

Another View of Sonnet 20

by Robert R. Prechter, Jr.

Most of Shakespeare's sonnets appear to be love poems to a male youth, although a number of them concern female lovers. As Shakespeare's plays are distinctly rendered from a heterosexual point of view in their portrayals of men and women and their relationships, the sonnets have proved a quandary to some readers who suspect a homosexual liaison between the poet and his male subject, which would indicate that Shakespeare was bisexual. On the other hand, some of the sonnets specifically refer to a father-son relationship.

The elder Ogburns in the 1950s postulated a controversial solution to the quandary by hypothesizing that the subject of the sonnets, Henry Wriothesley, 3rd Earl of Southampton, may have been Edward de Vere's son by Queen Elisabeth. The sonnets, according to this view, would then be love poems from father to son, magnified by the agony of their state-mandated separation from birth.

However, as Charlton Ogburn, Jr. worried in *The Mysterious William Shakespeare*, Sonnet 20—among all 154 sonnets—is the only one that might make “the postulation of a father-and-son relationship come crashing.” But, is this necessarily true?

It is usually inferred from sonnet 20 that the poet is hopelessly attracted to the young man but cannot have him because nature made the youth (“by addition” of his male organ) a man instead of a woman, which he otherwise resembles.

Ogburn half-heartedly argues that this sonnet was included deliberately to throw readers off the trail that the youth was the poet's son while simultaneously quashing the idea that anything physical had transpired between them. He considers this solution “the only one possible.” As these were private communications, and as the poet pours his heart out throughout the sonnets (“intimate” and “confessional,” says Sobran in *Alias Shakespeare*), this explanation appears strained at best.

Unfortunately for those who believe that Oxford was bisexual and that the male youth was his lover, this sonnet actually

pretty well destroys that case, although no one seems to have noticed. If the youth were truly the poet's lover, indeed clearly his most prized, then the poet would not be *bewailing* the presence of his male organ,

tion. If we read the sonnet to take into account the Ogburns' solution of Wriothesley's parentage and the heart-rending human *story* and Elisabeth's part in it, the meaning of the pertinent lines changes.

Here is the way I see them:

Sonnet 20

A woman's face, with Nature's own hand painted,
Hast thou, the master-mistress of my passion;
A woman's gentle heart, but not acquainted
With shifting change, as is false woman's fashion;
An eye more bright than theirs, less false in rolling,
Gilding the object whereupon it gazeth;
A man in hue, all hues in his controlling,
Which steals men's eyes, and women's souls amazeth.
And for a woman wert thou first created;
Till Nature, as she wrought thee, fell a-doting,
And, by addition, me of thee defeated,
By adding one thing to my purpose nothing.
But since she pricked thee out for women's pleasure,
Mine be thy love, and thy love's use their treasure.

he would be extolling it, in his hyper-eloquent style, as grander than the statue of David.

It will not do in this context to argue that the poet is *both* sexually attracted by the youth and repulsed by his maleness, as such a situation is incompatible with both heterosexuality *and* bisexuality. This fact appears to force the “bisexual camp” into the same position as Ogburn in having to presume that the sonnet is a ruse designed to throw readers off the trail, this time only of their physical relationship.

The only other explanation under the standard interpretation of the sonnet is that the poet was a psychological mess who was perhaps bisexually inclined but unable to accept the fact. If so, it is not easily accepted as the same Shakespeare who so finely expressed both war and peace between the sexes in his plays.

The dilemma is this: If the sonnet means what appears quite clearly intended at first exposure, it makes no real-life sense. If it was designed as a ruse, it is an exception to all the other sonnets. If it reflects a tortured sexual soul, then it is not the same Shakespeare who wrote the plays.

However, there may be another explanation.

“A woman's face... hast thou,”
You look like your mother.

“The master-mistress of my passion;” *In resembling her, your face harbors both my loves: for you (my son) and for her.*

“A woman's gentle heart, but not acquainted with shifting change, as is false woman's fashion;” *You have your mother's gentle heart, but not her falsity in loving, then spurning me.*

“An eye more bright than theirs, less false in rolling,”
[Elisabeth turned her false eye to another.]

“Gilding” through “amazeth”:
You're one great kid. [I'm so proud of you, I could burst, and anyone who sees you knows you should be a prince.]

“And for a woman wert thou first created;”
For love of Elisabeth you were conceived.

“Till Nature, as she wrought thee, fell a-doting, and, by addition, me of thee defeated,” *But then, your very addition to the world—your birth—defeated me of you [because the Queen orders us to remain apart to keep the birth secret].*

“By adding one thing to my purpose nothing.” *Ironically, by adding you, Nature added nothing to my ideal purpose of marrying Elisabeth, becoming king and raising my son as prince [because the pregnancy derailed our love affair, as the Virgin Queen had to keep up appearances].*

“But since she pricked thee out for women's pleasure,” *But since Nature produced you as a result of my pursuing the pleasure of women....*

“Mine be thy love,” *You have the love of your father.*

“...and thy love's use their treasure.” *While only women may enjoy the treasure of your love [as I am forbidden from doing so].*

This interpretation of Sonnet 20 removes what Charles Ogburn considered the single most serious impediment to accepting the hypothesis that *Shakespeare's Sonnets* address the Earl of Southampton as the son of Oxford and Elisabeth.