the first time.

Structure

This poem is a **Petrarchan sonnet**, divided into an **octet** and a **sestet**. The first eight lines introduce the idea of the poem and the final six tell us Keats' personal reaction to Chapman's Homer. This change of thought is called a **volta** and it is a typical feature of Italian poetry. Keats uses it effectively to move from the idea of the poet as an explorer in the world of literature to his feelings on discovering Chapman's Homer. (For more notes on the sonnet, see the section on literary terms at the end of this booklet.)

Tone

There is a real sense of the poet's **awe** and **excitement** on reading Chapman's Homer. This is effectively conveyed by the comparisons with the discovery of a new planet and the discovery of a new ocean.