

Fate and Choice in Musaeus' "Hero and Leander"

The Late Ancient epyllion *Hero and Leander*, written by an otherwise unknown, erudite *grammaticus* named Musaeus, is an account of the famous local legend from the Hellespont that is frequently alluded to in earlier classical literature but not fully told in any other surviving source. The legend is a simple love tale between two young people, Hero and Leander, who live in towns, Sestos and Abydos, which lie on opposite sides of the Hellespont. In an attempt to enjoy each other's love, which is made illicit by the social situation of both young people, they concoct a plan whereby Leander will swim across the Hellespont each night guided by a light emanating from a lamp in the tower wherein Hero resides. Though the lovers manage to enjoy this "nocturnal marriage" for a time, in the end their constant tempting of fortune begets tragedy. In a winter storm Hero's lamp goes out and Leander is drowned in the Hellespont. In the traditional tale Hero then takes a suicidal leap from her tower after she sees Leander's corpse lying on the shore. Musaeus does not tell the tale in a straightforward manner at all.

The narrative of Musaeus' underlying story, or *fabula* in narratological terms, is extremely uneven. The majority of Musaeus' short 343-line poem deals with the lovers' first meeting and profession of love to one another whereas the 'meat' of the story, the lovers' nocturnal meetings or the tragic fate of the couple that follows afterwards, is given extremely short shrift. Earlier scholars have explained this phenomenon in various ways: allegorical Neoplatonic readings, or generic constraints of the *epyllion*. I suggest a different reading: that the narrative structures of the poem reinforce the basic point of the myth, which is that human beings cannot escape fate. Just as the myth itself is one which problematizes man's ability to change his future in the face of the many external powers of the universe, summed up in the idea of fate, so too does Musaeus' way of relating the story.

Several narratological techniques enable Musaeus to do this. First of all, the narrator's own reliability is called into question. Musaeus, in sharp contrast to the traditional image of the poet who receives inspiration from the muses, creates a narrator who is assembling his poem and its implications based on his own secondhand knowledge through books and on likelihood, not absolute divine information. Thus the narrator reconstructs the tale of Hero and Leander based on his *a priori* assumptions about how the world works, which is evidenced in the narrator's treatment of the divine. Though several gods are in the poem, on the tongues of characters in it, the only real gods in *Hero and Leander*, in that they are definitely present and affect the outcome of the story, are the Fates and Love who direct the course of the story according to fixed rules. The characters that pray to these gods are too unable to affect the outcome of their own story as their own volition, little by little, disappears over the course of the narrative. By the end of the poem, inanimate objects, like ever-present lamp of Hero, are actually described by the narrator as the ones doing the actions of the story, not any sentient being. The only willful act of the protagonists in the work is that which Musaeus' narrative expressly focuses on: the admission of love and the concocting of the plan. For after these choices are made events must necessarily occur according to the natural outcome of those choices, which is already determined by Fate. This problematizing of what an individual has power over and what is predetermined by Fate based on the choices we make in life is exactly the point of Musaeus' poem and is why the narrative is structured in the way in which it is.

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