Sonnet 20 – Shakespeare (analysis)

In this crucial, sensual sonnet, the young man becomes the "master-mistress" of the poet's passion. The young man's double nature and character, however, present a problem of description: The first quatrain of sonnet 20 describes the fair lord as feminine: having "a woman's face," "a woman's gentle heart," etc. The beauty of the fair lord is that of a woman, yet he is still a man; as we read in the second quatrain, his appearance attracts both men and women alike. It is almost as though the narrator is saying all this with the ulterior motive of justifying his own attraction to the fair lord. The youth's double sexuality, as portrayed by the poet, accentuates the youth's challenge for the poet. As a man with the beauty of a woman, the youth is designed to be partnered with women but attracts men as well, being unsurpassed in looks and more faithful than any woman. In the sonnet's closing couplet - tying in with the theme of platonic love vs. carnal lust - the poet concedes that the fair lord's love can belong to him even as the use of his love remains for the ladies. Finally, note that sonnet 20 uses exclusively feminine rhyme perhaps a deliberate attempt to further feminize the fair lord. The poet's interest is in discovering the nature of their relationship. Even as the poet acknowledges an erotic attraction to the youth, he does not entertain the possibility of a physical consummation of his love. The poet "fell a-doting" and waxes in a dreamlike repine of his creation until, in the last line, the dreamer wakes to the youth's true sexual reality: "Mine be thy love, and thy love's use their treasure." We are assured then that the relation of poet to youth is based on love rather than sex.