

THE STORY OF HERO AND LEANDER IN OVID'S WORKS

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Rezumat: În acest studiu ne propunem să analizăm povestea de iubire dintre personajele mitologice Hero și Leander, așa cum apare ilustrată de Ovidius în mai multe dintre operele sale. Vom urmări eventualele schimbări de percepție ale poetului asupra relației dintre cei doi îndrăgostiți, sub aspect psihologic și literar. Povestea de dragoste invocată de poet ilustrează o capacitate remarcabilă de a utiliza aceleași teme și motive literare, cu scopuri diferite.

Abstract: In this study we aim to analyze the love story between the mythological characters Hero and Leander, as illustrated by Ovid in several of his works. We will follow the possible changes of the poet's perception on the relationship between the two lovers, from psychological and literary viewpoints. The love story invoked by Ovid illustrates his remarkable ability to use the same themes and literary motives for different purposes.

The love story between Hero and Leander is one of the most famous and generous in universal literature. It crossed ages, genres, cultures, influenced great ancient and contemporary artists, writers, painters and musicians¹. Leander, a young man from the city of Abydos, is in love with Hero, Aphrodite's priestess from Sestos. The two fortresses are facing each other, but separated by the Hellespont Strait, which Leander crosses every night, guided by the lighthouse in Sestos. Caught in waves by a terrible storm, the young man was not able to survive it. The light from the lighthouse, carefully turned on by Hero every night, had gone out because of the wind, so the swimmer lost his way and perished in

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¹ A short enumeration of some great artists of different genres, who found sources of inspiration in the story of Hero and Leander, was made by the researcher Silvia Montiglio, in the introduction to *The Myth of Hero and Leander: The History and Reception of an Enduring Greek Legend* (2018). A non-paged electronic version of this book, available on google.books, has been used for this research.

the waves. Hero waits anxiously for him on the shore, and when his lifeless body reaches her, she can't bear the loss and throws herself into the waves.

The origin of this myth is shrouded in mystery. Silvia Montiglio, in an extensive study dedicated to the echoes it had in ancient and medieval literature and art, links the emergence of the myth to the Hellespont region and the construction of the lighthouse in Alexandria, which in the days of Augustus, was nicknamed "Hero's Tower".

The story of the two lovers was so well known in the Augustan era that neither Ovid in (*Am.* II, 16, 31–32) nor Vergil (*G.* III, 257–263) feel the need to give readers narrative details and simply call them *Hero* and *iuvenis, virgo* and *iuvenis* respectively². Also, the two scenes have in common the use of the image of fire to suggest the uncontrollable passion and especially the epithet *caeca*, associated by Horatius with *fata* (*Carm.*, II, 13). Ovid's *via caeca* and Vergil's *nocte caeca* are the insurmountable obstacles for the young man who perishes, wandering on the way to the loved one who is waiting for him on the opposite shore.

Ovid starts the lyrical approach from a concrete image of his native Sulmo, an Edenic land, in which nature overflows with vitality. The dominant natural elements are water and earth, whose harmonization qualifies the space as *salubris* and prevents the harmful effects of solar heat. The literary imagination places these three natural elements in direct connection with the "emotional space concentrated within things"³. The landscape predisposes to an emotional experience in full harmony with nature, as for the romantic writers *avant la lettre*. We notice the flowing waters as "vegetative element"⁴ (*inriguis ... aquis, liquentibus undis, rivis labentibus*), having the power to fertilize the soil. The result is lush vegetation, which corresponds to the poet's feelings of love. Even if Ovid does not specify the period of the year that corresponds to his description, the explosion of freshness, expressed by the adjectives *tener* and *fertilis*, added in the text for extra dynamism, makes us think of spring: *et viret in tenero fertilis herba solo*. The polyptote *ferax ... feracior* that associates these adjectives with the deities Ceres and Pallas, intensifies the idea of fruitfulness, in a nature subject to man, as shown by the nouns *arva* and *ager*, which indicate the cultivated land.

Ovid's imaginary landscape is dominated by only two elements of nature, water and earth, whose combination – *madidam ... humum* – is protected by rustic deities and has creative powers. The water is sweet, flowing, clean, it encompasses in a sensual way, a welcoming earth, producing the vegetation necessary for mankind: *fertilis herbas, uvis, gramineus caedes*. In perfect harmony, these two elements of nature will be used by poet again, in the episode of Hero and Leander. The love of the two is consumed at night, on the shore of the Hellespont, at the joining between water and earth. The next sequence is introduced through the strong disjunctive connector *at*, and opens with the image of the poet in love, separated by his guilt, from the woman he loves: *verbo peccavimus uno*. Separation from his girlfriend has a devastating effect and changes the material imagination. If in the first part, the fire was kept away from

² Cf. WEIDEN BOYD 1997, p. 61.

³ BACHELARD 1998, p. 10.

⁴ BACHELARD 1997a, p. 17.

the paradisiacal landscape, through the cooling effect of the flowing water, in the next sequence, it appears in the hypostasis of the distant woman and in the effect she left in the poet's soul. Two verbs composed with *esse*, *abest* and *adest*, placed emphatically, at the caesura and at the end of the verse, illustrate the desperate state of the poet-lover who calls his girlfriend in a Vergilian manner⁵:

*At meus ignis abest. Verbo peccavimus uno! –
Quae movet ardores est procul; ardor adest. (Am. 2, 16, 11–12)*

Feeling abandoned and separated by his *domina* (Ovid's favorite term to name his girlfriend, in *Amores*), the poet reconfigures the imaginary landscape, in an anti-Sulmo, a *terra iniqua*. The lament against the roads, which do nothing but separate lovers, is a topos of the elegiac Latin poets, being previously used by Propertius and Tibullus⁶. In this parallel universe, another element of nature dominates, the air, associated with a "psychological fall"⁷ of the love-lorn. Ovid imagines himself in an aggressive world, together with his girlfriend (*cum domina*) where they let themselves be carried vertically either on the heights (*ventosas Alpes*) or in the depths of the sea (*Neptuni ventosa potentia*), in order to prove his strength and the ability to protect the loved one: *premerem, aussim perrumpere, nec timeam, dulce feremus onus*. The relationship between the climate in the land of Pelign and the emotional state is deeply indebted to the elegiac tradition of the Augustan age, represented by Gallus, Tibullus, Propertius, Horace, Vergil⁸. In this context, Ovid introduces a distich in which the story of the unhappy love between Hero and Leander, victims of the unbridled force of the wind, is invoked. Leander's inability to reach the other side of the water transforms it, from the "vegetative element," into the "body of tears"⁹. The water that transits the landscape is violent, no longer calm and cool, like the waters in Sulmo were. Stimulated by the force of the wind, it becomes lethal. Ovid imagines himself an opponent of Leander, whose effort is finely mocked by the *transnataverat ... transnatasset* polyptotone, which shows the lover's long effort, and yet ineffective. On the other hand, the poet imagines himself on a higher position, because regardless of the unfavorable place he is in - on earth or in the water -, being inseparable from the loved one, he becomes invincible. Another way of literary interpretation, very subtle, is offered by the considerations regarding the girls' words, inserted suddenly and somewhat unnaturally, in the final episode, full of sentimental outpouring:

*Verba puellarum, foliis leviora caducis,
Inrita, qua visum est, ventus et unda ferunt. (Am. 2, 16, 45–46)*

⁵ Cf. Verg. *Ecl.*, III, 66: *meus ignis, Amyntas*.

⁶ WEIDEN BOYD 1997, p. 55.

⁷ BACHELARD 1997b, p. 19.

⁸ WEIDEN BOYD 1997, p. 56.

⁹ BACHELARD 1997a, p. 10

The alliteration with the sound *u*, the emphatic placement of the epithets *caducis* and *inrita*, both related to the idea of wind dynamics, the relationship created between the girls' words and the movement produced by wind and water illustrate the poet's mood and close the open circle of the verse *verbo peccavimus uno* from the beginning of the poem. It is a subtle way to show that a relationship is endangered by both partners, in a communication impasse. Ovid therefore uses the famous couple Hero – Leander, to create a literary image of the danger that threatens his love affair with his *domina*. The wind that triggered the storm on the sea crossed by Leander and extinguished the lantern lit by Hero caused a double tragedy, a source of poetic inspiration over time. In the poet's case, the angry wind transforms the intimate Sulmo and threatens the relationship with *domina*, as indicated by the numerous references to it: *ventosas*, *ventosa*, *ventus*. In this poem, Ovid asks his girlfriend to behave like Leander, meaning to cross these unfavorable territories in order to return to him. The image is reminiscent of the elegy of Propertius, who sees Cynthia struggling with the waves and, confident in her love, wants to join her in this effort:

*Seu mare per longum mea cogitet ire puella,
Hanc sequar et fidos una aget aura duos.* (Prop. 2, 26b, 9–10)

The scenario he exposes in *Amores* is resumed in *Ars amandi*, the second book, in which the poet again invokes the difficulties of love, the importance of communication, of the spoken and unspoken word, the pain of separation, the force of love to overcome any difficulties. Thus, again, Ovid associates the wind with the struggle that lovers have to overcome:

*Nec semper dubias adiuvat aura rates;
Quod iuvat, exiguum, plus est, quod laedat amantes;
Proponant animo multa ferenda suo.* (*Ars. Am.* 2, 514–516)

He takes from Propertius the idea of uniting efforts to overcome together the difficulties of life, using the same image, of the voyage by sea:

*Sed neque tu dominam velis maioribus usus
Desere, nec cursus anteat illa tuos;
Ad metam properate simul: tum plena voluptas,
Cum pariter victi femina virque iacent.* (*Ars. Am.*, 2, 725–729)

Ovid metaphorically uses the image of running water, on which float either one of his lovers or the ship he is carrying, in battle with the opposing waves. It is a symbol of emotional turmoil, which gives strength to lovers and whose transcendence is equivalent to erotic fulfillment. At the same time, it can also suggest the agitation of public life, which the Stoics avoided, because they believed it keeps the man away from the woman who suffers in eternal waiting,

and this is what Hero also thinks¹⁰. The crossing of violent water, the defeat of a force of nature by Leander is a form of provocation of reality, which gives him every day, "the masculine joy of piercing reality"¹¹.

The concept of *durus amor*, used by Vergil (*G.* 3, 259), becomes synonymous with Leander's tenacity to reach his girlfriend every night through remarkable efforts. The two classical poets have categorical expressions in this regard, which have become axiomatic: *Audentes Fortuna iuvat* (*Aen.*, 10, 284), *Amor odit inertes* (*Ars. Am.*, 2, 229) respectively. Doubting Leander's feelings for a moment, Hero blames him for his seeming fear and lack of courage: *Unde novus timor hic, quoque illa audacia fugit?* (*Her.* 19, 88).

Love is strengthened by resistance to obstacles, by perpetual struggle, which transforms the lover into a true soldier: *vel mile, vel amans*, (*Am.*, I, 15), *miles in arma veni*, (*Ars. Am.*, I, 36), *miles ero*, *Ars. Am.*, I, 132, etc. In both works, the reference to the mythological couple is made in the climax, in the context of the analysis of various types of obstacles, which constantly test love. For Ovid, as for Vergil before him, Hero and Leander are the ultimate example of devotion and a spirit of sacrifice. On the other hand, as we noticed in *Amores*, there is also a dose of irony in *Ars amandi*, more direct than in his debut work. Ovid turns against superficial girls, who easily turn the confrontation with danger into a proof of love. At the level of artistic expression, irony is obtained by the emphatic placement, at the beginning and end of the verse, of the antithetical words *laeta* and *pericli*, followed by the placement at the caesura, of the noun *pignus*:

*Laeta erit, et causam tibi se sciet esse pericli;
Hoc dominae certi pignus amoris erit.* (*Ars. Am.*, II, 248–249)

Another poem in which the reference to the myth of Hero and Leander appears is *Tristia*, III, 10. Ovid apocalyptically describes the winter in the fortress of Tomis, presenting a landscape diametrically opposed to the one in Sumo, from *Amores*, II, 16. Clean, fast, spring waters, pleasant winds and fertile land, laden with vegetation are opposed to frozen waters (*undas ... concretas, immotas ... aquas, rigidas ... aquas*), the savage force of the northern wind (*Boreae saeva vis*), barren land (*iners ... terra*). The dominant element is the wind, whose violence corresponds to the aggression of the invading barbarians, which prevents any form of stability of the natives:

*Protinus aequato siccis Aquilonibus Histro
Invehitur celeri barbarus hostis equo.* (*Tr.*, III, 10, 53–54)

As the cold wind freezes the waters and makes the soil become barren, so the attacks of the barbarians prevent the development of agricultural activities:

Nec quisquam presso vomere sulcat humum. (*Tr.*, III, 70)

¹⁰ NICOLAE 2017, p. 73.

¹¹ BACHELARD 1997^a, p. 181.

As in *Amores*, Ovid supports his point of view by an analogy with agricultural activities. Their realization is equivalent to erotic fulfillment, and their absence indicates an imbalance between love and landscape¹²:

*Ulmus amat vitem, vitis non deserit ulmum;
Separor a domina cur saepe mea? (Ars. Am., II, 16, 41–42)*

*Non hic pampinea dulcis latet uva sub umbra,
Nec cumulant altos feroidea musta lacus. (Tr., III, 10, 71–72)*

In this context, the poet appeals for reference to the mythological story of Acontius, who uses an apple to get the attention of the girl he is interested in. The frozen and hostile landscape in Tomis prevents the practice of fruit growing, which, in terms of literature, leads to the failure of the young man's love:

*Poma negat regio, nec haberet Acontius, in quo
Scriberet hic dominae verba legenda suae. (Tr., III, 10, 73–74)*

Also, due to the icy water, it would no longer be possible to unfold in a familiar note the love story between Hero and Leander, because he would no longer have to swim to reach the shore in Sestos:

*Si tibi tale fretum quondam, Leandre, fuisset,
Non foret angustae mors tua crimen aquae. (Tr., III, 10, 41–42)*

We notice that Hero is not mentioned here, and Leander is alone, because, in the absence of a test of courage, as a measure of love, his presence in mythology has no justification. Cold wind, icy water and infertile terrain define a literary landscape, in which love cannot bloom: *Et me felicem nulla videbit hiems (Her. 98, 184)*.

On the other hand, as Peter Green noticed in a commented edition of poetry of exile, the hostile climate and the foreign land make mythological references impossible, which thus become irrelevant and indicate an insurmountable cultural difference between Ovid and the Tomitan populations:

„The mention here of Leander, and of Acontius at 73–4, points out the immeasurable gap between cultures imposed by this alien climate. Leander in Tomis could have walked to his Hero across the ice and never drowned; Acontius would have found it impossible to work his trick on Cydippe [...] since the region did not, says Ovid, produce fruit (*Cf. Ep. I, 3, 51*). The sustaining matrix of familiar mythology becomes at one stroke irrelevant.”¹³

The idea of a virtual scenario with an optimistic ending is also found in Heroides 18, in Leander's letter to Hero. The young man wishes there was no more storm: (*Quam cuperem solitas, Hero, tibi ferre per undas, (Her. 18, 1)* or he were

¹² WEIDEN BOYD 1997, p. 61.

¹³ GREEN 2005, p. 248.

able to fly over water like Daedalus: (*Nunc daret audaces utinam mihi Daedalus alas*, (*Her.* 18, 49). Ovid uses for both scenarios, a similar poetic expression, with the hortative subjunctive, a hyperbate between an epithet and a noun and the placement in the final position of the key term, *undas*, respectively *alas*. The landscape becomes an external correspondent of the male character's feelings, so that the storm that prevents him from swimming towards Sestos reflects his anxiety, turmoil, longing, which will finally make him almost consciously head for death: *Cur ego confundor, quotiens confunditur aequor?* (*Her.* 18, 129); *Cumque mea fiunt turbida mente freta* (*Her.* 18, 172). In Hero's absence, the young man feels like a stranger in his own country, just as Ovid felt Sulmo as a *terra iniqua*, as a result of his separation from his *domina*. The anaphoric use of the epithet *inuitus*, "unwilling", is suggestive in this sense. In fact, Leander confesses that he doesn't care which of the two cities he lives in, as long as he is with the girl that he loves: *Vel tua me Sestus, vel te mea sumat Abydos* (*Her.* 18, 127). Sensing his tragic end, Leander associates his destiny with that of Ceyx, who like him was killed by the waves of the sea and carried ashore to his wife, Alcyone, a myth that Ovid will deal with in the eleventh book of the *Metamorphoses*. And Hero appeals to her mythological readings (*nomina lecta mihi*, *Her.* 19, 136), in her letter to Leander (*Heroides* 19), evoking Alcyone along with other heroines whose destiny is linked to deceptive waters: *Has certe pluresque canunt, Neptune, poetae* (*Her.* 19, 137). Like Alcyone, Hero is disturbed by a premonitory dream, in which the image of the dolphin, as a symbolic link between the world of the living and the dead, is associated with the troubled sea. We notice here again a favorite correlation of Ovid's, between the landscape and the inner state of the character: *Hic ego ventosas nantem delphina per undas* (*Her.* 19, 199).

Hero's response to Leander's letter begins very differently from the one she received. Leander had been worried about the turmoil at sea from the beginning (*unda maris*, *Her.* 18, 2), while Hero first accuses him of being distracted by various activities, after which she notices the waves and the unfavorable wind (*concita ... aequora, odioso ... vento*, *Her.* 19, 21-22). Her long digression related to the fulfilling life of men is followed by the comparison with the female way of life, exclusively domestic, in which the only activities are spinning wool and sewing.

The metaphor of the moving sea and wind is used in ancient Latin literature to indicate the agitation of public life which, as Ovid repeatedly states, is a way to avoid or cure the effects of erotic passion. In *Aeneis*, Dido was also afraid for the same reason and recommended avoiding sailing: *Et freta mota vides, et debes illa timere* (*Aen.* II, 279). In this key reading, it was not Leander, but Leander's feelings that drowned in the icy sea, as Hero's love becomes unshared (*mea sola voluptas*, *Her.* 19, 17). Her solution is to swim together, which is equivalent to her desire to overcome her condition of a static being, in eternal waiting. This state of mind is reflected in the hidden desire to swim with Leander so as to be her the one to provide security for the couple. But she is aware of the harsh reality, which condemns the woman to a dull life, in which the only meritorious achievement is the sentimental one:

*Nam modo te videor prope iam spectare natantem,
Brachia nunc umeris umida ferre meis.* (*Her.* 19, 59-60).

*Ire libet medias ipsi mihi saepe per undas,
Sed solet hoc maribus tutius esse fretum. (Her. 19, 161–162).*

Erotic fulfillment in the middle of the waves appears to Hero as a compromise solution: *Exiguum, sed plus quam nihil illud erit* (Her. 19, 169).

Leander leads an external battle, with the waves and the rift, but Hero is torn by the internal struggle with her own fears and doubts. Dark thoughts torture her, imagining either that Leander is busy, that her social status is inferior, or that he has another love. Ovid uses the interrogative adverb *cur* nine times Hero supports her numerous rhetorical interrogations with, compared to four occurrences in Leander's letter. For both of them, the same verb, *uro*, „to burn”, was used, with reference to the passion that consumes them, in a Vergilian manner: *quibus uror, amores* (Her. 18, 167), *vel si minus acriter urar* (Her. 19, 15) and which Hero recognizes in both equally: *urimus igne pari* (Her. 19, 5). In both letters, Ovid anticipates the tragic end. Leander reminds her to make sure the lantern flame is on, Hero hope that he will start swimming when the sea is calm. Both letters end with the same term, *mora*, "delay", which contrasts with the impatience of the two, separated by the storm for seven nights. Their lack of patience was, in fact, the cause of the tragedy that followed.

The myth of Hero and Leander transcends Ovidian lyricism, offering readers several ways of interpretation influenced by the elegiac tradition, Stoic philosophy and Ovid's own vision. With the exception of the letters in *Heroides*, Ovid uses a technique common to elegiac Latin poets, in which the image of the lover, Leander in this situation, becomes a literary argument that serves the narrative purposes of the poet.¹⁴ The two letters in *Heroides* offer the perspective of the two characters on their own destiny, marked by the terrestrial distance, by the changing force of the sea and the wind, by the constant passion, with devastating effect. The masculine pride with which he adorns his feelings, displayed by Leander in his epistle, is completed by the frustrations of Hero, who sees her love threatened and feels unable to act. Emblematic is her desire to swim together, to offer her lover, Leander, her shoulders as support, which suggests the desire to overcome the female condition that Ovid pays attention to, throughout his lyrics.

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¹⁴ BLANCO MAYOR 2017, p. 202.

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