KEATS’S SONNET ON CHAPMAN’S
TRANSLATION OF HOMER:
MANUSCRIPT OF EARLY DRAFT AND INITIAL
PUBLICATION*

BRIAN FRANKLIN HEAD
Emeritus Center, University at Albany
Albany NY, USA

Resumo
Este estudo apresenta o mais antigo manuscrito conhecido do soneto de
Keats sobre a tradução da Ilíada por Chapman (1611), com uma leitura comparada
dos textos do manuscrito e da primeira publicação do soneto (1816), junto com
comentários filológicos e literários.
Palavras chave: Keats, Chapman, Ilíada, família indo-europeia.

Abstract
This study presents the earliest known manuscript of Keats’s sonnet to
Chapman’s translation of the Iliad (1611), in comparison with the first publication
of the poem by Keats (1816). A comparative reading is provided, along with related
philological and literary comments.
Key words: Keats, Chapman, Iliad, Indo-European.

* Artigo proposto para publicação em Maio e aceite em final do mesmo mês.

Humanitas 65 (2013) 251-262
The purpose of the present study is to present a copy of a manuscript of Keats's sonnet on Chapman’s translation of Homer, in comparison with the text of the initial publication of this sonnet, along with some related philological and literary comments.

Keats's sonnet on Chapman’s translation of the *Iliad* is well known, having frequently been included in collections of Keats's works. Later authors with references to Keats's sonnet include Edgar Allen Poe, Thomas Wolfe, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Vladimir Nabokov and P.G. Wodehouse.

Following partial translations from the *Iliad* in 1598 and 1608, Chapman released the complete twenty-four books under the title *The Iliads of Homer* in 1611.¹

Prior to composing the sonnet (1816) on Chapman’s work, Keats had completed a translation of *The Aeneid*, in 1811.

For purposes of reference, the manuscript reproduced here is identified as: Keats, John, 1795-1821. Much have I travell’d in the realms of gold. A. MS., early draft, MS Keats 2.4, Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge MASS.

The following is a reading of the manuscript, presented beside the text of the first publication of the same sonnet, for purposes of comparison.

Keats’s sonnet on Chapman’s translation of Homer: manuscript of early draft and initial publication

**On the first looking into Chapman’s Homer**

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,
Which deep brow’d Homer ruled as his Demesne:
Yet could I never judge what Men could mean,
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 wond’ring eyes
He star’d at the Pacific, and all his Men
Look’d at each other with a wild surmise
Silent upon a Peak in Darien

**On first looking into Chapman’s Homer**

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.
But of one wide expanse had I been told,
Which deep brow’d Homer ruled as his demesne;
Yet could I never judge what men could mean,
Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:
Then felt I like some watch’r of the skies
When a new planet swims into his ken;
Or like stout Cortez, when with eagle eyes
He star’d at the Pacific, -- and all his men
Look’d at each other with a wild surmise, --
Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

Features of capitalization, punctuation and vocabulary in the early manuscript and in the *Examiner*:

Title  Ms.: On the first..., *Examiner*: On first... (without «the»).
1.1. Ms.: Realms..., *Examiner*: realms... (without capitalization).
1.2. Ms.: States and Kingdoms..., *Examiner*: States and Kingdoms... (same)3
1.3. Ms.: Western...been, *Examiner*: western (without capital)... been (no comma).
1.4. Ms.: Bards..., *Examiner*: Bards... (without capitalization in later publications).
1.5. Ms.: Oft..., *Examiner* But... (different wording).
1.8. Ms.: loud, ... bold. *Examiner*: loud (no comma)... bold: (colon, instead of period)

---

2 As published *The Examiner*, December 1, 1816, p. 762. For a more recent publication of this sonnet, see Keats, J. (1992), *Poetical Works*, Oxford University Press: 38.
3 Some of the later publications have one or both of these words beginning with a small letter.
1.9. Ms. Watcher of the Skies. *Examiner:* watcher of the skies. (without capitals)
1.10. Ms.: Planet... Ken, *Examiner:* planet... ken; (without capitalization).
1.14. Ms.: Silent ... Peak ... Darien, *Examiner:* Silent peak, Darien.


Line 2: *goodly* is the combination of *good* plus the suffix –*ly,* meaning «somewhat large, considerable», with *good* via Old English gōd, from Germanic *gōdaz,* «fitting, suitable», allied to Old Slavonic god «fit season», Russian годный «fit, suitable» and Polish godny «worthy», from common

---

4 The principal source for identification of Indo-European roots is Watkins (2011), with additional information from Pokorny (1959) and from data from on-going Indo-European research on Proto-Indo-European Etyma (Pokorny Master PIE Etyma) at the Linguistics Research Center of the University of Texas at Austin. Skeat (1980) is a useful source for cognate forms in the Germanic languages and for description of words from Latin via Old French, Vasmer (1958, 1987) for related forms in the Slavic languages, Lehmann (1986) for Gothic and related words in other Indo-European languages, and Johnson (1755) for earlier meanings of English words.
Keats’s sonnet on Chapman’s translation of Homer: manuscript of early draft and initial publication

origin in the earlier Indo-European *ghedh- «to unite, join, fit» (Watkins 2011: 29a, Pokorny ghedh- 423.)

The derived form kingdom «country, state ruled by a king» is from Old English cyningdōm: king + dom, hence literally the «domain of a king». The base word king is from the Indo-European root *gens-, also *gen-, «to give birth, beget, with derivatives referring to aspects and results of procreation and to familial and tribal groups»; oldest form *ǵehn-. The word king is from the zero-grade form *ḡen-. Related words in English include, among many others, gene and indigenous. Related forms in other languages include Anglo-Saxon cyning «king» (literally, a man of good birth), cyne- «royal», cyn «tribe, kin, race», Latin gignere (past participle genitus) «to beget» and gnāscī, nāscī (gnātus, natus) «to be born», Greek γόνος «procreation» and γονή «seed, offspring», and Sanskrit janaḥṃv «offspring», jāta- «born», janate «he is born» (Watkins 27a, Pokorny 1. ḡen-373.)

The ultimate source of the suffix -dom is from the Indo-European root *dhē- «to set, put» (contracted from earlier dheh-), origin of Old English duēd «doing, deed» via Germanic *dēdiz. Variant *dhō- is origin of current English «do» from Old English dōn «to do», Germanic *dōn. Suffixed o-grade form *dhō-mo- is origin «doom» from Old English dōm «judgement», while -dom is from Old English -dōm, abstract suffix indicating state, condition or power, also Old Norse –dōmr «condition» in compound hōrdōmr. Related forms in other branches of Indo-European include Russian дума «thought, council» and Ukranian дума «thought, narrative poem», both from a Germanic source akin to Gothic dōms «judgement». (Watkins 2011: 18a-b, Pokorny 2. dhā- 235.)

The word state comes via Old French estat from Latin status, accusative of status «standing, condition», supine of stāre «to stand», Indo-European root *stā- «to stand», with derivatives meaning «place or thing that is standing», oldest form: *steh, colored to *stah, contracted to *stā-. Also origin of Avestan and Armenian stāya «stand, place», Latin sistō, stō «stand», Anglo-Saxon standan «stand», Old Irish tair- «stand», Old High German stān, stān «stand», Greek εὑτῆν «I stood», Sanskrit sthā «to stand», Russian стоять «to stand», Lithuanian stājū «stand», Tocharian B ste «is». (For related words in English, see Watkins 2011: 86b-87b; Pokorny stā- 1004.)

Line 4: bard is from Welsh bardo and Gaelic Irish bard, origin of Greek βάρδος. In Latin, the term bardus is found in Lucan. The word was originally used in reference only to Celtic poets and, in lowland Scotland, to wandering minstrels; the meaning was later extended for general reference
to poets. Although both the *New English Dictionary* (Oxford 1884) and the *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford 1971) indicate that the earliest documentation of the word is from the mid-fifteenth century, *Bard* had already become a surname by the end of the thirteenth century. Cf. Scottish surname *Baird*. The Indo-European root is *gwera- «to favor». Celtic *bardo* refers to a «praise poet», one who produced and bestowed praise poetry as gratification to his patron. (Watkins 2011: 35b, Pokorny 4. guer(ə)- 478.)

Line 5: *expanse* is related to the Latin verb *expandere*, from *pandere*, *pans- «to spread». The Indo-European root is *petɘ‑ «to spread», also the origin of Old English *fœthm «fathom», from Germanic *fathmaz «length of two arms extended». There are numerous derivatives from Latin *patâre «to be open* and *pandere* (past participle *pâssus < *patto‑) «to spread out», as well as from Greek *pέταλον, «thin plate», neuter of *pέταλος, origin of French *pétale and English *petal, *pατανέ (?<*pετάνα [petanā] > Latin *patina) «platter» and *pέταςος «broad-brimmed hat». (Watkins 2011: 69b, Pokorny 2. pet– 825.)

Line 5 begins with «Oft» in the manuscript, with «But» in the first published version. The former emphasizes the frequency of a certain special reference to Homer, the latter contrasts Homer’s domain with that of other literary references in the sonnet.

Line 6: *low brow’d* changed to *deep brow’d*. The word ‘low’ has meanings similar to those of ‘deep’: «deep browed» (or «low browed») implies profound knowledge and intellectual powers. The term *lowbrow* (based on *highbrow*) in the sense of ‘unsophisticated’ or ‘trivial’, is documented beginning in the early 20th century. In general, «brow» refers to the ridge above the eyes, also to «contenence». The Indo-European root is *bhrū‑ «eyebrow», contracted from *bhruh*, which yielded Middle English *browe, from Old English *brū‑, via Germanic *bhrūs. Related forms include Icelandic *brūn and, from other branches of the Indo-European family, Lithuanian *bruwis, Russian бро́вь, Greek ὀφρύς, Persian *abrū, Sanskrit *bhrū. (Watkins 2011: 14a, Pokorny 1. bhrū- 172, 2. bhrū- 173.)

Line 6: *demesne* refers to «possession of own land». The term entered English in the fourteenth century, via Old French *demeine «belonging to a lord», from Latin *dominus «lord» (allied to verb *domâre «to tame»), *dominicus «pertaining to a lord», also the source of English *domain, a more modern form, from 15th century French *domaine through alteration of *demeine ‘demesne’, source of English *demesne, ultimately from Indo-European *dem‑ «house, household», with reflexes in several branches, such as Greek

Line 7: mean (in both early draft of ms. and in the earliest printed version of the sonnet, The Examiner, December 1, 1816) comes from Middle English menen, Old English mānan «to intend», Old Irish mic, Brittonic mwyne, Old High German meinen «to think», meina «thought» (related to minni «memory»), Germanic *mainjan, Dutch meer, Danish mene, Swedish mena, as well as slavic meinō, Old Church Slavonic měnjo, měniti, Russian мнěнѣ «opinion», all ultimately from Indo-European *mei-no- «opinion, intention». (Watkins 2011: 54b-55a, Pokorny mei-no- 714.)

A later version (1992, see n. 2, supra) has a different text for this line, ending with serene, from Latin serēnus, via French, with the derivatives serenity, French sérénité and Latin serēnītas each used as honorific forms in certain titles. The use of serene («Yet did I never breathe its pure serene») is in accord with the reference to the Pacific, in the second and final simile in the sestet, in comparison with the experience of reading Chapman’s translation of Homer, «till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold». Both the early manuscript and the first printing indicate the unique nature of the experience («Yet could I never...»). The Indo-European root is *ksero- «dry», of Greek ξηρος «dry» (applied only to ground, according to Ernout-Meillet 1939: 928), Latin serenus, and Tocharian A ksär «morning», among others. (Watkins 2011: 46a, Pokorny ksē-ro- 625.)

Line 10: planet is from Middle English planete < Old French planete < Latin planētā < Greek πλανήτης «a wanderer», plural πλάνητες «wandering stars, planets», from Indo-European root *pel工商局 «flat; to spread», also ultimate origin of pole «field» in Russian, Ukrainian, and Old Russian, пôle, with a cognate form in Old Slavonic; Bulgarian, пълъ; Serbo-Croatian, поље; Slovenian, poljê; Polish, Czech and Slovakian, pôle; in Upper Sorbian, poló; Lower Sorbian, póło; and Polabian (now extinct), piūi (Vasmer 1987: III, 307), in addition to other related words in Slavic languages, such as polak (in reference to Polish people) and polka (a Polish dance, originally only in reference to a Polish woman). (Watkins 2011: 66b, Pokorny pel工商局 805.)

Line 10: ken, meaning «can» and «know» is from Anglo-Saxon cen-nan. Cognate forms are well attested in the Germanic languages: German kennen, können, Dutch kennen, Old Norse kenna, Gothic kunnan «to know, recognize» and kannjan «to make known». The root is from Indo-European
*gnō- «ken, know, recognize» (oldest form *gneh-, altered to *gnōh-, contracted to *gnō-), also origin of Latin gnārus «one who knows» (with numerous derivations and compounds) and its antonym ignārus, as well words in other branches of Indo-European: Classical Greek: γνως- root of «to know» and related words, such as the coinages gnosis, from γνώςις in the sixteenth century, and agnostic, based on ἀγνωστός (suggested in Acts xvii: 23), by Huxley in 1869; Avestan zānāiti «know» and zainti «knowledge»; Old Irish ad-gnimin «recognize»; Lithuanian žinōti «know», Old Prussian ersinnat «recognize», Armenian caneay «I Know» and an-can «unknown», Greek γνωτός, Latin (g)notus, Old Irish gnath, Lithuanian pa-žintas «known», Old Slavonic znati, Russian знал «know», Albanian njoh «know», Tocharian A and B knā- «know, recognize». (Lehmann 1986: K38, Watkins 2011: 33b, Pokorny 2. ġen-, ġen-, ġene-, ġnō-, 376.)

Line 11: stout, Middle English stout, Old French estout «stout, bold», related to Anglo-Saxon and Low German stolt, with the same meanings, is ultimately from the Indo-European root *stel- «to put, stand», with variant forms giving origin to diverse words, such as Old English stille «quiet», current English Apostle, stallion, stolid. The modern meanings of stout include «determined, bold, brave» and «strong, sturdy». Other words from the same Indo-European root include, among others, Greek στήλη «pillar», στολή «garment», Russian стойкий «firm», Flemish stille «stick». (Watkins 2011: 88a-b, Pokorny 3. stel- 1019. See also Skeat 1980: 522.)

Line 15: wild, meaning here «unrestrained, frenzied, full of intense emotion, bewildered», is ultimately from the Indo-European root *welt- «woods, wild», which yielded forms such as Old English weald, wald, from Germanic *walhuz; wild from Old English wilde, wild, derived from Germanic *wilthja-. Cognate words in other Germanic languages include Dutch wild, Icelandic villr, Danish and Swedish vild, German wild, Gothic wiltheis. (Watkins 2011: 101a, Pokorny 4. ūel- 1139.)

Line 15: surmise, meaning «guess or notion based on intuition or limited information», is based on mittere «to let go, send off, throw», of uncertain origin, with the likely oldest form being *smittere, as in the archaic spelling cosmittere, of the Classical Latin compound committere «to bring together». (Watkins 2011: 57b, Pokorny *smeit- 968.) The English verb surmise comes from Latin mittere via Old French surmise, feminine singular of the past participle of surmettre. The original sense in English is that of supposing or conjecturing, to which the meaning of Keats’s phrase wild surmise clearly indicates.
In terms of the use of punctuation and capitalization, there is close similarity between the features of the early manuscript shown above and those of the version of the sonnet first published in *The Examiner* on December 1, 1816. Most of the capital letters of the manuscript are preserved in the initial publication of the sonnet. The use of capitals in the manuscript is more extensive, including words that take the place of proper nouns, as well as some employed for emphasis. The punctuation is similar, with few differences. Both versions divide the octave into just two sentences, of four lines each, and both treat the sestet as a single sentence. It can be noted, however, that later publications have more differences, in relation to the texts considered here, with regard to the use of both punctuation and capitalization, with the later publications tending to be increasingly conservative with regard to contemporary pedagogical norms (hence, reflecting to a lesser degree the features of earlier versions).

Keats’s generation was familiar with the translations by John Dryden and Alexander Pope, in blank verse or heroic couplets, rendering Homer in a way similar to Virgil.

From the content of the sonnet, it is evident that Keats was profoundly impressed by Chapman’s rendition. Keats had a special affinity with Chapman: both possessed good knowledge of classical culture, both were poets and Keats also translated a classical epic poem.

Formally, Keats’s poetic tribute to Chapman is a sonnet in the style of Petrarch, consisting of an octave and a sestet, in iambic pentameter. The meanings of the parts are closely interrelated. That the manuscript is a draft

---

5 The website http://spenserians.cath.vt.edu/TextRecord.php?action=GET&txtsid=36006 presents a version of the text as a copy of «On first looking into Chapman’s Homer», as published in *The Examiner* (1 December 1816) 762. It is not, however, a faithful copy of the original publication, for, unlike the version published in *The Examiner*, it shows both of the names Chapmen and Cortez completely in capital letters: CHAPMAN... CORTEZ. There is no apparent justification for this change.

6 To the extent that they represent interference with the poet’s intended forms and meanings, such versions must be considered distortive. Without additional specific information, one can only speculate with regard to the causes of such textual interference, which seems to be the result of greater concern for normative grammatical features of common usage than for the special aspects of poetic discourse (such as linking and emphasis) in accordance with the poet’s own vision of his topic. One can imagine the distortions that would result from the use of normative principles by an overly zealous and disoriented editor for «correcting» the lack of capitalization in the poetry of e e cummings (Edward Estlin Cummings) or the lack of punctuation in the prose of Portuguese Nobel Prize winner José Saramago.
It is clear the «realms of gold» refers to literary riches, as evidenced by the successive references, in the first eight lines, to the Aegean islands, to Apollo (god of poetry, born at the sacred island of Delos, in the Aegean), to Homer, then to Chapman, preceded by «Yet could I never know what Men could mean», which calls attention to the value of literary translation in making works available to those who otherwise would not have access to them, and especially to the value of quality in translation. The sestet concerns the magnitude of the experience of the first reading of Chapman’s translation, through two comparisons: first with taking knowledge of a new planet, then with an initial sighting of the Pacific.

Keats’s generation knew of the discovery of Uranus, the first planet to become known modern times (not known in antiquity). Uranus (named after the Greek god ruler of the heavens) had been found fortuitously by Herschel in 1781. The phrase «swims into his ken» suggests the mode of the discovery (— contrary to the case of Neptune, to be discovered more than half a century later, through mathematical calculations, in 1846). Literary connections with the planet Uranus include the names of its seventeen satellites, all for characters in Shakespearean plays.

The second and final comparison is with the initial viewing of the Pacific Ocean by Cortez with «eagle eyes» (as shown in Titian’s painting of this subject), changed from «wond’ring eyes», hence denoting close attention, in addition to the wonderment indicated by «wild surmise» and «silent»), while «all his men look’d at each other in wild surmise». The two comparisons show the vastness of the discovery and the nature of its impression.

There are several links between words of like meaning, such as «Realms» (line 1), «Kingdoms» (line 2) and «Demesne» [=domain] (l. 6), between the reference to the Aegean Islands (l. 3), suggesting water, extended through the use of «swim» (l. 10), culminating in the reference to the awe-inspiring Pacific Ocean, and between the vastness suggested by the use of wide expanse (l. 5), the reference to a planet (l. 10), then the reference to the Pacific (l. 12). Such connections contribute to the emphasis and unity of the poetic composition. The climactic impression made by the total imagery of these comparisons is one of awe, caused by reading Chapman’s Homer.

Historically, the reference to Cortez viewing the Pacific from the Darién province in Panama is an error: it was Balboa, not Cortez, who viewed
the Pacific Ocean from Panama. It has been suggested that Keats did not change the reference to Balboa, because doing so would have added another syllable. Such a motive seems hardly likely: Keats gave ample evidence of poetic skill in more than fifty compositions. The differences both within the manuscript of the «early draft» reproduced here (line 6) and between it and the later publication (lines 7 and 11) show that it would not have been difficult for Keats to make additional changes required by alteration of the reference. The name of Cortez, who conquered Mexico and served as its governor, has different connotations and imagery from that of Balboa. Moreover, it is Cortez, not Balboa, who was immortalized in a portrait by Titian. Of course, many early explorers and conquistadores viewed the Pacific, as did Cortez, one of the most famous leaders of sixteenth century European expansion.

The final comparison in the sestet, with «stout Cortez», recalls the attributes determined, bold and strong, qualities also to be associated, as mental courage and artistic prowess, with both «deep-browed Homer» and Chapman, the principal English translator of The Iliad.

Bibliography


Johnson, Samuel (1755), A dictionary of the English language: in which the words are deduced from their originals, and illustrated in their different significations by examples from the best writers. To which are prefixed, a history of the language, and an English grammar. London, Printed by W. Strahan. (Facsimile edition: New York: AMS Press, 1967.)

Keats, John. Manuscript: Much have I travell’d in the realms of gold. A. MS., early draft, MS Keats 2.4. Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge MA.


Pokorny Master Proto-Indo-European Etyma. Information available on the Internet: 
www.utexas.edu/cola/centers/lrc/ielex/PokornyMaster-X.html