

# Queerness as otherness



The gods as depicted in Christopher Marlowe's *Hero and Leander* are beings that exist outside of the realm of morality, living near humans but bound by separate rules and ideas. This is especially true in relation to sexuality, and the senses of morality that humans cloak such in. In Marlowe's poem, Neptune is the only character who attempts to actively participate in homosexuality, and though Leander resists his advances, he does so without condemnation. As discussed in Andrew Bennett and Christopher Royle's chapter on queer theory, the term "queer" evolved from senses of morality, senses that are not applicable to or by the gods in the poem. By discussing how the term queer has evolved throughout time and relating it to Neptune's advances toward Leander, Marlowe's *Hero and Leander* is not queer because it exists in a context where queerness as homosexuality does not equate to something marginal and abnormal.

As Bennett and Royle outline, "queer" is a word rooted in divisiveness, rooted in creating and maintaining a sense of otherness. They write that the definition of the word queer is one which "includes three apparently unrelated senses for the 'same' word – clustering around ideas of strangeness, sickness, and homosexuality" (Bennett and Royle 216). Human notions of morality in regard to sexuality revolve around ideas of what is and is not normal, and therefore what is and is not desirable, something to be either encouraged or discouraged. While it is ironic and disheartening that labeling in order to separate and alienate is widely considered a moral act, it is not a view shared by the gods, as portrayed in Marlowe's poem. The gods are described as beings that exist without abiding by any moral code, and are shown as doing horrible things; they commit rape, incest, adultery,

murder, and they just generally cause harm, with the floor of Venus's temple depicting these things.

Regardless of what actions they commit however, they are still the gods, they are still the almighty, all-powerful beings who delineate what is and is not acceptable. Neptune is an example of this. His advances towards Leander are aggressive and unwanted, and nearly result in Leander's drowning. His actions, though Leander finds them frightening, are not inconsistent with the attitudes of the gods, namely, that they can and will do whatever pleases them, on any given whim. Morality can have no part in this, because it is uniquely human; no other species are subjected to it, including the gods. Just as it is unlikely that Venus takes right and wrong into account when she sleeps with a married man, or god, Neptune does not stop to consider that intimacy with Leander, as a fellow male, could be construed by human subjects as immoral. It is simply a context that does not exist in Marlowe's *Hero and Leander*, and therefore labeling the poem "queer" would be inaccurate, because regardless of the perceptions of audiences, and the personal biases they bring with them, queerness as otherness, as something "' odd' or ' singular'" is not present in the poem (216). Though Leander resists Neptune's advances, he does so without expressing judgment. He is frightened not because of the obvious homosexual nature of the encounter, but because Neptune's enthusiasm nearly drowns him, before he reaches Hero's tower. When Leander is trying to escape the amorous clutches of the god, he cries out " O let me visit Hero ere I die" (Line 662). He speaks not in anger or disgust, as would be expected and appropriate if he were morally aghast at Neptune's homosexual advances, but in

desperation, because he does not want to die, especially before visiting Hero. When Neptune goes on to kiss and touch and lustfully gaze upon Leander, speaking of love, Leander replies “ you are deceived; I am no woman, I” (676). While this line is often read as dubious, because instead of claiming his love for Hero to fend off Neptune, he says that he is not a woman, and Neptune must be confused. While this is seemingly indicative of Leander’s revealing of ill judgment towards “ queerness”, and that Leander believes heterosexuality to be superior, or more moral and normal, than homosexuality, it seems more likely that it is simply rather just a sign of Leander’s sexual innocence.

The poem has already made clear that Leander is a virgin with no sexual experience, despite all the lustful appreciation directed towards him. Leander does not fully understand what it means to be with a woman, as is shown at the end of the poem, when he does not understand the mechanics of consummation - it stands to reason that Leander would not have much insight towards being with a man. As such, it seems much more probable that rather than decrying Neptune for wanting to have sex with him (sex being something Leander only really understands, at this moment, as strong urges and desire, as opposed to understanding the act itself), Leander is genuinely unaware of what is going on. Leander is not denouncing Neptune for being “ queer” but instead expressing his sincere confusion, and when Neptune’s hand is injured Leander is sorrowful; if Leander were in moral outrage at Neptune’s “ queerness”, he would not pity the god, but rather feel that his wound is justified and deserved. He does not marginalize the god, or regard him with any of the negatives Bennett and Royle outline as being the

foundations of the evolution of the word “ queer”, because the context necessary for those notions of queer is not existent in the poem.

In his essay “ Hero and Leander: The Sense of an Ending” W. L. Godshalk says that the characters of Hero and Leander are each deeply grounded in their individual senses of morality. He says that this is in contrast to the obvious indifference of the gods towards notions of right and wrong, acceptable and unacceptable, writing that: “ The gods are totally uninhibited; they have no conscience, no sense of sexual taboo. Hero and Leander just as surely do... [they are] moral creatures who are not in tune with the amoral universe in which they exist” (Godshalk 303). As evidence of Leander’s sense of morality, Godshalk discusses the interaction between him and Neptune and Leander’s reaction to the god’s sexual advances, saying that when he cries out “ you are deceived; I am no woman, I” he is revealing his homophobia (676). Godshalk arrives at this reading because Leander states his status as a male rather than his status as being in love with Hero, saying Leander “ rejects Neptune’s advances in terms of taboo against homosexuality” (306). Essentially, Godshalk is saying that Leander prescribes to the definition of queer as outlined by Bennett and Royle, where queerness equates to otherness, abnormality, and defectiveness. Again, however, it seems more likely that Leander genuinely does not understand Neptune’s intentions, and even if he did, his lack of reciprocation would amount to the very human inability to comprehend the feelings and desires of others when he himself does not hold them. Additionally, throughout the poem Leander exhibits no other signs of a sense of morality - Godshalk himself admits that it is curious and ironic that Leander is “ not at all morally

troubled by his seduction of a young virgin" (306). This indifference towards his taking of the chastity that Hero has so carefully cultivated and preserved, however ironically given that she is a priestess of Venus, again speaks to Leander's overall sense of sexual ignorance, ignorance which encompasses any potential negative understandings of "queerness."

To conclude, "queer" is a term identified by Bennett and Royle as being a word whose evolution is derived from something inherently negative, rooted in divisiveness, to deliberately separate people whose sexual habits are perceived as normal, and those who are perceived as abnormal. "Queer" is an intentionally adversarial term. While homosexuality and homosociality are present in the poem, they are not shown in a way that any characters find unacceptable or repulsive or immoral, instead only being portrayed as misunderstood. Leander is clearly outlined as being sexually inexperienced, so it stands to reason that he would not fully comprehend Neptune's amorous advances. The gods are understood to be amoral and androgynous, characteristics they are not condemned for in the poem; rather, the only sexual condemnation in the poem is Hero's towards herself and her heterosexual longings, which speaks only to the sexual taboos forced upon women, instead of upon male-on-male relations. Due to the lack of marginality and otherness that is required in order to constitute "queerness" as Bennett and Royle define it, Marlowe's poem is not "queer" because the necessary context for such is absent.

## **Works Cited**

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