

Shakespeare's Sonnet 20: a new interpretation

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ABSTRACT

The erroneousness of the widespread conclusion that the sonnet testifies to the homoeroticism of the author is shown.

The 18th century Shakespeare commentator George Stevens wrote about sonnet 20: *“It is impossible to read this fulsome panegyric, addressed to a male object, without an equal mixture of disgust and indignation.”*

Our contemporary sonnet expert Amanda Mabillard: *«Sonnet 20 has caused much debate. Some scholars believe that this is a clear admission of Shakespeare's homosexuality. Despite the fact that male friendships in the Renaissance were openly affectionate, the powerful emotions the poet displays here are indicative of a deep and sensual love».*

As you can see, it is widely believed that the sonnet reflects the homoeroticism of the author to some extent. We think that this view is erroneous which arose due to a misunderstanding of the meaning of the sonnet. And the key to its understanding is the next, 21st, sonnet, which, in turn, is also usually misinterpreted. What will be the key to it? Its own first line: *So is it not with me as with that Muse,*

Obviously that this phrase is spoken by the Muse of the poet and the whole sonnet is written on her behalf. In this case the content of sonnet 21 immediately became clear.

And now let's return to sonnet 20, which, as we assert -- and this is the most important thing -- is also written on behalf of the Muse. In it, unlike the 21st, the Muse does not talk about creativity, but with tender tells about the poet she patronizes (addressing him):

*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 women'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 prick'd thee out for women's pleasure,
Mine be thy love and thy love's use their treasure.*

And here the substitution of the person who is speaking at once leads to a deplorable result -- a gross distortion of the meaning. After all, the “gender inversion” of the narrator radically changes the whole, so to speak, erotica: instead of the love couple “muse-poet”, a far-fetched, mythical couple “poet-friend” appears.

If we accept this point of view, we will come to the conclusion: in sonnet 20 no homoeroticism at all.

For more details about this and several others sonnets see my article (in Russian):

IX. Луки Эроса. Заметки об отдельных сонетах Шекспира

(18+) <http://www.w-shakespeare.ru/library/shekspir-lica-i-maski10.html>