

Go On Slower, Timeless Leander

Christopher Marlowe's *Hero and Leander* (1598) acts as a retelling of a tragic romance by Musaeus. The story follows Hero and Leander, two youths on opposite sides of the Dardanelles Strait, then called Hellespont, as they fall in love with one another. In Musaeus's original, the two engage in a clandestine marriage, and Leander drowns one night crossing the water and Hero throws herself in to join him in death. However, Marlowe drags out their interactions, delaying any sexual engagement and excluding the marriage entirely as he ends it on the dawn of their first night making love. This incomplete iteration of the myth, paired with the manuscript's discovery being posthumous, led to ongoing scholarly debate on whether the work was finished or if Marlowe passed away before he could complete the tale, with George Chapman even adding his own conclusion in later publications. This paper argues that Marlowe's poem is complete within itself and functions, due to an unreliable narrator, as a celebration of real love uncontrolled by fate.

The first indication that *Hero and Leander* may be a finished work stems from its difference with the original poem by Musaeus. Katherine Cleland explains that "the paradigm of [Musaeus's] Hero and Leander myth — a secret courtship and consummation — would have translated in an early modern reader's imagination into a story about clandestine marriage," which Bruce Brandt notes "had become controversial in Marlowe's day" (Cleland 216; Brandt 9). This offers an incentive for Marlowe to change a core message of the original text, envisioning a separate direction that did not need Musaeus's ending within it to convey his message. Moreover, Cleland further mentions "Marlowe's seeming disinterest in a courtship that leads to marital love," which also contributed to his lack of engagement with the sonnet genre, which emerged as a form of courtship (219). This background gives Marlowe a personal motive to stray from the original *Hero and Leander* on top of the societal one presented by the condemnation surrounding clandestine marriage.

The implementation of this turn away from marriage can be seen within the poem and serves as evidence for Marlowe's intentions to differ from Musaeus. In the first night when the two get married in Musaeus's, Marlowe depicts Leander as "rude in love and raw" and ending the night feeling that "Some amorous rites or other were neglected" (Marlowe 545, 548). The scene of a secret consummation compared to one where Hero and Leander do not even sexually interact signifies the different story Marlowe intends to tell. The mutual inexperience shared between the couple portrays the slower pace set in this version and also gives the impression of younger ages for both Hero and Leander, alienating the idea of a marriage that neither party would be rushing towards. Leander's naivete in particular prohibits him from leading Hero through a practiced courtship towards marriage, implying that the relationship between the two is instead a less formulaic one, undriven by social customs. Moreover, aside from never explicitly depicting marriage, "Marlowe never presents the relationship between Hero and Leander in terms of the behaviour of husband and wife" and instead focuses on presenting "attraction, fear, excitement, passion, and regret — characteristic of a young couple's movement toward first sexual experience" (9). This sets an overall goal for the piece that diverges from the original,

calling for a different ending, which Marlowe supplied in order to sufficiently convey his intent. Brandt points out how though Marlowe expanded Musaeus's original 343 lines into 818 lines with his retelling, he actually "ignor[ed] the opening 15-line invocation" and "the 70 lines that follow the lovers' first night together" (2). Though Marlowe's disuse of the latter lines may be attributed to him dying before he could, his departure from the message of the source text and the disregard of lines earlier in the poem indicate that he does not mind straying from his source text. If Marlowe had his own vision for the story between Hero and Leander that fuelled his decision to discard parts of the original, then this same logic could explain why he ended his story differently.

Another indication that Marlowe's story is complete lies within the completeness of its ending and the context of George Chapman's continuation of it. As it stands, the poem concludes with Night "o'ercome with anguish, shame, and rage,/Dang[ing] down to hell her loathsome carriage" (Marlowe 816-817). Though Hero and Leander do not face tragedy at the end, Brandt points out that "both [Marlowe and Musaeus's poems] end with a woman falling, and that they both end at dawn" (14). Despite expanding greatly in content from the original, Marlowe reflects Musaeus with key points and moments. This parallel of a woman falling as dawn approaches continues that trend and indicates that despite changing the fates of Hero and Leander, the story has reached its end. Regarding Chapman's additions in subsequent publications, Cleland notes that the "difference in the style and tone of Chapman's continuation suggests that he did not finish Marlowe's Hero and Leander so much as he responded to it" and that his "focus on the marriage ritual" reflects his dissatisfaction of "the lack of a public ritual formalizing a marriage" (216, 219). This desire to depict marriage gives Chapman a motive grounded in his societal beliefs to add on to Marlowe's poem, allowing the poem to be complete from Marlowe's differing point of view. Furthermore, the varying style and tone that alienates Chapman's version indicates that there is a disconnect between the two where Marlowe's can exist without this "response" and be read and understood in its entirety.

Considering the poem to be complete, the narrator becomes an important but unreliable one with his own motives. Regarding the narrator's role as a whole, Brandt notes that "most of the narrator's perspective is Marlowe's addition to Musaeus" (4). This means that the functions of the narrator are meant to change the story in Marlowe's own way and particular attention must be given to how he participates in the story to discover the purpose of his addition. One of the earlier instances of the narrator demonstrating intent is within the initial descriptions of Hero and Leander, which expands over 46 and 40 lines, respectively, whereas in Musaeus's version, illustrations of their beauty are kept succinct and unemphasised (Marlowe 5-90). Brandt describes this "exaggerated, hyperbolic imagery" as attempts to "persuade" the reader of their attractive appearances rather than simply relaying the information, which, as Pamela Macfie notes, "focus[es] attention upon [Marlowe's] own ingenuity (Brandt 6; Macfie 74). A desire to persuade implies that the narrator has a belief that he is trying to impose, and though believing in the beauty of Hero and Leander is not controversial, it begins to draw attention to where else in the rest of the poem the narrator is conveying his bias. Moreover, though Macfie attributes this

arrogant display of “ingenuity” to Marlowe, since the poem has a distinct speaker, it must be attributed to this narrator instead, which reveals a wish to elevate his own literary credibility through verbose descriptions filled with allusions. Macfie points to another instance of this when the narrator performs a *recusatio* by insisting his linguistic ability cannot sufficiently describe Leander’s beauty, calling upon “the precedent of Ovid” and his “*recusatio in Amores 1.1*” (74). By performing this, the narrator likens his talent to that of Ovid, forcing himself into the same high regard with which Ovid is held and comparing *Hero and Leander* to other texts.

Additionally, this idea of competition is further encouraged by the narrator throughout the poem even when the events of the poem do not reflect these ideals, further discrediting his reliability. Right after describing Hero and Leander’s first view of each other, as they begin to become attracted to one another, the narrator brings up the image of “the [race] course begin[ning]” and “our” response that “We wish that one should lose, the other win” (Marlowe 169-170). This equates the romance about to proceed between Hero and Leander to a competition, “framing human events in terms of a narrative of competition” and implying that one should win if they enter a relationship since “Hero’s chastity is the prize” (Wall 78, 80). However, as the story progresses, this is not the case. Amongst their first few interactions, Hero drops a “painted fan of curled plumes.../Thinking to train Leander therewithal/[but] He, being a novice, knew not what she meant” (Marlowe 495-497). If Hero and Leander’s relationship were a competition, Hero would lose by engaging with Leander, but she is depicted as reciprocating Leander’s affection, and in this instance, even instigating further interaction between them with Leander too naive to understand her sentiment. Therefore, “the narrator seeks to convince us of the truth of the claims he has just made” despite the actual relationship between Hero and Leander, as evidenced by the contradiction between his views of the situation and reality (Wall 81). Since some of the narrator’s statements can be directly disproven in the story, the integrity of all his opinionated generalisations come into question.

The unreliability of the narrator then challenges one of his central claims about the relationship between fate and love. As Hero and Leander initially see each other, the narrator asserts that “It lies not in our power to love or hate,/For will in us is overruled by fate” (Marlowe 167-168). Though this is a sentiment common in literature, and perhaps even in society to modern day, it is not one present between Marlowe’s Hero and Leander. This idea is followed by another philosophical generalisation as the narrator proclaims “Who ever loved, that loved not at first sight?” (Marlowe 176). Throughout the poem, Leander is shown to make attempts to woo Hero, who even makes her own move with the aforementioned dropping of her fan. Their first night is rife with their inexperience, and despite the expanded length of Marlowe’s version, the two only reach their first night of intercourse by the conclusion of the poem. Though they were attracted to each other’s looks when they first met, it took numerous interactions and steps in order to reach the point of copulation that in Musaeus’s indicated a fulfillment of love. Therefore, the relationship between them was a gradual work in progress akin to real life rather than a fantasy ideal controlled by fate and ideas of “love at first sight.” Moreover, fate is traditionally associated with a predetermined end, which for Hero and Leander, as set by

Musaeus, is death and suicide. However, Marlowe's couple does not share this "tragic destiny" (Cubeta 501). By purposely excluding this, Marlowe not only fights against the message behind Musaeus's original, but his own narrator who he has established to be biased and questionable, drawing more attention to his true message about depicting a case of genuine and realistic love. Furthermore, John Cubeta points out how the idea of fate having control "is alien to Marlowe's thought throughout his dramas," creating a clear discourse between Marlowe and his narrator (501). This then provides further evidence to the message of this version of *Hero and Leander* being about love undisturbed by fate since Marlowe's beliefs are in contrast to his narrator's. The oddity of this *Hero and Leander* is not the absence of fate imposing a "tragic destiny," and rather, its inclusion would make it uncharacteristic of Marlowe, circling back to the idea that this poem is complete.

Despite the faithfulness to Musaeus that George Chapman's conclusion to Marlowe's *Hero and Leander* can provide, Marlowe's work is sufficient to convey his own interpretation and message of the story. By depicting a more realistic understanding of love, especially between young lovers, Marlowe modified the myth to be applicable throughout time since it does not reflect an idealistic view of romance.

Works Cited

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