

Contradiction, comedy, and sympathy in marlowe's 'hero and leander'



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Christopher Marlowe's *Hero and Leander* challenges 16th century Christian teaching. Christian teaching on desire stems from Thomas Aquinas' Natural Law which is a set of moral laws intended to identify God's purpose for human life. One of the five primary precepts states that the main purpose of sex is to procreate. Therefore, according to Natural Law, Hero and Leander's sexual relationship contradicts God's intention for humanity. Through exploring the immaturity of the characters' relationship, the poem dissuades the reader from condemning the protagonists' actions by inviting sympathy for them through comedy. The protagonists are presented as young people with a limited view of desire rather than sinners who deliberately contradict God's word.

The only expressions of desire that Hero is aware of are extremes, either lust or coyness. This is immediately obvious when she is described as 'Venus' nun' (45). The contradiction here is clear. As the Goddess of love, Venus embodies desire, fertility and sex whereas the nun embodies purity and chastity. Kocher notes that 'Venus' nun' was Elizabethan slang for prostitute which further enhances the extremes Hero represents, her existence is a contradiction because she is both nun and prostitute (p295). This is key in evoking sympathy for Hero as it shows that her understanding of desire is limited. She is not a sinner for desiring Leander, as traditional Christian teaching would suggest. Indeed she is confused by Leander's interest, usually disapproving of the men who fall at her feet, waiting the judgement 'of her scornful eyes'. When Leander openly asks her to bed, saying 'we human creatures should enjoy that bliss' (254) she bursts into tears, 'a stream of liquid pearl' (297) falls down her face. She is caught between

what she knows of chastity as a nun and the physical attraction she naturally feels for Leander. Leander's view of love and women is limited. He is aware of his feelings for Hero but sees women as objects; 'strings to be tuned' and 'vessels to be kept shiny'. He speaks boldly of sex and virginity, asking Hero 'Wilt thou live single still? One shalt thou be, Though never-singling Hymen couple thee' (257-258) but has no idea how to consummate. This lack of information means he cannot realise his sexual desire in a meaningful way either. Douglas Bush criticizes the poem for its general lack of depth and purity in its depiction of love (p130-137). Although this may seem to be the case, this lack of depth is clearly a deliberate act. Hero and Leander have a view of desire that leaves them unable to confront their sexual urges in a meaningful way and so by extension their sexual relationship will lack depth. The lovers are unable to have a productive sexual relationship because they have such a limited understanding of sexuality. By highlighting this Marlowe encourages sympathy for the lovers rather than condemnation.

The comedic nature of the poem encourages us to laugh at the lovers and sympathise with them. Walsh notes that 'although aware of the lover's shortcomings we are both amused and sympathetic' (p42). An example of this comedy can be seen in Neptune's pursuit of Leander. We are told that 'the lusty God embraced him, called him love and swore he never should return to Jove' (167-168) and Leander replies 'I am no woman, I' (192). The comedy comes from Neptune's mistake over Leander's gender and shows the reader that the piece is intended to be humorous. The consummation between the protagonists is also comic. Leander is said to cling to her 'so about that mermaid like onto the floor she slid' (314-315). The image of a

mermaid is incongruous with romance and far from the impressive rhetoric Leander uses to convince Hero to have sex with him. This adds to the humour of the scene and also shows that their act of passion is not full of lust but youthful and fumbling. The comedy humanizes the lovers and evokes the reader's sympathy for them. As Walsh notes, ' Marlowe enjoys their fumbling pursuit of sex' (p50) and indeed the humour encourages the reader to see their sex as a youthful expression of desire, undeserving of punishment.

Marlowe's version of the poem does not end in death, unlike Museus' original. Omitting the known ending serves a dual purpose. It avoids casting a moral judgement on the behaviour of the protagonists but it also symbolises the lack of information the lovers have on sexual desire from the prevailing Christian narrative and because they are so young. The ending of Museus' poem would have been known by all so the decision to end with ' desunt nonnulla' is poignant as it is not simply changing a narrative, but changing a narrative that would have been ubiquitous. This reflects the challenge the poem poses to the pervasive nature of Christianity and its condemnation of the lover's desire. The ending of the poem is unlike the digressive story of Mercury (386-484) which operates conventionally according to cause and effect and includes the conventional ending (Haber, P378). This is interesting as it demonstrates that passion should not necessarily result in death as Christianity would suggest. Haber points out that ' the stability of the desired end is further undermined in Leander's homoerotic encounter with Neptune (p380). In this encounter we are shown an alternate depiction of desire that is clearly condemned in Christian

teaching, Leviticus states that ' man shall not lie with man as he does with woman' (Leviticus 18. 22). Although homosexual desire is not explicitly endorsed in the poem, Neptune's attraction to Leander is successful in showing that alternate forms of desire exist which are not socially conventional or encouraged. The subversions of expected endings are crucial in the poem's attempt to undermine traditional narratives on desire and promote sympathy for the protagonists.

It is clear that traditional understanding of desire as either being lustful and sinful, or chaste (unless within marriage), as suggested by Christian teaching, leaves the lovers confused and uneducated in desire. Through the use of comedy, Marlowe evokes sympathy for the lovers and avoids passing moral judgement on their actions by omitting the known ending. While the poem does not explicitly endorse extra-marital relations, it does suggest that the protagonists have a limited understanding of desire and should not be condemned to die for their acts.

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