

Chapter One

Cortez, Keats, Chapman, Homer

Form and Error

Keats, “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer” (1816)¹⁴

MUCH have I travell'd 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-brow'd 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
Look'd at each other with a wild surmise—
Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

14. Keat’s “On First Looking Into Chapman's Homer” was first published in Leigh Hunt's “Young Poets,” *Examiner* (1 December 1816), no. 466: 761-762. The canonical reckoning of Keats' poem is not published until 1863, when Tennyson, then–Poet Laureate of the United Kingdom, first posited that Keats’ depiction of Cortez was in error. Of the extensive literature on this poem that has developed since, it is worth noting that, exactly a century after Tennyson’s observation, the great American critic Walter Jackson Bate could claim, with equal parts authority and exasperation, that surely “every possible echo ... of Keats’s reading” had been “exhaustively traced.” Still, the matter of Keats’ historiographic “error” remains largely unsettled. A valuable review of the debate surrounding the poem’s putative problem is most recently reviewed in Rzepka, Charles J. (2004). “Cortez — or Balboa, or Somebody Like That: Form, Fact, and Forgetting in Keat’s Chapman’s Homer Sonnet.” *Keats-Shelley Journal*.

Among the thin-papered anthologies that accompany every college freshman to her first “Intro to Lit” course, Keats’ sonnet, “On First Looking Into Chapman’s Homer,” is something of a work-horse. Where other poems follow heatedly, one upon the next, Keats’ memorable verse is invariably called upon to perform double-duty in the university classroom, and is therefore set apart from the rank-and-file verse: “On First Looking Into Chapman’s Homer” is commonly presented as a poem-in-itself, and, more often than not, as an illustration of something greater-than-itself. In the Fifth Edition of the *Bedford Introduction to Literature*, for example, the poem serves to introduce students to the idea of the sonnet form.¹⁵ In a chapter entitled “Pattern,” *Perrine’s Literature* makes a similar example of the poem’s formal character.¹⁶ In *Charters and Charters’ Literature and Its Writers: An Introduction to Fiction, Poetry, and Drama* (Bedford Books, 1997), Keats’ poem is the first one featured in a chapter called “Poet to Poet.”

When a friend introduced John Keats to the translation of Homer by the Elizabethan poet George Chapman, they stayed up all night reading to each other. As Keats walked home at dawn he was already composing his sonnet.... The poem was finished and reached his friend by the first mail, only a few hours later.¹⁷

Among these anthologies, the story of the poem’s invention commonly appears with the poem, as it so perfectly illustrates the Wordsworthian ideal of the poem as “emotion recollected in tranquility.” Indeed, in Pickering and Hoepfer’s classic *Literature* (2nd Edition), these same 14 lines of Keats (and a markedly similar creation story) serve as the exemplar in a section entitled “Poetry as Vent for Emotions”.¹⁸

But, in addition to these instances, and in dozens of others like them, there is something more: A footnote, usually suspended above the eleventh line of the poem, “Or like stout Cortez, when

15. Meyer, 1999, #14473@879

16. Arp, 1998, #9073@781

17. Charters and Charters, 1997, #30265@998-999

18. Pickering, 1986, #76878@597

with eagle eyes / ”. It is thus that the university puts Keats’ sonnet to an even greater, graver task: The calculated and strategic diminution of poetry’s verity. In the Pickering, that eleventh line is glossed by footnote number five:

5. Actually, Balboa first stood on this mountain, as Keats was doubtless well aware.¹⁹

In the Norton Anthology of World Literature, Volume II, it is note 4:

4. In fact, Vasco Núñez de Balboa (1475-1519), Spanish conquistador, not Hernando Cortez (1485-1547), another Spaniard, was the European explorer who first saw the Pacific from Darien, Panama.²⁰

In the Charters’ text, the caveat appears as note eleven at the foot of the page:

11. **Cortez:** Keats mistakenly identifies Hernando Cortés, not Vasco Núñez de Balboa, as the first European to view the Pacific from Darien, a peak in Panama.²¹

And with language strikingly similar, the Bedford reader introduces the problem to the reader with the following footnote:

11. Cortez: Vasco Núñez de Balboa, not Hernando Cortés, was the first European to sight the Pacific from Darien, a peak in Panama.²²

Indeed, some anthologies, like the Bedford and *Perrine*’s, take the extra, if ambivalent, step of putting the matter directly to the reader. The Bedford appends the following text to the conclusion of the poem, as the final prompt in a section entitled “Considerations for Critical Thinking and Writing:”

19. Pickering, 1986, #76878@597, n. 5

20. Norton, p. 819 n. 4

21. Charters and Charters, 1997, #30265@999, n. 11

22. Meyer, 1999, #14473@879, n. 11

5. Does Keats's mistake concerning Cortés and Balboa affect your reading of the poem? Explain why or why not.²³

Similarly, in the fourth of a series of notes included in the main body of its text, *Perrine's Literature* observes frankly that “Balboa, not Cortez, discovered the Pacific.” “How seriously does this mistake detract from the value of the poem?” inquires the text, immediately prior to launching into a disquisition on the Shakespearean sonnet form.

A few of these anthologies offer their own explanations of the putative error, often managing to do so while elaborating on a larger theme: “In his mood of exhilaration,” observes the Bedford reader, “Keats made a mistake in the name of the Spanish explorer who first saw the Pacific...”, to which it adds, brightly, “but critics have never felt that this diminishes from the effect of his poem”²⁴. The Pickering is unequivocal: “The sound of Cortez's name and the romantic associations that name conjures up explain and justify the historical inaccuracy.”²⁵

The poem's page on the online, collaboratively-authored Wikipedia, instantiated in 2004, has much to offer on Keats' often-reported gaffe, and even quotes at length from Robertson's *History of America*, the text which occupied the 21-year old author's mind concurrent with the Chapman.²⁶ Unfettered by the necessary compression of print-bound anthology, yet still informed by the self-same sensibility, Wikipedia's explanation, appearing immediately to the left of the text of the poem in a section called “Background Information,” cites Robertson as Keats' probable source of misreading:

“Darién” is in the east of Panama. However, it was Vasco Núñez de Balboa who first saw the Pacific, not Hernán Cortés. Keats had been reading William Robertson's *History of*

23. Meyer, 1999, #14473@880

24. Charters and Charters, 1997, #30265@999

25. Pickering, 1986, #76878@597 n. 5

26. The observation is unqualified on Wikipedia (June 12, 2009), but cf. Frosch, 2004, #18496

America and apparently confused two scenes there described: Balboa's discovery of the Pacific and Cortés's first view of the Valley of Mexico.²⁷

In offer of contrast to the scene as rendered erroneously by the poem, the page quotes from Robertson's narration of Balboa's first encounter with the Pacific:

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"²⁸

In explaining the error, the Wikipedia page is more generous than the conventional anthologies, and offers the reader the following (unattributed) analysis:

John Keats simply remembered the image, rather than the actual historical facts. ... [Keat's addressee] Clarke noticed the error immediately, but Keats chose to leave it in, presumably because historical accuracy would have necessitated an unwanted extra syllable in the line.²⁹

Thus, the Wikipedia page reduces the problem succinctly: Substituting three-syllabled Balboa for two-syllabled Cortez might improve the accuracy of the poem, but at the expense of poetic integrity. Keats, a poet, opted for the latter.

And so a third, tacit task of this workhorse poem as it is conventionally anthologized and glossed has been to intimate to the young reader an important, if only partly articulated, fact: That the facts of a poem do not correlate, with any useful precision, to the reality of the world in which

27. , #22504

28. , #22504

29. , #22504

she will live; that the language of poetry is formally overdetermined; that — cartographic tropes aside — Keats’ sonnet, like all sonnets, and all poetry generally, is mere adjunct to the world, and not its coeval. In short, the anthologies tell us, this poem about the sundering discovery of new worlds through verse is an object lesson in what we must not expect of poetry: Truth.

Maps of Misreading

Editors’ and wiki contributors’ rationales notwithstanding, the odd marvel of the putative mistake is twofold: First, that Keats let it stand; and second, that it stands uncommented for almost fifty years.³⁰ Granted, per the suggestion in the Wikipedia entry, “Balboa” would have added an extra syllable to the 10-syllable line, corrupting the poem’s iambic pentameter. But it hardly takes a poet to observe that the monosyllabic adjective “stout,” which modified Cortez, need not remain, and the line would still cleanly scan: “Or like Balboa, when with eagle eyes / He stared at the Pacific.” The new three-syllable emphasis (- — -) is somewhat at odds with that of the line as it stood (- — —), but it hardly ruins the poem. It is hardly a glaring error of fact. Given what we know, it seems a reasonable price for Keats to have paid for accuracy.

Indeed, upon further reflection, that single-syllabled “stout” seems out of place in more than one way. The OED confirms that, for several hundred years, “stout” consistently stood for strong, robust body, especially that of a soldier. But beginning in the mid-1700’s, that usage has fallen away, and by Keats’ early 19th century, it is obscure and archaic. By then, the term has been ironized, and indicates “corpulence,” “thickness in the body,” and, euphemistically, “fat.” Recall what Robertson suggests in great detail, that:

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.³¹

30. Tennyson was the first to notice the error publicly, nearly half a century after the poem’s publication. His comment on the matter first appeared in an earlier anthology, Francis Turner Palgrave, ed., *The Golden Treasury of Best Songs and Lyrical Poems in the English Language* (1861; rpt. New York: Walter J. Black, Inc., 1932) 298.

31. , #22504

There is little reason to believe that “stout,” as it is reportedly in use in 1816, would accurately have characterized a man racing up a steep ascent, hoping to be first to the top. And given Keats’ youth, his exposure to all manner of different classes in England, and his demonstrated sensitivity to language, there is little reason to believe that the poet would inadvertently use an outmoded, even ironic, term.

Given the plausibility of these individual details, it is interesting to ask, why is Keats necessarily regarded as mistaken in his use of Cortez? On this point, after all, the anthologies (echoing Tennyson’s comments of 1861) are unequivocal: The poet is mistaken in his facts, but that should not impinge on the pleasure the reader takes of the poem.

Let us revisit these facts.

Balboa, who was in fact the first European to see the Pacific Ocean, was born in 1475, ten years prior to Cortez. An inveterate adventurer, he traveled to the New World in 1500, and, in 1510, founded the settlement of Santa Maria la Antigua del Darien, in present-day Panama, “the first permanent European settlement on the mainland of the Americas”). Balboa was the first European to set eyes on the South Sea, and thereby the first European to “discover” the Pacific of the Western Hemisphere, in 1513. He was then 38 years old. In a complicated bit of imperial politics, Balboa was eventually captured by a jealous rival, tried by the Crown, found guilty of treason, and beheaded at the age of 44.

Cortez, who never enjoyed the success of martyrdom, was doomed—like so many other long-lived conquistadors — to a life of burdensome debt, physical incapacity, and political impotence. Arriving in the New World only after the Pacific’s discovery, his role as conquerer of the Aztec empire soon gave way to that of the embattled administrator of Mexico. When the syphilitic Cortez was forced to return to Spain in 1541, he was greeted by lawsuits (failure to repay loans; murderous abuse of power) but ignored entirely by the Crown. Disgusted and despondent,

Cortez eventually sailed for Mexico in 1547; on the way, in Sevilla, he was stricken with dysentery, and died.

And so imagine Cortez in 1543, during his last years in Spain. At 58, his time abroad has taken its toll: his health is unsound, his gait uneven. He spends most of his time waiting at home for representatives of the Court who will never come. Imagine round, stout Cortez, ignored by his King, hounded by his enemies, surrounded by a public he does not recognize. It is not difficult to imagine that signal comfort to which the old conquistador turns: Maps of the New World. Maps of Cuba, from his time there as governor. Early street plans of Mexico City, the most important city in the Americas, built and settled at his request. Imagine him hunched over his maps of Panama, his “eagle eyes” still sharp, as he traces a fat finger along that route from the peak at Darien to the Pacific. It is not difficult to imagine his housekeepers — “his men” — creeping silently, rolling their eyes behind the old man’s back, glancing at one another “in wild surmise.” It is not difficult to imagine the old conquistador, mired on the wrong side of the Atlantic, quietly summoning the Pacific as best he can.

All of History (Footnote to Plato)

This seems to me no great feat of readership. Keats’ experience of Ancient Greece through Chapman *is like* Cortez’ experience of the Pacific through his maps. But the anthologies do not entertain this reading. Why?

I think that the anthologies present a blunted, unsatisfactory sense of this poem because, more broadly, they are burdened by an altogether literate sense of poetry. As Eric Havelock carefully demonstrates in his masterful *Preface to Plato*, the ancient founder of the Academy and student of Socrates is vehement in his indictment of poetry: Its “danger is one of crippling the intellect”; it “indulges in constant illusionism, confusion, and irrationality”³².

32. Havelock, 1963, #99026@25

It is a line of thought that has been internalized with such success, to such a degree, that even poetry's champions are unlikely to disagree. The anthologies insist on the poem's factual error because they have internalized Plato's hierarchy of ideal forms, and they tacitly contend that poetry ultimately corrupts the ideal by the inferiority of its mimesis. "That is what mimesis ultimately is," writes Havelock, "a shadow-show of phantoms, like those images seen in the darkness on the wall of the cave."³³

Thus, if the poem is to present a rational simile, the poem needs to refer to some genuine act of discovery. At its core, there needs to be some unmediated experience. Reading Homer is *like* really discovering the Pacific. Maps like those of Cortez are merely another instance of problematic mimesis.

In other words, the anthologies expect the poem to present a hierarchy of experience. The repeated story of the poem's invention is another instance of this hierarchy: The anthologies repeatedly present the "actual" event of the poem's creation in unpoetic, historically circumstantial language, as an important anchor to the imaginative, unreliable mimesis of the poem itself.

Overdetermined by its weight as exemplar, the poem is burdened by our long-time faith in a hierarchical relationship between the world and its reproduction. The poem is held by the anthologies to privilege the reality of Balboa's experience at the edge of the Pacific over Cortez' inky simulation of that experience.

33. Havelock, 1963, #99026@25