


CHAPTER 1: FOUR PIVOTAL SONNETS: SONNETS 20, 62, 104, 129



In this chapter we have selected four sonnets for special consideration, as taken together they illuminate the Poet's most prevalent concerns, including his horror of aging and his bisexuality. We will be referring to these sonnets again and again throughout this book.


If we allow ourselves to assume that the "I" of the sonnets is a single character (whether that is Will Shakespeare himself or a character of his creation doesn't matter) we can connect seemingly disparate material into a revealing, coherent picture. By so doing we are well aware that we have ventured beyond the relatively safe harbor of the psychoanalytic hour where a living patient can confirm the analyst's insights and we recognize that what seems evidence to us may not be convincing to some readers. But the approach has one certain benefit: by following it we will gain access to the major themes of the sonnets and get to know this astonishing body of poems very well.

The Poet of the Sonnets, being a man of the Renaissance, made full use of classical mythology but was also capable of coining new myths of his own making and creating an imagery so beautiful that, once compre-

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hended, it remains with us even if we do not share the Poet's interior psychic conflicts.

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

In the first five lines the feminine aspects of the Young Man are stressed, as is his superiority over women. The next three lines will emphasize his masculine aspects. In line 6, this androgynous man-woman is compared to the sun: "Gilding the object whereupon it gazeth." The act of gilding, as distinguished from gilded, appears only twice in Shakespeare's work, in this sonnet and in Sonnet 33:

Kissing with golden face the meadows green,
Gilding pale streams with heavenly alchemy (Sonnet 33, lines 3-4)

In mythology the sun is usually a masculine symbol, whereas the "pale" moon is experienced as feminine; the use of the term gilding emphasized the masculine aspect of this bisexual youth.

A gender change is introduced in line 7, when the Young Man is addressed as "A man in hue, all hues in his controlling." The word "hue" had in Shakespeare's time many connotations, such as appearance, bearing, and grace. In these lines, the Poet seems eager to counteract the femi-

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nine impression he conveyed in the first six lines. “Masculine” means being in control of all his hues so that nothing that emanates from him is beyond his control. In Sonnet 94 a similar praise appears: “They are the lords and owners of their faces,” meaning that those whose face does not betray what they feel are masculine. Commentators have also noted that “controlling” in line 7 contains a pun on “cunt.” In that case the faint echo of “his cunt” in “his controlling” increases the sense of the Young Man as hermaphroditic.

Line 8 affirms the Young Man’s appeal to both men and women: “Which steals men’s eyes and women’s souls amazeth.” We note that the appeal is not equal on both genders. The Young Man evokes admiration from men, “stealing their eyes,” implying taking men’s eyes away from women. The Young Man has an even deeper effect on women, whose “souls he amazes.” Blackmore Evans believes that the asymmetry is intended to convey that men responding with their eyes are more intellectual, while women, responding with their souls are more richly endowed with emotions. However, we will see that the eye is often the principal sexual organ in Shakespeare’s sonnets—perhaps because it is the organ used to read them—so to “steal men’s eyes” has sexual undertones.

The third quatrain introduces a legend that Shakespeare created for this occasion. Nature was engaged in creating a woman when she “fell a-doting”—that is, in love with the woman she was creating. Being heterosexual, Nature decided to add a penis for her own sexual pleasure. The Poet suggests that he was ready to love the woman nature was creating, but nature defeated him by the addition of the penis, making a sexual relationship between the Poet and the Young Man impossible. Hence, “me of thee defeated.” Nature can have him but the Poet cannot. The verb “painted,” found in the first line, appears in Shakespeare’s work 58 times and is mostly used as a metaphor, often to connote the opposite of genuine as in “your painted counterfeit” in Sonnet 16. In this sonnet, when nature paints a woman, the woman comes to life, and when she adds a penis the woman becomes a bisexual person.

The term “a-doting” appears only in this sonnet. In the quarto edition, the line reads: “fell a dotting.” In Sonnet 131 the Poet speaks of “my dear dotting heart.” In Sonnet 141 the Poet tells us that his heart is “pleased to dote.” And in Sonnet 148 the Poet speaks of “my false eyes dote.” In these

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sonnets, as well as in other works of Shakespeare, doting means loving to excess, or loving foolishly. However, to be the recipient of such a love may not be undesirable. Thus, in *Much Ado About Nothing* we are told that Beatrice loves Benedick with an “enraged affection.” Don Pedro muses “I would she had bestowed this dotage on me” (Act II, Scene III). An extreme form of dotage takes place in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* when Titania tells Bottom, transformed into an ass, “Oh, how I love thee; how I dote on thee.” Oberon comments, “Her dotage now I begin to pity.” Dotage can be a painful emotion.

Who is this nature so charmingly anthropomorphized? If we turn to other sonnets to discover who nature is, we will find, in Sonnet 4, that “Nature’s bequest gives nothing, but doth lend,” meaning that the loveliness of the Young Man was not given to him as a permanent right, but only lent to him by “nature,” obliging him to pass on his beauty to the next generation. In Sonnet 18 we are told that “nature” is far from constant: “nature’s changing course untrimmed.” In Sonnet 60 “nature” can be in conflict with time, when time “Feeds on the rarities of nature’s truth.” In Sonnet 67 “nature” can be experienced as bankrupt, and when that happens there is no reason to live on. Depressing is also that “nature” uses the Young Man as a kind of souvenir of times now past. In Sonnet 126 “nature” is described as “sovereign mistress over wrack.” At times “nature” is equated with life itself, a ruler over destruction, as for example in Sonnet 122: “so long as brain and heart/Have faculty by nature to subsist.” Nature can be playful and goddesslike; she sometimes helps and at other times hinders our effort. Basically, in this sonnet, nature is portrayed by the Poet as narcissistic and irresponsible, pursuing her own ends indifferent to human wishes. In other sonnets discussed in Chapter 2 she is a sort of stand-in for the Poet himself, keeping the Young Man youthful as a souvenir of the beauty she had long ago. This idea seems strange but we will come to know it well, beginning with the discussion of Sonnet 62 later in the chapter.

There is a bawdy play on words in line 12: “adding one thing” is a reference to the penis; “to my purpose nothing” is the opposite of “one thing” and a reference to the vagina. It is likely that line 14 in Sonnet 8—“Thou single wilt prove none”—is also a reference to the female genital. There is a famous scene in *Hamlet* that can also be cited as confirmation of the Elizabethan equation between vagina and nothing:

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Hamlet: Lady, shall I lie in your lap?

Lying down at Ophelia's feet.

Ophelia: No, my lord.

Hamlet: I mean, my head upon your lap?

Ophelia: Ay, my lord.

Hamlet: Do you think I meant country matters?

Ophelia: I think nothing, my lord.

Hamlet: That's a fair thought to lie between maids' legs.

Ophelia: What is, my lord?

Hamlet: Nothing [Act III, Scene II, 119-28.].

In the third quatrain of Sonnet 136, (a sonnet we do not otherwise include in this book) we read:

Among a number one is reckoned none.

Then in the number let me pass untold,

Though in thy store's account I one must be.

For nothing hold me, so it please thee hold

That nothing, me, a something sweet to thee (lines 8-12).

The Poet asserts that one is no number, and that one is to be reckoned as none. That one is none is a proverb in many languages. For example, the German "Einmal (once) ist Keinmal (never)." A favorite strategy used by seducers is to persuade that one intercourse is no intercourse. "Store's account" contains an allusion to cunt. "Nothing" in line 11 can be read as "no thing" and therefore again as a reference to the vagina. The psychoanalyst Bertrand Lewin (1948), without reference to Shakespeare stated, "When a patient in analysis says he is thinking of nothing, he or she will soon be talking about the female genital."

The Poet has fallen in love with a very attractive and effeminate young man, but the Poet knows that homosexual relationships are forbidden under Elizabethan law. He may also share the abhorrence for homosexual activities, or may only be careful not to express them. In any case, he hopes homosexual love that does not lead to homosexual activity can be made acceptable to the reader. No wonder, then, that in subsequent years this poem evoked controversy, some using it to prove Shakespeare's homosexuality while others employed it as a proof that he was not. It is hardly sur-

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prising: an overt homosexual would never have written this sonnet, but neither would it have occurred to a heterosexual man.

The Young Man in this poem represents a solution to a particular problem that the Poet experiences. The Young Man is as beautiful as a woman but, being a man, is free from the character defects that the Poet attributes to women. The Poet of the Sonnets leads us to believe, at least in his case, that love and sexuality run along different tracks: the Poet's feelings of love are easily and unselfconsciously directed towards a man, but his feelings of sexual attraction remain directed towards women. Both feelings are presented as natural, so as to require no explanation to the reader.

In Sonnet 20, the beauty of women is regarded as self-evident, as the poem begins by attributing to the man "a woman's face." Written in an exuberant mood with a great deal of humor, many original ideas, and unexpected puns, this sonnet is a charming fable. One would have expected that it would rank among Shakespeare's more popular sonnets, but only one anthology included it. We suspect that it did not fare well because in spite of the Poet's denial so charmingly stated, the implicit homosexuality was too disturbing to many readers. To our knowledge, Sonnet 20 is unique in celebrating love based on the bisexual appeal of the person chosen.

In real life there are heterosexual women who love their female friends, and enjoy their company and have much more in common with them than they do with their heterosexual mates. The reverse is equally common: men who spend most of their time and pleasure in the company of other men and yet seek sexual gratification from a woman or from more than one woman. In psychoanalytic terms such solutions are called compromise formations between homo- and heterosexual wishes. Many masculine women and feminine men exert a special fascination on their partners, appearing bisexual; as both man and woman, they represent a possible solution to a conflict between homo- and heterosexual wishes. As a rule, however, the perceived bisexuality of the partner remains unconscious. However in Sonnet 20, this knowledge has not only become conscious but was transformed into a highly original poem. Sonnet 20 is an attempt at compromise formation based on love for a man who seems to the Poet to possess the attributes of both genders; the Poet admits openly that it is the bisexuality of the Young Man that is attractive, but denies that the Young Man is sexually attractive. Bisexuals attract for the same reason

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that narcissists are attractive: they are or at least appear self-sufficient. Psychoanalysts often discover that both envy and jealousy often interfere with the capacity to love, but love for a bisexual person who is believed to have within her or his orbit all that is the best in both genders must evoke also a great deal of envy. Falling in love with a hermaphrodite, as the Young Man is experienced in Sonnet 20, contains an obstacle. Anyone experienced in fantasy as hermaphroditic fantasy is bound to seem self-sufficient and therefore incapable as well as unwilling to love the other.

On the surface, this sonnet is in praise of a young man the Poet adores, or to use Shakespeare's term, "dotes upon." There are many sonnets in praise of this or another young man, but the nature of the praise bestowed in this sonnet is unique. The Young Man is exalted because he has androgynous qualities; because he combines masculine and feminine tendencies, being both master and mistress is proclaimed to be unique. This dual nature is captured in the second line: "the master mistress of my passion." In Shakespeare's time, the term "mistress" had not yet acquired the connotation it has for us—that of a "kept woman," or a woman who belongs to a man, usually married, who is financially supporting her. The term "master" here refers to a person endowed with the right to command. A note of submission to this hermaphroditic creature is introduced.

Shakespeare's commentators have interpreted that "but not acquainted" puns as not having a cunt. Whether this interpretation is accepted or not, it is clear that a strong anti-female attitude is present when the Young Man's eyes are seen as "less false in rolling," namely, more loyal than woman's eyes. This belief in the lover's constancy will not be sustained in the subsequent sonnets. Patrick Mahony (1979) noted that the syntactical structure of Sonnet 20 contains many inversions (changes in the words' order), ellipses (omission of words necessary to complete the sentence), paralaxis (change in direction), and hypotaxis (subordinate clauses). The sonnet is unique in having fourteen hypermetric lines (exceeding the established meter of the sonnets). The bisexuality is also reflected in the binarity of the lines, two different ideas being pressed into the same line. He noted that to be accepted with the reverse side, or back side, is a reference to anal eroticism, so prominent in homosexuality. What Mahony discovered is a connection between the style of the poem and what the Poet tried to

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repress. What is repressed in the content, the anal homosexual wish, resurfaces in the style.

In psychoanalytic practice, one occasionally encounters men and women who have fallen in love with someone of their own gender, but this love or even sexual attraction notwithstanding, they insist that they are not homosexuals. As the Poet declares in Sonnet 20, they only happen to have fallen in love with this particular person. With humor and irony some people wear a button that says, "I'm not gay, my lover is."

One of the important contributions of psychoanalysis to the understanding of homosexuality was the insight that in addition to overt homosexuality, two other types have to be added: latent homosexuality, where homosexual wishes, insufficiently held back by repression, require fear and hatred of homosexuals to contain the homosexual wishes in a state of repression. Latent homosexuals rely heavily on projection (attributing their feelings to others, not themselves) and reaction formation (feeling repelled by what unconsciously attracts them) to keep their homosexuality repressed. Another diagnostic group comprises desexualized homosexuality; such men and woman have passionate love relationships with members of their own gender, including jealousy when the loved one prefers someone else, but the relationship does not include direct sexual wishes. In Sonnet 20 desexualized homosexuality is the Poet's ideal. It is possible to read all the love sonnets to the Young Man as examples of desexualized homosexuality, but the heterosexual sonnets discussed later in this book (Chapter 7), including the painful triangle, cast doubt on the fact that the desexualization idealized in this sonnet was actually achieved.

In the Poet's unconscious there was a choice: he could desire the Young Man's penis as a woman would and find that he is a homosexual. Or he could ask for friendship based on admiration but devoid of sexual interest, thus sublimating homosexual wishes into a "mere" friendship. Unwilling to accept the implication of homosexuality, the Poet created Sonnet 20. Resigned to the fact that nature "pricked" the man he loves, that is, endowed him with a penis for woman's pleasure, he asks only for the Young Man's love and suggests the Young Man's sexuality, here called "love's use," should go to women. What the Poet advocated was a radical separation between love and sexuality; as we will see in other poems, sexless love also implies loveless sexuality.

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SONNET 20 AND THE CLASSICAL PAST

Shakespeare very likely wrote under the influence of the Roman poet Ovid, who in his famous book *Metamorphoses* told the story of the sculptor Pygmalion, who fell in love with and caressed the statues of a young woman he had created. Venus granted his prayer that the statue come to life and become his wife. In psychoanalytic terms both Shakespeare's Nature and Ovid's Pygmalion are not capable of loving a real person and fall in love with what they themselves have created.

Whether Shakespeare read Ovid in the original in his student years or whether he read it in the Golding translation that had just appeared in 1565 is not clear, but the bisexuality was described by Golding thus:

Her countenance and her grace
was such as in a boy might well be called a wench's face,
and in a wench be called a boy's (Golding 10:429-36)

Ovid's story of Salmachis and Hermaphroditus is also relevant to Sonnet 20. The water nymph Salmachis did not enjoy the hunt, preferring to look at herself in the water mirror and comb her lovely hair (we will meet her masculine equivalent as Narcissus). Hermaphroditus, the son of Hermes and Aphrodite, was a beautiful lad fifteen years old. He came to a pool translucent to the very bottom and it was the pool that Salmachis was using as mirror to her self-love. She sees Hermaphroditus, admires his beauty, desires him and pleads for kisses. Hermaphroditus is reluctant. Salmachis lures him into the water and once there, serpentlike, she coils herself around him. She prays to the gods, "May no day ever come to separate us." Her prayer was answered. Their bodies merged, becoming one person, both man and woman. "Two beings and no longer man and woman but neither and yet both" (Ovid *Metamorphoses*, 4:285-388, Humphries translation).

"Master mistress of my passion" goes even further back to the fable told in Plato's *Symposium*. The best-known part of the *Symposium*, the one that has influenced Western culture most profoundly, is the legend told by Aristophanes to explain the nature of love: originally mankind was com-

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posed of double creatures, having two heads, four arms, four legs, and two genitalia. Some were double-males, others double-females, and still others were composed male and female. These creatures threatened the gods because being self-sufficient they felt no need to sacrifice to the gods and the gods were in turn desperately dependent on human sacrifices. So the gods decided to cut each creature in half and since then the two halves are yearning to be reunited.

The legend told in the *Symposium* explained also why some people are heterosexual and others homosexual: sexual orientation depends on the gender of the person with whom we were originally united. We should note the wisdom of this legend. The hermaphrodite is self-sufficient and does not need the help of the gods, and therefore will feel no need to sacrifice to the gods. Being self-sufficient themselves, these gods nevertheless “need” the sacrifices offered by mortals for their own gratification; therefore they have a narcissistic relationship with mortals. These gods are interested in mortals only as sacrificers.

Our analysis of Sonnet 20 leads us to believe that this sonnet has been underestimated by the commentators and anthologizers. There is first the original use of the classical heritage and its transformation beyond what had been transmitted by the tradition. But there is more; whenever in the course of psychoanalysis sexual or love wishes for someone of one’s own gender emerge, anxiety of becoming homosexual or bisexual surfaces. Shakespeare was capable of taking this anxiety-laden subject and treating it lightly and with humor; a taboo subject was given permission to become articulated. A weight of guilt and shame was lifted, if only for the time it takes to read this sonnet.

In Sonnet 20 we encounter the Poet who can bring to life the classical past, but is capable of creating a personal myth modeled on the classical past. Shakespeare’s humor goes beyond Ovid; his nature is not a goddess-like Aphrodite who grants the sculptor’s wish. She herself falls a-doting and for her own sexual satisfaction adds the penis the Poet claims not to need. We can look upon this sonnet as a compromise between homo- and heterosexual wishes. If the Poet had succeeded to live up to this division we would not have had the conflicts that animate the other sonnets. Because the sonnet is an erudite and funny compromise it remains inherently unstable. An unstable compromise is a wonderfully promising dramatic

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premise and since the rest of the sonnets show that the compromise of Sonnet 20 did not lead to a permanent resolution, we selected this poem as the gateway to one of the Poet's major inner struggles.

SONNET 62

Credit for the discovery of self-love as a third form of love after heterosexual and homosexual love goes to Ovid. This love still carries the name of his legendary character Narcissus and is called narcissism. Ovid, being a poet and not a systematic thinker, created a legendary character, not a psychological concept.

According to Ovid, Narcissus was a youth of wondrous beauty. Perceptively, Ovid made him not the child of a loving couple but of the nymph Leiriope, who was ravished by the river god Cephisus, who encircled her with his winding streams. Leiriope consulted the prophet Tiresias as to whether Narcissus would reach old age; the prophet replied, "Only if he never knows himself." It has been pointed out that the seer's answer was Ovid's ironical reversal of the Greek ideal "know thyself," inscribed on Apollo's temple in Delphi. Beautiful youths, men, women and nymphs fell in love with Narcissus but he rejected them all. In response to a rejected lover, Nemesis, the goddess of vengeance, inflicted upon Narcissus the pain he caused others, to love without being loved. Exhausted from the hunt, Narcissus reaches a fountain whose waters are unruffled. In the silvery waters he is smitten by love for the image that stares at him from the water. Narcissus cannot tear himself away and dies gazing at his image.

Among those who fell in love with Narcissus was the nymph Echo, who was punished by Juno to be unable to have independent speech and was capable only of repeating what she was told.

Out of the woods she came with arms all ready to fling around his neck, but he retreated. "Keep your hands off," he cried, "and don't touch me. I would die before I would give you a chance at me." "I'd give you a chance at me," was all that poor Echo could reply (Ovid *Metamorphoses* 3, Humphries' translation).