

## Topic Page: [Hero \(Greek mythology\)](#)

Definition: **Hero, in Greek mythology** from *The Columbia Encyclopedia*

in Greek mythology, priestess of Aphrodite in Sestos. Her lover, Leander, swam the Hellespont nightly from Abydos to see her. During a storm the light by which she guided him blew out, and he drowned. Hero, in despair, then threw herself into the sea. Christopher Marlowe's poem *Hero and Leander* is based on the story.



Image from: [The Parting of Hero and Leander - from the Greek of Musaeus in National Gallery Collection](#)

Summary Article: **HERO**

From *Gods, Goddesses, and Mythology*

**The tale of Hero and Leander is one of Greek mythology's most tragic love stories. Although a relatively minor myth, it remains enduringly popular and has caught the imagination of writers and artists through the ages.**

Geography plays an important part in the myth of Hero. An exceptionally beautiful young woman, Hero, lived in the city of Sestos in Thrace (modern Turkey). Sestos stood on the shore at the narrowest point of a strait called the Hellespont, now known as the Dardanelles. On the opposite shore stood another city, Abydos, in the western Asian region of Dardania. The Hellespont, which divides Europe from Asia, took its name from a young girl named Helle. She had fallen into the strait and drowned while flying over it on the back of a magical ram, whose golden fleece featured in the story of Jason and the Argonauts.

Hero was a priestess of the goddess Aphrodite. Her name comes from the ancient Greek word *heros*, meaning "hero," which was used to describe men or women who were honored after their death. Hero dedicated her life to serving the goddess Aphrodite, making sacrifices to her and worshiping her in a temple. Since Aphrodite was the deity of love, Hero might have been expected to celebrate the goddess by being in love herself. Instead, according to the wishes of her parents, she lived alone in a high stone tower, with only an old maidservant to look after her. She kept away from boys, and also from other girls her own age, fearing that they would be jealous of her beauty.

### **Hero's love for Leander**

According to the myth, every year the people of Sestos held a festival to celebrate the beautiful youth Adonis and his lover, Aphrodite. The festival may well have been the Adonia, in which worshipers planted seeds in shallow soil that sprang up and quickly died. The seeds symbolized the brief nature of Adonis's life, which ended when he was killed by a wild boar. Although she normally avoided parties, Hero had to take part in the festival since she was a priestess of Aphrodite. Many people came to the festival, some traveling great distances. All the young men were amazed at Hero's beauty and talked about how they would love to marry her. One youth, Leander, approached Hero in silence, showing his feelings for her only in his face and his gestures, and in this way they fell in love.

When he did finally speak, Leander told Hero that he came from Abydos, the city on the opposite shore from Sestos. He said that if she lit a lamp in her tower late at night, he would swim across the Hellespont to visit her in secret, using the light to guide him. Leander assured her that Aphrodite would approve of their relationship, to which Hero agreed. Every evening Hero lit a lamp in the tower, and

Leander, seeing it from Abydos, swam across the water to spend the night with her. He always swam back before dawn so as not to be discovered by Hero's parents.



Permission: Corbis, Christie's Images

*This painting, Hero Holding the Beacon for Leander, is by English artist Evelyn De Morgan (c. 1850–1919).*

## A tragic end

For several months Leander visited Hero every night, relying on Aphrodite to protect him as he battled the strong currents of the Hellespont. Then winter came, and the sea grew rougher and more dangerous, but the young couple were so in love that they could not bear to be apart for long, so Leander continued to make his perilous journey. One stormy night, when the sky was pitch black with clouds, a gust of wind blew out Hero's lamp. Before she could light it again, Leander, with nothing to guide him, lost his way and drowned. The next morning his battered body washed ashore on the rocks at the foot of Hero's tower. Seeing him lying there, Hero was so overcome with grief that she threw herself from the top of the tower and fell to her death at his side. No one had ever known of their love except Hero's maidservant.

## Star-crossed lovers

Mythology and folklore are littered with tales of young lovers thwarted by circumstance —usually because their parents or society condemns the relationship—but who refuse to be separated by death. Hero came from Thrace, which was part of the Greek empire, while Leander came from Dardania, part of the Persian empire. Between 492 and 449 BCE the Greeks were involved in a series of wars

against the Persian Empire to keep their independence. This historical background suggests that neither the inhabitants of Sestos nor of Abydos—both of which stand as ruins today—would support a love affair between citizens from either city, and that Hero and Leander's love was in opposition to their societies' wishes.

Other stories with the theme of thwarted love include the Greek myth of Pyramus and Thisbe and the Indian tale of Khamba and Thoibi. Pyramus and Thisbe grew up as neighbors and fell in love, but both sets of parents forbade them from being together. Instead, they agreed to meet in secret, but Pyramus, finding Thisbe's bloody veil on the ground, believed she had been eaten by a lion and so killed himself. Thisbe, on finding Pyramus's body, decided to kill herself, too. In contrast, Khamba and Thoibi's love for each other promised to unite their clans, the Khumals and the Moirangs, but the Moirangs' chief rejected their marriage out of jealousy or spite. The lovers killed themselves and war broke out. The doomed lovers and warring families have parallels with the tale of Romeo and Juliet, which was used in a play by William Shakespeare (1564–1616).

The lovers in these stories are star-crossed, meaning that fate obstructs their love. Some writers have interpreted such myths as reminders that happiness is temporary and that death comes to everyone. Other people have observed that, by dying together when young, the lovers preserve their love for all eternity instead of letting it grow stale. They argue that the appeal of the stories lies in the universal recognition of the passion and power of young love.

## Hero and Leander in literature and art

The story of Hero and Leander is mentioned in the work of Roman writers Ovid (43 BCE–c. 17 CE) and Virgil (70–19 BCE), while the fifth- or sixth-century-CE Greek poet Musaeus wrote a lengthy poem about the lovers. Scholars believe that all three writers copied the story from an earlier version that is now lost.

Hero and Leander have appeared in the work of many writers and artists since classical times. In the 16th century, English poet and playwright Christopher Marlowe wrote a long poem retelling the story, and the tale became especially popular in the 18th and 19th centuries, when it was retold by German poet Johann Schiller and English poets John Keats and Lord Byron.

### Lord Byron and Leander

English romantic poet Lord Byron (1788–1824) was alive at a time when many artists and poets were especially interested in tales from Greek mythology. An adventurer who traveled a great deal, Byron decided to try to swim the Hellespont himself while on a tour of Europe in 1810. He undertook the challenge along with his friend Lieutenant William Ekenhead, who was a member of the British Navy and a good swimmer. It took the pair two attempts, but on May 3, 1810, they succeeded. Although at its narrowest point the Hellespont is less than a mile wide, because of strong currents the two men swam a total of 4 miles (6.5 km). Their swim took them just over one hour.

Byron was hugely proud of his achievement and recorded it in the poem "Written After Swimming From Sestos to Abydos." He also mentioned the feat in his long comic poem, *Don Juan*, in which he wrote:

*A better swimmer you could scarce see ever, He could, perhaps, have pass'd the Hellespont, As once  
(a feat on which ourselves we prided) Leander, Mr. Ekenhead, and I did.*

Meanwhile, many artists, including Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640) and J.M.W. Turner (1775–1851), have depicted scenes from the story.

**See also:** ADONIS; APHRODITE; FATES; FESTIVALS; JASON.

### Further reading

Ovid, and A. D. Melville, trans. *Metamorphoses*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Virgil, and Robert Fagles, trans. *The Aeneid*. New York: Penguin, 2009.

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Claybourne, A., & CLAYBOURNE, A. (2012). Hero. In *Gods, goddesses, and mythology*. Tarrytown, NY: Marshall Cavendish Reference. Retrieved from [https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/hero\\_greek\\_mythology](https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/hero_greek_mythology)

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Claybourne, Anna, and ANNA CLAYBOURNE. "Hero." *Gods, Goddesses, and Mythology*, Marshall Cavendish Reference, 1st edition, 2012. *Credo Reference*, [https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/hero\\_greek\\_mythology](https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/hero_greek_mythology). Accessed 16 Oct. 2019.