

## The Interpretation of Marlowe's *Hero and Leander* Poem in Correlation with Elizabethan Era

Luh Nyoman Seri Malini\*, Effa Chalisah Jawas

English Department, Faculty of Arts, Universitas Udayana PO box 80361, Denpasar, Bali, Indonesia

Corresponding Author: Luh Nyoman Seri Malini, E-mail: seri.malini@unud.ac.id

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history

Received: November 14, 2017

Accepted: January 26, 2018

Published: May 01, 2018

Volume: 7 Issue: 3

Advance access: March 2018

Conflicts of interest: None

Funding: None

### ABSTRACT

This research aims to discover the relation between the historical background in the Elizabethan Era and the poem by Christopher Marlowe entitled *Hero and Leander* which is written during this Era (published in 1598) and the characters' gender orientation which are also influenced by the Era. This research uses descriptive-qualitative method since the data is collected by reading then it is identified and analyzed by the writers about the characters' gender orientation of Marlowe's *Hero and Leander* poem. In analyzing the data, for the main data, the writers use the primary data source. As it is a poem that is observed, the writer uses *Hero and Leander* poem by Christopher Marlowe, from Renaissance Edition text transcribed by Bear, January 2001, from the 1598 edition (STC number 17413). In order to present the data that has been collected and analyzed, the writer uses the descriptive technique. It finds that the romantic theme is greatly influenced by the Elizabethan Era and the Roman mythological elements described in the poem. Ambiguous gender orientation also could be discovered in this narrative poem.

**Keywords:** Elizabethan Era, Marlowe, *Hero and Leander*, Narrative poem, Romance, Gender orientation

### INTRODUCTION

There are various kinds of literary works, and one of them is poem. The word 'poem' itself, according to the fifth edition of American Heritage Dictionary of English Language, is described as a verbal composition designed to convey experiences, ideas, or emotions in a vivid and imaginative way, characterized by the use of language chosen for its sound and suggestive power and by the use of literary techniques such as meter, metaphor, and rhyme. The great philosopher Aristotle suggested that poem is divided into three genres: comedy, tragedy, and epic. Today, poem is still considered the three main poetic forms: lyric, narrative, and dramatic.

In this research, the writer focuses on a romance narrative poem by one of the most famous writers in the Elizabethan Era - the Queen Elizabeth I's reign which is depicted as the most productive Era in terms of producing literary works by famous writers when Christopher Marlowe and William Shakespeare were born. Christopher Marlowe, an English playwright, poet, and translator who lived during the Elizabethan Era - the era when literature is developed well. He was born in Canterbury, England and merely lived for 29 years (1564-1593); then he died under mysterious circumstances. Marlowe was the foremost Elizabethan tragedian of his day. During his life, many literary works were produced by him such as *Tamburlaine*, *Doctor Faustus*, Translation of *Ovid's*

*Elegies*, *Hero and Leander*, etc. The poem entitled *Hero and Leander* by Christopher Marlowe is written by him during this Era. It is one of his most famous narrative poems published in 1598, however, because of Marlowe's mysterious early death, it was unfinished until George Chapman continued the poem and finally finished. In the Elizabethan Era, most of writers or authors write under the romantic theme. Therefore, romantic becomes one of the characteristics of literary works during the Elizabethan Era, as in the narrative poem of *Hero and Leander* by Christopher Marlowe. The background of writing this poem, Christopher Marlowe was inspired by Roman mythological story about two lovers, *Hero and Leander*. In writing that poem, Marlowe was inspired by the style of Ovid who wrote the *Heroides*, a collection of letters from women to their men. Although these poems are in epistle form, they maintain Ovid's satirical and erotic style. Marlowe's *Hero and Leander* was entered in the Stationer's Register in 1593; that was officially published in 1598 (Kristin Johnson, 2009).

In a further analysis of this poem, gender orientation of the characters and ambiguity could be discovered. Some scholars argue that it was caused by the historical background as it is produced when Queen Elizabeth I was unmarried and she was political androgyny - she was known at home and abroad as a "female Prince", and Parliamentary statute declared her a "king" for political purposes (Jordan, 1990). The

ambiguity of those characters within this narrative poem involves their sexual orientation. Christopher Marlowe as an author seems that he has his own story and background in writing this poem because of the function of poem itself is to express the author's feeling and experience.

Based on the background above, this article aims to figure out the romantic side of the poem and its relation to the Elizabethan Era, show Roman mythological element as during this Era Greek and Latin have a significant influence in terms of literary works and gender orientation of the characters.

### Research Problems

Based on the research background above, the writers formulate two problems of study:

1. To what extent is the relation between the Elizabethan Era and Marlowe's *Hero and Leander* poem?
2. How the author describes the characters' gender orientations in the poem?

### Research Method

This research uses descriptive-qualitative method since the data is collected by reading and then it is identified and analyzed by the writers about the characters' gender orientation of Marlowe's *Hero and Leander* poem. In analyzing the data, for the main data the writers use a main data source. As this research tries to observe a poem, the writer uses *Hero and Leander* poem by Christopher Marlowe, from Renaissance Edition text that was transcribed by R.S. Bear, January 2001, from the 1598 edition (STC number 17413). Any errors that have crept into the transcription are the fault of the present publisher. In order to present the data that has been analyzed and collected, the writer uses descriptive technique. As a qualitative based study, this work presents the results by using sentences.

### Literature Review

The poem of *Hero and Leander* is a romantic narrative poem which is produced in the Era of Queen Elizabeth I. Both Ovid and the grammarian-poet Musaeus are sources for Marlowe's story in making the outline of this poem. Leander and Hero are lovers separated by the ill-famed Hellespont (now the Dardanelles). The poem tells the readers about Hero and Leander in 818 lines total. Hallet Smith, in Elizabethan Poetry, comments on the Ovidian tradition and the decorative-narrative aspects of Hero and Leander. He remarks that sexuality was an essential element in the Ovidian tradition and Kocher comments, Hero and Leander is a paean to sex, and to all the pleasures of sense, unabashed and un-condemned. Other Elizabethan poems were erotic enough, but Marlowe's work also has a homosexuality which sets it apart. Kocher refers to the Neptune scene in the poem, and also to parts of the plays *Edward and Dido*. In addition, Preedy (2009) states that Elizabeth Tudor's accession to the English throne in 1558 significantly challenged and disrupted contemporary assumptions about gender roles. Elizabeth I was an anointed monarch, but she was also a woman in a world of men. Elizabeth

I's political androgyny. During this period, the very act of praising a beloved woman was attacked as "feminine" and emasculating; the loss of "masculine" dominance resulted in a slippage of gender identity in which the subservient male was re-imagined as stereotypically female. However, in this research, the writer focuses on the historical background of Marlowe's life during the Elizabethan Era to his literary works especially, *Hero and Leander*.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Relation to the Elizabethan Era

Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593) is an English poet who lived during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, he becomes famous after adapting a classical text—Ovid's *Elegies* (bound with John Davie's *Satyres and Epigrammes*), he produced *Hero and Leander* that is published in 1598. *Hero and Leander* is a narrative poem and romance is the general theme. In a specific category, this poem is considered as an epyllion, that is, a "little epic": it is longer than a lyric or elegy, but concerned with love rather than with traditional epic subjects. As the unique style in this Era, there are four distinct forms of poetry: lyric, elegy, tragedy and pastoral; so that we can see Marlowe took the similar form of the poem during the Elizabethan Era. This poem is written in the last year of Marlowe's life, 1593. It was a plague year, and the London theatres were closed because of the Elizabethan Era was nearly end. Therefore, Marlowe could not write for the stage, however, still, he was possible to write poetry. For a poem written in such a dark time which talks about a tragic subject (though the lovers' end is actually not shown to us by Marlowe), Marlowe's tone is surprisingly light. The lines reflect the love of humanity and a wonder at the beauty of the world.

This poem tells how *Hero and Leander* love each other although *Hero* needs to keep her chastity pure because she is a virgin priestess of the goddess. Besides the romantic theme, Marlowe also uses myth especially Roman mythological in writing this literary work. How Marlowe describes the character with beauty even Gods spellbound with them. The narrative itself is one of the iconic separated lovers, a tale full of Roman mythological references which would have been clear and meaningful to most of Marlowe's readers. As historians say, that during Queen Elizabeth I's reign there were many discoveries in literary works which are influenced by the writers at that time to explore and develop their idea. Marlowe uses a technique of the genre is adorning – the narrative with literary and mythological allusions, and not only that, incorporating a complete secondary tale which was either borrowed or invented (as in the Mercury and Neptune episodes in *Hero and Leander*) (William, 1969).

The nineteenth-century "discovery" of Christopher Marlowe, which transformed his status from a relatively unknown and unread poet to an exalted position as a precursor or near equal of Shakespeare, has led to a critical "discovery" in the twentieth century. People and other authors began to deliver their comments toward Marlowe's dramatic, as well as non-dramatic. The poem of *Hero and Leander* was entered in the Stationer's Register. September 28, 1593/5.

Both Ovid and the grammarian-poet Musaeus are sources for Marlowe's story. *Leander and Hero* are lovers separated by the ill-famed Hellespont (now the Dardanelles). Mythological decoration, which abounds in *Hero and Leander*, is also an element of Ovid. "*Abydos and Sestos* were two ancient towns," Chapman explains, "one in Europe, another in Asia, opposite ..." Hero is a priestess of Venus, sworn to life-long chastity. The beautiful young man, Leander, visits Sestos for the Feast of Adonis, and thus the tragedy is set in motion. "*in Hellespont*" (the strait which joins the Black Sea and the Aegean) which separate two lovers "*The one Abydos, the other Sestos high*". Hero belongs in *Sestos* and Leander belongs in *Abidos*. Hero was the incomparably lovely virgin, dedicated to the service of the love goddess – she is "*Venus' nun*". She has a beauty that is portrayed by her beautiful hair, as stated in the poem "*Whom young Apollo courted for her haire, And offred as a dower his burning throne,*" Hero is a very beautiful that the love-god Cupid mistakes her for that most beautiful of the goddesses, his mother Venus, "*Some say, for her the fairest Cupid pyn'd, And looking in her face, was strooken blind. But this is true, so like was one the other, As he imagyn'd Hero was his mother.*" She is a virgin priestess of the goddess. Her duties are to sacrifice to Venus and to remain her sexually pure. On the other side, Marlowe also describes the appearance of Leander which is described in feminine, "*Some swore he was a maid in mans attire, For in his lookes were all that men desire,*". Later, Marlowe tells the reader about Leander, however, in more detail, with a muscular, masculine figure. The reason of Marlowe using the feminine word is there was a limited vocabulary at that time for male attractiveness and masculinity, and a feminine description was sometimes deemed necessary even when the subject was, perhaps, not as androgynous as it might seem. However, in this case, the homoerotic undertones of Leander's beauty are a foreshadowing of a future event in the poem.

They met for the first time at the yearly festival to Adonis (one of Venus' lovers) in Sestos. Leander saw Hero and spellbound by her, Marlowe described it with a memorable ten lines,

*It lies not in our power to love, or hate,  
For will in vs is ouer-rul'd by fate.  
When two are stript long ere the course begin,  
We wish that one should loose, the other win.  
And one especially doe vve affect,  
Of two gold Ingots like in each respect,  
The reason no man knowes, let it suffise,  
What vve behold is censur'd by our eies.  
Where both delib'rat, the loue is slight,  
Who euer lou'd that lou'd not at first sight?*

Then, both of them fall in love each other, though Leander fall for Hero firstly, the God Cupid shoot an arrow of love to Hero. They make conversations. However Hero has made a vow the Goddess Venus, to keep her chastity. Leander uses clever-sounding rhetoric to assure Hero that remaining a virgin is no way to serve her goddess (or herself), "*Vessels of brass, oft handled, brightly shine*", Hero returns to her tower. After that, Leander goes back to his place even though he has a strong desire to meet Hero. He meets his father who al-

ready knows by Leander's face that he has fallen in lovewith a girl. No longer after that, Leander realizes that he cannot be separated to Hero so that he takes off his clothes and dives into the water to meet his lover and ignored his father's command. However, in the half of his swimming, the Sea-God Neptune sees him and mistakes him for another famously handsome youth – the king of the gods Zeus's cupbearer Ganymede, "*Whereat the saphirvisag'd god grew prowd, And made his capring Tritonsondalowd, Imagining, that Ganmed displeas'd,*". Neptune has long coveted this young man, and takes this as an opportunity to steal him from his brother-god. He took Leander and takes him down to his palace in the deep. Descriptions of sea-nymphs and mermaids, and the wealth of the oceans ensue. Once Neptune realizes that Leander is almost drowned, "*But vwhen he knev it vvas not Ganimed, Forvndervwater he vvas almost dead,*" and therefore cannot be Ganymede, the god brings Leander back to the surface. Fortunately, he can breathe again and continue swimming to the Hero's place. However, Neptune is actually not freely release Leander because he keeps on kissing and caressing him at every stroke, which is frightened by Neptune's action, he starts to cry "*O let me visit Hero ere I die*" Neptune will not relent and continues caressing him and talking of love. Once again Leander's sexual ambiguity is brought up – he tells Neptune he is no woman, "*And talke of loue: Leandermadereplie, Youare deceau'd, I am no woman I,*". Neptune, at last, sees that Leander will not give into him, and sadly lets him go.

Leander reaches Hero's tower and knocks on her door. Hero is surprised to find out who is standing in front of her – Leander standing there, dripping wet and naked. She brings him inside, and since he is cold she lets him lie next to her in bed. They engage in amorous embraces, but Hero, mindful of the value of her sacred chastity, attempts to hold Leander off for a time. Eventually, they are overcome by their feelings, and, though they are both a little unsure of how to proceed, they consummate their love. The poem by Marlowe ends as morning dawns.

Besides the myth inside of the poem, humor also exists in this poem. From the literaryencyclopedia.com "I know that the poem of *Hero and Leander* also has been considered as "mock-epic" because it is full of humor". Hopkins calls it "one of the most deliciously comic poems of Elizabethan literature". There is also humor in the poem which is stated by William Scott Lenihan "At the core of Marlovian humor is irony, such as Hero being a priestess of Venus, a nun who vows chastity to the goddess of love. The irony takes an added impact when one notes the slang meaning of "nurf" in Elizabethan times" (William, 1969). State by Paul H. Kocher on his book entitles *Christopher Marlowe: Study on his Thought, Learning, and Character*: "Another important element in the humor is laughter at the maneuverings of the lovers, which leads Marlowe to some wryly sententious comments on human nature, particularly feminine human nature." Women are won when they begin to jars (I, 332). In other words, the imaginative, recognizably unreal element in the story is not the only one. At many points, the unreality passes over into reality through temporary and partial perceptions of Hero and Leander as actual persons.

Marlowe must have intended to write the whole story; nevertheless, he crams his opening “sestiyads” with such color and event that, in a way, the project seems complete. There are gorgeous descriptive passages.

Chapman takes up the story in a way typical of the gifted scholar and translator. He is too lavish with brilliant ideas. He can't tell us about Hero's torch without building an elaborate moral analogy from the fact that “when bees make wax, Nature does not intend/It shall be made a torch ...” Not that he's a bad poet, but he doesn't get to the point with Marlowe's purposefulness, nor tease out those psychological strands which, to Marlowe's deep-sea-diving imagination, are at least as dramatic as an external action.

### Gender Orientation of the Characters

Thematically, Elizabethan poetry focused on romance, courtly love and erotic, though the most popular one was romantic while describing the characters in erotic words, as in the poem of *Hero and Leander*. The background of the theme about erotic, gender, etc., actually comes from Elizabeth Tudor's accession to the English throne in 1558 significantly challenged and disrupted contemporary assumptions about gender roles. Elizabeth I was an anointed monarch, but she was also a woman in a world of men. Elizabeth I's political androgyny – she was known at home and abroad as a “female Prince”, and Parliamentary statute declared her a “king” for political purposes (Jordan, 1990). Elizabeth I often exploited her physical femininity as a political tool: for instance, she justified her decision not to marry by casting herself as the unobtainable lady familiar to Elizabethans from the Petrarchan sonnet tradition and encouraged her courtiers to compete for apolitical favor by courting her in the language of love. During this period, the very act of praising a beloved woman was attacked as “feminine” and emasculating; with sexual and political subservience imaginatively conflated in contemporary discourse, the loss of “masculine” dominance resulted in a slippage of gender identity in which the subservient male was re-imagined as stereotypically female. The courtly verse was dedicated to the queen, and therefore at least apparently aimed to flatter Elizabeth. However, another poetic genre of the period also responded to questions of gender identity, political interaction, and power: the erotic verse of the 1590s.

In the poem of *Hero and Leander*, gender categories are questioned and challenged from the beginning. In the opening part, Leander hints at a feminine element to his appearance, characterized by “*orient cheekes and lippes*” (I.73), while the narrator tells that “*some swore he was a maid in mans attire./For in his lookes were all that men desire*” (I.83-84). This potential hint of same-sex desire is reinforced in a later passage when Leander encounters the sea-god Neptune. The “*lustie god*” (II.167), “*imagining, that Ganimed I had left the heavens*” (II.157-58), seizes Leander and “*imbrast him, caldhim love./And swore he never should returne to Jove*” (II.167-68). Even when Leander's human identity becomes apparent (II.169). Yet the anticipated climax of the episode never arrives; as, when in Sestos, Leander bemused those who “*knew he was a man*” (I.87) by his reluctance to

participate in “*amorous play*” (I.88), so now he rejects Neptune's “*talke of love*” (II.191) with comic naivety: “*You are deceav'd, I am no woman, I*” (II.192).

For Leander, the encounter with Neptune threatens his masculinity just as the Thracian soldier's earlier advances at Sestos had done: the latter's feelings of desire suggested to some that Leander was a “maid” (I.83), while Leander believes that submission to Neptune's desires must entail a feminized identity which he rejects. Significantly, however, it is *not homosexual desire which threatens male identity: Leander's suitor in Sestos is introduced as a “barbarous I soldier, moov'd with nought*” (I.81), while Neptune is described as “kingly” and “lustie” (II.166-67), terms that suggest a military and masculine potency. Indeed, Leander's first physical encounter with Hero erodes his masculinity as ably as either of his homoerotic experiences, when he reverses the Sestian image of “*a maid in mans attire*” (I.83) by dressing up in Hero's feminine accessories (II.105-10). In the poem we can imagine Hero's exotic garments, her ground-length veil and buskins of silvered shells; visiting the Temple of Venus, underneath whose glass floor there are foreshadowing depictions of the gods-in-love, “committing heady riots, incest, rapes”. Marlowe plunges Leander into the Hellespont as soon as is feasible, and gives sinewy play to a homoerotic sub-plot: the “sapphire-visaged” Neptune falls for Leander.

What is controversial, is not necessarily heterosexual or homosexual desire, but rather sexual authority: the implication is that gender is a constructed category, linked to the performance of surrender or conquest. In the same way, Leander's first encounter with Hero, Leander's sexual omissions implicitly undermine his masculinity by allowing the power within the relationship to remain with Hero. Marlowe writes this poem by using couplet rhymes and iambic pentameter, a popular choice for poetry writing during Marlowe's time. The iambic pentameter helps Marlowe set the tone for the audience. It brings them in slowly and sets them up for the climax. Despite the story within the poem that attract people's attention at that time up to now, how the way Marlowe create the plot may also be gain people's desire to read the *Hero and Leander*.

### CONCLUSION

During Queen Elizabeth I's reign socio-political situation was influenced the writers to explore and develop their idea through literary works as Marlowe did. In his narrative poem, Marlowe uses romantic, erotic, as well as tragedy and we can discover the sense of his humor that expresses in satire. The reason upon the popularity romantic, erotic, and tragedy as the theme is because of the social background and the condition Elizabeth I was an anointed monarch, but she was also a woman in a world of men. Elizabeth I's political androgyny – she was known at home and abroad as a “female Prince”. Thus, the sexual orientation or gender in this Era became a popular discussion. Gender categories are questioned and challenged from the beginning of the poem. What is controversial, is not necessarily heterosexual or homosexual desire, but rather sexual authority: the implication is that gender is a

constructed category, linked to the performance of surrender or conquest.

## REFERENCES

- Biography.com Editors. (2017). *Christopher Marlowe*. [Online] Available: <http://www.biography.com/people/christopher-marlowe-9399572>
- eNotes. (2017). *Hero and Leander Analysis*. [Online] Available <https://www.enotes.com/topics/hero-leander/in-depth>
- GradeSaver LLC. Unknown year. *Christopher Marlowe's Poems Summary and Analysis of Hero and Leander*. <http://www.gradesaver.com/christopher-marlowes-poems/study-guide/summary-hero-and-leander>
- Greg, W.W. Unknown year. *The Copyright of Hero and Leander*. Retrieved from: [people.exeter.ac.uk/ccb203/165.pdf](http://people.exeter.ac.uk/ccb203/165.pdf)
- Johnson, KJ. (2009). *Love, Lust and Literature in the Late Sixteenth Century*. [digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/etd/165.pdf](http://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/etd/165.pdf)
- Lenihan, S. William. (1969). *Marlowe's Hero and Leander: theme and form*. Iowa State University. [lib.dr.iastate.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=17090&context=rtd](http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=17090&context=rtd)
- Loudon, Ashley. (2015). *Elizabethan Era Literature*. Viewed on 19<sup>th</sup> May 2017. <https://prezi.com/ckkuhptvjkv1/elizabethan-Era-litErature>
- Preedy, K. Chloe. (2009). "I Am No Woman, I": *Gender, Sexuality, and Power in Elizabethan Erotic Verse*. Volume 2 (2), 2009, p46-48 and 53-54.
- Rumens, Carol. (2011). *Poem of the week: Hero and Leander by Christopher Marlowe*. Viewed on 19<sup>th</sup> of May 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2011/jun/20/poem-of-the-week-christopher-marlowe>
- Suharno, Alaydrus, Abubakar. (2001). *Introduction to English Literature*. Jakarta: Universitas Terbuka
- Vineski, Patricia. Unknown year. *Christopher Marlowe's Hero and Leander: Summary & Analysis*. <http://study.com/academy/lesson/christopher-marlowes-hero-and-leander-summary-analysis-quiz.html>