

LOVE IS IN THE AIR: READING DESIRE AS FIELD IN *HERO AND LEANDER*

by

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## THESIS ABSTRACT

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Christopher Marlowe's *Hero and Leander* presents rich opportunities for understanding early modern sexuality and emotions. In the poem, hyperbolic representations of desire between beings of varying ontological status convey a mechanics of interpersonal emotions alien to many modern conceptions of self-experience—namely those that view emotions as individuated, willed, and internal phenomena. In the poem, I argue, desire affects all kinds of beings in the form of an ambient field, creating an array of nonanthropocentric and nonheterosexual sexual encounters. Each encounter troubles the ways in which desire, seduction, and the fulfillment of pleasure often occur along predetermined socialized patterns. In this thesis I explore how Marlowe's renderings of desire and seduction, while at times outlandish and hyperbolic, illustrate an underlying structure of emotion that is nonindividuated, external, and, ultimately, nonhuman.

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## Love Is in the Air: Reading Desire as Field in *Hero and Leander*

Christopher Marlowe's poem *Hero and Leander* begins with vivid blazons of the titular characters that depict them as supremely attractive and intransigently unavailable beings. Hero's veil of lifelike flowers and "sweet smell[ing]" breath attract swarms of bees who land on her lips, forcing this graceful figure to constantly swat them away (1.21). Leander too draws his share of suitors, from an unrequited Cynthia whose "Grief makes her pale" to "barbarous Thracian soldier[s]" who are otherwise, the speaker says, "moved with naught" (1.60, 1.81). While the blazons paint two epitomes of beauty and attractiveness, neither depicts a protagonist at all interested in these various advances. Nor do the blazons feature heterosexual human attraction in particular, though they include it, but rather the nonhuman and non-heterosexual beings who are drawn to Hero and Leander. Bees, gods, minerals, and men (who fawn over Leander as well as Hero) are all drawn into their irresistible pull. Even the sun, moon, and wind are enamored with the two characters in the descriptions of their beauty and throughout the poem. The attraction is strong enough, and the descriptions wild enough, to evoke celebrities<sup>1</sup> of our own time: suicidal throngs go mad when Hero appears in public, and her outrageous, Bjorkian outfit (more on this below) in the opening blazon would steal any award night gala. The blazons are condensed opening images of the strange and strong attractive forces that the poem and its characters navigate. I am interested in the extreme ways that this poem presents its protagonists as exceptional figures around whose beauty tremendous amounts of erotic energy circulate and the way that this induces cross-ontological sexual possibilities. *Hero and Leander* treats desire as a quasi-gravitational force that exists outside of individuals and operates as an ambient field of

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Ben Saunders and Brent Dawson for encouraging me to think of Hero and Leander as celebrity figures.

erotic energy that affects everything, thereby exploring the complexities of emotion, agency, attraction, courtship, and erotic pleasure.

This imagery is more than poetic hyperbole, offering a capacious vision of sexuality that is not limited to familiar anthropocentric or heterosexual norms or object choices. Rather, in the world of the poem, all beings respond to powerful erotic energies that force them to negotiate gendered and ontological boundaries to achieve (or refuse) sexual gratification. These negotiations indicate a collision of early modern emotional experiences and relationships with new social conditions. Marlowe's characters bring early modern emotional phenomenologies to bear on an emergent society of impersonal, public relationships, embodied here in the outrageously attractive, alluring, and elusive proto-celebrities of Hero and Leander. By attending to the peculiar way that attraction runs across all boundaries in the poem in the form of an ontologically promiscuous energetic field, we can better understand this collision and a range of issues on which it comments. This project follows, in other words, Jeffrey Masten's suggestion in his discussion of desire in *Hero and Leander*, that "there is a history of sexuality in a preposition," meaning that we might find that history by attending to the relationality and "positionality" of desire and sexuality (150).

This paper will proceed in three contiguous parts. I will first identify and describe two key features of the erotic field as I see it. Then I will explore the ways in which these features interact with, intensify, and in some ways, counterbalance one another. In brief, the first feature of this field is that it displaces and complicates notions of individuality and individual agency, placing what we today think of as internally-experienced will and emotions into an ecological framework. In other words, I will show how the characters' emotions and will are coextensive with and analogous to their surroundings and relate this to what Gail Kern Paster calls the



“ecology of the passions” (9). Second, the field effectively randomizes object choice, creating a situation where erotic charge—the degree to which one being attracts other beings—is the primary condition for desire or its expression. This means not only that large numbers of human strangers are attracted to Hero and Leander, but that all manner of other beings are as well. Third, I will show how the poem’s stakes, comedy, and drama unfold in this field, where individual will meets a chaotic, threatening, horny, and not-necessarily-hetero-human cast of agents. This tension, accentuated with Marlovian verve, gives the poem its compelling, erotic, and entertaining charge.

My reading relies on the work of scholars working in posthumanist and early modern studies as well as queer theory. In a posthumanist reading of Spenser, Melissa E. Sanchez identifies “a premodern ambivalence and uncertainty about human difference and potential in [Spenser’s] pointed representation of humanity as an unstable and fabulous construct” (“Posthumanist” 22). Marlowe’s poem is populated by similarly fabulous and ontologically unstable sexual beings. As we will see, *Hero and Leander* throws its characters into a churning mix of erotic energy, challenging their individual agency and their commitments to anthropocentric heterosexuality. Paster and Masten similarly demonstrate that phenomenological and cosmological understandings of the human in early modern texts differ significantly from post-Cartesian and humanist worldviews.

Masten and Paster show that modern conceptions of the phenomenology of emotions, the inner psychology of the self, the boundaries between self and other, and human centrality with its coincident exceptionalism are often at odds with early modern cosmologies. Such analyses show that some of the central claims of posthumanism, which refute or trouble of the above-mentioned modern conceptions, have significant precedents in premodern writers and can enhance readings

of the texts themselves (Campana and Maisano 4). As Joseph Campana and Scott Maisano discuss, however, such shorthand terms as “Cartesian” and “humanist” may in fact be quite misleading if we consider the differences between Renaissance humanism and Enlightenment humanism (4). Sanchez succinctly clarifies the issue: “as medieval and early modern scholars have shown, premodern thought was far too complex and contestatory to be adequately represented by brief gestures to humanist idealism or Cartesian dualism” (“Posthumanist” 21). Posthumanist inquiry must take care in its attempt to understand the alterity of the human experience as written in early modern texts. This posthumanist reading of Marlovian erotics will account for the poem’s risky and thus seductive mix erotic boundary crossing, violence, discursive courtship (i.e., wooing with words), and youthful naivete while demonstrating that it evinces a unique worldview that resists anthropocentrism and heterosexist normativity.<sup>2</sup>

It behooves us, for example, not to assume that a sixteenth-century author like Christopher Marlowe perceived emotional experiences as inner, psychological phenomena. Rather, as Daniel Juan Gil finds, early moderns, (in this case, Edward Reynolds, writing somewhat later than Marlowe) present “emotions that are endowed with a recalcitrant, alien power [that] invade the well-constituted, Puritan subject” (11). Alien, recalcitrant powers define the very structure of sexual desire in *Hero and Leander*, and much of the poem’s narrative hinges on how characters choose to interact with them. Gil observes that “sixteenth-century literary texts... value powerfully corporeal, often depersonalized emotions for the way they define specific forms of connection between bodies,” (xii). *Hero and Leander*’s exceptional attractiveness in this field brings about many situations in which they must contend with how

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2 I use the terms ‘normative’ and ‘normativity’ advisedly here, recognizing the complexities of sexualities in early modern England. Marlowe’s poem, according to Stephen Orgel, stands out for its bold treatment of male-male desire at the time of its writing and initial publication (xv-xvi).

strangers perceive and respond to them. Leander is implored, “be not thine own thrall,” and Hero’s outrageous outfit and appearances in public bring about suicidal fits of passion in those around her (1.90). If indeed “Love enters from the outside,” in the form of an erotic field, then how do characters respond to it, and (where) can we locate Hero and Leander’s will, since so many figures in the poem appear to be so concerned with what Hero and Leander *want* (Masten 150)?

Many critics address the question of Hero and Leander’s will. At issue, as I will explore below, is the degree to which the two have any at all. Eric Dunnun notes in his discussion of teaching *Hero and Leander* to undergraduates in the context of the ongoing “public discussion about sexual assault and rape culture on college campuses” that “the mutual attraction described by the narrator of ‘Hero and Leander’ is depicted as a natural force, alienated from the characters’ conscious will” (1, 4). Dunnun usefully focuses on the sexual interactions between Hero and Leander, but this “natural force” exists between other beings in the poem as well. Hero and Leander’s navigations within the erotic field indicate that these two lovers, while inept at times, are more aware of their choices and of the structure of their emotions than they are given credit for. L.E. Semler concludes that Marlowe’s poem privileges a Lucretian moderation, in which the narrator, unaffected by the tempestuous passions in the poem “exhibits the rational command of the wise man” (186). His analysis contends that all told, the depictions of desire and love throughout the poem display its destructive excesses such that only the narrator transcends them. Though Semler treats the “irresistible external force” of “fate” and other forces in the poem, and is careful to recognize how the poem complicates a simplistic view of such forces, including a “force of desire animating the world of Marlowe’s love-story,” his ultimate contention is that Marlowe’s poem is intended as a stoic lesson, or, as he puts it, “Epicurean

therapy” (167, 181, 185). As we will see, I think the poem is far more than a lesson in moderation (and we don’t need to get into Marlowe’s infamous biography to see this).

Wendy Beth Hyman sees “no indication of Hero’s interiority made at any point in the poem,” and claims that the poem presents Hero as utterly mechanical (251). Hyman focuses on Hero’s boots, bizarre and fantastic constructions of coral and metal which feature mechanical sparrows who chirp as she walks, which for Hyman are “visual emblem[s] of her triviality, her hollowness, even her ‘nothingness’” (251). Hyman sees the hydraulic birds also as a symbol for “enchanting deception in poetry and in passion,” and though there is indeed a theme of artificiality in the blazon, I see the birds, and Hero’s will, as more complicated than Hyman allows (247). If here we are invited to metonymically associate Hero with the birds and thus assume she too is a “creature[] wanting sense,” (more on this below) the poem troubles this simple association (Marlowe 2.55). Hero is aware of how outside forces influence her and others, for she actively attempts to overcome them. She is torn with conflicting emotions as she, to her own surprise, blurts out “Come thither” to Leander during their first encounter (1.357). The speaker tells us that “like a planet, moving several ways / At one self instant,” Hero is aswirl with conflicting emotions and that “every part” of her “strove to resist the motions of her heart” (1.361-64). So conflicted, she vainly prays to Venus to help her resist this desire, and in response yet another external force intervenes to impel her to do otherwise. Cupid, whose dubious involvement in the whole affair is central to their story, “beats down her prayers with his wings / Her vows above the empty air he flings” (1.369-70). As if to confound what little will Hero expresses in the poem, Cupid, child of Venus and symbol of love, thwarts her plea for an external force to help her do what she consciously desires and has committed to as a nun: maintain her virginity. His prayer-beating evidently fails, so he takes stronger measures against

this willful being, “All deep enraged, his sinewy bow he bent, / And shot a shaft that burning from him went” (1.371-72). Hero’s resistance is not easily overcome. Failing to sufficiently dissipate her prayers, Cupid resorts to his bow and arrow to overpower Hero. It is not so much that Hero lacks will but that she uses her will to attempt to withdraw herself from the erotic field within which she is, despite herself, a powerful node. Although she appears to be passive, as the blazon and Hyman’s reading suggest, Hero recognizes desire as one force among others. The poem depicts her initial encounter with Leander as a whirlwind of forces: the “motions of her heart,” Cupid with his prayer-dissipating wings and bow, and Cupid’s subsequent departure to appeal to higher authorities (the destinies) (1.364, 1.369-72, 377-80). All depict a complex schema of erotic forces that is both outside of and wholly contiguous with what we now generally treat as internal emotional experience. Hero and Leander are each so accustomed to struggling with these forces that when they feel attraction for one another, they scarcely know how to do anything but resist: Hero is shocked at herself a few lines above when she utters “Come thither” (1.357).

The introductory blazons indeed give readers little indication of either character’s inner experience—Hero and Leander’s beauty simply draws everything inexorably to them. The speaker is too busy fawning over Leander, “I could tell ye / How smooth his breast was, and how white his belly,” to mention how Leander might feel about Jove “sip[ping] out nectar from his hand,” but if so many ask him why he is not in love, we can infer that others have taken notice (and issue) with his apparent celibacy (1.65-66, 1.62). As with Hero, we are alerted to the injunctions that others constantly place on Leander. Those who know him, the speaker tells us, “would say, / ‘Leander, thou art made for amorous play,’” and imploringly press him to “‘be not thine own thrall’” (1.87-88, 90). As Masten points out, with all of these figures after him,

“Leander’s status as [an] active, desiring agent would initially seem to be somewhat in jeopardy” (Masten 149). Despite his appeal, it doesn’t at all appear that Leander could be a desiring agent, for he invariably rebuffs the sexual advances others make toward him. Masten’s reading of the word “amorous” is highly productive, as his philological analysis leads him to observe that in the poem “Love enters in from the outside, its passion working through the fungible body” (150). The poem is suffused with this ambient desire, love entering from the outside, and we are introduced to the main characters through descriptions that depict them as particularly potent attractors of love. Masten’s reading concludes that “Amorous Leander, however, is simply enamoured, in the passive voice, without further comment; he swings, or is swung, both ways” (151). Masten troubles Leander’s will through the word ‘amorous’ by pointing to the predominantly passive ways it functions across the poem. An ‘amorous’ Leander, in other words, isn’t quite the love-sick young person he appears to be, but, like Hero, an unwilling heartthrob with persistent admirers of all kinds.

There are striking contrasts between the descriptions of Hero and Leander, but they share a conflict between their own will and the powerful erotic energy around them. Their Bartlebyian refusals illustrate the seeming ubiquity and intrusiveness of the field while centering their singularly disruptive impact within it. If “pebble-stone[s]” shine like “diamonds” in Hero’s radiance, “neither sun nor wind / Would burn or parch her hands,” and her beauty leaves “half the world” in melancholic ruin, Leander’s appears no less potent, if differently inflected (1.25, 1.27-28, 1.50). Humans (and as Jeffrey Masten’s enumeration of Leander’s suitors in this passage makes clear, a preponderance of male suitors in particular are or theoretically would be interested in Leander)<sup>3</sup>, gods, and celestial bodies are all drawn to Leander’s otherworldly

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3 “In the space of forty lines, amorous Leander is the actual or hypothesized object of the affections of (in addition to the vent’rous youth) Cynthia (59), Hippolytus (77), ‘the rudest peasant’ (80), ‘[t]he barbarous

attractive force (Masten 149). In lines 59-60, for example, Cynthia (the moon) is pale from grief over her unrequited love for Leander. As with Hero's power to turn the world black (which I take here to mean Galenically, that is, melancholic), the poet's comedic explanation for the color of the moon is Leander's rejection. Hero and Leander's erotic charge, despite their apparent lack of interest in sex, does not only affect humans. Indeed, because it is so strong, it throws the world into disarray.

The poem depicts desire and attraction as real forces or 'influences' that cross gender, species, and ontological boundaries. These representations function within a cosmology in which emotions, in this case desire, are non-individuated rather than internally-experienced. The speaker tells us as much later in the poem, comparing the difference between "creatures wanting sense" who are "Moved by love's force," and "subjects having intellect," who are similarly driven by "Some hidden influence" which "breeds like effect" (2.55-60). Noteworthy here is the word "influence," which for early moderns had a specifically cosmological or astrological valence: "influence," according to the OED is "The supposed flowing or streaming from the stars or heavens of an ethereal fluid acting upon the character and destiny of men, and affecting sublunary things generally" (OED). I assume that in this definition "men" is intended to mean any "subjects having intellect" for in his first words to Hero, Leander says "I would my rude words had the influence / to lead thy thoughts" (OED, Marlowe 2.59, 1.200-01).

Emotions as phenomena that are affected by internal *and* external influences is well-established in early modern studies. Paster, for example, writes of an "ecology of the passions," and discusses "locutions of affect" in Shakespeare to show "what is now emotional figuration for

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Thracian soldier' (81), and an unnamed god... (67- 68)... Jove... (62). Imprinted, dinted (dented or indented), his hair hypothetically shorn to launch a Jason-revising quest... the poet's 'rude pen,'... a catalog of specific and general mythological types mortal and immortal, and tasted or incorporated like Pelops' shoulder ([63- 65])" (Masten 149).

us was bodily reality for the early moderns” (25-6). Paster points to early modern understandings of the relationship between the “inner and outer,” and claims that there was an express “link between psychology and the constitution of the world” (9). For early moderns the link between the environment and one’s character, emotions, and experience were understood to be far stronger than one might generally assume them to be today. Paster points out that “post-Enlightenment readers” tend to assume that language used in the Renaissance to describe affects and emotions is figurative rather than literal (26). So when the speaker describes “influence” driving sexual attraction with regard to beings “wanting sense” versus those “having intellect,” and when Leander refers to “influence” in his efforts to woo Hero, I propose, following Paster, that we take both of these figurations quite literally (2.55-60). We should also notice that in one case, influence is “hidden,” prefaced by a “Some” that suggests its origins are unknown (or at the very least not human), while in the other, “influence” refers to Leander’s words, his discursive forces (2.60, 1.200). *Hero and Leander* nearly collapses the discursive and the ecological in these uses of ‘influence,’ and it is the dynamic tension between the two that defines attraction and seduction in the poem.

Paster focuses on humoral language in Shakespeare, and yet there are other ways in which we might interpret early modern idioms of affect if we refrain from assuming they are figurative. Paster opens new ways of thinking about early modern phenomenologies of emotion by showing that “to understand the early modern passions as embodying a historically particular kind of self-experience requires seeing the passions and the body that houses them in ecological terms—that is, in terms of that body’s reciprocal relation to the world” (18). This claim aligns with similar arguments made by posthumanists, who look to other forms of emotional experience



based in or evidenced by human relationships to the non-human.<sup>4</sup> Nor should it seem inconsistent with new materialist concepts of porosity, transcorporeality, or embodiment.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, as Campana and Maisano note, to some, these early modern theories of “embodied psychology resemble[...] post-Cartesian neurobiology” (4). As these distinct but connected new disciplines in the sciences and humanities question the separation between “inner and outer” and the uniqueness and discreteness of the human and human consciousness, texts like *Hero and Leander* can reveal premodern parallels to these contemporary theoretical pursuits (Paster 9). By focusing on how the poem presents an abstracted and ambient field of desire that unsettles notions of agency and will while blurring ontological distinctions, we gain access to the alternative cosmology it constructs, even if, as in this case, it appears at first to be simple comedic exaggeration. The high stakes of scenes that feature sexual encounters—coercion, violence, rape, strong attraction, and the charged erotics of seduction and refusal—suggest that the figurative and comedic aspects play on real anxieties and tensions around ontological, sexual, and agential questions.

So the question of *Hero and Leander*’s will must be understood as situated within an ecology complex of forces that, early on in the poem, manifest variously as Cupid, glowing rocks, and mindfully gentle (as it were) breezes and sunbeams. Agency in the poem is not limited to “subjects having intellect” and in another scene of the poem, an individual’s attractive force itself is not an act of will (2.59). For posthumanists, as Sanchez observes, “the capacity of objects to act on the world... unsettles the idea that human beings possess unique ‘agentic capacities’” (“Posthumanist” 25). This “agentic capacity” swirls around *Hero and Leander*

4 As in much of the work that appears in the collections *The Indistinct Human in Renaissance Literature and Animal, Vegetable, Mineral: Ethics and Objects*.

5 “Indeed,” Paster writes “the relationship of self to world is less one of resemblance and correspondence than it is of reciprocity or even mutual permeation—what the cognitive scientist Andy Clark has described as ‘mutually modulatory influences linking brain, body, and world’” (34).

throughout the poem in an ontologically promiscuous context that threatens to overcome and even to drown them or those around them. While we see evidence of their will within a highly charged field, their will can be and often is displaced by the field. For instance, consider the speaker's description of Hero's attractive force as no greater than that which the moon has on the tides. In this scene, Hero appears in Sestos on her way to Venus's temple during a festival. The lines read: "Nor that night-wand'ring pale, and watery star /... /... more overrules the flood / Than she the hearts of those that near her stood (1.107-112). The moon's influence on the tides is no greater than Hero's on the hearts of those around her.<sup>6</sup> The speaker analogizes Hero's attractive effect on those who are in proximity to her with the force that a nonhuman body (the moon) exerts on another nonhuman body (the sea). This striking analogy, equating Hero to the moon, implies that Hero exudes 'influence' in the astrological sense (and her influence, as we've already seen, is not simply on humans). Her power over others operates at a distance and emanates from her outward appearance, which "stole away th' enchanted gazer's mind," effectively removing these suitors' agency (1.104). "The hearts of those that near her stood" are affected because of their proximity to her—it is not that the suitors are driven to Hero by their own interior will, but rather that they react to a force much like celestial influences or the gravitational field that causes tidal fluctuations (1.112). In other words, the force of Hero's attraction "unsettles... 'agentic capacities'" in two ways—it does not originate from her will while it simultaneously hijacks that of those caught in her attractive field ("Posthumanist" 25). Hero's suitors are "enchanted" and her influence is likened not only to the moon, but also to

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6 Marlowe's analogy invests in a contested scientific discourse around the tides; it was not yet established fact that the moon was the cause of the tides. Despite long observations of a relationship between moon phases and the tides, authors continue to publish competing theories to explain the relationship after the composition of *Hero and Leander* (Meli 645).

“sea-nymphs” a few lines earlier, who famously overpower individuals with an exceptional, here threatening, will-obliterating form of desire (1.104-05).

Hero and Leander’s invariable rejections of suitors reveal the extent to which others are overwhelmed by their attractive force. When those enchanted by Hero are rejected in the passage above, receiving “the sentence of her scornful eyes,” they react in dramatic ways (1.123). In her wake,

... you see one sigh, another rage,

And some (their violent passions to assuage)

Compile sharp satires...

[...]

And many seeing great princes were denied,

Pined as they went, and thinking on her died. (1.125-130)

Hero’s rejection sets off a wild disruption, sending these hopeful suitors into a mad frenzy, some even dying from unrequited love. Here we have another instance of the “powerfully corporeal” and the “recalcitrant, alien” emotions described above (Gil xii, 11). The suitors, under the influence of Hero’s attraction, lose self control, and become melancholy, enraged, or worse.

We thus see something very different from a dualistic mind-body paradigm in *Hero and Leander*, finding instead one that (as Paster observes) views environmental conditions as contiguous with the emotions. The poem also supports Paster’s claim that early moderns do not experience emotions as individuated, inner phenomena as they have come to be understood today. According to Paster, the passions were “one of the six Galenic nonnaturals” and “are ontologically coextensive with the particular social and physical environments in which those emotions arise” (27). Central to this schema is analogy: “similitude and resemblance” were at the

time “the richest and most direct path to knowledge of the world” (27). As we will see, despite the ecological manifestation of desire in *Hero and Leander*, what slips in the poem is precisely analogy and similitude: ontological identity isn’t a precondition for attraction or sexuality in the poem, and it is this ontological blurring that makes erotic scenes turn comical, titillating, violent, or absurd. Additionally, it isn’t necessarily the breakdown of ontological distinctions that causes problems in the poem, so much as it is a lack of openness on the part of Hero and Leander to the fluidity it seems to engender in others. The multiple instances of cross-ontological attraction and eroticism troubles a strict Galenic reading of the poem, for the passions in this case don’t obey the principle of identity. Even while the poem explicitly distinguishes between “creatures wanting sense” from “subjects having intellect,” its implicit ontological rules do not seem to acknowledge this distinction (2.55, 2.59).

Gil makes a similar case about early modern sexuality specifically, claiming that “early modern writers treat emotions neither as states of a deep, personal psychology, as modern cognitive psychologists do, nor as humoral imbalances that trigger disease, as many early modern thinkers still did” (10). At the core of Gil’s reading is the idea that texts from this period comprise an “archive of the felt reality of early modern sexuality” that tracks the “contradiction between a nascent universal social grammar and persistent vestiges of a premodern social vision [] vectored through gender” (15, 17). His idea, that as a modern, impersonal ‘society’ emerges in the early modern period, people felt a great deal of emotional distress as the older, established structuring principles eroded. Thus we see in the poetry of Wyatt, for example, how “powerful emotions provide a grammar” of new connections between people that arose amidst the friction between competing social systems (24). Perhaps owing to Marlowe’s long interest in classical representations (as evidenced by his translation of Ovid’s *Elegies*, e.g.), his depictions in this

poem “vector” the “vestiges of a premodern social vision” through more than gender. It is here that posthumanist theory bolsters our understanding of the “felt reality” of sexuality in *Hero and Leander*, for it can help us to recognize how Marlowe’s poem questions the mechanics of individual agency, here with regard to desire and the stability or legitimacy of the category ‘human’ in a universe of agentic entities animated by ambient erotic energy.

*Hero and Leander* depicts sexuality within a system reminiscent of Paster’s “ecology of the passions” with two key differences: 1) ontological similitude is not an organizing principle for attraction and erotic possibility; 2) the power of attractive forces is amplified dramatically. Gil writes that “When emotions are conceived as recurring somatic types rather than as private, mental states, they can be used to define bodies that link with (or repulse) other emotionally defined bodies in ways not regulated by social norms” (12). *Hero and Leander* repeatedly elaborates such attractions and repulsions, but it emphasizes a range of “emotionally defined bodies” that sweeps in essentially all beings, regardless of ontological status.

This broad ontological sweep comprises the hyperbole in the poem, but it also generates more erotic potentials and problems than is contained by the comedic relief of the poem. Moreover, because Hero and Leander’s affair (the least ontologically promiscuous of attractions in the poem) ends ambiguously and is itself riddled with the same (if not more fraught) staccato attractions and repulsions as the other erotic depictions, we are not left with a triumphant recovery of heteronormative erotics in the poem. Rather, attractive and repulsive forces are depersonalized, chaotic, and have tremendous effects across great ontological divides. More than cause suicides, Hero’s beauty turns the world “black,” while Leander’s gives the moon her characteristic pallor.

Hero and Leander function, despite themselves, as intensely powerful magnets that excite everything around them—human, animal, vegetable, mineral, deity, climate. When these other beings, under the influence of their erotic charge, come to Hero and Leander seeking sexual pleasure, or requital of their love, the pursuers are not in the least concerned about categorical differences (gender/sex, whether they are the same species) that otherwise might dictate such pleasure. In other words, their pursuers (like Neptune, as we will see below), appear to be motivated more by erotic charge than by object choice. For Masten, “amorous” in the poem means “fondness and affect [that] is directed *toward* Leander, *from* multiple subjects” (Masten 148). This amorousness doesn’t stop at humans, for Hero and Leander function as magnets of sexual energy, exciting everything around them like so many iron filings. The field model I propose here helps us to see that acted on or no, desire in *Hero and Leander* doesn’t originate within individuals and so those moved by it are in some cases unconcerned with the gender or ontological status (human, animal, god) of the source of attraction. What matters, over and above object choice, is erotic charge, and Hero and Leander have so much of it that nearly everything around them responds to it. Some beings in this field want to act on this charge regardless of who or what causes it, and this causes problems for the highly desirable characters.

Hero and Leander’s refusals are juxtaposed with visions of chaotic, human-nonhuman sex, and the threat of violence often subtends these juxtapositions. These threats manifest throughout in the poem, including in Hero and Leander’s final encounter. This might be a result of Marlowe’s Ovidian influence. As Ian Frederick Moulton writes, “[Ovidian] Eroticism is not (as in neoplatonic theory) a manifestation of cosmic unifying forces; it is an eruption of chaos and madness” (113). Such influence is visible at several points in the poem, perhaps most explicitly in the architecture of Venus’s tower. As Hero retreats into Venus’s tower after leaving

the festival in Sestos in the passage above, she is surrounded by scenes of mythological sexual excess. Representations of Zeus “bellowing loud,” Jove “dally[ing] with Idalian Ganymede,” and of course, other “gods in sundry shapes, / Committing heady riots, incest, rapes,” surround Hero as she sacrifices a turtledove (2.143-44). This Ovidian excess contrasts with the titular characters’ prudishness and their hetero-anthropocentric sexuality, juxtaposing ontological promiscuity with youthful innocence. Later in the poem Leander encounters yet another chaotic, amorous force, and is proffered sex with a male nonhuman and threatened with violence for refusing. As inside Venus’s tower, this encounter takes place with another backdrop of sexual excess, only this time he is nearly drowned. How is it that these scenes, depicting an Ovidian erotics of “chaos and madness,” maintain their humor and what is it about them that so appealed<sup>7</sup> to sixteenth and seventeenth-century audiences (Moulton 113)?

Leander’s encounter with Neptune in the Hellespont is the culminating Ovidian scene in the poem, and exemplifies Marlowe’s deft combination of chaotic, mad, and violent desire with the strangely defusing comedic appeal that characterizes the poem. It is this Marlovian blend that perhaps accounts for its appeal then and now. As he swims toward Hero’s tower, Leander draws Neptune’s attention and is caught in the water by the lustful god. Neptune mistakes Leander for Ganymede and immediately brings him to the bottom of the Hellespont, where Leander sees the sea floor “strewed with pearl, and in low coral groves / Sweet singing mermaids sported with their loves / On heaps of heavy gold” (2.161-3). Naive as he is, it would be difficult for Leander to mistake Neptune’s intentions in this setting. Readers might also note the ominous echo of Hero’s “sea-nymph” comparison above (1.105). When Neptune realizes that Leander is not Ganymede, he releases him to the surface, only to continue pursuing him. In a striking and

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<sup>7</sup> See Hooks, Orgel, and Kiséry for discussion of the success, subsequent printings, and continuations of the poem (Hooks 103, Orgel xiv-xx, Kiséry 166).

strange passage, Neptune proceeds to fondle Leander in the water, flowing around his body with viscous caresses:

He watched his arms, and as they opened wide,  
At every stroke, betwixt them he would slide  
[...]  
And dive into the water and there pry  
Upon his breast, his thighs, and every limb  
And up again and close beside him swim... (2.183-90)

As god of the sea, evidently Neptune is able to swim so proficiently as to lasciviously slide himself into and out of Leander's arms as he swims. Neptune's abilities, odd and oddly employed as they are here, strain the imagination; the passage asks readers to picture a fish- or octopus-like Neptune swimming around Leander as he makes for Hero's tower. This force of divine desire surrounds the swimming Leander nearly as fluidly as water itself. As he makes his way to his final encounter with Hero, the love "enter[ing] in from the outside," to borrow Masten's phrase again, now envelopes his naked body (the speaker tells us that Leander "stripped him[self] to the ivory skin") on all sides (Masten 150, Marlowe 2.153). Neptune's "pry[ing]" recalls the "immortal fingers" that run down Leander's back, "[t]hat heavenly path," from the introductory blazon of Leander, but now, rather than imagined as forming the spaces between his vertebrae, the sea-god slithers all around him with an eel-like fluidity (2.188, 1.67-68). Neptune responds to the tremendous erotic charge he senses in his waters, and, like the bees or Cupid to Hero, like the "immortal fingers" pressing into Leander's supple lumbar nooks earlier, uses his watery nature to envelop Leander's irresistible attraction (1.67).



Object choice ceases to matter for some characters in the poem, and in place of ontological or gender preference, pure erotic charge drives action. Leander, of course, being in love with Hero and otherwise disinclined to being another's "thrall," resists Neptune's advances (1.90). But the horny god is persistent. Leander then assumes that Neptune has taken him for a woman, but when he points this out to Neptune, the god merely "smiled" and launches into a story of bucolic pederasty (2.193-201). Neptune's story, a lengthy come-on line, alludes to several beings, human and nonhuman alike, fawning over "a boy so fair and kind / As for his love both earth and heaven pined" (2.195-96). In effect, Neptune invites Leander to 'amorous' play by telling him that he swings all ways. Having brought him to the opulent mermaid sex party at the bottom of the sea and given him a bracelet to allow him to survive in the water, Neptune's initial misprision and subsequent reaction illustrates the nature of his erotic interest in Leander. Leander's gender and ontological status is less relevant than his erotic charge—even Leander's apparent inability to live underwater is of no consequence to Neptune. When Neptune attempts to make this clear by giving examples of shepherds, "Goat-footed satyrs and up-starting fawns," all taking pleasure with the "boy so fair and kind" he indicates to Leander that Leander's prejudices about who can or should take pleasure in whom are arbitrary and limiting (2.200, 2.195). This diversion does little to change Leander's mind, and Neptune proceeds to throw a fit over his refusal.

This scene, toward the end of the poem, represents one of the most forceful scenes of sexual entreaty in the poem outside of Hero and Leander's relationship, if for no other reason than that it takes Neptune longer to desist than it does any of the other suitors. It is preceded by several other such scenes, such as the many suitors in the blazons, Hero's appearance at the festival in Sestos, and in the story of Mercury's pursuit of a shepherdess (in which Mercury falls

in love with a shepherdess, then attempts to rape her, then agrees to woo on her on her own terms). In each case, the field of attraction that surrounds an individual draws others seeking sex or love with others who often fall far outside of human male-female pairings. From mostly harmless bees to Thracian soldiers to the dangerously aggressive Neptune, these would-be suitors not only propose sex to Hero and Leander, but tend to cause harm to themselves or their objects or threaten to when denied. These troubled negotiations, which Moulton identifies as characteristic of Ovidian erotics, make up a major theme of the poem, and are depicted again and again in different permutations. Pointedly, the agency of the suitors often destabilizes, randomizing their object choice and causing to acts of violence to themselves or others. In each case, the threat of violence, rape, and strong physical desire occur alongside discourse as a tenuously privileged mode of seduction. Leander effectively talks his way out of the Neptune debacle, while Mercury and Leander both resort to verbal wooing to achieve their aims. The tension between the raw, nonindividuated erotic field exists in constant and unresolved tension with the discursive. Such a reading dovetails with Judith Haber's analysis, which examines how the poem's "disruption of end-directed narrative is paralleled by, and equivalent to, the disruption of end-directed sexuality" (378). Her reading traces the delayed gratification in the poem, including but not limited to its ambiguous ending, and, like Masten, analyzes attempts at "straightening" it out through posthumous textual alteration. This tension, the grey area of alluring potential and boundary-play, gives the poem its comedic value, its erotic appeal, and its generative ambiguity.

I focus on the nonhuman mechanics of the forces of attraction in *Hero and Leander* and suggest that the poem tells us much about early modern emotions, identity, and erotics if we attend to its nuanced phenomenology of desire. Desire operates as a non-agentic field of erotic

charge and it affects all manner of beings—not even the moon or “half the world” escape the extraordinary attractive power that surrounds Hero and Leander—in ways that seem to dramatically overpower them (1.50). I suggest that this field, impersonal and often threatening, might be understood to reflect changes in early modern England’s social structures as described by Gil. The ontologically promiscuous field in *Hero and Leander* stages something like the collision of a “modern ideal of universal humanity” with “residual elements of a premodern social imaginary that emphasizes inherent identities and quasi-biological differences between persons” that Gil describes (xi).

This reading has significantly benefitted from the work of early modern scholars who have disentangled contemporary notions of individuality, anthropocentrism, and the phenomenological experience of being human from the diversity and alterity of Renaissance cosmologies. Without the nuanced and studied awareness of these differences, our reading of *Hero and Leander* would be significantly hampered. My insistence on an externalized force of desire in the poem attends to both sexualities that don’t center individual will or object choice and the ways that the main characters navigate their sexualities.

What does *Hero and Leander* tell us about how early moderns experience emotions, desires, and sexuality? Hyperbolic though it may be, Marlowe’s poem depicts tensions in the early modern English sexual imaginary. Just as Paster looks to “Shakespeare as more representative of his age than not” because “there must be epistemic limits to the possible sweep of idiosyncratic thought,” I look to *Hero and Leander* as representative of certain attributes of early modern phenomenology/ies of desire, eroticism, and attraction (23). Even if we were to assume that Marlowe’s presentation of desire in this poem were a product of his idiosyncrasies (and how can a text be anything but, to a greater or lesser degree, idiosyncratic?), it is

nonetheless a product of and was a popular cultural object in the English Renaissance. I contend that through its farcical exaggeration of the navigation of attraction and eroto-sexual activity, it offers both a mechanics of desire that crosses borders and a diverse representation of sexualities. Operating in the poem as hyperbole, the ambient, natural, and erotic field creates situations in which individuals must navigate the complexities of a changing, ontologically unstable world. When Leander turns Neptune down, Neptune responds by advocating for group sex, sex between nonhumans and humans, and (again) sex between him and Leander—all amidst an opulent mermaid orgy in the inaccessible (to humans) deep. In so doing, he assumes Leander needs to be convinced that he can have sexual gratification outside of heterosexual and anthropocentric determinations. The discerning and awkward young Hero and Leander turn everyone away and only carefully and after several attempts scarcely and ambiguously achieve gratification together. Yet in several instances the poem points to the ways in which rigidity, hesitation, and the making of distinctions and boundaries inhibits sexual gratification, particularly when both parties want it. As Dunnum argues, it is Hero and Leander's incapacity to be frank and to understand one another (due to their following of scripts from the sonnet tradition) that complicates their romance (4). This tentatively, perhaps, accounts for the awkward and overdetermined encounter between of Hero and Leander. I measure these claims, for the same scenes can and should be read as coercive and downright violent (it is a rape scene). If the temple of Venus that Hero visits is frescoed with scenes of gods "Committing heady riots, incest, rapes," the poem contains also a critique of the violence of unrestrained, aggressive, and non-consensual sexuality (1.144).

This reading troubles our assumptions about early modern sexuality and challenges modern conceptions of emotion toward an "ecology of the passions" model. Many have already pointed to how certain emotions were, for early moderns, very different from the cognitive

psychological model proposed (and more recently challenged) today. The poem also depicts what Gil calls “a special class of interpersonal relations that are set apart from the rest of social life” (xiv). This manifests in the variety of suitors in the blazons, mermaids having sex undersea (quite far from “the rest of social life”), and in the tale of Mercury with his “country maid” (Gil xiv, Marlowe 1.388). Despite the violence I’ve pointed to here, there is yet an erotics to all of these encounters, and the poem’s charm and popularity suggests that dangerous play within the poem’s ambient desire-field was and is itself a source of allure and entertainment. Sanchez notes how early modern authors were “well aware of the voyeuristic pleasure... both women and men” took in reading about “nonnormative sexualities” (“Spaniel” 497). If ‘love is in the air’ in early modern England, that is, then *Hero and Leander* presents it in all its chaos and madness, managing somehow to make it playful, violent, and unpredictable.

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