Renaissance Epyllions: A Comparative Reading of Christopher Marlowe's *Hero and Leander*, Thomas Lodge's *Scylla's Metamorphosis* and Francis Beaumont's *Salmacis and Hermaphroditus*

Yazdan Mahmoudi

Shahid Beheshti University, Tehran, Iran

E-mail: yazdan_mahmoodi@yahoo.com

Abstract

The present paper is supposed to compare and contrast three of these masterpieces written the Renaissance period. The epyllions under study are Christopher Marlowe's *Hero and Leander*, Thomas Lodge's *Scylla's Metamorphosis* and Francis Beaumont's *Salmacis and Hermaphroditus*. Bush believes that "the influence of Marlowe is very pronounced in the Salmacis and Hermaphroditus of 1602, which has been associated with Francis Beaumont, but, it is generally agreed, is almost certainly no this. The poem is top heavy with decorative additions, and the myth-making faculty runs wild" (213). The shared characteristic of these works is their indebtedness to Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, so it is important to analyze their modifications so as to observe in what way or ways they are different from their original stories. Moreover, the paper will analyze these works based on their treatment of such elements as narration, subversive facets, intertextuality, their relation to their paintings and other important aspects of the works. At the end, the researcher is going to compare and contrast these epyllions and their paintings of the era in order to analyze their mutual influence which may affect the understanding of their readers.

Keywords: epyllion, Renaissance, Marlowe, Lodge, Beaumont, intertextuality

1. Introduction

An epyllion is a minimized version of the epic which tries to depict a clash or conflict in the poem. What is significant is the fact that this clash or opposition is usually based on war and romance. Thus, epyllions more or less and in a limited space try to challenge some of the epic conventions. Renaissance epyllions are profoundly indebted to the classical literature, especially to Ovid. So the Renaissance authors and poets do not entirely invent the genre. It is notable that the Renaissance depiction of the epyllions is usually artistically better than their predecessors, because these writers try to compete the classics and write their works in a higher level of artistry.

2. The Review of Literature

Among these works, Christopher Marlowe's *Hero and Leander* has been more extensively scrutinized than the other two works. Accordingly, there are more critical views dedicated to Marlowe's epyllion. Walsh puts more emphasis on the sexual aspect of Christopher Marlowe's *Hero and Leander* and believes that "the opening portraits of Hero and Leander suggest through mythological allusion the Neo-platonic sanction for sexual love: the propagation of beauty in this world." (33) Further, Campbell explores "*Hero and Leander* is conventionally regarded as a fragmented poem, begun by Marlowe and completed by Chapman." (241) Blanco in her well-structured thesis minutely investigates Lodge's *Scylla's Metamorphosis* and pointed out that it's "stylistic genre flourished in England and poets dealt with it with the purpose of writing mythological poems on the example of ancient and contemporary authors." (5)

3. Narration: The Tone and the Role of the Narrator

Maybe more than any literary genre the role a narrator plays in an epyllion is much more important in determining the tone and the purpose of the work. For example, to what extent the narrator is going to give the reader the images about the subject matter of the poem? Of course this is a matter which is of utmost importance in analyzing these three epyllions. In fact, through the juxtaposition of *Hero and Leander, Salmacis and Hermaphroditus* and *Scylla's Metamorphosis* we come to this understanding that in the first two poems the narrator uses a jolly and lighthearted tone which in some parts provides the reader with a humorous image of these epyllions. In *Hero and Leander* the narrator provides us with a mixture of comic and tragic scenes. While the narrator is narrating Leander is suffering from Hero's love and how he dives into the sea to swim for the other side of the Hellespont, suddenly Neptune comes into the scene. Here, Leander is mistaken for one of the servants of Zeus and Neptune takes him under the water. But after a while when he notices that he is not Ganymede, he lets him go. So one of the things which makes this epyllion entertaining is such comic elements. In Francis Beaumont's *Salmacis and Hermaphroditus* such an amusing tone can be observed as

well. Such a mixture of the serious and the jolly is obviously seen in Hermaphroditus's treatment of love. When Salmacis tries to woo him, he acts in in a way as if he had no idea about what love is that may be in opposition with his character as a deity. Indeed, Hermaphroditus is represented as a shy and blushed deity who becomes embarrassed when Salmacis tries to make advanced. He continually uses funny conceits and talks back to Salmacis so as to get rid of her and deny her of his love:

At her loose speach Hermaphroditus blusht:

He knew not what loue was, yet loue did shame him,

Making him blush, and yet his blush became him:

Then might a man his shamefast colour see,

Like the ripe apple on the sunny tree,

Or Iuory dide o're with a pleasing red,

Or like the pale Moone being shadowed.

By this, the Nymph recouer'd had her tongue,

That to her thinking lay in silence long,

And sayd, Thy cheeke is milde, O be thou so,

Thy cheeke, saith I, then do not answere no,

Thy cheeke doth shame, then doe thou shame, she sayd,

It is a mans shame to deny a mayd.

In Lodge's *Scylla's Metamorphosis* the treatment of narration and the tone of the epyllion is in some respect different from the previous ones. This epyllion starts with the narration of the inner feelings of a narrator who is not happy about what has happened to him. When the sea god Glaucus comes to the story, he tries to sympathize with him. The deity narrates the reasons for his own depression and talks about how he fell in love with Scylla and the way she refused his love. Therefore, this epyllion from the beginning initiates with a lamenting tone which makes it different from Marlowe's and Beaumont's:

Walking alone (all onely full of griefe)

Within a thicket nere to Isis floud,

Weeping my wants, and wailing scant reliefe,

Wringing mine armes (as one with sorrowe wood);

The piteous streames relenting at my mone

Withdrew their tides, and staid to heare me grone (1-6).

Another aspect of these epyllions which is related to their narration and their narrator is the descriptions which exist in these poems. It seems that they are also different from each other because of their unequal amount of descriptions. These descriptions of the main characters are more visible in *Hero and Leander* and *Salmacis and Hermaphroditus*. In the first, Leander's body and Hero's clothes are artistically described and filled with exaggeration. Marlowe at the beginning of the poem describes Leander as a very handsome character and gives an artistic cataloguing of his body in which the hair, the neck, the skin and at the end the feet are beautifully pictured. Following Leander, Marlowe describes Hero as well. But the significant matter is that she is not described for her body but in terms of her clothes. Her clothes are described in a hyperbolic manner and it is this exaggeration which renders the poem an entertaining tone. So the role of the narrator is more highlighted in Marlowe's epyllion, because he provides the reader with much more details in comparison with the other two works. Francis Beaumont's *Salmacis and Hermaphroditus* also starts with the description of Hermaphroditus and his attractiveness for other deities, but his description is not as much as that of Hero or Leander. As for Leander, there is a cataloging of his body, or blazon, and such organs as the cheek, the eyes and the legs are given an account. But, as mentioned earlier, Lodge's epyllion does not contain such long descriptions. Instead it mainly focuses on the story of the unrequited love of Glaucus, and therefore, the narrator does not much go through the details. Another matter about Lodge's narrator is the shift of narration which takes place. At the very beginning of the poem a young man who is complaining about the world is the narrator, but when Glaucus appears he starts to narrate his own story. This shift of narration occurs one more time in which Glaucus stops telling the story and the first narrator narrates the section where Thetis go to Isis, the issue which makes it different from the other ones:

With secret eye looke on the earth a while,

Regard the changes Nature forceth there;

Behold the heavens, whose course all sence beguile;

Respect thy selfe, and thou shalt find it cleere,

That infantlike thou art become a youth,

And youth forespent a wretched age ensu'th (31-36).

Another matter which can be a point of comparison in the analysis of these three epyllions is their usage of language. In fact, in Morlowe's *Hero and Leander* the narrator uses a language which is more similar to the modern language which we use today. But if we take a close look at the other epyllions under study in this paper, we will realize that their usage of language involves some differences compared to Marlowe's version. For example, Lodge adds "e" to the end of many of the words such as "griefe" and "reliefe". Alongside the usage of "e" in Francis Beaumont's work there are many words which have "u" instead of "v". Words such as "loue" and "euery" are the best examples in this regard. "That euery Louers eye may melt a line; /Commaund the god of Loue that little King/To giue each verse a sleight touch with his wing" (8-10).

4. The Role of Female Characters in the Renaissance Epyllions: Individualism?

Bell believes that "a very important reason for giving attention to women in mythology is the biological fact of the limited duration of childbearing capability, which has strong implications for chronologies" (Bell x). This matter can be also taken into account for the Renaissance epyllions. Since the theme of the Renaissance epyllions is mainly love, the role of women and female characters can be a fertile ground in the analysis of these works. But the question is whether they are individual or not? These epyllions or narrative poems are full of women and female characters who are different from the female characters of the novels, because in epyllions there is no access to the motivation of the characters. In fact, the shared characteristic of these three works is that their female characters, whether mortal or immortal, are given a fixed and preexisted role, and they just do their best to play out that role. In Marlowe's work Hero is a nun and a virgin who tries to be faithful to the goddess Venus. She lives in a strict world and must live her life like a cliché woman. There is also a cliché and traditional perspective towards these female characters not only in *Hero and Leander* but also in Thomas Lodge's *Scylla's Metamorphosis* and Francis Beaumont's *Salmacis and Hermaphroditus* in which they are mostly respected for their sexuality and erotic purposes. For example, Leander falls in love with Hero mainly because of her beautiful appearance and encourages her to stop being a nun and uses her beauty. So the idea of male gaze is highlighted in this poem. In *Scylla's metamorphosis* the character of Scylla is portrayed as an evil or malicious deity who did no return Glaucus's love and caused him to suffer. In Beaumont's *Salmacis and Hermaphroditus,* this traditional perspective towards the female characters is represented in the ways in which Salmacis wants to have Hermaphroditus at any cost. As Kier explores "the blush which evokes these comparisons is specifically the blush of erotic inexperience and embarrassment, the kind of blush that is both aesthetically beautiful and erotically arousing" (4). Indeed, when she clings to Hermaphroditus and prays for their eternal union, it can be deduced that this is seen as a ruse or trick from a female character so as to achieve whatever she wants. Therefore, women and female characters in these three works cannot be considered as totally free individual beings. Rather they are given cliché roles based on traditional perspective towards women. But this does not necessarily mean that they do not try to change their fixed roles in their societies. For example, at the end of Marlowe's epyllion it seems that Hero's fluctuations towards love make her give in to Leander's advances, which can be regarded as the trespass of her preexisted boundaries:

So Hero's ruddy cheek Hero betrayed,

And her all naked to his sight displayed,

Whence his admiring eyes more pleasure took

Than Dis on heaps of gold fixing his look.

By this Apollo's golden harp began

To sound forth music to the Ocean,

Which watchful Hesperus no sooner heard,

But he the day's bright-bearing car prepared,

And ran before, as harbinger of light,

And with his flaring beams mocked ugly Night,

Till she, o'ereome with anguish, shanle and rage,

Danged down to hell her loathsome carriage (2nd Sestiad, 323-334).

5. Determinism, Love and Classicism in the Renaissance Epyllions

It seems that there is an interrelated relationship between the determinism which exists in the Renaissance epyllions and their classical background. So the main reason for what happens to the characters of these narrative poems is the existence of the mythological characters which take their roots from the classical texts such as Ovid's *Metamorphosis*. According to Sokolova,

> Clearly the piece touched a vibrant vein in the artistic air of the times as the next decade or so saw an outburst of erotic metamorphic poems on subjects derived from Ovid and older Greek models. These dealt with the love games of mythological gods, nymphs and mortals, the delights of watching and touching beautiful bodies, the consummation of sex or the impossibility of it, and with a final (more often than not tragic) transformation into a natural form, plant or animal (392).

In fact, the intervention of gods and goddesses in a crucial factor in the way the destiny of the characters is determined at the end of the poems. For example, Cupid is an almost omnipresent goddess who by striking his arrow causes many mortal or immortal characters to fall in love with each other. In *Hero and Leander* when Leander meets Hero in the

feast for the first time, he falls in love with her and Cupid shoots his arrow for her as well. The same thing occurs in Lodge's *Scylla's Metamorphosis* in which Cupid strikes his arrow of passion. But there is a difference between Marlowe's and Lodge's case; in *Scylla's Metamorphosis,* Glaucus's love is unrequited. The immortal god who intervenes in *Salmacis and Hermaphroditus* is not Cupid but other gods such as Zeus who respond to Salmacis's prays and unify her with Hermaphroditus. But these are not the only deities who play out a role in these epyllions. Of course, there are other gods and goddesses who have their own stories in these poems which make them totally intertextual narratives. In *Hero and Leander* the god of the sea Neptune enters the poem, and then we have his story about how he mistakes Leander for the cupbearer of Zeus. The Lodge's epyllion this intertextuality happens as well. At the very beginning of the poem we see the narrator who is crying and talking about the misfortunes of the life until the sea god Glaucus tells his own story. Also in Beaumont's work there are a lot of references to mythological deities such as Phoebus, Astraea, Vulcan, etc.

But, as mentioned earlier, the chief justification for the presence of many of these gods and goddesses can mainly be the issue of love. In other words, they mostly intervene when one or more characters in epyllions are troubled or affected by love which is a classical issue more obviously in the works of Ovid. In *Hero and Leander* Venus, Cupid and Neptune are the deities who are directly or indirectly related to the love relationships of Hero and Leander. It is important to note that in most cases when one of the gods or goddesses intervene, his or her intervention causes one of the parties in these love relations to suffer. This matter can be justified not because of the cruelty of these deities but because the nature of love in these epyllions which is going to bring distress and agony for one or both parties. In *Scylla's Metamorphosis* Cupid's shot does not have any influence on Scylla and even makes Glaucus suffer, for Scylla did not return his love. Further in this epyllion, Glaucus gets rid of suffering, but now it is Scylla who suffers from the unrequited of Glaucus. In fact, her suffering is because Thetis, Glaucus's mother, asked Cupid to shoot his arrow at her and take revenge. Therefore, in Lodge's work the relationship between the deities and love exists which comes from the original classical texts. The role of gods and their intervention in love relations in Beaumont's poem is obvious in the scene where Hermaphroditus rejects the aggressive love of Salmacis.

6. Subversion and the Subversive Facets of the Renaissance Epyllions

Through a close analysis of these epyllions we can come to this understanding that there are lots of subversive elements which are against the norms of the love poems. Indeed, it is important to mention that subversion of conventions and norms can be considered as another aspect in the comparative reading of these three Renaissance works. In Marlowe's *Hero and Leander* the first and foremost is the secret consummation that happens between the lover and the beloved. At the end of the epyllion Leander decides to swim to Heroes' tower, and when he arrives there, Hero invites him to sleep in her bed. This sexual relation that happens secretly is what that does not usually occur in the love stories of the time. The next subversive act in his epyllion is the homoeroticism which is about to happen in the poem. Swimming for Sestos, where Hero lives, Leander is trapped by the sea god Neptune. It seems that Neptune has a homosexual character in this poem, because Neptune mistakes Leander for Ganymede, who is another male character, and takes him to the depth of the sea:

Hero of love takes deeper sense

And doth her love more recompense;

Their first night's meeting, where sweet kisses

Are th' only crowns of both their blisses;

He swims t' Abydos! and returns;

Cold Neptune with his beauty burns,.

Whose suit he shuns, and doth aspire

Hero's fair tow'r and his desire (485-492).

Another dominant subversive aspect seems to be the ending of the story which is foreshadowed at the beginning. The last but not the least, is what can be called the relative shift of the female position in this poem. The idea is that Hero continually vacillates between her position as a nun and her passion towards Leander and his love. She chooses the second one which gives her a relative individuality as a woman.

Similar to the structural subversion in *Hero and Leander*, there is also a subversion in the structure of Thomas Lodge's *Scylla's Metamorphosis*. This subversion takes place when Glaucus is indifferent to Scylla's love. At the beginning of the story Glaucus falls in love with Scylla, but she rejects him and does not pay attention to his sufferings. Here Scylla has the upper hand and Glaucus is an unhappy and wretched lover. Around the middle of the poem Glaucus gets rid of the suffering of her love, and this time she gets fascinated in Glaucus. Predictable enough, he is apathetic to her feelings, and therefore, the position of the weak and the strong changes at the end. Further, "Venus reassures Thetis about her son's prompt recovery and Cupid shoots the repulsion arrow against Glaucus: thanks to this second "restorative" wound, the sea God is finally free from his obsession and happy again (Blanco 29). But Beaumont's form of subverting the norms is not a matter of the structure, but as with the character of Hero, a matter of gender role and the position of the female in the society. In fact, when Salmacis, the beautiful Nymph who falls in love with Hermaphroditus, clings to Hermaphroditus and they become one entity, none of them are the same as before anymore. Carter believes "Hermaphroditus' androgyny potentially serves to undermine the bisexual (in the literal sense) nature of the hermaphrodite. The myth and the representations demonstrate that the prototypical hermaphrodite, the unified figure

of Salmacis and Hermaphroditus, is not so much a combination of man and woman, but of woman and boy: not so much a combination of opposites but an amalgamation of the ideologically comparable" (130). That is, a subversion takes place in their gender relations. Now both the male and the female characters have trespassed the fixed boundary of their fixed and preexisted sex. As Keach writes, "Beaumont heightens the sense of a similar bisexual beauty which unites Salmacis and Hermaphroditus descriptively and metaphorically long before they are united physically and literally" (47). This is beautifully depicted at the end of Beaumont's epyllion:

Struggle thou mayst, but neuer get away.

So graunt, iust gods, that neuer day may see

The separation twixt this boy and mee.

The gods did heare her pray'r and feele her woe;

And in one body they began to grow.

She felt his youthfull bloud in euery vaine;

And he felt hers warme his colde brest againe.

And euer since was womans loue so blest,

That it will draw bloud from the strongerst brest.

Nor man nor mayd now could they be esteem'd:

Neither, and either, might they well be deem'd,

When the young boy Hermaphroditus sayd,

VVith the set voyce of neither man nor mayd.

7. The Mutual Relationship of the Renaissance Epyllions and Their Paintings

Generally, there is a reciprocal relationship between the literature and the painting of the Renaissance. The major reason for this matter lies in the nature of the poetry and the painting of the era; on the one hand, because the poetry of the era is full of artistic descriptions that makes it highly picturesque, and on the other hand, the painting of the Renaissance is mostly used to inform a story or narrative. For example, many of the paintings of the period entitled altarpieces, have been utilized to convey first and foremost religious and then social and political messages, and the other way round. In fact, "the altarpiece tradition, with its roots in Medieval polyptychs and winged retables, continued throughout the 16th century and beyond in Italy, France, Spain, and the Catholic areas of Northern Europe" (Johnson 28). In Marlowe's *Hero and Leander* there are beautiful descriptions of Heroes' clothes or Leander's body, and they are so much effective for the visualization of the epyllion. But a question may remain unanswered here. Do these paintings give a better understanding of such Renaissance epyllions? The researcher of present paper believes that the paintings which are drawn based on these epyllions in some cases contribute to and in some cases damage our understanding of these narrative poems, because some of them deviate from the details of mentioned in these Renaissance epyllions.

Christopher Williams (1873-1934) has painted Hero and Leander. If we take a close look at this painting and the poem *Hero and Leander*, we will realize that there are notable deviations from the story.

Fig. 1. Christopher Williams's Hero and Leander

The most notable difference between this painting and Marlow's epyllion is certainly the way Leander's body is represented. In Marlowe's poem Leander has been described as a very handsome young man. Indeed, the poem concentrates on his naked body and gives a blazon of the organs of his body. So the epyllion pictures an erotic, and sometimes a homoerotic, depiction of the character of Leander, but Christopher Williams has painted Leander covered in red clothes. Moreover, in the poem Hero and Leander embrace each other on Heroes' tower, while Christopher Williams's illustration shows them in nature and in a natural background.

This relatively free-floating adaptation of the renaissance epyllions by the painters and artists can be also observed in Bartholomaus Spranger's illustration of the story of Glaucus's love for Scylla.

Fig. 2. Bartholomaus Spranger's Illustration of Scylla and Glaucus

When Glaucus narrates the story of his love for Scylla, he tells the man that he wants to tell him the story of the past love when he was a young handsome man. Through a close analysis of this painting we will understand that the painting gives the reader a good visualization of the story. For example, the appearance of a sea god or the beautiful face of Scylla. But it also deviates, for it demonstrates Glaucus's face in a way that seems to be older than the time he falls in love with Scylla.

Maybe the least amount of deviation from the story can be seen in Francois Joseph's *The Nymph Salmacis and Hermaphroditus*.

Fig. 3. Francois Joseph's *The Nymph Salmacis and Hermaphroditus*

This painting is based on the myth of Salmacis's love for Hermaphroditus in which the setting is Salmacis's fountain and while she is naked holds Hermaphroditus's body to pray for union. In Francis Beaumont's epyllion Hermaphroditus is a shy character who has no idea of what love is. This characteristic of Hermaphroditus is also illustrated here.

Therefore, this painting helps visualize its background story better than the previous ones analyzed in this section. In sum, it is true that many paintings have been drawn based on the Renaissance and classical stories, but some of these illustrations deviate in some major or minor details from the original narratives, so their contribution to better understand the epyllions is a matter of degree.

8. Conclusion

In sum, the Renaissance epyllions are narrative poems o minor epics which mainly cover a love story. But this story does not usually go on smoothly and contains conflict and opposition. This paper tried to compare and contrast *Hero and Leander, Scylla's Metamorphosis* and *Salmacis and Hermaphroditus* so as to give a more obvious picture of these Renaissance epyllions. To do so, firstly the researcher scrutinized these works in terms of their narration and the role of the narrator which is of high significance in the reading of the narrative poems. Also the Renaissance epyllions are the reconstructed version of classical stories; thus, investigating elements such as love, determinism and the intervention of deities are crucial as well. They often involve many subversive elements such as homoeroticism and relative change in the position of female characters, etc. The importance of these poems becomes more highlighted when we analyze them in relation to the paintings which have been illustrated based on these poem. But it is important to note that some of these paintings have deviation in portraying the details mentioned in the epyllions. Further research can be also done on these epyllions. For instance, they are a fertile ground for interdisciplinary studies, especially their parallel reading with the cinematic adaptations which are made on such stories. Furthermore, the researcher believes that they are a good area for the comparative readings in Persian literature.

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