



*Review Article*

## **Depiction of Sensuous Beauty and Love in Marlowe's *Hero and Leander***

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### **Abstract**

Inspired by ancient poets through his Renaissance education, Christopher Marlowe recounts the story of two youthful lovers, Hero and Leander, in his titular work. Mainly focusing on the sensuous beauty and sexual naivety of the lovers, the poem accentuates the importance of physical appearance and the concepts of love, morality as well as fate in the Renaissance tradition. Preserving the original story in the romantic part of the poem, Marlowe indeed makes some alterations in the details and leaves the story unfinished which is completed by George Chapman after Marlowe's death with the addition of the tragic part. Within this context, referring to Greek mythology and noted Roman poets, Christopher Marlowe's "Hero and Leander" displays a love story carved out as a combination of the ancient corpus and the Renaissance values, which eventually puts forward a new approach to the well-known romantic story.

**Keywords:** Renaissance love tradition, Christopher Marlowe, Greek mythology

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"Hero and Leander" is a reinterpretation of the original love story from Greek mythology from the distinct perspective of the Renaissance poet and playwright, Christopher Marlowe. It reflects the romantic beginning and the tragic ending of the love story involving two young lovers fighting for their love against all odds.

The poem starts with the praise of the lovers' beauty. Hero is a virgin and a nun in the service of Venus enchanting all males in her city, Sestos, which is a strait on one side of Hellespont. On the other side, Leander is a very handsome youth living on the other side of Hellespont, Abydos, stirring up emotions in both males and females. Hero and Leander see one another during a festival dedicated to Adonis, Venus's lover and fall in love instantly thanks to an arrow of love shot by Cupid as follows:

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And in the midst a silver altar stood,  
There Hero sacrificing turtles blood,  
Vaild to the ground, vailing her eie-lids close,  
And modestly they opened as she rose:  
Thence flew Loves arrow with the golden head,  
And thus Leander was enamoured. (2006, I, 157-62)

However, Leander cannot convince Hero to leave her sacred life and to quit her vow of chastity to Venus. Hence, Hero goes home to her tower alone whereas Leander has to go across the water to Abydos. When Leander's father sees him, he realises that Leander has fallen in love and forbids him from seeing Hero again, which pushes Leander to swim across the sea to meet Hero once again. Nevertheless, he is taken by Neptune in the sea as he mistakes him for Ganymede, the beautiful youth and cupbearer to Zeus, and instantly desires to keep him for himself. As he sees that Leander is indeed a mortal who is about to be drowned, Neptune brings Leander back to the surface and saves him although he harasses him to be his lover afterwards. Leander manages to escape from Neptune and appears in front of Hero's room. Seeing a naked and dripping wet Leander, Hero is both surprised and embarrassed. She tries to hide from him in her bed, but she is soon convinced to bring him inside the bed to keep him warm through the success of Leander's eloquence (Cantelupe 1963, 296). In the bed, they are indulged in the acts of love although Hero is reluctant to leave her virginity. At last, they are overpowered by their emotions and decide to consummate their love. At this point, Leander's convincing argumentation and Hero's own internal conflicts lead them to the passionate side of love (Norwood 1950, 9). As the dawn breaks, Leander must return his home swimming across the sea while he is expected by an angry and disappointed Neptune. These incidents comprise the romantic part of the poem composed by Marlowe. Furthermore, in Chapman's part, as Leander swims towards Sestos another night after many nights with Hero, he cannot see the lamp which is supposed to be lit by Hero each night to guide him towards his destination, he is taken by the stormy sea and gets drowned. Seeing Leander's dead body, Hero joins him and the poem ends in a tragic way.

As mentioned earlier, the poem consists of two main parts, written by Christopher Marlowe and George Chapman. The division is made by Chapman after Marlowe's death. The poem is generally considered a fragment due to the original myth itself, which is exemplary for the following works. Thus, it is assumed that the poem should have a tragic ending, not a romantic one as observed in Marlowe's part. Chapman's part is sometimes criticised for being overtly didactic and his "sestiaids" are found faulty in terms of style (Sinkhorn 1966, 1). For many modern critics, the two-part structure presents two contemporary possibilities for the ending of the poem and two different styles. Besides, it is discussed that Marlowe might have deliberately left the poem in a romantic mood and never finished it to evade the gloomy end of the story (Campbell 1984, 242, 247). Another perspective about the romantic part of the poem which belongs to Marlowe is that he possibly made use of the romantic tradition as part of his satire. His intention is "to satirize a literary world of overdone, romantic distortions of life" through the use of humour and mockery (Lenihan 1969, 27).

As per the style of the poem, it is made up of sestiaids referring to Sestos, similar to the Iliads referring to Ilium in *the Iliad*. The love story which first appears in Virgil's *Georgics* in European literature is later adapted by Ovid and Musaeus (Ovid 1996, 10). However, some Renaissance scholars argue that Marlowe's version is more purified and distinct from the earlier versions. As C.S. Lewis states, Marlowe's "Hero and Leander" surpasses other poems handling

the Greek myth, as a superior Ovidian work, even more successful than Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* (Cheney 2004, 11). Impressed by Ovid and Musaeus, Marlowe succeeds to adapt their styles with significant changes and renewals. In this respect, Marlowe's part of the poem is considered more novel and innovative than Chapman's part through their distinct styles:

After studying Hero and Leander, however, one would have to conclude that the appeal of the classics was different for Marlowe and Chapman. Captivated by the pagan joyousness and erotic playfulness of Ovid's *Amores*, Marlowe clearly had these same Ovidian characteristics in mind when writing *Hero and Leander*. Chapman, on the other hand, was drawn more to the restraint and desire for order typical of the classical mind. (Sinkhorn 1966, 90-91)

In the same line, although the theme of the original myth is tragic, its manner is comic, which is utilised by Marlowe in the first part of the poem to add sensuousness and "erotic sensibility" in a way Renaissance literature has never included (Cantelupe 1963, 298). Furthermore, Marlowe dwells on the beauty inspired from the classical atmosphere of Musaeus' poem. Therefore, in the early parts of "Hero and Leander", Marlowe clarifies his source of inspiration as follows: "Amorous Leander, beautiful and young/ Whose tragedy divine Musaeus sung" (I, 50-51). Nevertheless, Musaeus is impressed by Homer's form himself, which once again underlines the Greek origin and aspects of Marlowe's poem (Norwood 1950, 15).

To illustrate more on the Ovidian influence in Marlowe's poem, Marlowe makes use of the Ovidian eroticism and calls forth a fresh perspective into the poem. He is highly impressed by Ovid's works, especially *Amores*, which draws parallelism with his "Hero and Leander" (Bush 1929, 760). Marlowe is known to have translated the work when he was a student. Although he refers to the erotic quality of Ovid's work he manages to achieve a nice balance between sensuality and conciseness in the poem, which brings about an almost Chaucerian narrative (Cubeta 1965, 505). In and in-between the lines, there are layers of meanings foreshadowing the future incidents as seen in the physical depiction of Leander and the assumption that he shall be loved or desired by others aside from Hero (Heaney 1992, 37): "His body was as straight as Circe's wand;/ Jove might have sipped out nectar from his hand./ Even as delicious meat is to the taste," (I, 61-63). Then again, Marlowe utilises Ovid's ekphrasis in the description of Venus' glass which displays the ancient tradition and importance of the work of art and the artist (Mitsi 2007, 2, 9). Besides, Marlowe utilises physical descriptions and sensuous beauty in the Ovidian fashion and cherishes the imagistic aspect of the Roman poetry. Yet, he emphasises Hero's clothes more than her body, which differs from the Ovidian tradition (I, 9-14). The depiction of clothes yet serves for another purpose as it refers to another love story, the myth of Venus and Adonis. Another difference seen in Marlowe's poem is his stress on sexuality and morality at the same time. He displays Hero and Leander's passion for one another, which is already prophesied at the beginning of the poem as something ill-omened through the line "true love's blood" (I, 32). Thus, Marlowe's poem stands aloof when compared to Ovid's *Heroides* and *Metamorphoses* in terms of eroticism (Cubeta 1965, 504). Finally, "Hero and Leander" is distinct from Ovid's works as it also appreciates the beauty of a man, rather than a woman, which demonstrates homoeroticism. Through the use of a classical myth, the poem pictures beautiful boys and men desired by other men and gods (Mitsi 2007, 9). Marlowe expresses how Leander affects other men in these lines underscoring his beauty:

[h]ad wild Hippolytus Leander seen,  
Enamour'd of his beauty had he been:  
His presence made the rudest peasant melt,

That in the vast uplandish country dwelt;  
The barbarous Thracian soldier, mov'd with nought,  
Was mov'd with him, and for his favour sought.  
Some swore he was a maid in man's attire,  
For in his looks were all that men desire. (I, 77-84)

Accordingly, sensuous beauty is another issue Marlowe lays emphasis in the poem as a Renaissance poet. Renaissance Period defines, universalises and exalts beauty in the most abstract and general terms, and promotes the “worship of the body” (Pater 1980, 4). Similarly, the lovers, Hero and Leander are both described beautiful and appealing to the eye. It is through this physical perfectness that the romantic and the following tragic story of the poem can leave such a deep impact on the reader. Marlowe justifies the concept of “love at first sight” through lovers’ beauty and physically attractive characteristics (I, 167-174) and underlines the significance of sight in love. Along with beauty and sight, possibility of generation and creation through their relationship is also implied in the “Neoplatonic justification of physical love” (Walsh 1972, 38). Hero’s beauty is exhibited in a portrait in which she is mistaken for Venus by Cupid for her excellent beauty:

Some say, for her the fairest Cupid pin'd,  
And, looking in her face, was strooken blind.  
But this is true; so like was one the other,  
As he imagin'd Hero was his mother;  
And oftentimes into her bosom flew,  
About her naked neck his bare arms threw,  
And laid his childish head upon her breast,  
And, with still panting rock, there took his rest. (I, 37-44)

Cupid takes Hero for a mother and nestles in her bosom, which proves her beauty once again and presents the suggestion that she shall be loved for her beauty soon. Her beauty is such an asset that it places her on a level above the goddesses and makes her a more important person, which is narrated by Musaeus in a likewise manner (Norwood 1950, 14). Even her ankles gleam below her robe and she is depicted as such:

Nor that night-wandering, pale, and watery star  
(When yawning dragons draw her thirling car  
From Latmus' mount up to the gloomy sky,  
Where, crown'd with blazing light and majesty,  
She proudly sits) more over-rules the flood  
Than she the hearts of those that near her stood. (I, 107-112)

Hero’s beauty is even more effective on those who have seen her even more so than Cynthia, the moon goddess controlling the ebb and tide. In a way, she is likened or even depicted to be superior to Cynthia herself. In the same line with Hero’s beauty, Leander is depicted in a portrait parallel to Hero’s, which in a similar fashion links his beauty to Adonis’s bisexual figure (Walsh 1972, 37). He is so beautiful that he is desired for “sexual sport” by

Cynthia and Jove. Cynthia wants him to be “her sphere” whereas Jove thinks of him as beautiful as Ganymede, his cupbearer and desires to drink his “nectar from his hand” (I, 59-62). Likewise, when Leander gets into the world of men, he arouses emotions in them and they are confused about his sex and identity in the way Neptune was (Walsh 1972, 36). His body is depicted so elaborately that Leander emerges as the embodiment of perfection and proportionate beauty praised in the Renaissance culture:

How smooth his breast was, and how white his belly;  
And whose immortal fingers did imprint  
That heavenly path with many a curious dint  
That runs along his back; but my rude pen  
Can hardly blazon forth the loves of men,  
Much less of powerful gods: let it suffice  
That my slack Muse sings of Leander's eyes;  
Those orient cheeks and lips, exceeding his  
That leapt into the water for a kiss  
Of his own shadow, and, despising many,  
Died ere he could enjoy the love of any. (I, 66-76)

Leander’s physical appearance is so overpowering that even the narrating persona feels like his words and poetry cannot suffice to depict this beauty which has lured men and gods alike. Furthermore, Leander despises most of his admirers and does not respond to their love until he encounters Hero, a virgin fleeing away from his charms. He is unable to persuade Hero to be his beloved in heart and flesh despite his beauty in body as well as shape and male strength. However, it is through his eloquence that he succeeds in his plans. Through aphorisms, he covers the truth and confuses Hero, who is already debating with herself about remaining a virgin or not (Cantelupe 1963, 296). Similarly, the messenger god, Hermes puts forth a similar situation. He falls in love with a shepherdess, tries to seduce her in the rough way, but gets rejected. He tries to catch her roughly and scares her away. Right then, the shepherdess reminds him that maids can be won only by pleasing words, not by force (I, 419-20). Thus it can be safely argued that the rhetoric used by Leander and not-used by Hermes puts forth the power of words and the importance of art in winning over the minds and hearts of people. It is through Leander’s “self-representation” and words that Hero is able to understand and appreciate him (Weaver 2008, 401).

In a similar vein, “Hero and Leander” portrays the erotic and sensuous side of love. Even though some critics regard it as an escape from real life, eroticism is applied to the narrative to create a pretext for the moralistic and comical/satirical parts of the poem (Miller 1953, 158). First of all, Hero is a nun worshipping Venus, which creates a comical atmosphere and leads towards eroticism. In these parts, Marlowe plays with the “Italianate-Ovidian tradition” through mockery for satirical purposes (Lenihan 1969, 24). Likewise, because the poem celebrates Eros and physical love, it demonstrates lovers’ transition from inexperience to experience in the physical acts of love. In addition, the preciousness of Hero’s virginity is symbolised with a fort to be climbed up and conquered by Leander. There are ambiguous erotic indications about the fort and the jewels. In this respect, Hero’s virginity can be interpreted to be as difficult to achieve as a high tower in which she lives and as precious as gems (Banerjee 1973, 49). So, Hero and Leander struggle over their emotions and resist one another’s beauty,

which depicts a situation referring to the Neo-platonic side of sexual love and the significance of beauty. They are succumbed to passionate desire which is neither fruitful nor blessed. Remarking the slight possibility of generation and the continuation of species as a result of the physical acts of love, the poem pictures their first unification driven by their desires. Nevertheless, they are rather inexperienced and naïve in sexual love as Hero has fashioned herself as an unattainable lady in the service of Venus whereas Leander has been arrogant towards love. Yet, soon after he discovers his feelings and convinces Hero for a sexual relationship, which brings about comical scenes humanising them in the readers' regard (Walsh 1972, 35).

Finally, emphasising the interference and importance of fate in humans' lives, Marlowe brings two contradicting forces into his poem: Fate and Love to create order out of chaos (Braunmuller 1987, 60). Marlowe's speaking persona points out the workings of fate as follows:

It lies not in our power to love, or hate,  
For will in us is over-rul'd by fate.  
When two are stript, long ere the course begin,  
We wish that one should lose, the other win;  
And one especially do we affect  
Of two gold ingots, like in each respect.  
The reason no man knows; let it suffice,  
What we behold is censur'd by our eyes.  
Where both deliberate, the love is slight;  
Who ever lov'd, that lov'd not at first sight? (167-76)

Thus, it is fate that defines humans' lives, gets to decide whoever wins or loses in life and makes the ending of Hero and Leander's love story. Since the beginning of the poem, Fate foreshadows the doom of their love. Hero and Leander are vulnerable and weak in the face of fate. In the beginning of the poem, it is denoted that Hero is one of a kind and she shall suffer for this:

So lovely-fair was Hero, Venus' nun,  
As Nature wept, thinking she was undone,  
Because she took more from her than she left,  
And of such wondrous beauty her bereft:  
Therefore, in sign her treasure suffer'd wrack,  
Since Hero's time hath half the world been black. (I, 44-50)

In these lines, it is emphasised that Hero is so beautiful that she has to compensate for that with her doom and suffering. Moved by Fate and her own desires, Hero involves with Leander and lights the lamp each night while Leander swims across the sea, which becomes like a monotonous ritual of love. However, one night the light is extinguished by the stormy wind and Leander is drowned by angry waves, which proves the intervention of fate (Norwood 1950, 9). His death is described in full detail and his fight to the bitter end is not a nice scene to imagine. It is George Chapman, who opts for the tragic ending with the lovers' death which is already predicted in Marlowe's part in the poem. In other words, as their story began, it was

already obvious that their end would be tragic (Tjarks 1981, 161): “On Hellespont, guilty of true love's blood,/ In view and opposite two cities stood,” (I, 32-33). Even the place the lovers consummate their love is associated with Acheron (I, 189), the river of pain in Greek mythology, which once again notifies the lovers' grievous story.

In conclusion, Christopher Marlowe makes a novel re-interpretation of the Greek myth, “Hero and Leander” in his poem through accentuating sensuous beauty and erotic love along with morality and the intervention of Fate. Setting forth the extremely beautiful couple and their romantic involvement, he leaves the poem unfinished, which is taken over by Chapman with his tragic ending, leaving the lovers devastated in the face of Fate for their extreme charms and passionate desires. Chapman's addition keeps the poem true to its origin whereas Marlowe's account posits the poem among the most accomplished versions of the story.

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