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**Shakespeare and the Master-Mistress -
An Analysis and Interpretation of
Sonnet 20 with special
regard to its homoerotic
content**

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Contents

Nr.	Topic	Page
	Contents	1
1.	Introduction	2
2.	Analysis and interpretation of sonnet 20	3
2.1.	Form	3
2.2.	Close reading	3
2.3.	Summarizing interpretation	9
3.	The biographical background - Shakespeare and the young man	10
4.	The question of homosexuality	13
4.1.	Homosexuality in the Renaissance	13
4.2.	Publishing and reception history of the sonnets	15
5.	Bibliography	17

1. Introduction

The homoeroticism expressed in Shakespeare's sonnets has been hotly discussed for over 200 years. Shakespeare, British national hero, god of drama, father of eight children, symbol of "high culture" - a homosexual? Sonnet 20 plays a central role in this debate. Some use it as evidence proving the poets "innocence" others, however, see homosexual desires uttered in it.

Firstly, this work will analyse and interpret sonnet 20. The "close reading" will be accompanied by a German translation of the author of

this work. Special attention shall be paid to the ambiguities expressed through puns or other tropes and figures.

Secondly, a look at the biographical background will be taken, notably at the speculations about the identity of the addressee, the young man. This will be done in order to add new aspects to the interpretation.

The last part will be about homosexuality. A discussion about the perception of that issue in Renaissance England will be followed by a glance at the publishing and reception history concerning homoerotic content.

2. Analysis of Sonnet 20

2.1. Form

The sonnet consists, as it is usual for Shakespearean sonnets, of three quatrains and a couplet. Each quatrain forms a sense group of its own, as well as the couplet, which has a concluding function.

The rhyme scheme is abab cdcd efe(´)f(´) gg. The rhyme in the lines 9 and 11 ("created [...] defeated") may be inexact. John Kerrigan suggests that the words were probably pronounced "cre- ahted, def- ahted". He also mentions that "a-doting [...] nothing" is "distinctly shaky here (though 'th' was harder, closer to 'd' and 't', than now)". All rhymes are feminine. The metre used is the iambic pentameter.

2.2. Close reading

The following analysis will be done line by line. You will find the German translation of the author of this work set next to the original line.

The sense of the sonnet is often ambiguous, in these cases the translation will offer one meaning, the others will be discussed below.

A woman's face, with Nature's own hand painted,	Ein Frauengesicht, von der Natur mit eigener Hand gemalt,
--	--

Supposing that the addressee is male "A woman's face" is a metaphor. The anthropomorphism in the second part contrasts his face with women's faces, which are often painted by cosmetics. Alternatively it could also refer to Shakespeare's protest "against the poetic praise which, daubing the youth with verbal cosmetics, conceals the natural painting of what he is, to leave him a merely 'painted beauty'". The line ends with an enjambement.

Hast thou, the master-mistress of my passion;	Hast du, Herr-Herrin meiner Leidenschaft;
--	--

The alliteration "master-mistress", meaning "both man and woman", stresses the androgynous appearance of the addressee. Stefan George mentions that it can also have the sense of "the primary mistress", however, as a man is addressed (because it is very unlikely that you say "A woman's face [...] hast thou" to a woman), this would not really change much. In the Renaissance "mistress" did not have the meaning of a lover of a married man but of a woman a man has fallen in love with or is interested in. The line reveals the poetic 'I's homoerotic feelings.

A woman's gentle heart, but not acquainted	Das sanfte Herz einer Frau, doch nicht vertraut
---	--

The repetition of "A woman's" (line 1) is an anaphora. "Acquainted" carries with it a pun referring to "quaint", a slang term for the female sex organ, thus has the sense of "You are not physically a woman". The line ends with an enjambement.

With shifting change, as is false women's fashion;	mit der Wechselhaftigkeit, wie sie bei den falschen Frauen üblich ist;
---	---

The pleonasm "shifting change" strengthens the sense of "change" and puts emphasis on its durability. "False women" does not mean "that women, who are false" but that all women are morally and - with regard to the cosmetics of line one - visually deceitful. "False [...] fashion" is an alliteration.

An eye more bright than theirs, less false in rolling	Ein Auge, strahlender als ihre, doch weniger falsch im Schweifen
--	---

The parallelism "more bright [...] less false" again stresses the opposition between the addressee and women in character. In addition, "false" is a repetition from line 4, which also functions as a connection between quatrain one and two..

Gilding the object whereupon it gazeth;	Das vergoldend, worauf es blickt;
--	-----------------------------------

This is a metaphor saying that everybody the addressee looks at is enchanted. Shakespeare compares the eye of the man with the sun casting its golden light on everything.

A man in hue all hues in his controlling,	Ein Mann in der Erscheinung, der aller Erscheinungen fähig ist,
--	--

"A hue is a 'form', an 'appearance' (with strong implications of

comeliness), or 'colour' [...] [respectively] 'complexion' " explains

Kerrigan and thereafter offers several meanings of this line: " 'a fine-

looking man, he enthralls everyone' [...] 'though his complexion is

manly, touched by *all hues* it is womanly too' [...] 'a mere man in

appearance, he controls all living forms', 'though he looks like a man,

he has the power to adopt any form he chooses' " On the contrary,

James Winny regards the man being "sexually neutral [...] incapable of

fulfilling either sexual role." This seems odd and unconvincing.

Eric Sams points out that in the first edition of the sonnets of 1609

(which contained many misprints) the line was printed as "A man in hew all *Hews* in his controwling". He assumes that *Hews* is a kind of name-monogram referring to *Henry Wriothesley*, Earl of Southampton, while Oscar Wilde identifies the actor Willie Hews / Hughes. For further information on this subject compare chapter 3.

Which steals men's eyes and women's souls amazeth.	Betörend die Augen der Männer und die Seelen der Frauen
---	--

The structure of this line is a chiasm. "Steals men's eyes" is a metaphor meaning "attracting men visually". "Amazeth" here is used in the sense of "overwhelms" or "stuns".

And for a woman wert thou first created,	Und als Frau wurdest du zuerst erschaffen,
---	---

Kerrigan says "for a woman" here means "to be female", whereas Bredbeck also offers " 'you were first created for sexual pleasure with

women [but now shall have it with men]". The address "thou" during the sonnet implies a close relationship between the poetic 'I' and the addressee.

Till Natur as she wrought thee fell a-doting,	Bis die Natur, als sie dich bildete, sich in dich vernarrte
--	--

Here again nature is personified. That not god but nature acts as creator here reflects the Renaissance Zeitgeist, the renunciation of religion and the middle ages accompanied by a growing interest in nature. The man's attractiveness is again stressed, he/she was so beautiful that even nature went crazy.

And by addition me of thee defeated,	Und durch eine Zugabe dich mir verwehrte,
---	--

The poetic 'I' feels betrayed by nature because she deprived ("defeated")

him of the perfect girl by making her/him a boy. The internal rhyme "me

[...] thee" points out that they were meant to form a pair. "By addition" is

a semantic pun, it can both have the meaning "by honouring you" and

"by adding something".

This line is the strongest counterargument against the homosexual interpretation of the lines 9 and 12-14.

By adding one thing to my purpose nothing.	Durch Zugabe eines Dinges mit dem ich nichts anfangen kann.
---	--

"By adding" together with the ambiguous "by addition" form an organic paronomasia. It is quite clear that "one thing" refers to the male sex organ. "To my purpose nothing" is also ambiguous. It may be read in the sense of "of no interest to me" or "irrelevant to my concerns" as well as "irrelevant here, in this context, this poem", which would weaken the anti-homosexual statement of this line. "Nothing" can - in opposition to "one thing" - be read as "no thing" and thus stress the poetic 'I's dislike of the man's penis and, concluding, of homosexuality.

But since she pricked thee out for women's pleasure,	Doch da sie dich bestückte zum Genuß der Frauen,
---	---

"Pricked thee out" is a semantic pun. It means "select someone from a list

by pricking a paper", but it can also be used to describe "the act of placing

a young plant in a specially prepared hole". Thirdly, "prick" is a taboo

expression for penis which leads to the paraphrase "she gave you a penis".

This would make much sense in connection with "women's pleasure"

which is meant sexually. The constant repetition of the word "woman /

women" - it occurs six times in the sonnet - symbolizes the femininity of the man.

Mine be thy love, and thy love's use their treasure.	Sei mein deine Liebe, und der Gebrauch deiner Liebe ihr Schatz.
---	--

Shakespeare uses a chiasm in connection with the semantic

paronomasia of "love" to stress the difference between the poetic 'I's love for the addressee and the women's sexual love ("love's use"). Here it is important that the Elizabethan sense of "love" was wider as is it in today's English, including things as close friendship, adoration and deep respect (notably Germans should pay attention to this as their "Liebe" is even more narrow in use than English "love" today). Norton points out that " 'treasure' and 'pleasure' are erotic puns in Renaissance diction, the former connoting semen, and the latter connoting orgasm or at least sexual foreplay."

Conversely, Gregory Bredbeck offers a totally different understanding of the couplet. The old spelling of these lines was as follows:

"But since she prickt thee out for womens pleasure,

Mine be thy loue and thy loues vse their treasure."

"Loues" thus can be "love's" as well as "loves" in the sense of "lovers" or "desirers". Accordingly, the lines may be read " 'Since you were created to be used as a woman (i.e. penetrated), I will be your lover, and others (presumably women) will have to masturbate' ('use' of 'treasure' playing within the metaphors of usury associated with onanism)." An interpretation being as interesting as far fetched.

2.3. Summarizing interpretation

The poetic 'I' feels a great affection for the androgynous man he talks about. He is both attracted by his charismatic and handsome outer appearance and his character which he compares to the character of women in general. He considers women being false and inconstant. Perhaps his discomfort at his homoerotic feelings makes the speaker explain them in a heterosexual way: He points out that he is not desiring a man but a woman who by accident got male sex characteristics. He wants to make clear that these hinder him from wishing to have a sexual relationship with the addressee.

His statements on this matter seem strong and vehement at first sight. Nevertheless, the ambiguities mentioned above and somehow this vehemence in his solemn declaration (if you read it this way) leave much space for speculations. Does he try to persuade others, the addressee or himself? Is he really sure about this feelings? Is he aware of the ambiguities, or are they even intended (which would not harmonize with line 11)? These questions can not be answered, yet this constitutes a part of the fascination of sonnet 20.

3. The biographical background - Shakespeare and the young man

For over 200 years there has been a debate among literary scholars and historians if the sonnets reflect a part of Shakespeare's life and "tell the

story of Shakespeare as a lover" or if they are to be considered fiction.

The people who think they are *pure* fiction are a minority.

In this part parallels between Shakespeare's life and sonnet 20 shall be drawn. To use this approach in order to add new aspects to the interpretation of the poem is not unproblematical. It must be pointed out that the author of a poem is not - or only up to a certain degree identical with the poetic 'I'.

Who was the young man?

Apart from a group of scholars assuming "Shakespeare is not analysing the character of an actual person but exploring a complex of ideas which his creative consciousness holds together." and others, similarly, supposing "there must have been many men involved in the production of that single image", there have been dozens of speculations about the identity of the young man. Most of the literary scholars agree that the mysterious "Mr. W. H." that is mentioned in the dedication prefixed to the first edition of the sonnets by the editor, Thomas Thorpe, is a hint to his identity. The dedication goes as follows:

TO. THE. ONLIE. BEGETTER. OF.
 THESE. INSVING. SONNETS.
 Mr. W.H. ALL. HAPPINESSE.
 AND. THAT. ETERNITIE.
 PROMISED.
 BY.
 OUR. EVER-LIVING. POET.
 WISHETH
 THE. WELL-WISHING.
 ADVENTVRER. IN.
 SETTING.
 FORTH.

T.T.

Most of these speculations do not make much sense purely concentrating on people Shakespeare knew that fit into these initials: William Harte, Shakespeare's nephew; William Hathaway, his brother-in-law; William Hunnis, a minor poet or William Herbert, the third Earl of Pembroke.

The two *HEWS*

Perhaps the most plausible candidate for the young man is Henry Wriothesley, the third Earl of Southampton (1573-1624). Henry, like Shakespeare, was the son of a Catholic family, in a branch related by marriage to that of Shakespeare's mother, the Ardens. He was known as the patron of poets and the only known patron Shakespeare ever had. The poems "Venus and Adonis" and "The Rape of Lucrece", both containing a remarkable account of homoeroticism, are also dedicated to Southampton. Furthermore parallels can be drawn between the sonnets and his biography. In the 1590, when most of the sonnets were probably written, he refused to marry his fiancée, Lady Elisabeth de Vere, which would fit the procreational sonnets. He was not only young and handsome at this time, moreover his father had died in 1581, accompanying Shakespeare writes "You *had* a father;" (sonnet 13, line 14). This would add new aspects to the relationship. Firstly, the class difference, secondly, a financial supporter - supported relationship. Moreover, it could explain the meaning of "the onlie begetter" (the man who is both the cause and the (financial) essential of the sonnets) in the dedication. Accordingly, there are many ambiguous lines in the sonnets that could be meant monetarily, e.g. in sonnet 29 lines 5 and 13/14.

"Wishing me like to one more rich in hope"; "For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings / That then I scorn to change my state with kings".

As already mentioned Sams sees Wriothesley's name hidden in the word "*Hews*" of sonnet 20 and suggests that it could be read either

Henry Wriothesley Earl of Southampton or:

Henry *Wriothesley*
 Earl of *Southampton.*

Conversely, Rictor Norton takes up an idea of Oscar Wilde. Wilde beholds that in the sonnets there is much punning about the name "Will" (e.g. sonnet 135) and in connection with "*Hews*" in sonnet 20 concludes that the addressee was the actor Willie Hughes, an androgynous boy who used to play the women's parts in Shakespeare's early plays like Juliet in "Romeo and Juliet" or Rosalind in "As you like it" (both written in the 1590's). "As you like it", says Norton, is "a play whose central theme is based upon the master-mistress metaphor and literal transvestism. In this play Rosalind, a girl played by a boy, dresses up in boy's clothing and assumes for herself the new name 'Young Master Ganymede'" Against this background it becomes quite clear why Shakespeare says that the addressee is "A man in hue all hues in his controlling," in the sense of "though he looks like a man, he has the power to adopt any form he chooses".

The Master Himself?

Another assumption for Mr. W.H. is "William (Shakespeare) Himself". This is quite interesting to think about although it does not really fit into the dedication because it is unlikely that Thorpe wished Shakespeare "THAT. ETERNITIE. PROMISED. BY." Shakespeare, in other words, that Shakespeare promised himself eternity.

4. The question of homosexuality

4.1. Homosexuality in the Renaissance

This issue is, to put it mildly, very complicated. In Renaissance language the words "homosexual" and "homosexuality" simply did not exist, for the first time it appeared in writing in 1868. Nevertheless, it was strictly prohibited by the English law. Offenders could expect to be sentenced to death. The term used in the law code was "sodomy" which denoted homosexuality, pederasty and bestiality at the same time. Many scholars have concluded from this that "homosexuality was not placed in a special spiritual category: it was thought to stem from the same carnal source as other sins of the fallen flesh [...] [moreover] there was no language for coping with it," Therefore a complete "absence of any felt specificity of male homosexual desire in the culture at large" was assumed.

By contrast, Joseph Cady convincingly argues that in the Renaissance "a definite awareness and language for a distinct homosexuality existed, at least among those who were willing to face and discuss the subject frankly." Instead of "male homosexuality", he points out, the term "masculine love" was used. He gives evidence analysing the use of this

term in Francis Bacon's "New Atlantis"(1610, published 1627) and Thomas Heywood's "Pleasant Dialogues and Dramas"(1637), a collection of translations from antique and contemporary European writers, e.g the greek homosexual story of "Jupiter and Ganymede". Anyhow, there was confusion of terms. Homosexuality was hardly distinguished from pederasty and, as we can see in Shakespeare's sonnets, it is often difficult to decide whether the term "friendship" is meant platonically or alluding to homoeroticism / homosexuality.

This may serve as one explanation why there has been a discussion about the homoeroticism in Shakespeare's sonnets for over 200 years.

4.2. Publishing and reception history of the sonnets

The sonnets were first published in 1609 by Thomas Thorpe. That he did not reissue the quarto supports Lee's assumption that it "does not seem to have been received by the public with enthusiasm".

In 1640 John Benson rearranged the sonnets. He put them together to longer poems, omitted eight sonnets out and changed all masculine pronouns into feminine. The sonnets were reprinted in this form until 1766, when George Steevens included an accurate transcription of the 1609 quarto in his "Twenty of the Plays of Shakespeare". However, in 1793 in the fourth edition of the Johnson-Steevens "The Plays of William

Shakespeare", Steevens excluded the sonnets with strong words of condemnation: "Had Shakespeare produced no other works than these, his name would have reached us with as little celebrity as time has conferred on that of Thomas Watson, an older and much more elegant sonneteer." Three years before, in 1790, Edmond Malone published the first serious critical edition of the sonnets. Concerning the homoeroticism he writes that "such addresses to men, however, indelicate, were customary in our author's time, and neither imported criminality, nor were esteemed indecorous". The discussion about the nature of the relationship between Shakespeare and the young man had begun, accompanied by discussions about the identities of the addressed persons and the sonnet's biographical content (Compare chapter 3).

For instance, Samuel Butler regards the sonnets as Shakespeare's youthful, sexual experimentation and "considering [...] the perfect sanity of all his later work" is willing to forgive him. In 1933 Lord Alfred Douglas "rejects the notion that Shakespeare was a homosexualist". In addition Edward Hubble seeks "to establish the complete normality of Shakespeare's affective life as revealed in these sonnets". Conversely, George Wilson Knight argues that Shakespeare was bisexual: "the creative consciousness is bisexual; otherwise there could be no creation". Martin Seymour-Smith thinks the sonnets describe "a heterosexual's homosexual experience" and "that on at least one occasion Shakespeare did have some kind of physical relationship with the Friend." Joseph Pequigney considers "the interaction between the friends being sexual

both in orientation and practice" and calls the sonnets "the grand masterpiece of homoerotic poetry". Norton sees evidence for this in sonnet 121:

'Tis better to be vile than vile esteemed
 When not to be receives reproach of being,
 And the just pleasure lost, which is so
 deemed, Not by our feeling but by others'
 seeing. For why should others' false adulterate
 eyes Give salutation to my sportive blood?

Perhaps the wisest comment on this issue was made by Stephen Booth:
 "William Shakespeare was almost certainly homosexual, bisexual, or heterosexual. The sonnets provide no evidence on the matter"

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