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Research Paper on
Shakespeare's Sonnet XX (1609)

Sonnet 20, admission of Shakespeare's homosexuality?

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Table of Contents:

1. Introduction	1
2. The Sonnet	2
a) The Context.....	2
b) Detailed Analysis	3
3. Further Interpretation.....	6
a) The Question Of Homosexuality.....	6
b). The Authorship Question.....	11
4. Conclusion.....	13

Introduction

Almost unbelievable amounts of people have already studied and interpreted Sonnet XX¹ and with it the whole cycle of the Shakespearean sonnets, and thus I can hardly claim any originality with what I'm putting forward in this essay. In a certain sense I am merely trying to restate the obvious and to present the most controversial viewpoints concerning Sonnet 20, and then to weigh these points against each other in such a way as to indicate to which of them I may lean.

It seems safe to say that as far as finding genuinely new aspects is concerned, either broader or more profound research would be necessary, especially as the danger of over-simplifying things in the urge to arrive at certain "conclusions" is always present and may all too easily cause us to forget how large a timespan lies between us and the time of Shakespeare's writings and how difficult it is to accurately interpret a work written more than 400 years ago.

Additional note: After I felt that I'd have to come up with at least a *somewhat* coherent theory concerning the question of how sonnet 20 and with the whole sonnet cycle relate to the question of same sex and this essay lay for almost a year on my desk I now think that I finally managed to formulate more clearly the gut feeling that I had from the beginning, namely that the sexual content of the sonnets is greatly overrated. Now this conclusion is not exactly breathtaking of course and essentially just restates the conservative, classical approach to the sonnets (as I will try to show in the following) so, to escape the reproach of not adding anything new, I have tried to link this conclusion to a controversy concerning Shakespeare, namely the Authorship question, which poses the question of whether Shakespeare really was the historical figure he is commonly believed to be. What led me to this "link" was an observation I made while trying to understand just why this "Authorship Debate" has been able to generate such enormous amounts of heated discussion, namely that those who overrate or at least heavily stress the sexual content of the sonnets seem to favor the same conceptions (or misconceptions) concerning Shakespeare, as those who cannot bring themselves to believe that the Shakespeare of Stratford, whom they often disparagingly call "a Commoner" actually should have been able to write what

1 Shakespeare, William. "Sonnet 20" Poetry Archive.
http://www.poetry-archive.com/s/shakespeare_sonnet_020.html (05/08/2003).
All subsequent references are to this edition.

we now know as the "Shakespearean Plays and Sonnets.

2.) The Sonnet

a.) The Context

The Sonnet discussed in this essay is part of a series of 154 sonnets, which can be roughly categorized into three groups:

The first 17 sonnets are addressed to a young and beautiful man of apparently higher social status. Their main topic lies in encouraging the young man to marry and have children in order to preserve his beauty.

The question of who the subject of the sonnets might be has never been answered conclusively, and the historical figures proposed are of course also strongly linked to how the sonnets themselves are being interpreted, an aspect that I will come back to later on.

The next 109 sonnets (18-126) are concerned with many different topics, ranging from more personal subjects to Petrarchan themes.

A small sub-range (79-89) deal with the "The Rival Poet" and the apparent demise of Shakespeare's relationship with this patron.

Sonnets 127-133 and 147-152 are concerned with the subject of The Dark Lady - a beautiful black woman inducing emotions of lust, but also of strong self-loathing in the author.

As we see sonnet 20 is very close to the first 17 sonnets, which are often called the procreation sonnets as well. Being only close and not actually part of these procreation sonnets though, sonnet 20 does not directly touch on the question of marriage, but concerns itself with more general questions concerning the sexes and their relationship both on an incorporeal, idealistic, (we might also say, platonic) and on a sexual level. The latter of these two, or better: the exact way these platonic and sexual elements are coupled has been subject of almost immeasurable amounts of scholarly debate.

I will try to outline at least the most basic elements of this debate (along with possible

explanations where the controversy might stem from) in the more detailed analysis of sonnet 20 that follows.

b.) Detailed analysis

When looking at some more formal aspects of Sonnet 20 we may notice that feminine rhymes are used throughout the sonnet, which is especially interesting since Sonnet 20 is the only sonnet in the whole sonnet cycle to which this fully applies. All the other sonnets in this cycle are written in masculine rhymes, with only two exceptions: sonnet 20 and sonnet 87, though in the latter these double rhymes are not used throughout.

A possible interpretation is certainly that these feminine rhymes serve to further underline the feminine aspects of the young man which the sonnet so distinctly eulogizes.

Another thing that attracts our attention when looking at formal aspects of the sonnet is the fact that the word "woman" appears as often as six times in the sonnet, again showing how important the aspects of femininity and womanliness are in this sonnet, both with their positive connotation, such as beauty (line 1) and gentleness (line 3), as well as the more negative connotations like fickleness (line 4) or even falseness (line 5).

The sonnet starts out by praising the addressee, describing him as having a "woman's face with nature's own hand painted", thereby evoking a picture of true womanly beauty. True insofar as it stands in visible contrast to the qualities of falseness attributed to women in a negative sense in line four. We are made to see the youth as a natural beauty painted by Nature itself and thus free from any negative artificiality. Very interesting here is that if it weren't Nature painting this beauty, the very act of painting would of course suggest exactly the opposite of what is suggested here, namely the quality of being artificial, made up, maybe even painted in such a way as to conceal or disguise the actual appearance. The possible ambiguity that we see here, which is only unambiguous in this case due the painting being coupled to Nature itself, is an element that we will find later in the word hue in line seven.

Line two then calls the addressee “the master-mistress of my passion”, the first part of which again implies a certain quality of androgyny on the part of the addressee.

Whereas in the first line the stress clearly lay on the womanly aspects (a woman's face) it now seems more difficult to decide which of these two words might be attributed more weight. It might seem as if the womanly aspects would dominate again in that “mistress” could be seen as being the base of this double noun and “master” being merely something like an attribute to mistress, however the opposite might also be argued depending on where you think the stress should be. Most probably this expression was simply meant to be ambiguous thereby conveying the androgyny that the author ascribes to the addressee.

The word passion is ambiguous as well, in that it has two distinctive meanings, the one reflected in the contemporary use of the word, namely denoting a strong positive emotion towards something, the other meaning being extinct nowadays, namely that of a poem. These two meanings again reflect a purposeful ambiguity, since the first meaning implies strong feelings towards the addressee, whereas the other meaning carries a more professional, and at least slightly more detached note.

In the next two lines the author again stresses the positive womanly features of the addressee, namely by ascribing to him “a woman's gentle heart”, but eulogizing the young man even more, by emphasizing that these positive womanly features are genuinely free from the negative aspects of femininity, namely that of having a changing and fickle mind.

The end of line three “not acquainted” may contain a pun on the noun quaint apparently a slang word for the female sex organ still in use in Elizabethan times (the OED² gives an example from 1598), but the fact that the sentence obviously does not end here does not give a lot of weight to such an interpretation, since in this case the actual meaning of acquainted seems to be quite firmly determined by its context “acquainted with...”.

Line five continues the theme of contrasting the positive female features and qualities of the young man with the negative aspects of femininity found in real woman, again pointing out that the eyes of the young man are more bright than that of the “false” woman mentioned in the line below and “less false in rolling”, thereby alluding to the luring and enticing qualities attributed to women in a negative sense. The eyes of the young man are described as being bright to such an extent that they render everything their gaze falls on golden.

2 *The Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. quaint

Line seven describes the youth as a man in appearance (hue), who now even controls all other hues through his appearance. Hue in this context either referring to other men, other “appearances” or to a strong feeling, a passion. As already indicated above, looking at the word hue in this context reveals a very interesting ambiguity, in that it at least may be interpreted as standing in contrast to the quality of not being artificial stressed in the first lines of the sonnet. It now is the young man who is able to take on appearances and even control objects around him through it, whereas such (false) fashion was only reserved to woman in line 4.

The lines 9 to 12 are highly interesting in that they tell us that the young man was created as a woman first, and only after mother Nature fell in love with this beautiful female she had created, she made a man out of her creation by adding “one thing to my purpose nothing”, an expression that the lyrical I quite obviously uses to refer to the male penis, which is of no use to him. I will come back to the question of how to interpret this last sentence when discussing the question of homosexuality in the next section.

In the last but one line the reason for adding this “one thing” is given, namely that Nature pricked out the young man (equipped him with a penis) to give him the ability to pleasure woman. And finally in the last line the lyrical I draws the conclusion of the latter by apportioning the aspect of physical love solely to relationships between men and women (“and thy love's use their treasure”), while leaving the aspect of ideal, platonic love to men. Again, I will come back to interpreting possible interpretations of this line in the next section.

Further Interpretation:

a) The Question of Homosexuality:

Much in our interpretation of Sonnet 20 as a whole, especially in regard to its “sexual” content, hinges on the interpretation of the last four lines, simply because if we take these lines literally we have a clear renunciation of same sex practices, since the lyrical I explicitly tells us that the male sex organ that mother Nature added to the her creation is of no use to him.

So could we adopt the point of view that the Sonnet is an expression of platonic,

incorporeal love, thereby rejecting any interpretations reading varying degrees of same sex allusions or homo-erotic elements as we might say into the sonnet? Of course, that would be much to simpleminded a point of view, since it is perfectly possible to argue that the explicit gesture of renunciation was only an addition, playfully, mockingly concealing the true intentions or fantasies of the lyrical I, which would then be presumed to be actual same sex practices. In that light the renunciation could also be seen as an element that the writer of the sonnet was forced to add to his "passion" in order to preserve at least a semblance of decency.

To determine whether such an interpretation would actually make sense we would need to be able to show that the attitude towards sexual encounters between men in Shakespeare's times was negative enough to give the writer of the sonnets a compelling motive to conceal his homosexual wishes. In trying to answer this I will take recourse to one of the established works in this field, namely Alan Bray's book "*Homosexuality in Renaissance England*"³.

Just enlisting some historical details (as taken from Bray's book) is already quite informative in itself:

- Prior to 1533 sodomy (sexual penetration per anum) and gross indecency (any other form of sexual intimacy, such as mutual masturbation or fellatio) between men, were treated as a vice or sin punishable by ecclesiastical rather than civil courts.
- By a Statute of 1533 (under Henry VIII), such acts were made capital felonies, punishable by death.
- This Statute was renewed in 1549 or 1550, under Edward VI.
- There was a brief reprieve from 1553, when the statute was repealed under Queen Mary.
- However, in 1563 - under Elizabeth I - the statute was revived and made perpetual.

As we can see the legal situation alone would have provided a compelling motive to not openly admit homosexual acts and although Bray also points out that actual indictments under this law were extremely rare he effectively describes the Elizabethan society as being extremely intolerant towards homosexual behavior. Hence, even *if* we take into account that other studies might come to less drastic conclusions it seems very unlikely that one could show that there was widespread acceptance of homosexual acts in Shakespearean times, which is something that would be necessary if we wanted to discount the argument that the negation of

³ Bray, Alan. *Homosexuality in Renaissance England*. (London: Gay Men's Press, 1982.)

homosexual acts in the sonnet was done in order to protect the author of the sonnet from dangerous accusations of indecency.

Since we thus obviously cannot use the historical approach to dismiss the notion that Sonnet 20 may contain strong hints towards same sex wishes of its Author we may ask a different question: Is it possible that the above question about whether the writer may have had a motive to conceal or disguise his actual intentions relevant at all?

A positive answer would only be possible if the writer of the sonnet really had homosexual penchants and thus actually had something to conceal at all. This however is a point that a close reading may seem to be able to disprove, since in my interpretation (which I will explicate below) both the overt and the covert imagery used in the sonnet, that is, what is being stated and what is being said, seem to fall together, which leads me to the conclusion that there is no difference between what the lyrical I actually says (namely renouncing same sex practices) and what the lyrical I actually wants (strongly affectionate, but in its essence still platonic love).

The strongest argument in favour of such an interpretation seems to be the observation that the tone of the sonnet neither evoke images of sadness or wistfulness concerning the sexual unreachability of the young man imposed by the addition of the penis, nor does it seem to exhibit any strong feelings of sexual coveting, or craving for the young man. The strongest word in this context is "defeated" in line eleven, to which we might definitely attribute qualities of sadness and frustration, but the phrase "to my purpose nothing" in the next line seems to already dispel this notion, as it attaches a rather unemotional quality to this act of having been separated from the young man sexuality-wise.

The last two lines show this even more clearly, as the lyrical I now even does not only state what *might* be seen as something going against his wishes but explicitly endorses the situation brought about by the acts of Mother Nature, namely by first asserting that the sole purpose of pricking out the young man (providing him with a penis) is indeed the pleasure of woman and then by making this intention into his own in the performative utterance in the last line, which is intended to bring about the effect of actions in accordance to the purpose of Nature: the use of the penis to pleasure woman (which of course does not preclude other forms of love) and platonic, incorporeal love as the expression of affection between men. One might argue that this platonic love is actually even made possible in its purest form by the fact that bodily love is assumed to have no place between men, whereas hetero-sexual does

not have this simplicity, as it always has the element of bodily love as well. Such an interpretation seems especially sound if we take into account the role sexuality plays in the relationship with the dark lady in the latter sonnets, which may serve as a perfect example for how difficult (or maybe even impossible at times) it can be to reach a synthesis between pure, platonic love and sexual, bodily love in heterosexual relationships.

Another aspect, which is very closely related to the homosexuality question (as seen from an historical point of view) is the aspect of subject/object relations. All of our modern conceptions about homosexuality as a continuous state presuppose an extremely sovereign subject, a subject that is able to decide to actually “live” something that is different from the rest, to live in a way that may at times even lead to discrimination for instance in the form of ridicule (as an example we may consider the extremely negative connotations that the word “schwul” (gay) often has if uttered by German teenagers).

Hence, even though the Renaissance clearly marks the beginning of the “sovereign subject” within literature, and thus is the period we identify with our own point of origin as “true individuals”, we ought to keep in mind however, how vastly different our own consciousness and that of even the highest minded people of the Renaissance must be, simply because of the fact that the Renaissance marks only the *beginning* of this concept we have called the “sovereign subject”.

To use an analogy from nature, we might compare this difference with the difference we perceive if we look at the large estuary mouth of a river and then compare it with the small runlet it was in the beginning, the connection between these two being absolutely clear, the factual similarity however being quite limited.

Hence, to return to the topic at hand, we should not make the mistake of interpreting, especially the sexual content of the sonnets (and what we might perceive to be a statement about the authors sexual orientation), in the same way we would interpret for instance the statement of one of our contemporaries about his sexual orientation. Therefore, asking a question like “Was Shakespeare gay?”, is a fundamentally flawed approach to the problem at hand (that of interpreting a sonnet written some 400 years ago), simply because we thereby fall into the trap of falsely applying a question originating out of our own “modern” mindset - and therefore being only applicable within this very context itself – to a work originating out of a mindset which must be

seen as vastly different from our own, all philosophic and sociologic linkages notwithstanding.

(Addendum: Exactly these aspects about the inapplicability of the modern notion of homosexuality to the time of the Renaissance make up one of the main points of Bray's book, but since I only read it after I had written the above I want to just add the observation here that serious historical research, as the one carried out by Bray, evidently supports the above mentioned points.)

Now, to lead over to the next aspect I promised to cover in my introduction: it seems to be exactly the problem of misapplication described above that constitutes the underlying force of the alternative authorship interpretations regarding Shakespeare and among them especially the Oxfordian approach that I will take a closer look at in the following section.

b) The Authorship Question:

Probably one of the most ardent proponents for Edvard de Vere, Earl of Oxford as the real Shakespeare is Joseph Sobran who has written numerous essays⁴ on this topic. Essentially his main argument is the fervent belief that the works of Shakespeare (and among them especially the sonnets), if interpreted correctly, force us to recognize that the Shakespeare of Stratford, to whom all historical evidence (such as the First Folio) points to, could never be the author of those plays and sonnets and that the alleged biographical information contained in the works strongly suggest Edvard de Vere, the Earl of Oxford instead.

It is clear why the sonnets are so important in this context, simply because they do indeed contain an enormous amount of information that we have to consider to be personal, unless we want to adopt the point of view that they are mere "poetical exercises", written by Shakespeare under an assumed character and thus not expressing anything personally related to its author. (As the word "poetical exercise" already suggests, such an interpretation would seem to severely lessen the literary worth of the sonnets and I will thus exclude it here, at least for the purpose of this essay.)

Since such an approach places an enormous stress on "internal" evidence, namely

4 <http://www.sobran.com/oxfordlibrary.shtml> (05/08/2003)

the plays and sonnets and even discards the contradicting “external”, historic evidence it seems all the more important to make sure that the interpretation of this internal evidence, as gleaned for instance from the sonnets, is sound. How does Sobran approach this task then?

He does so by almost unquestioningly assuming that the sonnets reveal a strong homosexual predisposition on the part of its author, which he then uses to point out that the commoner Shakespeare could never have been so bold as to make such amorous advances to nobleman such as Henry Wriothesley, Third Earl of Southampton or William Herbert, Earl of Pembroke two of the most likely candidates for being the “young boy”, the dedicatee of the sonnets. Sobran never actually analyzes one of the sonnets as a whole but more or less randomly picks out single words that support his notion that the the writer must have been an depraved old man expressing his amorous lust for the young boy addressed in the sonnets, a description that would certainly fit Oxford, as a nobleman himself and with a track record of sexual escapades, much better than it would fit the commoner Shakespeare of Stratford. Maybe even the best example for this selective picking out of words he gives when he writes: “..., he [the writer of the sonnets] even jokes about his genitals”⁵, thereby of course referring to sonnet 20 . Once cannot but call such an approach entirely unsound indeed, since absolutely no reason whatsoever is given as to why he considers the lyrical I to be joking (which I personally can see no evidence for).

To draw at least a tentative conclusion from the above: It seems as if the general problem of those favoring other historical figures as the “real” Shakespeare (for whom I have taken the Oxfordians as an example, but the same thing could be shown for the others) was the fact that they approach the task of interpreting Shakespeare, (both his works and the time he lived in) hermeneutically, but that they undertake this task in a seriously flawed way: First they almost entirely fail to take into account how much our consciousness has changed since Shakespearean times and that terms like Homosexuality should be used with greatest care (if at all) in connection with the analysis of Renaissance works and their authors and second they (at least in the case of Joseph Sobran) combine this with incredibly sloppy analysis of the actual works the real meaning of which they claim to understand so much more thoroughly than anyone else.

5 <http://www.everreader.com/sobran.htm> (05/08/2003)

Conclusion:

As I have tried to show only a skewed, because all too modern perspective, coupled with not reading the sonnet itself closely enough may lead us to the conclusion that Sonnet XX contains hints to an actual homo-sexual predisposition of its author much less some sort of endorsement of same sex practices.

Interpreted literally we cannot but understand the sonnet as an expression of platonic love. Physical love is explicitly renounced, and the theory that the preceding lines might serve as an indication that bodily love is what the lyrical I actually craves, only begrudgingly contenting himself with incorporeal love due to the misdeed of Mother Nature, seems tenuous at best.

Quite to the contrary the allusion to the “thing” that is “nothing” to the purpose of the author make it quite clear that the final essence of the poem is rather one of platonic love and not of sodomy. But it is exactly the latter kind of depravity that scholars like Sobran try to read into the Sonnets to then arrive at the conclusion that only historical figures like the Earl of Oxford with a track record of sexual escapades and an affinity to younger males could have written something like Sonnet XX.

It seems as if we may thus answer the question posed in the title of this essay with a clear no, both because the question wrongly presupposes the notion of homosexuality as a continuing state which did not exist in that sense in Shakespearean times and furthermore because even if the question were phrased more suitably, (along the lines of “Sonnet 20, indicative of acts of sodomy of its author?” for instance), it seems safe to say that a closer analysis the sonnet itself, such as the one I have attempted in this essay does not produce any evidence that we might answer such a question even with a tentative yes.

I will end this essay with a thought that goes back to the question of whether the sonnets actually contain personal information about its author or not by asking: what if we adopt the more positive version of the idea that the sonnets are mere poetical exercises namely by seeing them as beautiful works of art that express archetypical emotions and problems of man, such as the relationship of bodily and spiritual love to name but one of them?

In that light the sonnets appear timeless to such a degree, that we may see the many “modern” interpretations which seem so avidly bent on extracting as much sexuality

as possible out of the sonnets in a different light: they are not exactly wrong in themselves, but they probably tell us more about those interpreting the sonnets and the time they live in than they reveal historical evidence that might be used to find out more about the historical figure that wrote them.

Those who think that Freud is all there is to man, may easily believe that there's not more to Sonnet 20 than sodomy. But this may tell us more about our own culture and the weight it places on sexuality than being an accurate answer to the question of what the sonnets actually express, the answer to which will surely have to include a lot more than just speculation about the sexuality of its author.

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