



4-25-2014

## Six Poems on Sixteenth-Century Maps

Jeremy Dae Paden  
*Transylvania University*

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13023/disclosure.23.05>

Follow this and additional works at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/disclosure>

 Part of the [Latin American Languages and Societies Commons](#), and the [Other English Language and Literature Commons](#)

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](#).



---

### Recommended Citation

Paden, Jeremy Dae (2014) "Six Poems on Sixteenth-Century Maps," *disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory*. Vol. 23 , Article 5.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13023/disclosure.23.05>

Available at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/disclosure/vol23/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by *disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory*. Questions about the journal can be sent to [disclosurejournal@gmail.com](mailto:disclosurejournal@gmail.com)

## Six Poems on Sixteenth-Century Maps

JEREMY DAE PADEN  
*Transylvania University*

The Age of European Imperial Ascendance, more typically known as the Age of Discovery, was also the age of maps and the age of Petrarchan poetry. I mean by the age of maps primarily two things: a period when more and more sophisticated portulan charts were being produced to aid in navigation and a period when, though not necessarily in rigorous intellectual debate, the nature and purpose of maps was under discussion. Medieval European maps, like St. Isidore's famous O-T map that represented the *orbis terrarum* as a circle divided into three parts by a T of water, had always been overtly ideological documents, more interested in theologico-political depictions of the world than with showing the wandering traveler the way to San José. As the usefulness of the new technology became undeniable, as news of new continents came back and the contour of those shores were traced out, the map as representation of geographical accidents rose to prominence. Yet, in the century or two after Columbus' stumbling onto that archipelago in the western ocean, an event that coincided with and aided in the development of the modern conception of what a map should be, two kinds of maps, the overtly ideological/symbolic one and the one we presume to be more objective because it is utilitarian, came together in strange ways. Europeans struggling to understand how those new lands fit into their understanding of the world created maps that, while they tried to be geographically and mathematically correct, were also visual icons of theological, philosophical, and political conceptions of the world. (This is not, of course, to say that the modern map, the Rand-McNally Atlas or the digital Google Map, are not themselves political and ideological documents, but that is another matter altogether.)

As European nations spread across the globe taking land and gold and spices, enslaving peoples, raping women, setting up Colonial outposts, and stealing the booty extracted from these places from each other, their poets were busy writing about desire and love. Some of these like Philip Sidney, Henry Howard, Garcilaso de la Vega, and Juan Boscán, to name a few from the English and Spanish traditions, were also soldiers. Others, like the epic poet Alonso de Ercilla y Zúñiga or the privateer Walter Raleigh, actually participated in the conquest of America. The discourse of desire and love is closely bound in the Early Modern period to the expansion of empire and the extraction of material goods based on human exploitation.

The six poems that follow explore the topic of mapping in the Early Modern period. They are a series of ekphrastic poems on sixteenth-century *mappa*

*mundi* and use the trope of the cosmographic heart or the cordiform map to tell the story of early European and American contact. The first two poems take up the figure of Columbus. Rather than true ekphrasis, which is a description in words of a visual icon, they are descriptions of imaginative objects. (It should be noted, though, that the first example of ekphrasis, the description of Achilles' shield in the *Iliad*, is a description of an imagined physical object.) The first poem takes as its point of departure the well-known fact that Columbus kept a secret captain's log and map, now lost, which presumably recorded the real mileage and latitude in order to keep proprietary claims on his route. According to Columbus's official, known, and publicized log, after leaving the Canary Islands he sailed straight across the ocean, just north of the demarcation line that would have put him in Portuguese waters, possibly invalidating his trip and forfeiting everything to Portugal's crown. This route has him landing in the Bahamas. Curiously, no other journey of his has him sailing that far north or that straight across the Atlantic. The second poem riffs on the rumor that started soon after his return that he got the idea to sail west from a man named Alonso Sánchez, who had discovered Santo Domingo and provided the Genoese mariner his hard-won map. The purpose of this rumor was to invalidate Columbus' claim of discovery, thus to wrest from him his titles.

The latter four poems use sixteenth-century *mappa mundi* as points of departure: Fineaus's 1566 cordiform map, Bünting's 1581 clover-leaf map, Hondius's 1589 cosmographical heart, and an anonymous Flemish map ca. 1590 that uses Ortelius's cordiform map as the face of a jester. These maps, which use mathematical projections to iconographically distort the world while still maintaining fidelity to the relative position of landmasses to each other, make visible the trouble Early Modern Europe had with fitting the Americas into its established theologico-political framework. To wit, the O-T map of medieval Europe not only depicts one world made of three landmasses, it often shows Jerusalem either at the center or the top of the map, and sometimes has inscribed on each continent which son of Noah populated said region. Bünting's map can be considered part of a grouping of maps that struggles with how and where to place America in relation to Europe on the globe. His map is later than those from the first part of the century where the real problems were worked. In fact, it's something of a novelty map and shows a self-conscious awareness of the theological questions at stake. The other three maps, all which show the world as a heart, are part of a mystico-cosmographical set of maps that try to resolve the theologico-political tension of Europe's stumbling upon America by justifying the conquest as the final movement in a divine love story. These maps tried to allegorically incorporate the Americas within the European cosmographical imaginary through the discourse of love.

All six poems use traditional tropes from European love poetry, both the Petrarchan tradition and the Hispano-Arabic one. When Columbus sailed in 1492, he brought with him Arabic and Hebrew translators. This way, should he indeed

arrive on eastern shores, he would be able to make his economic intentions plain. Thus, the first language heard by the Taino people after Columbus's Italian/Portuguese/Castilian pidgin would have been Arabic. The golden age of Arabic science and literature and Hebrew philosophy and literature coincided with Arabic and Sephardic existence on the Iberian Peninsula – Al-Andalus and Sefarad, respectively. A central poetic form of the Hispano-Arabic lyric tradition is the muwashshah, in Spanish, *moaxaja*. These poems, written in Arabic, had final refrains, known as *kharja*, or *jarcha*. The *kharja*, though written in Arabic script, could be in Classical Arabic, colloquial Andalusian Arabic, and even, a number, in Ibero-Romance, or proto-Spanish. The *kharja* is often in the voice of the female lover responding to her beloved. In these poems, those passages in italics specifically draw on the *kharja* tradition, both in terms of their images and in speaking voice.

These poems bring together tropes taken from love poetry along with cartographic images from the period in order to comment on the violence of the conquest. My interest in this period is because it is the birth of the modern world: capitalism, nation state, global commerce, etc. If the discourse of love, in the cosmographic heart maps of Hondius and others, allegorically overcomes the new and fragmented world of the sixteenth century, these poems turn that discourse on its head. They juxtapose the discourse of love and desire that has come down to us, that was forged in the crucible of Petrarchan poetry and spread throughout western culture, with the language of desire and possession that are part of colonial/capitalist system in order to trouble both, and mark more insistently the violence on which the modern world was founded.

Because the World Is Round

Because neither winds nor waves  
obey a lover's wants

a secret account must be kept  
a book that tells the story straight

a log of trials  
only heroes vanquish

Let the world think the heart  
has sailed about in circles

think desire is a silly  
fickle thing that blunders

blind through waves  
and lands confused

on sandy beaches

Lies and rumors  
will always be spoken

in the market place  
so keep the secret close

balance the columns

on one side, the real  
and the false miles

on the other, the bodies  
captured, bought and sold

On the Map Columbus May or May Not Have Gotten from Alonso Sánchez

It says, simply, acts of God

Says, skirt along the coast  
of Africa until a storm

heavy with locust and dust  
batters your heart

like a ship on waves  
dark as wine on lees

Whispers, over the ocean seas  
are cinnamon-skinned women

with golden bracelets  
and parrot-feather skirts

Murmurs, there are islands  
green and ready for sugar cane

Sailing west, it says  
is also sailing east

The Heart Is Both Bow and Arrow  
*On Fineaus's Cordiform Map, 1566*

The heart is both bow and arrow  
and shoots, not in an arc, but straight  
across the waters and lands  
quivering on virgin beaches

The heart follows its own desire  
line across the ocean sea  
and pays no mind to currents  
or winds that pull south

*The world is one*, it says  
and speaks its love in *moaxajas*  
and *kharjas* and calls the earth  
*aceituna*, green and plump

*You are mine, O world*  
*beyond the western seas*  
*O meu al-habib, I open*  
*tonight for you my door*

Because the World Is No Longer Three In One  
*On Bünting's Clover-leaf Map, 1581*

Because the world is no  
longer three in one

Jerusalem no  
longer a jewel, center

from which the continents  
unfurl like God's own

*fleur-de-lis*, the one  
for which he became man

because the world is now  
four and still dividing

draw the earth as a heart  
split the world in two

discovery is passion  
possession is love

the mining of gold?  
the harvest of cane?

call these the search for a mate  
that completes the heart

The World Is a Sacred Burning Heart  
*On Hondius's Cosmographical Heart, 1589*

The world is a sacred  
burning heart

hung and held in place  
by the very breath of God

The continents, pendants  
that like the heart taper away

*Africa, India, America*

each claimed as prize  
given as booty

The world, a sacred burning  
heart that lays its body

down on the altar of war  
and pestilence as offering

We Are Fools On the Stage  
*On a Flemish Fool's Cap Map, ca. 1590*

All the world is a play  
and we are fools on the stage  
who wear our heart on our face  
as a mask to hide our eyes

*Little sister, are all men false?*

*Mother, mother, I did not  
open the door last night.*

*Who is this man beside me?*

*Mother, mother, he has my heart.*

*Little sister, he stole my world,  
he came in through a window  
like a thief in the night,*

*now he sits by the door  
singing of his exploits,*

*my body an ocean, my heart,  
a world he's circumnavigated.*