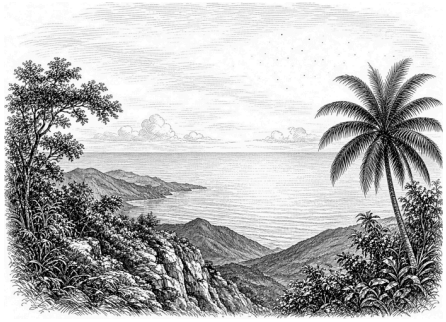
Name _____ Class _____ Date _____



On First Looking into Chapman's Homer

by John Keats

Grades 9–12 · Common Core RL.9-10.4, RL.9-10.2, RL.9-10.5

In October 1816, Keats, then 20, stayed up all night with a friend reading George Chapman's 1616 translation of Homer's Iliad and Odyssey; he wrote this sonnet the next morning. It is a Petrarchan sonnet (octave and sestet). Keats made a famous slip: it was Balboa, not Cortez, who first saw the Pacific from Darien (Panama), in 1513. A new planet, Uranus, had been discovered in 1781.

THE POEM

Much have I traveled 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 star'd at the Pacific—and all his men
Look'd at each other with a wild surmise—
Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

VOCABULARY

realms — kingdoms, areas

goodly — fine, attractive

bards — poets

fealty — loyalty to a lord

Apollo — Greek god of poetry

demesne — land ruled by a lord; a domain

serene — here, clear air

ken — range of sight or knowledge

stout — brave, determined

surmise — a guess, a wondering thought

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are the “realms of gold” the speaker has “traveled” in?

2. What “wide expanse” had he heard about but never experienced?

3. What two discoveries does he compare his reading to in the sestet?

4. How do Cortez’s men react, and how does this capture the speaker’s feeling?

5. Why do you think Keats chose images of exploration for an experience of reading?

WRITING PROMPT

Write a poem of 10–14 lines about discovering a book, song, game or place that amazed you. Use at least one simile of exploration or discovery.

On First Looking into Chapman's Homer — Answer Key

1. The world of literature and poetry: books are like golden kingdoms and islands he has visited.
2. The poetry of Homer ("deep-brow'd Homer ruled as his demesne"); he had never breathed "its pure serene" until he read Chapman.
3. An astronomer ("some watcher of the skies") seeing "a new planet," and Cortez staring "at the Pacific."
4. They "Look'd at each other with a wild surmise— / Silent." The amazement is too great for words.
5. Accept supported answers: reading Homer felt like discovering a whole new world.

Read the full poem online: poetrycatalog.com/on-first-looking-into-chapmans-homer-john-keats/