

Colby



Colby Quarterly

Volume 2
Issue 5 *February*

Article 5

February 1948

Did Keats Read William Falconer?

Carl J. Weber

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq>

Recommended Citation

Colby Library Quarterly, series 2, no.5, February 1948, p.75-77

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Quarterly by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Colby.

Colby Library Quarterly 75

DID KEATS READ WILLIAM FALCONER?

By CARL J. WEBER

VARIOUS suggestions have been made, at one time or another, as to where John Keats got the phrase "pure serene" in the famous sonnet "On First Looking into Chapman's *Homer*." On this subject C. L. Finney remarks: "To one who is not versed in the diction of eighteenth-century poetry it [the phrase 'pure serene'] may seem unusual and original. It has been suggested that Keats derived the phrase from Cary's translation of Dante's *Paradiso*; but it is unlikely that he had read Cary's *Dante* at this time. The type of phrase to which 'pure serene' belongs is common in eighteenth-century poetry. In Thomson's *Seasons* . . . we find 'blue serene' and 'pure cerulean,' and in his *To the Memory of Lord Talbot* we find 'pure serene'."¹ In addition to these examples cited by Finney, I notice that, in the last-named poem, Thomson also writes (line 124): "disturbed the clear serene."

I do not know whether it has ever been suggested that Keats may have found the phrase in another eighteenth-century source,² one with which readers of poetry were familiar a century ago and throughout Keats's lifetime, but one that has dropped out of sight in the twentieth century. Only recently has a copy of the verses of this forgotten author come to the Colby College Library. I refer to William Falconer, born in Edinburgh in 1732, and lost at sea in 1770. His popularity in the days of Keats's youth may now seem hard to understand, but who has not found it sim-

¹ Claude Lee Finney, *The Evolution of Keats's Poetry* (2 vols., Harvard University Press, 1936), I, 124.

² I find no comments on this matter in Douglas Bush's "Notes on Keats's Reading," *PMLA*, 50 (1935): 785-806; or in Frederick S. Boas's article "On First Looking into Chapman's *Homer*" in *The John Keats Memorial Volume* (London, 1921); or in the Hampstead Edition (New York, Scribners, 1939) of the Poetical Works of John Keats, edited with Notes by H. Buxton Forman, revised with additions by Maurice Buxton Forman.

76 Colby Library Quarterly

ilarly hard to understand young Coleridge's enthusiasm for the *Sonnets* of William L. Bowles? That same W. L. Bowles once wrote:

Farewell, poor Falconer! When the dark sea
Bursts like despair, I shall remember thee.

But in mid-twentieth-century there are few who remember the sailor-poet and fewer still who know his once-famous poem.

The Shipwreck by William Falconer was published in 1762, and in the century that followed the first appearance of the poem its popularity was the cause of nearly thirty editions.³ *The Shipwreck* was re-issued a dozen times during the life of John Keats, and the young man who could read and admire the poetry of Mary Tighe would not find Falconer's poem unattractive. As Falconer's biographer reminds us, there was a time when "*The Shipwreck* was hailed as one of our finest and most original national poems. Its descriptions were pronounced to be not inferior to those in the *Aeneid*; and, in versifying his sea language, Falconer was held to have achieved a greater miracle of success than . . . Homer."⁴

In Canto I, ii, of *The Shipwreck*, Falconer wrote:

the calm domestic scene
Had o'er his temper breathed a gay serene.

It will of course be at once observed that the phrase "gay serene" is no nearer to Keats than is the phrase in Thomson's *Seasons* and not as near as is the phrase in the poem *To the Memory of Lord Talbot*. But it should also be noted

³ I have not attempted an exhaustive list but have identified the second edition, London, 1764; the third, London, 1769; the fourth, London, 1772; as well as the following: Dublin, 1777; London, 1785 and 1787; Philadelphia, 1788; London, 1789, 1794, 1796, and 1800; Wilmington, 1801; London, 1802; Dundee, 1802; London, 1804, 1806, 1808, 1811 (twice); Philadelphia, 1813; New York, 1825; London, 1826; Philadelphia, 1830; London, 1836; New York, 1843; Edinburgh, 1858; and London, 1868 and 1894.

⁴ *The Shipwreck* by William Falconer, with a Life by Robert Carruthers (London, T. Nelson, 1868), xviii. This is the edition now in the Colby Library.

Colby Library Quarterly 77

that Falconer not only uses "serene" as a noun, as does Keats, but he also *breathes* the serene, again as does Keats. And there is an additional reason for offering the suggestion that one poet knew the work of the other. In Canto III, i, of *The Shipwreck*, we read:

Darkling I wander with prophetic dread.

Who can escape thinking at once of Keats's line, "Darkling I listen. . . ." in the *Ode to a Nightingale*? None of the references cited in Notes 1 and 2 above offer any suggestions regarding Keats's "Darkling"; but it is clear that William Falconer not only preceded Keats in the choice of this unusual word but also used it with identical effect, i.e., as the initial word in an iambic verse, thus inverting, in the first foot, the rhythm of an otherwise normal iambic line.

In the years immediately preceding the publication of the *Ode to a Nightingale*, half a dozen London publishers vied one with another to render Falconer's lines familiar to every reader of poetry. It is therefore easier to believe that in Keats's "Darkling I listen" we have an echo (conscious or unconscious) of Falconer's "Darkling I wander" than it is to believe that the two poets stumbled into identical phraseology independently. Once the "Darkling" echo is heard, breathing the "pure serene" follows close behind.

Farewell, poor Falconer! When next I see
John Keats's lines, I shall remember thee.



HARDY'S LADY SUSAN AND THE FIRST
COUNTESS OF WESSEX

By WALTER PEIRCE
Santa Barbara, California

HARDY wrote a short story about the first Countess of Wessex and a poem about Lady Susan, but he does not mention the relationship between them or connect them in any way. As a matter of history, Lady Susan was