

On Sonnet 20 (In Relation to Merchant of Venice)

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,  
Much 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.

The sonnet is about Portia, whose 'key' number is 20. In the play, her face is painted by an artist with wonderful accuracy – Bassanio discovers this portrait in the casket. But Portia herself has a “woman’s face, with Nature’s own hand painted”. She is a woman with the mind and organizing capacity of a man. She is (in one sense) the central figure of the play or ‘passion’. Therefore she is the “master-mistress of my passion”.

She is touched with pity for Antonio – she has “a woman’s gentle heart”. She has money, a great deal, but it is inherited money. She is, as it were, unsullied by it – therefore she is not acquainted with “shifting change”. (Antonio, on the other hand is, “as is false women’s fashion”). Portia is also loyal – both to Bassanio and to Nerissa, and is therefore not acquainted with shifting change in the other sense.

From the play we learn of the eloquence and brilliance of Portia’s eyes. Bassanio says, “Of wondrous virtues sometimes from her eyes I have received fair speechless messages.” Then, when he sees the portrait “Move these eyes? Or whether riding on the balls of mine seem they in

motion?” And later, “But her eyes, how could he see to do them? Having made one, methinks it should have power to steal both his, and leave itself unfurnished.” So in the sonnet ‘An eye more bright than theirs, less false in rolling, Gilding the object whereupon it gazeth.’ There follows the description of this object, “A man in hue, all hues in his controlling,” And this is Bassanio, who has the body of a man, and yet a man–woman soul within it, (and who is also an amateur painter as his appreciation of the portrait shows). He steals Antonio’s heart and amazes the soul of Portia (and all feminine souls), “Much steals men’s hearts and women’s souls amazeth”. It is also true that he who is “a man in hue, all hues in his controlling” is Shakespeare the poet, and the ‘master-mistress’ of his passion is his muse, Diana, the Moon.