

The veiled woman:
female innocence
comes "undone" in
marlow's hero and
leander



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Although the nature vs. nurture debate seems as though it is a rather contemporary argument, it was actually a common thematic element of Elizabethan literature. Christopher Marlowe, in particular, focused on human behavior and the influences of natural instinct versus learned habit. In his “minor epic” *Hero and Leander*, Marlowe genders nature and nurture by characterizing each of his main characters as either one or the other. While Leander embodies nature in his sexual desire and longing, Hero is representative of nurture in her flirtation and repressed sexual desires. Yet, by gendering nature and nurture as characteristics of males and females, Marlowe makes it so that the “natural” desires of men become excused behaviors. It becomes the responsibility of women to fend off the sexual advances of men and keep female virginity intact.

Marlowe uses both Hero and Leander and their reactions to their own beauty, along with their desire for each other, to characterize Hero as a culturally aware female and Leander as a nature-driven male; this characterization also places the majority of the blame for the pre-marital affair on Hero while simultaneously excusing Leander for his acts of cruelty toward her.

According to Marlowe, Hero is aware of her own beauty and of the effect that it has on men. Her reaction to “the people” who run “forth to gaze upon her” is to “sentence” them with her “scornefull eyes”(Marlowe 1007 ll. 117-23). She looks the men who stare at her in the eye when she catches them looking at her beauty instead of looking away from them and avoiding their stares. Marlowe suggests that, in doing so, Hero is knowingly challenging these men to chase after her because she is aware that it is in their “natures” to sexually desire women. Therefore, when Leander is caught

looking at Hero and she glances back in his direction, she is to blame because “ Thence flew love’s arrow with a golden head,/ And thus Leander was enamored”(Marlowe 1008 ll. 161-162). Marlowe does not mention that Hero’s natural sexual desire caused her to return Leander’s gaze, thus leaving the reader to believe that her curiosity regarding him is a fault that she has acquired during her lifetime rather than one she was born with. Hero is using her own beauty to manipulate men because, while she is a creature of learned habits, she knows that men are naturally uncontrollable in their sexual desires and “ wants” them to become enamored with her.

In their work, *Automated Marlowe: Hero and Leander*, Boehrer and Henley state that Hero manipulates “ sexual desire itself. The manner in which she dresses becomes a sign of the studied repression of her own erotic impulses – a repression Marlowe’s narrative is committed to undo”(Boehrer, Henley 13). The use of the word “ study” implies that Hero comprehends the situation and that her sexual desire is a learned behavior rather than a natural impulse. Her clothing, although modest, only enhances her mystery, and she knows that combined with her natural beauty the clothing she adorns herself with makes men even more curious to know what she is hiding underneath. Leander, on the other hand, is uninterested in and unaware of his own beauty and the effect it has on others, according to Marlowe. While describing Leander’s appearance, Marlowe states that “ Some swore he was a maid in man’s attire,/ For in his looks were all that men desire”(Marlowe ll. 83-84). Leander is unable to control the fact that men are attracted to him as if he were a woman. It is not in his “ nature” to find men attractive and therefore it can not be a fault of his own that they find him to

be as beautiful as a woman. In a manner that recalls his naivete about his own beauty, he is unaware that Hero is “manipulating” him by showing him attention. In response to his “natural” infatuation, Leander begins “to display/ Love’s holy fire, with words, with sighs and tears,/ which like sweet music entered Hero’s ears”(Marlowe 1008 ll. 193-195).

Although Leander is pursuing Hero adamantly, Marlowe suggests that Hero is enjoying the effect she has had on him and is excited by the fact that Leander is attempting to seduce her with his words. She has the opportunity to stop him from continuing to pursue her because “naturally” she has no sexual desire for him. It is her own learned behavior that is leading her to let him continue with his advances. Marlowe further suggests that Hero desires Leander because she has the ability to make him lust for her rather than because she actually desires him sexually. Marlowe states that “(All women are sexually ambiguous)”(Marlowe 1013 l. 428). Hero is a virgin but she is not innocent in Marlowe’s definition. Because she does not have lust for men, she must desire manipulation instead. Although Hero does not have much to say on the subject of lust, William Weaver states that because she “speaks aloud two words, ‘To Venus’, in the first 337 lines of the poem”(Weaver 16), Marlowe is attempting to compare her to Venus who was lusted after by every man who laid his eyes on her and who was seen as a symbol of female sexuality. Weaver also states that “Hero’s relative silence fits her priestly other worldly role as an object of men’s gaze”(Weaver 16).

Marlowe uses Hero’s quiet nature to show how even that part of her personality is a manipulation. She is as quiet as a statue of Venus, but her beauty combined with her determined gazes into the eyes of men reveals <https://assignbuster.com/the-veiled-woman-female-innocence-comes-undone-in-marlows-hero-and-leander/>

more about her than her words alone could. She is unable to foresee, however, how her own flirtation with Leander will lead her to break her vow and lose her virginity in the end of the poem. Yet Marlowe makes it clear that it is her own manipulation of men that leads to her fall. Leander is “naturally” inclined to take advantage of the situation he found himself in while Hero’s “natural ambiguousness” has nothing to do with her decision to have sex with him. Leander, on the other hand, is completely justified in his uncontrollable lust for Hero according to Marlowe. He is not aware of the difference between love and lust and simply sets out to fulfill his sexual urges toward Hero, thinking that he is in love with her. Yet, Marlowe also suggests that Hero is not innocent in matters of love and is aware that her ability to manipulate Leander arises because he lusts for her rather than because he loves her. She “lets” him have sex with her, and it is therefore her fault that after their sexual encounter he looks upon her with more pleasure “Than Dis on heaps of gold fixing his look”(Marlowe 1021 l. 810). The truth about Leander’s supposed love for Hero is revealed when she stands before Leander naked and he looks at her body purely out of lust. Leander has finally realized that he is not in love with Hero at all and has only pursued her for his own sexual desires. He also believes that Hero knew that she was manipulating him all along and leaves her lying completely naked in her room without any regret for his actions. Marlowe’s Leander has completely acted out his “natural instincts” while Hero has rejected her own natural ambiguousness and attempted to manipulate Leander instead. For stepping out of her female nature, Hero “Danged down to Hell her loathsome carriage”(Marlowe 1022 l. 819) while Leander leaves the scene without any obvious consequences for his actions.

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Hero and Leander are representatives of nature and nurture in Marlowe's "minor epic". By gendering nature as a masculine trait, Leander becomes an uncontrollable sexual force without any ability to limit himself regarding his own sexual behavior. Nurture then becomes a feminine trait, and the weight of men's actions is then reliant on women's ability to defend themselves from men's sexual advances. Because Hero is unable to control her "learned behaviors", she becomes a sexual object for Leander and suffers the full consequences of "seducing" him with her gaze, while Leander has simply satisfied his desire and can now find a "suitable" woman who was able to preserve her virginity and therefore deserves his love.