

J. M. W. Turner and The Parting of Hero and Leander

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Joseph Mallord William Turner was a profound landscape artist in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, who eventually turned away from traditional landscape art and paved the way for art movements to come. With a unique painting style, Turner astounded the viewers at the exhibitions and salons, leaving the people wanting more. Nearly all of Turner's paintings were successful when exhibited in the Royal Academy, yet there was always one critic who did not find a piece appealing, even though each work was ready with a buyer ready to take the piece of fine art home. However, in the case of the painting, *The Parting of a Hero and Leander*, there was never a buyer after it was displayed at the Academy, even though it is an incredible Romanticism-styled approach to a poetical landscape. Within this research paper, my objective is to go through the year leading up to this painting and the one following to determine the contextual clues as to why this piece in particular was not successful compared to others.

Turner's artistic career started when he was a young boy; in fact, it is said that he was only eleven or twelve years old when people believed he would have a career in architecture.¹ Due to this and the encouragement of his father and uncle, Turner joined the Royal Academy when he was quite young. However, once he was there, he took a different approach than the Neoclassical style of the architect Thomas Hardwick.² He approached architectural style with a more simplicity, though Turner did not stick with architecture alone for very long. When he was twelve, he became highly interested in topography, and this is how his career began within the Royal Academy.³

In 1836, the year before *The Parting of a Hero and Leander* was being exhibited in the Royal Academy, he spent time traveling to Venice and completed quite a few paintings and sketches while there.⁴ This is one way that his background in topographical and architectural studies came into good use. Turner was commissioned to create a "copy" or a picture of what he

saw and not the idealized version.⁵ The Painting *Rome, Mount Aventine*, is believed to have been commissioned as early as 1828-29, even though Turner did not complete and exhibit it until 1836, nearly a decade later.⁶

There is one painting in particular that did get attacked by *Blackwood's Magazine* in the 1836 exhibition; this piece was *Juliet and her Nurse*. This piece is a birds eye view of St. Mark's Square, though the title of this painting is a reference to Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. The Reverend John Eagles wrote in *Blackwood's Magazine* that this piece was 'A strange jumble—“confusion worse confounded.” It is neither sunlight, moonlight, nor starlight, nor firelight... Amidst so many absurdities we scarcely stop to ask why Juliet and her nurse should be at Venice. For the scene is a composition as from different models of different parts of Venice, thrown higgledy–piggledy together, streaked blue and pink and thrown into a flour tub.'⁷

With such a strong review tearing apart Turner's work, the writer John Ruskin was quite frustrated with the magazine and the Reverend himself and decided to respond with a publication defending the artwork.⁸ Upon his father's advice, Ruskin sent J. M. W. Turner his draft that he was ready to publish though Turner advised him not to publish.⁹ Some of this letter states, 'Many–coloured mists are floating above the distant city, but such mists as you might imagine to be aetherial spirits, souls of the mighty dead breathed out of the tombs of Italy into the blue of her bright heaven... Instinct with the beauty of uncertain light they move and mingle among the pale stars and rise up into the brightness of an illimitable heaven...'.¹⁰ Needless to say, Ruskin was a huge supporter of Turner and his works, and always found means to defend his works. Though some magazines enjoyed this artwork as well, the *Spectator* wrote about this painting and said, 'Turner's dreams are finer than the waking thoughts of many, for, in spite of his exaggerations, he cannot forget nature.'¹¹

In 1836, Turner also exhibited *Mercury and Argus*, a romantic depiction of characters from literature and romance between two individuals. There is a sketch of this painting that was drawn circa 1804; it appears to be a common habit of Turner's to utilize an older sketch of his to create a new artwork or continue working on a piece for an extended period of time.¹² The painting was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1836, though it is believed that Turner had started working on this painting many years before.¹³ A frequent purchaser of Turner's artwork, Munro of Novar wanted to buy this piece as well, even though it is recorded that he had previously bought Turner's other two exhibits and did not want to take so many of his artworks.¹⁴ Yet again, Blackwood's Magazine had something to say about Turner's work, 'It is perfectly childish. All blood and chalk.' Another magazine, The Times, said the work was 'composed of mercury, sulphur, and crude antimony, and completely imbued with sulphureo-ochreous tints...' further insulting Turner's work.¹⁵

The paintings *Juliet and her Nurse*, *Mercury and Argus*, and *Rome, Mount Aventine* were all exhibited together, though only *Rome, Mount Aventine* was well received overall.¹⁶ Each of these paintings was purchased rather quickly, unlike the exhibition in 1837 with the painting of *The Parting of Hero and Leander*.

Before jumping straight into what critics have to say about this piece, it will be preceded with a visual analysis of *The Parting of Hero and Leander*. One's eyes begin at the parallel lines on the terrace to the left of the artwork. The lines lead the eye along the staircase following the buildings climbing up to the top of the canvas. The natural arch of clouds flow from the top of the architecture, across, and downward toward the right side of the composition along the rocky cliff. Finally, the path cascades across the human figures grasping at the cliff face and along the perpendicular reflection on the water upward to the crescent moon.

Turner flips the formalities within history painting, which often places the main characters within the centre of the composition, and moves them to the dark water's edge where Leander is about to leave into the raging sea. Being one of the most well known Romanticism artists, J.M.W. Turner captures the height of the moment with the darkness and shadows encapsulating the tragic moments right before disaster when Hero will be left without their lover forever.

Hero and Leander also have a triangle shape around them created by the arms of the figure reaching over the railing and the reflection on the water triangulating at the moon. Due to this subtle highlighting and line it brings attention to those figures that could simply become lost on the dark shore. The gaze and actions of people looking out at the waters also aid us in finding this couple. There are a few figures on the terrace each engaging in different actions portraying different emotions. The couple closest to us are visibly upset. One may not be able to tell from a facial expression, though, the position of their bodies, one laying across the other's lap while they envelop them in their arms. It is a comforting motion, giving us a sense of emotion in what appears to be a landscape painting at first glance.

Even though Turner is not giving us a refined human being anywhere within this artwork, he displays the contour of many people with a haunting feeling. The wave crashing against the cliff does not appear to be made completely of the churning waters, it seems it is configured by humanlike bodies. The bright, almost ghostly foam is reaching great height on the face of the cliff, as if the figures are attempting to claw their way up the wall to safety, though the waters are overcoming and swallowing them. These ghost-like figures could be foreshadowing the fate that is to come to the couple of which the painting depicts. Turner was an expert in capturing the tone of a story with light and shadows alone.

Some scholars write that Turner could have found his subject from William Etty's *The Parting of Hero and Leander* which was exhibited in the Royal Academy in 1827 as well as in New York in 1836.¹⁷ This one was a completely different style, with drastic amounts of chiaroscuro, almost in the style of Caravaggio. Though the Tate is in possession of two sketches from 1816 that are believed to be a preparatory sketch for this painting, with a composition so similar it is hard not to agree.¹⁸ Whether or not either is true, Turner's painting of this tale was not received well within the public scene.

Blackwood's Magazine claimed Turner was 'boldly attempting to insult the public taste being a dream of sick genius... blending the ridiculous and mysterious' as well as the excessive use of white.¹⁹ The Athenaeum stated 'full of imagination – but imprudent imagination... and its bearing faults can be only let pass by the exercise of the strongest forbearance'; the figures were 'gross and deformed in their shapes'.²⁰ Needless to say there was no buyer ready to jump at purchasing *The Parting of Hero and Leander*. The only two owners listed under this painting are Turner himself and The National Gallery. The criticism did not stop at the exhibition, and continued once it was sent to the gallery.

There are letters written by Turner asking the frame makers to clean and line the painting. Though in *Modern Painters* v Ruskin harshly critiqued yet again, after it was hung within the National Gallery.²¹ They argued, 'Turner's storm-blues, for instance, were produced by a black background with opaque blue, mixed with white, struck over it', within the notes he added that because of the cleaning the glazes were removed leaving the black canvas.²² Ruskin also states 'I remember the picture when its distance was of the most exquisite blue', he was not attacking Turners work of art but instead the ones who "cleaned it".²³

This painting was not exhibited at the Academy alone, it was hung alongside another painting of a Greek tale titled *Story of Apollo and Daphne*. Even though they were not meant to be viewed as a pair, it was bound to happen. The two paintings have nearly opposite color palettes, one with warm and pastel like tones while the other is dark with cool tones. While this painting did not get away without criticism, it wasn't nearly as disliked as the others. Ruskin described the piece by saying, 'the whole picture us to be illustrative of the union of rivers and the earth; and of the perpetual help and delight granted by streams in the earth, in their dew, to the earth's foliage'.²⁴ Blackwood's Magazine claimed that Turner places exactly what you are supposed to see directly in the foreground even before his figures, giving us the story bluntly.²⁵

Every other magazine had pleasant things to say about this painting; The Spectator said it was 'a wonder of art; a splendid picture of nature'.²⁶ The Athenaeum compares it to *The Parting of Hero and Leander* by saying, '*Apollo and Daphne*..., exuberant in its invention, and rich in colouring, and exceptionable in the careless deficiency of its figures, is more moderate than the last mentioned extravaganza [*Hero and Leander*], and we therefore prefer it...'.²⁷ Out of the two paintings of greek tales, it is apparent that *Story of Apollo and Daphne* was much more favored among critics.

Many of the artworks J. M. W. Turner exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1837 were subjects that return to a 'poetical' and imaginative subject-matter which is something that he had strongly avoided for many years.²⁸ Though, in Andrew Wilton's writing, he states, 'Turner was irresistibly reminded of the theatre when he was in Venice'.²⁹ Due to the fact J. M. W. Turner traveled to Italy quite a few times it would not be a great surprise he pulled inspiration from the city.³⁰ Whether he saw a performance of *Romeo and Juliet* while there or simply attended the

theatre. This could be a major factor as to why Turner engaged in a subject he had kept from doing for so long.

After the Royal Academy Exhibition of 1837, later that year Campbell's *Poetical Works* was published with 20 vignettes of Turner's design.³¹ This is not the first time he illustrated images for poetical books, in early 1831 Turner was asked to illustrate works for the latest edition of Scott's *Poetical Works*; once again in 1834 he created 33 vignettes for Roger's *Poems*.³² It is apparent that Turner was no stranger to poetry, and spent quite some time reading other's poetry. Each of these projects he accepted for poetry illustrations were in the six years leading up to *The Parting of Hero and Leander*, which could have been more inspiration for this painting and the ones of the 1836 Royal Academy Exhibition.

In 1838 J. M. W. Turner came to the Royal Academy exhibition pulling out all the stops, *Phryne Going to the Public Baths as Venus – Demosthenes taunted by Aeschines* was on display. At first glance this painting looks strikingly similar to the works in the 1836 Royal Academy Exhibition, from the color palette to the types of trees framing the compositions. The scene within this piece is nodding at Greek stories while simultaneously portraying a typical day in Athens at that moment in time.³³ The Athenaeum summed up their reception of Turner's exhibition from 1838 by saying, 'Mr. Turner is in all his force this year, as usual – showering upon his canvas splendid masses of architecture, far distant backgrounds; and figures whereby the commandment is assuredly not broken.'³⁴ From what I have been able to find, even the notorious critic of Turner Blackwood's Magazine had nothing to say on this piece or others within this exhibition as well. Perhaps it is due to the fact Turner stayed within what the magazine considered his expertise, architectural and topographical art with a touch of poetical painting combined with the two so as not to disrupt the rest of the composition.

In conclusion, people were quite unimpressed with J. M. W. Turner's work in the year 1837. He may have had an incredible reputation and successful career leading up to and following 1837. In an Art-Union publication they said 'Turner's works are not yet understood because the distance between them and common nature is immense.'³⁵, and I find this to be true. Like many artists do, Turner tried different methods and styles throughout his career. With such a strong reputation in the art world having one bad year at the Royal Academy's Exhibition would not cause much damage, especially with writers like John Ruskin on his side.

Leo Costello says at the end of his writings, 'We should not, therefore, imagine that we can or should see Turner whole. Rather it is by seeing the individual painter.... We do the most service both to his art and the period to which he gave such complex form.'³⁶ With that we can look back at the exhibition of 1837 and see that the critics in the time were focused on what was typically scene and what is typical to see is all they had to compare to *The Parting of Hero and Leander*. After traveling and encountering different artforms through his work, it is not surprising he wanted to portray a different type of subject or a new way of displaying his work. Turner was an artist who was not one to shy away from challenging what the critics and public were expecting to see from him.

Notes

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