

Threading Shakespeare's Sonnets

by

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Preface

The chief aim of this book is to make *Shake-speare's Sonnets* (the original title of the volume published in 1609) more readily accessible to readers of the twenty-first century. Because of the many changes in the language and the modes of poetic expression since Shakespeare's era, the modern reader is easily daunted if he ventures to sit down and read the poems straight through. Shakespeare's audience had no need of elaborate annotation such as that found in later editions, though even they may well have been puzzled at times. Although the earlier narrative poems--*Venus and Adonis* and *Lucrece*--were frequently reprinted and made Shakespeare's name well-known, the sonnets were not published again until 1640, and then only in a badly garbled form. As a result, all succeeding editions are reconstructions, beginning in the late eighteenth century with Edmond Malone's ground-breaking scholarship. The masses of subsequent inquiries have focused on biographical and textual matters. While new editions have, in cumulative fashion, worked out the most likely wording and punctuation of the sonnets, attempts to identify real persons and historical situations behind the characters and incidents in the sonnets have failed to produce a convincing consensus. Barring new discoveries, such problems will never be resolved.

As for the attempts to read the sonnets as revelations concerning Shakespeare's private life, they too have failed because very little is known about him other than certain external facts about his life, his death (his will has survived), and his career prior to his appearance on the London theater scene. As one famous scholar remarked, all the provable facts about Shakespeare's life can be summarized on a letter-sized sheet of typewritten paper. Therefore, we cannot say that the sonnets reveal his emotional life. No letters by him, no diaries or journals, no remarks on anything or anyone else have been preserved. What books he may have owned have disappeared. Except for one letter written to him by his future son-in-law asking for money, everything has vanished into thin air. There is not even a laundry list left behind.

What we can do, however, is to read the sonnets as a work of lyrical fiction, a series of monologues and poetic epistles by a single character--a person invented by the author. Shakespeare may have used his own experiences, but he didn't have to, as he amply demonstrated in his dramas. Did he not create voices for Caliban as well as Ariel, Cordelia and her sisters as well as Lear, Iago as well as Othello--and so many others? My task has been to render as carefully as possible the psychological experiences that one man has undergone in dealing with emotional tensions (largely derived from his sexual impulses). Although the poems have been attacked as having no coherent story, they should be seen as an intelligible sequence following the spate of sonnets in the late sixteenth century.

The reader will have to judge whether the unifying threads I have found make sense--as a human tragedy, not as simply a miscellaneous collection of "love songs" and instructive verses.

This book--*Threading Shakespeare's Sonnets*-- provides not only a modern text but a new running commentary that reveals, poem by poem, the emergent meaning of the whole. The overall impact of this tragedy is far more potent than the response evoked by any single lyric.

Introduction to *Threading Shakespeare's Sonnets*

Any reader approaching the complete Shakespearian sonnets for the first time will probably have been moved to do so by sampling a handful of individual sonnets in a school room. No one I have talked to has claimed to have studied all the one hundred and fifty-four sonnets intensively in order and come away with a coherent notion of the whole. This is not surprising. From first to last, the poems present formidable problems, even to professionals. Questions that arise immediately are hard to answer. Is there really a narrative going on? Who are all these nameless people who seem so far away from the rich and vivid characters who step so memorably from the plays? Are they fictional or veiled realities? Can we leap from one sonnet to the next and just hope that some sense will eventually appear?

Even with copious footnotes and commentary, most of us soon find the going rough. I can remember pondering the very first line for a considerable time and wondering what "fairest creatures" might be meant and what kind of "increase" we should want from them--and why. The second line merely complicated matters: how could we expect a rose (and "beauty's Rose," at that) never to die? By the time I reached the end of the first quatrain, I was further befuddled: whose heir might bear whose memory, anyway? I might have added, "Who cares?" But after such bafflement, I turned to more accessible sonnets, like "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" and found the ground smoother. So I persisted. So did frustration.

Years later, after much fumbling, I began, with the much needed help from scholarly editions, to understand more. Still, the continuity and the main thrust of the sequence eluded me. Though the whole has become largely intelligible, I have come to realize that there will forever be insoluble problems, such as why the friends of the speaker who are "hid in death's dateless night" in Sonnet 30 are made to miraculously reappear in the next sonnet. How can the speaker have supposed them to be dead? We can only guess.

Despite the hazards, it is a great pleasure to follow the threads of the sonnets and work out the narrative line with the help of previous scholarship. A good modern edition will cast much light into the darker pathways. This book is intended to give an overall interpretation based on the mass of information that has accumulated about the sonnets. The sonnet by sonnet explication should aid readers new or experienced to find their ways through the great maze that Shakespeare created.

The threads employed by Shakespeare are many and varied in type and length. There are, from the start, major threads like the rose, which is a symbol

with many meanings, and time, which may be a personification or simply a universal measure. Time is usually an all-powerful destroyer but it is sometimes an enemy that can be defeated by the immortality of poetry. Some threads have minor ones attached, as does the rose in the first sonnet, where it stands for the youth in all his beauty but also is connected to his "bud," which can signify, on another level, the glans penis. Once seen in all their intricacies and diverse connotations, the threads, when followed, enrich our reading as we find the poetic fabric being sewn together.

The frequency and the duration of the threads can emphasize themes, forces, and interrelationships. For example, the thread of gluttony is very long: it crops up initially at the end of Sonnet 1 as a fatal sin the youth may, without guidance, commit. This thread has a literary history, too, as one of the Seven Deadly Sins of medieval literature. In Shakespeare's sequence, all the sins manifest themselves as connecting threads. They are linked to and dominated by pride, the greatest sin of all and that which causes the speaker's downfall. They are also linked to the strongest narrative thread, which is that of betrayal, especially the self-betrayal of the speaker, which results from his pride as the youth's mentor. This can also be seen in the first sonnet when the speaker accuses the youth of being a foe to himself. Ironically, it turns out that the charge applies more forcibly to the speaker, who does not see his own errors until the closing sonnets--if then.

The Speaker as Hero

The crucial fact underlying the sequence is that all the sonnets are spoken by one person; in effect, it consists of 154 soliloquies linked by the various threads. Although the sonnets are individual entities of fourteen lines (with two exceptions), they gradually form both characters and emotions into a finely knit progression requiring many inferences by the reader. Though at first the poems seem disjunctive, the narrative connections begin to emerge from scattered clues. The broad lines have always been apparent although even they were tangled in the second edition (1640), which prevailed through most of the eighteenth century. With the return of interest in the sonnets during the nineteenth century, scholarly efforts were largely directed towards the text and the identities of the persons that appear. Biographers began to squeeze out of the sonnets "facts" concerning Shakespeare's life. In some circles, notably those who wish to deny Shakespeare's authorship, such activities continue to this day. Professional scholars, however, now believe that no definite models can be found for the characters. Trying to find out who the youth and the mistress and the rival poet really were has been deemed a futile pursuit. More importantly, the speaker is no longer seen as Shakespeare himself in any literal sense.

In the Romantic era and long afterwards, the idea that poets could and should write about themselves became dominant. When poets wrote about themselves they either meant it--or pretended to do so. The cult of personality prevailed, even after the unreliable narrators began to come on stage in the latter part of the nineteenth century. In a famous line in 1827, Wordsworth asserted that the sonnets were a key with which Shakespeare "unlocked his heart." But in 1876, Browning rather shrilly responded, "Did Shakespeare? If so, the less Shakespeare he!" But Browning did not always stick to the principle implied, despite his remarkable dramatic monologues. Modern scholarly editions do not refer to the speaker as anything but that and no autobiography can be drawn from the poems.

Shakespeare left no personal statements about his role as poet; in fact, he left no manuscripts at all--no letters, no journals, no recorded conversations (as did Ben Jonson). It is true that the speaker in the sonnets is a poet, but there is no evidence that he is Shakespeare's mouthpiece. It is also true, however, that the sonnets *might* have been created from his personal experience. Unfortunately, we do not know what his experiences were, and so we must not pretend that what we read is Shakespeare's personal confession. Besides, thoughtful study of the character of the speaker also makes it very unlikely that the author is speaking.

Let us draw the picture of the speaker as he emerges from the poems. As a character he is largely credible. He is a poet, but one who would be called an anti-hero today. He is clever, though over proud of his logic, and he is not long on self-knowledge. He is less vivid and concrete than the males in Shakespeare's plays but he has more lines than Hamlet, with whom he has some things in common, especially his inconsistent, melancholic speech and behavior. Though we cannot envision him physically, his strings of words reveal in depth his emotional experiences, though sometimes in a teasing fashion. He responds intensely to the other characters, who are themselves not fully drawn. Compared with their flimsiness, he is solid, but still scarcely complete. We know that Hamlet went to Wittenberg, but did our speaker go to a university or even a grammar school?

Shakespeare, as author, knows all about the speaker, but he does not tell us any more than he wants to and that is precious little. We also learn that little only from the speaker's lips. Much is simply overheard: what the speaker tells the young man who becomes his friend and what he says when he addresses the woman who is his mistress. We are also allowed to hear some meditative interior monologues that seem to be addressed directly to us as readers. The remarkable lecture on lust (Sonnet 129), for example, seems like an agonized shout, and the declarative voice in Sonnet 116 (which is a direct antithesis) forcefully praises "the marriage of true minds."

We also come to know the speaker through his succession of cameo appearances: in one instance when he has a vision of his friend like a jewel in the darkness (Sonnet 27), in another when he thrusts his bloody spur into the horse that carries him away from his friend (Sonnet 50), and in a third when like a madman he denounces both himself and his mistress, whom he discovers to be “as black as hell” when he had thought her “bright” (Sonnet 147). These are but random glimpses. The narrative as a whole is like a train ride, during which we can mentally recreate, scene by scene, the landscape of the speaker’s love.

At the beginning the speaker acts like a kindly tutor, advising the youth, whose parents the speaker has known, to perpetuate his beauty by wedding and producing offspring stamped with his superlative virtues. Two things immediately become clear: the speaker loves to contrive arguments to persuade the youth, but he fails to realize (or mention, if he does understand) that the offspring may not live up to expectations. Shakespeare is creating a character who does not have the omniscience of the author and therefore a distance between them is established.

Obviously the speaker does not persuade the youth to take his well-meant advice. All through the first seventeen sonnets the speaker repeats--with subtle variations--his argument for procreation. Perhaps the youth sees the weaknesses of the arguments; perhaps he is bored by the repetition; perhaps he has other plans. We do not know. Shakespeare’s focus is always on what is in the speaker’s mind, and the speaker is portrayed as quixotic: intent on his own logic in support of his obsession--to seek a mate for his young friend, who is painted as the ideal of beauty. In the speaker’s eyes he can do no wrong (except to refuse to procreate); his virtue is supreme.

Later on, the speaker realizes how wrong his eyes have been, but he keeps on with his misperceptions right to the close of the narrative. He is another example of Puck’s verdict, “Lord, what fools these mortals be.” But the speaker’s errors are much more serious in their consequences than any of the characters’ mistakes in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Is he tragic? His actions take a disastrous course despite his good intentions, which is the basic tragic movement from *Oedipus Rex* to the present. On the other hand, he is clearly gifted, intelligent, wise to most of the ways of the world, humble--sometimes to the point of cringing--idealistic, true--in his fashion--to the man and the woman whom he loves. Sometimes he is comic but he never loses his dignity as Bottom does. Instead, he becomes a tragic figure--corrupted and diseased. We also see a lover who is divided about his loves and whose emotional swings are swift and strong. Today he might be diagnosed as suffering from a bipolar disorder. Without this there would be little drama.

The Other Males

The young man has been much described and debated by scholars, who have tried to track down his original. Some have called him Mr. W. H., thus linking him to the elusive dedicatee of the volume, but no connection has ever been established. All attempts to identify Mr. W. H. have failed. Those wishing to follow the history of this controversy will find a fascinating account in the compendious Variorum Edition of the sonnets edited by Hyder Rollins. This is a sixty-four page appendix in small print, and it concludes as follows:

The friend, or W. H., remains unknown. Theories about him are still theories: he may have existed, he may be a fictitious, a conventional, a dramatic figure or figures. In any case, Wyndham . . . was not far wrong in asserting that any attempt to identify the friend of the sonnets must "prove detrimental to an aesthetic appreciation of their lyrical excellence". . . . (Vol. 2, p. 241)

No evidence has emerged since this statement that could unseat this judgment.

What can truthfully be said about the youth is that his portrait is drawn from Petrarchan tradition, except for his sex. He is beautiful, young, aristocratic, a paragon and a cynosure worshipped by society. Later in the sequence he turns out to have feet of clay, but the speaker continues to be true to him. The two men have become bosom friends after the first stage of the narrative, but the youth deserts the speaker for others, including the speaker's mistress. Although the circumstances are not revealed, the youth has some friends that he has lured away from the speaker. The friends mentioned in Sonnets 30 and 31 are mentioned only fleetingly; they are like ghosts, serving only to confirm the youth's faithlessness.

Just as hard to pin down is the so-called "rival poet," who comes on stage briefly at a distance as someone eclipsing the speaker in popularity because he wields "a worthier pen" (Sonnet 79). This poet (along with some other rivals) appears fitfully in Sonnets 78-86, and is characterized only by a few phrases: he has "a golden quill" (88) and writes verses of "proud full sail" (86). Using such clues, scholars have rounded up all the usual suspects from among Shakespeare's contemporaries, and, as usual, have convicted none.

The Mistress

The pattern of identification in the case of the mistress is no different and is similarly unsuccessful. For years she has been called the "Dark Lady," even

though she is definitely not a lady in rank or character. The word *black* is used to describe her from her first appearance in Sonnet 127, where her eyes are “raven black” and “black” is rated as the current preference in beauty. The word *dark* does occur once, and the modern equivalent would be *brunette*; but “the mistress” is the best descriptive term, especially since she is the mistress in the modern sense to more than one male--both the speaker and his friend. She is tyrannical and capricious, with a wandering eye to boot, not the pure idol that Petrarch’s Laura is. She (if it is truly she in Sonnet 128) plays upon a keyboard, which the speaker envies because of her tender touch. This might seem a clue, but the situation was often used in Elizabethan literature.

The upshot of all this scholarship is that the characters are traditional types rather than discernible individuals. Shakespeare’s interest is in the situations and the emotions that are bred by them. The last glimpse that we get of the triangle--in Sonnet 144, “Two loves I have of comfort and despair”--is unique among sonnet sequences, but the characters and their situation most resemble a miniature morality play.

“The World”

Finally, there is another “character,” a thread laid down in Sonnet 1 in the form of the pronoun “we” and made specific--twice--in the couplet. The character (or force, if you will) is “the world,” a phrase of surprising frequency: 27 times in the sequence, 5 of them in Sonnet 9. The phrase varies in its denotation, but it is used mainly to indicate the public, especially the court and the upper classes, which determine social laws. Long before John Stuart Mill, Shakespeare realized the supreme tyranny of public opinion. Shakespeare uses “the world” as a force to be reckoned with and develops situations where that force cannot be defied without penalty. For example, the speaker feels at one point that he must stay away from his friend in society so that the friend’s image will not be ruined by his association with the speaker, who has fallen from grace in certain circles. (Sonnet 36) Tracing this thread will be one of particular interest since it affects the action all the way through to the catastrophe.

Narrative structures

As random as the sonnets sometimes seem, the whole sequence is guided by various forms, such as the continuation of the threads. The poetry itself is traditionally cast in the English form of the sonnet developed by Wyatt and Surrey in the middle of the sixteenth century. Because English has so many fewer rhyming words than Italian, aspiring poets in Britain modified the Italian rhyme scheme, and generally followed Wyatt and Surrey by using the pattern of abab cdcd efef gg. (Of the 154 sonnets, only a few are irregular.) Because of the

traditional *volta*, or turn of thought at the end of the octave (the first eight lines) or at the beginning of the final couplet, or both, the form is suited to narrative shifts and contrasts. A simple, but subtle, example is Sonnet 18 ("Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?"), which establishes the transiency of beauty in the octave, then, at the turn, contrasts the permanence of the person addressed, who shall achieve immortality through the speaker's verses. After the second turn at the couplet, both the person addressed and the readers are swept forward in a vision of life eternal.

Tragic structure

Those who bought copies of the Quarto in 1609 were well aware of the popular sonnet sequences that flourished in the 1590's after the widely admired *Astrophel and Stella* by Sir Philip Sidney, which appeared posthumously in 1591. That sequence and the deluge of sonnets that followed bore titles named after the lady being praised and had at least a token narrative of a conventional nature drawn from the Italian tradition. Shakespeare, entering the lists towards the end of the sonnet vogue, used the conventions in a different way. His sequence was strikingly different in being addressed first to a young man and then to a woman of great sexual appetite and little fidelity. As a successful dramatist Shakespeare knew how to paint vivid portraits in short spaces. Characters like Richard III and Prince Hal could reveal themselves quickly in intimate speeches. (Hamlet's seven soliloquies can be taken out of context and read seriatim as a psychological novel.) The story of the speaker of the sonnets takes longer to develop fully and lacks the framework of specific narrative detail, but it is nevertheless a strong and dramatic tale. In fact, it follows the basic form of the Shakespearian and other classic tragedies.

The opening section of the sonnets in which the speaker tries to convince the youth of the virtues of procreation is equivalent to the exposition in a drama. The relatively sunny scenes between the speaker as avuncular teacher and his youthful friend as resistant pupil reveal a subtle agon not unlike that between Polonius and his son Laertes, who almost completely ignores his father's lecture. All the sonnets are structured like arguments and seem at first like excessive repetitions. Although we are not told what the youth replies, his answers are obviously rejections.

The second section of the sonnets has a complication similar to that in a Shakespearian tragic structure: the speaker gives up trying to convince the youth to get married and have children and begins to fall in love with the youth himself. Gradually the men become close friends, and the speaker treats the youth more like an adult and an equal. As the emotional intensity increases, the pair become "one soul in bodies twain" (a common phrase of the period), and the crucial step

is taken when each gives his heart to the other. (Sonnet 22) The bliss is short lived. Not only does friction develop, but the agon is complicated by the introduction--at first very briefly--of the triangle involving the mistress, who becomes the mistress of each man in turn. (The first stage of this is evident in Sonnets 39-42.) The plot proceeds slowly because the speaker is unwilling to give up his love for his friend, the one thing that endures, with difficulty, until the close.

Much longer is the third section, which follows the waves of emotion that become more complex as they ebb and flow. As the center of the sequence approaches, the speaker sinks into the deepest despondency, imagining his death and asking his friend not to mourn longer than the bell tolls. (Sonnet 70) Though he discovers that his love has betrayed him (Sonnet 80) and his poetic power seems spent, he continues to praise his friend and recover from his hatred. But the oscillations continue, too, and the speaker reveals his own infidelity. By the end of the section (Sonnet 126), the friend has taken up with others, and the empty spaces at the end of the poem suggest the finality of their relationship.

The pathos--typical of the fourth act in a tragedy--begins early and lasts long; the sonnets' structure is more like that of *King Lear*, which takes a downward plunge with the rejection of Cordelia at the end of act one. The fourth section, the sonnets addressed to the mistress (127-152), intensify the bitterness of the speaker, and cynicism predominates. More swiftly than the sorrows of the speaker and his friend, the harsher infatuation with the mistress comes to grief when the speaker loses her utterly to the young friend, whom she keeps in thrall. The speaker's descent into hell, then, is complete when he loses both his loves and fails to find a way out. (Sonnet 144) Ironically he still has doubts, but the reader does not.

In the last section, as in a drama's last act, the speaker/protagonist makes a tragic discovery--this time without a doubt. In Sonnet 152, we learn that the speaker has found out that the mistress has been unfaithful to her husband (she has broken her "bed-vow") and, in effect, betrayed at least three men. The speaker has gone from one catastrophe to another. To cap it all, he reveals that he is himself "forsworn": he has betrayed himself by swearing her "fair" all along.

In Sonnets 153 and 154, the catastrophe is rounded out by a final discovery: the speaker has contracted a venereal disease and is seeking a cure in the sweat baths that were commonly built to relieve afflictions like syphilis. That Shakespeare had such an idea in mind is supported by his frequent mention of such illnesses. One striking parallel in the plays comes in Pandarus' vicious epilogue to *Troilus and Cressida*:

Brethren and sisters of the hold-door trade, [prostitution]
Some two months hence my will shall here be made.
It should be now, but that my fear is this,
Some galled goose of Winchester [prostitute] would hiss.
Till then I'll sweat and seek about for eases,
And at that time bequeath you my diseases.

By the end of the sonnets the triumph of Cupid is complete. As the last two poems show, all efforts by Diana and her maidens to defeat Cupid, "the general of love," will fail. That eternal agon is foredoomed.

Other Narrative Devices

Because the tragic progress is recounted through the words of one man, other narrative means are devised by Shakespeare to enhance the story. The chief of these we can call affective: the forward motion is propelled by subtle (and not so subtle) shifts in the speaker's emotions. Since he is torn (his agon is largely internal) his positive and negative feelings, especially those towards the youth, are closely juxtaposed. In Sonnet 26 ("Lord of my love"), for example, the speaker happily takes on the role of vassal to his friend and trusts him to inspire his poetry. But when (in Sonnet 27, "Weary with toil") he retires to write and suffers a disturbing (though beautiful) vision of his friend, he can find no rest either for himself or his friend, in body or in mind. The horseback poems (Sonnets 50 and 51) also illustrate cleverly how emotions can slow and speed journeys to and from the loved one. As the speaker rides, he feels both the grief that lies ahead and the joy that lies behind.

The pendulum of feeling swings often and swiftly but there are just enough variations to create a sense of forward motion. Sometimes, Shakespeare builds groups of sonnets that intensify a single emotion, like the growth of his love for the youth in Sonnets 18 through 26 or his disgust with his sins of the flesh that rises to a crescendo from Sonnet 141 (which acknowledges the falsity of his sight) through Sonnet 146 ("Poor soul, the center of my sinful earth") to the horrified admissions of betrayal at the end of the sequence. That Shakespeare is using this wave technique consciously is apparent from the beginning of Sonnet 60:

Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore,
So do our minutes hasten to their end,
Each changing place with that which goes before,
In sequent toil all forwards do contend.

The movement of (and within) the sonnets thus reflects the emotional ebb and flow of our own lives.

The simple repetition of theme that characterizes the first seventeen sonnets is a subtle way of moving emotions forward, including the implied resistance of the youth. The reader doesn't realize quite what is happening until the end of this first group when the contending promises of personal immortality--through procreation and through the poet's verses--are neatly packed together in the couplet of Sonnet 17. The speaker has promised both to the youth by way of finally winning him over. Now he can go on in Sonnet 18 to direct praises of the youth on his own behalf.

Another device used to enrich the narrative is the miniature allegory. Because the whole story is essentially allegorical, a periodic change of scale can create a sense of moving quickly on. The brief digressions add another drama to the main stream. The most obvious allegories appear in the catastrophe, when the tragic agon created by the triangle is epitomized in Sonnet 144 "Two loves I have, of comfort and despair." There the speaker, like an everyman in a morality play, is torn between a good angel and a bad one. And finally, the two Cupid sonnets (153 and 154) cap the whole sequence by adding mythic allegory to a pair of poems which tell the same story twice, thus echoing of the repetitive form used in the opening section. Sonnet 1 established the thread of Eros by using the myth of Narcissus. The thread reappears throughout and culminates in the agon between Venus (the mother of Eros, or Cupid) and Diana, the goddess of chastity. Eros, "the general of hot desire," wins the battle, and the results, especially the diseases incurred by humans, demonstrate the hazards of our sexual being.

Vocabulary

Anyone attempting to read the sonnets must be forewarned: the differences between Elizabethan English and our current usage abound. All the words cannot possibly be listed here, so a scholarly edition such as the Arden or the Oxford Shakespeare is a more than useful aid. The commentary that follows has rendered the meanings of every sonnet according to the best lexical information available, but many problems are well-nigh unsolvable. *The Oxford Complete Sonnets and Poems* edited by Colin Burrow is exceptionally thorough regarding difficult words and passages and gives the reader a chance to decide for himself among the various possible meanings. In addition, it must be said that while the *New Oxford English Dictionary* is unmatched for definitions generally, all the many meanings for a given word are not applicable and the dates of citations must be noted. In some instances a citation may indicate that a particular word or phrase is found only in Shakespeare's sonnets, and therefore the editors had to construct their own meaning. In the last analysis, the meaning

of a given word in a given line is determined by the context. Ironies and ambiguities often must be matters of individual interpretation.

Certain key words must be mentioned in advance because they are vital to an understanding of the whole. First, the words *friend* and *lover* were interchanged quite freely in the late sixteenth century. The word *love* did not imply a sexual relationship as a rule, so that when Shakespeare has one man use the verb to express the admiration of one man for another--as he does, for example, in *Julius Caesar* and *Coriolanus*--a sexual relationship is not intended. (The word *lover* appears in only two places in the sonnets but sexual relations exist and are expressed in other ways.) The word *friend* is very flexible in its reference and was certainly used at times to mean what we now call a lover or sexual partner. Unfortunately it is not easy to tell. There is no absolute evidence that the speaker and his friend were lovers in the physical sense, but there is no evidence to the contrary either. That the speaker and the mistress were sexual partners--with each other as well as with others--is plainly stated in Sonnet 152 in the final climactic revelation.

The word *mistress* can be ambiguous, too, and did not usually imply a physical relationship. This is important when trying to determine, for example, the significance of the speaker's phrase describing the youth as the "master mistress of my passion" in Sonnet 20. Its meaning has caused much controversy: does it refer to a sexual relationship or does it only denote the control of the emotions generally? If, as the following commentary suggests, Sonnet 20 is pivotal, Shakespeare could well have left the whole poem intentionally ambiguous. The reader is just realizing that the speaker's feelings towards the youth are more than avuncular.

More problems arise when certain ordinary words have slang meanings now obsolete or obscure. Did Shakespeare intentionally use them for his audience of "private friends"? In Sonnet 1, for example, the word *bud*, which is used in the context of implied masturbation (l. 11) by the narcissistic youth, has the slang meaning of penis. This is startling to a modern reader, but the durability of this usage is shown by its having been found in recent years in the Bahamas. However, the hazards are great. In the same sonnet the important symbol of the rose appears, and the slang meaning of rose for the female genitalia has been brought up as pertinent not long ago. But does it really apply here? Context, again, is all. What could this mean as applied to the youth? It seems unlikely that we can ever be sure how Shakespeare and his contemporary readers felt about it. Slang is slippery and ephemeral. We should remember that if double entendres weren't double, they would lose their force. And sometimes we must accept being left in linguistic limbo.

Long-standing Issues

When W. H. Auden declared in 1964 that more nonsense had been written about Shakespeare's sonnets than any other literary work in the world, his judgment was not new. And the mountain of criticism has continued to grow; bardolatry is not dead.

To get matters into perspective, we need to remember that information about the sonnets did not begin to accumulate until the late eighteenth century when Edmond Malone completed the first scholarly edition, *Plays and Poems*, in 1790. Though Shakespeare probably began writing the sonnets by the mid 1590's-- and there has been much futile dispute about their dates--there was no recorded mention of them until 1598. Then a gentleman of letters, Francis Meres, published a book titled *Palladis Tamia*, which surveyed literature past and contemporary. It specially praised Shakespeare, named some of his plays, and cited his "sug'red sonnets among his private friends." None of the sonnets were published until 1599 when two were pirated by the printer William Jaggard for a volume he put together under the title *The Passionate Pilgrim*. Jaggard falsely claimed that all the poems in the book were written by Shakespeare.

The complete sonnet sequence did not appear until 1609. This book, the first Quarto, was made available by Thomas Thorpe, who wrote the cryptic dedication which no one has yet deciphered. Far too much time, energy, and paper has been devoted to this problem, so I shall say no more. The actual title of the Quarto was *Shake-speare's Sonnets*, a point of interest because no other sonnet sequence was given the author's name as title. Most sonneteers followed the lead of Sir Philip Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella* (1591) by using an invented name, most often that of the woman worshipped in the poems. *Diana*, *Cynthia* and *Delia* are examples of the ladies so honored. The fact that Shakespeare's sonnets have his name suggests, but does not prove, that he did not invent the title any more than he wrote the dedication. Was the collection compiled by Shakespeare himself? Was it given to Thorpe by the author or an intermediary? The chances are we shall never know.

What does seem likely is that the sonnets as published were transmitted intact to the publisher; although this cannot be proved, the sonnets are now treated as if they were a whole presented in the order intended by Shakespeare. In the preceding centuries, the order has been widely disputed and alternate orders have been proposed. Any reader wishing to follow this controversy should begin by consulting Hyder Rollins' account in the Variorum edition of 1944. The text you will be reading has been modernized in keeping with my understanding of the work, and as few changes as possible have been made

other than in punctuation, capitalization, and italics. Obvious errors have been silently corrected. Most importantly, the sonnets are numbered as they are in the 1609 Quarto. This is universal practice now, but in the second Quarto of 1640, the sonnets were re-ordered and the numbers removed by the publisher, John Benson, and until Malone's scholarly edition in the late eighteenth century, his ill-advised changes were influential.

The issue of the text is linked to the issue of sexuality. No very early reactions to the sonnets were recorded at all except the brief clause, already quoted, by Francis Meres. Some of the poems copied in private manuscripts have survived. However, no significant comments appeared until the second Quarto. Like the first publisher, Thomas Thorpe, the second, John Benson, was an entrepreneur primarily interested in making money. At the same time he did not want to alienate an increasingly Puritan society. To that end, he gathered the sonnets, re-arranged them--cutting some up in the process--and shoved them together to disguise the fact that they were fourteen-lines originally. He also gave them titles of his own devising to suggest their morality, and finally wrote a preface which, strangely, described the sonnets as "serene." Eight of the poems were omitted and other poems by other poets were mingled with Shakespeare's without acknowledgment. His main change, however, was switching male and female pronouns to conceal the fact that many of the poems were addressed to a young man.

In the eighteenth century, sonnets were out of fashion and ignored. Dr. Johnson did not think them worth criticizing. He edited Shakespeare's plays, but he did not deign to do the same for the sonnets. Though he admired the plays he did not think them great sources of moral instruction, and one suspects that he thought the same about the sonnets. He simply didn't comment. It was the same Johnson who told Boswell that all stories ought to be true. With the Romantics, the sonnet was restored, but the taint of what the Victorians considered sexual immorality still clung to Shakespeare, who was cheerfully bowdlerized. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, opinions began to change because bardolatry had taken over. Though Oscar Wilde was scarcely the most popular advocate of the sonnets, he was influential, and *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.* (1889), a fanciful picture of a boy-actor in Shakespeare's plays, gave further impetus to the search for the identity of the friend in the sonnets. Readers of all sorts had already begun to look for the "true" story behind them. What would Dr. Johnson have said?

In the twentieth century, and now in our own, sexuality in the sonnets became a primary matter of interest, and the arguments and theories have somewhat clouded over the poetry. It cannot be denied that *homosexuality* and *homoeroticism* are words that came into being in the nineteenth century and that

the sixteenth century drew no line separating “gay” from “straight.” The Tudors were scarcely liberated, however. Sodomy was forbidden and the statutes decreed capital punishment for the convicted. We can be somewhat pleased to find out that only one execution is known to have taken place. But we must also confess that both the Elizabethans and the Victorians were more oppressive than not.

It is time now to go back to the sonnets and reread them for what they are: explorations of the relationship between sexuality and what we have invented as “love.” Ultimately they constitute the tragedy of the flesh and the eternal story of Eros and self-betrayal. To appreciate Shakespeare’s accomplishment, we need to read the whole sequence, not just a smattering of anthology favorites. Shakespeare’s story may at last be seen as the best one.

Kenneth C. Bennett

*From fairest creatures we desire increase,
 That thereby beauty's Rose might never die,
 But as the ripper should by time decease,
 His tender heir might bear his memory:
 But thou, contracted to thine own bright eyes,
 Feed'st thy light's flame with self-substantial fuel,
 Making a famine where abundance lies,
 Thyself thy foe, to thy sweet self too cruel:
 Thou that art now the world's fresh ornament,
 And only herald to the gaudy spring,
 Within thine own bud buriest thy content,
 And tender churl makes waste in niggarding.
 Pity the world, or else this glutton be,
 To eat the world's due, by the grave and thee.*

In almost every line this sonnet lays down a thread of thought which will be traceable in the rest of the sequence. Some of these are obvious, some more subtle. All may be dropped from time to time only to be taken up again later. Some are introduced briefly, disappearing when their work is done, like minor characters in the plays. In the first line of Sonnet 1, for example, the word *increase* (emphasized by its position at the end of the first line) introduces the idea of procreation, a dominant thread in the first seventeen sonnets but dropped thereafter. Other threads run through the whole fabric: beauty (and its symbol, the rose), immortality, time, and death—all of which appear in the first quatrain.

However, the most crucial element in the sonnets is the character of the speaker, the only voice Shakespeare allows us to hear. It is his tragedy that slowly unfolds, each sonnet a scene in the drama. The speaker engages right away in an argument, his favorite form of discourse, and the first line is a typical axiom-like beginning from which the rest of the sonnet develops. Because everyone wishes to preserve beauty, he argues, we wish for the “fairest creatures” to produce heirs that will make them live in memory even though they must die in the course of time. Like a wise uncle, the speaker leads the youth he addresses through a train of logic, chastising him for not wanting to marry and have offspring to preserve his beauty. How successful the speaker will be in persuading the

young man is the key question that draws the reader on.

An agon—a dramatic struggle—develops between the speaker and the youth. This subtle contest of wills goes on so long that the reader realizes how difficult it is for the youth to be convinced, despite the rhetorical skills of the speaker. In Sonnet 1 the youth may well be antagonized by the speaker's accusations of narcissism, but he may also be indifferent. Since he says nothing in the whole sequence, he must be understood by inference. The very fact that the speaker feels he must hammer at the same theme for seventeen sonnets indicates that the youth is resisting. By this technique Shakespeare achieves dramatic interest like that of a mystery with few clues.

The agon begins with the second quatrain, when the speaker addresses the youth directly for the first time with a reprimand. Instead of being contracted to another (a hint at marriage) the youth as obsessed with himself as Narcissus was. He is contracted to his own "bright eyes" (l. 5), which will become a major thread—a symbol of appearance as opposed to reality. The speaker warns him that he is using up his own reserves of energy to feed his life's flame. Where he had an abundance of procreative power he is creating a famine. The octave ends with the speaker's most serious criticism: "Thyself thy foe, to thy sweet self too cruel." This line enunciates the overarching theme of the sonnets: betrayal, especially self-betrayal. The speaker sees in the youth a betrayal that he will finally realize in himself. He will also be cruel to himself, sometimes without knowing it.

Next, in the sestet, the speaker argues that the youth has a role to play as "the world's fresh ornament" (l. 9). He becomes a force of nature when described as a "herald to the gaudy spring." (l. 10) In these hyperbolic metaphors the speaker shows his susceptibility to the youth's charms, and, in his role as mentor, he repeats his warning against a narcissistic approach to life. He clinches his

argument with a paradox (a device he uses lavishly): the youth is wasting his beauty by being miserly ("niggarding," l. 12). He is a churl, a worthless fellow, by sinning in this fashion—but a tender one. (This is a reverse parallel to his being cruel to his own sweet self in line 8.)

The speaker ends by admonishing the youth that he has a duty to the world, which would suffer from his failure to reproduce. That would be a form of gluttony (one of the Seven Deadly Sins) because he would overindulge himself, denying his beauty to others. If he went to his grave without offspring he would betray both himself and the world.

By this, the speaker introduces another force in this sonnet which we shall call "the world." This thread appears in both lines of the couplet (and in l. 9), and it refers to the collective will of society, especially those in positions of power and influence. This takes us back to line one, where the word *we* subtly introduces the power of society (including the speaker) to control individual behavior. Shakespeare well knew the tyranny of public opinion.

*When forty winters shall besiege thy brow
 And dig deep trenches in thy beauty's field,
 Thy youth's proud livery, so gazed on now,
 Will be a tattered weed of small worth held:
 Then being asked where all thy beauty lies,
 Where all the treasure of thy lusty days,
 To say within thine own deep sunken eyes,
 Were an all-eating shame, and thriftless praise.
 How much more praise deserved thy beauty's use,
 If thou couldst answer, "This fair child of mine
 Shall sum my count and make my old excuse,"
 Proving his beauty by succession thine.
 *This were to be new made when thou art old,
 And see thy blood warm when thou feel'st it cold.**

If the youth had immediately taken the advice of the speaker in Sonnet 1, another sonnet would not have been necessary. Like the patient tutor that he is, the speaker hopes to drive his point home by using more forceful metaphors depicting the youth's future at the age of forty. Again the enemy is time and his ravages are described in military terms (*besiege* and *trenches*), implying the great agon between time and beauty. This agon will inevitably be won by time, and the speaker uses that axiom to win his point in his own agon with the youth. Another shift in metaphor helps to support him. Now the youth, who was in Sonnet 1 the "fresh ornament" of the world, has his "proud livery" reduced to a "tottered [tattered] weed of small worth." (l. 4) The implication is that the youth will then be no better than his garments. He who was the object of "the world's gaze" will be devoid of beauty.

Shakespeare cleverly places these particular sonnets back to back; the pictures of youth and old age are so closely juxtaposed that decay seems cruelly immanent. In the second quatrain, the focus shifts towards death, which lurks behind the youth's "deep-sunken eyes," eyes that in Sonnet 1 (l. 5) were bright with vitality. The idea of self-betrayal is also carried over from Sonnet 1, brought on by the implication of the youth's bad judgment. Note that the thread of gluttony in the first poem (l. 13)

reappears at the end of the octave in Sonnet 2 in the phrase “all-eating shame.” The speaker makes it clear that the potential catastrophe could be avoided if the youth would submit to marriage and fulfill his duty to the world by having beautiful progeny. Then—so goes his logic—if society should question the youth’s use of his beauty, he could point to his own “fair child” (l. 10) to justify his existence. Also, a child would be a rebirth for him, warming his blood when he feels the chill of age.

Such logic may be questioned. The child may not be as beautiful as its father. In fact, he may not have offspring at all. The speaker ignores this. What he is doing is appealing to the youth’s vanity—his possible need to have his beauty verified. The speaker’s eloquence, as evident in the paradoxes of the couplet (as in Sonnet 1), may curry favor with the youth, but it will also feed his pride, and pride is the deadliest of the Seven Deadly Sins. The charge of gluttony would be darkly overshadowed.

*Look in thy glass and tell the face thou viewest,
 "Now is the time that face should form another,
 Whose fresh repair if now thou not renewest,
 Thou dost beguile the world, unbless some mother.
 For where is she so fair, whose uneared womb
 Disdains the tillage of thy husbandry?
 Or who is he so fond will be the tomb
 Of his self-love to stop posterity?"
 Thou art thy mother's glass and she in thee
 Calls back the lovely April of her prime,
 So thou through windows of thine age shalt see,
 Despite of wrinkles this thy golden time.
 But if thou live remembred not to be,
 Die single and thine image dies with thee.*

The speaker turns up the pressure, beginning with a command and then asking some direct questions. (Questions are asked more and more after this, forcefully combined with the arguments.) Instead of imagining the youth's future, the speaker tells him to look into his "glass" (a common word for "mirror") and tell the face he sees that now is the time he should create another such face. By this the speaker seems to move closer, almost peering over the young man's shoulder. His logic again warns that if the youth does not replicate his own image, he will not play fair with "the world" and will deprive some potential mother of his ability to father beauty. The word *unbless* suggests a devotional and masculine deficiency that the youth would not want to have attributed to him. (l. 4)

The urgent tone is carried over in the second quatrain's argument that the speaker knows no virgin so beautiful that she would refuse to be his wife. The imagery becomes more plainly sexual when he asks what fair woman would disdain "the tillage of [his] husbandry" (l. 6—pun intended). Then the speaker shames the young man with the contention that no one but a fool would be so much in love with himself (Narcissus again) that he would evade procreation.

In the third quatrain, the argument hits home by shifting to familial grounds. The speaker calls the youth his mother's glass, thereby

summoning up for him (and others) the image of “the lovely April of her prime.” (l. 10) Finally he shoots the youth ahead to his future wrinkles described in the first lines of the preceding sonnet. Plowing as a metaphor for sexual intercourse (l. 6) is connected to the deep trenches dug by time in the youth’s beautiful brow by forty winters. As his mother now sees her beauty in him, so will he see himself in his son; despite his wrinkles he will enjoy a “golden time.” (l. 12)

Again the couplet is cautionary. If, says the speaker, you choose not to be remembered, you will die single and your beauty (“image,” l. 14) will die with you. The noose of logic is beginning to tighten with the mention of death—twice in the final line. This is a continuation of the thread of death begun in the couplet of Sonnet 1, followed by the images of deep-sunken eyes and chilling blood in Sonnet 2.

*Unthrifty loveliness, why dost thou spend
 Upon thyself thy beauty's legacy?
 Nature's bequest gives nothing but doth lend,
 And being frank she lends to those are free:
 Then beauteous niggard why dost thou abuse
 The bounteous largesse given thee to give?
 Profitless usurer, why dost thou use
 So great a sum of sums yet canst not live?
 For having traffic with thyself alone,
 Thou of thyself thy sweet self dost deceive.
 Then how when nature calls thee to be gone,
 What acceptable audit canst thou leave?
 Thy unused beauty must be tombed with thee,
 Which used lives th'executor to be.*

The speaker's reproaches to the youth grow stronger here. His argument is repetitious but more insistent, and the suggestions of masturbation are expanded. The tone is set by the three semi-harsh, semi-comic names he uses to address the youth: "unthrifty loveliness" (l. 1), "beauteous niggard" (l. 5), and "profitless usurer" (l. 7), all of which revert to the vocabulary of the first sonnet. Similarly, the threads of money, death and beauty are carried over and combined with legal terms: "beauty's legacy" (l. 2), "nature's bequest" (l. 3), and the "executor" (l. 14). Paradoxically, the youth is both a spendthrift and a miser, another echo of Sonnet 1 (l. 12).

Time has been the youth's greatest enemy so far, but here nature is added as a major force. Nature has bequeathed him beauty, but only as a loan. As a generous lender ("frank," l. 4), she lends to those as generous ("free," l. 4) as she is. But she is not likely to extend his lease on beauty. Almost like a lawyer, the speaker charges the youth with miserliness because he will not marry and have children; therefore the youth abuses nature's largess, which is meant to be spent. Even worse, he can't make a profit, spending huge sums and not investing in legitimate offspring.

The logic continues: since you don't have traffic (sexual) except with yourself, you deprive others of your "sweet self." (l. 10) Therefore you cannot give an "acceptable audit" (l. 12) when nature calls you to the

grave. The conclusion of the argument is also paradoxical. If the youth does not use his beauty (to procreate), his "unused beauty" (l. 13) must go to the grave with him; whereas, if he had used it properly and begot a son as beautiful as he is, that beauty (the son) would live on to be the executor of his will.

Note that the phrase "sweet self," which is repeated from Sonnet 1, reinforces the affectionate feeling that the speaker evinces for the "tender" youth despite the speaker's harsh language concerning his failure to marry. If the youth is betraying his duty to procreate, the speaker is betraying his own attraction by urging the youth to marry.

*Those hours that with gentle work did frame
 The lovely gaze where every eye doth dwell
 Will play the tyrants to the very same,
 And that unfair which fairly doth excel:
 For never resting time leads summer on
 To hideous winter and confounds him there,
 Sap checked with frost and lusty leaves quite gone,
 Beauty o'ersnowed and bareness everywhere.
 Then were not summer's distillation left
 A liquid prisoner pent in walls of glass,
 Beauty's effect with beauty were bereft,
 Nor it nor no remembrance what it was.
 But flowers distil'd, though they with winter meet,
 Lose but their show; their substance still lives sweet.*

Though this sonnet seems not to be addressed to anyone, the opening of Sonnet 6 makes it clear that the youth is still intended as the recipient. However, taken as a separate poem, as a number of the sonnets can be, it takes on a meditative quality and the harsh words of Sonnet 4 are absent. The tone is more relaxed; the insistent queries and the driving force of argument are abandoned for a while. The focus is on time and beauty as embodied in the summer and flowers. Ultimately the subject is that of human decay, which parallels that of the seasons.

The first two lines of this poem talk about procreation, the "gentle work" that leads eventually to the "lovely gaze" of a beautiful child. The owner of this gaze becomes, in turn, a cynosure, gazed on by "the world." But immediately the hours that were used for creation become the destroyers ("tyrants," l. 3) of that same human being. Time will remove ("unfair," l. 4) that beauty which excels all others.

The second quatrain brings in the seasons. In an even quicker progression, time turns summer into "hideous winter" (l. 6) and then destroys him. By contrast two whole lines are allotted to the static winter landscape, which is barren; its "lusty leaves" are gone and its beauty "o'ersnowed" (ll. 7-8). If it were not for "summer's distillation" (l. 9)--a glass vial of perfume made from flowers--both beauty and its

“effect” (l. 11) —that is, what is made from it—
nothing would remain, not even the memory.

However, even though distilled flowers are subject to winter, they lose only their appearance; their “substance” (reality) still smells sweet. The flower (like beauty’s rose of Sonnet 1) stands for the youth, and the perfume (in its protective vial) stands for the child, the essence created from his father’s beauty. Thus the meditation becomes a symbolic message (not an open argument) which implies that if the youth does marry and beget a child, his beauty can be preserved like the flowers’ scent that survives the winter, which stands for the youth’s inevitable death. He, too, will be slain by time.

*Then let not winter's wragged hand deface
 In thee thy summer ere thou be distil'd:
 Make sweet some vial; treasure thou some place,
 With beauty's treasure ere it be self-killed.
 That use is not forbidden usury,
 Which happies those that pay the willing loan;
 That's for thyself to breed another thee,
 Or ten times happier be it ten for one.
 Ten times thy self were happier than thou art,
 If ten of thine ten times refigured thee;
 Then what could death do if thou shouldst depart,
 Leaving thee living in posterity?
 Be not self-willed, for thou art much too fair
 To be death's conquest and make worms thine heir.*

The *then* which opens this sonnet provides a surprise connection with Sonnet 5. It makes the whole of the preceding poem into a premise and therefore Sonnet 6 becomes its momentous logical conclusion. Just when the reader—and the youth—thought the argument had been abandoned, it surfaces again. The speaker tells the youth to make “some sweet vial” (l. 3) before winter “defaces” (l. 1) his summer. Enrich, he says, “some place” (a womb) with “beauty’s treasure” (his semen) before the summer—and therefore his potency—dies a natural death.

Causing wealth to increase in that fashion is not unlawful usury because it makes those happy who pay the loan freely, that is to say, the women who have the beautiful children. Thus, says the speaker, happiness will come to you as the breeder of another self. In fact, if you beget ten children you will be ten times happier. After his usual fashion, the speaker expands the hyperbole, envisioning one hundred grandchildren for the young man. The climax, as we might expect, is the defeat of death by living on through such ample posterity.

The tone has become a combination of the serious and the comic, not unlike that of pompous Polonius. A touch of the comic is followed by more than a touch of the macabre. The last command

that the speaker gives to the youth is to abandon selfishness. He is much too beautiful and virtuous ("fair" embodies both) to be conquered by death and thereby forced to bequeath everything to worms.

Note: the repetition of *self* in *self-killed* (l. 4) and *self-willed* (l. 13) is a subtle echo of the self as foe in Sonnet 1 (l. 8), thus carrying forward the thread of self-betrayal.

*Lo, in the Orient when the gracious light
 Lifts up his burning head, each under eye
 Doth homage to his new appearing sight,
 Serving with looks his sacred majesty,
 And having climbed the steep up heavenly hill,
 Resembling strong youth in his middle age,
 Yet mortal looks adore his beauty still,
 Attending on his golden pilgrimage:
 But when from high-most pitch with weary car,
 Like feeble age he reeleth from the day,
 The eyes (fore dutious) now converted are
 From his low tract and look another way.
 So thou, thyself out-going in thy noon,
 Unlooked on diest unless thou get a son.*

Patterns begin to emerge after the main threads have been laid down in the first half dozen sonnets. Though the subject of the speaker remains the same, new combinations of threads create striking effects. In the first quatrain of Sonnet 7 the eye and court motifs are picked up again in a sunrise scene where ordinary earth dwellers pay homage to the gracious majesty of the rising sun. As elsewhere in the sonnets, looks and gazes are significant. The cynosure—the person or object that attracts and rivets the eyes of the world—typically the courtiers or society in general—is the most powerful force, both political and sexual. Here the cynosure is a double figure, first the sun at mid day and then the youth whom he resembles (l. 6). The mortal gazers adore the sun’s beauty even though he is middle aged. His pilgrimage is “golden,” and his “courtiers” form a retinue to attend him.

However, a dramatic shift comes, as it frequently does, at the end of the octave. As quickly as winter came in Sonnet 5, the sun tumbles from the zenith in his weary chariot (“car,” l. 9). Already he appears to be old aged, feeble and reeling. The reaction from his followers comes just as fast: their eyes, which had been lowered respectfully, now turn away. The same thing will happen, the speaker implies, to the beautiful young man when he ceases to be the cynosure.

The connection between the sun and the youth comes out clearly in the couplet. The youth going out, even dying (“outgoing,” l. 13), in his prime, will not be gazed at by the many unless he begets a son. That son, we are to assume, will be just as beautiful and fit to worship as the sun.

*Music to hear, why hear'st thou musick sadly,
 Sweets with sweets war not, joy delights not joy:
 Why lov'st thou that which thou receiv'st not gladly,
 Or else receiv'st with pleasure thine annoy?
 If the true concord of well tuned sounds,
 By unions married, do offend thine ear,
 They do but sweetly chide thee, who confounds
 In singleness the parts that thou shouldst bear.
 Mark how one string, sweet husband to another,
 Strikes each in each by mutual ordering,
 Resembling sire and child and happy mother,
 Who all in one, one pleasing note do sing:
 Whose speechless song, being many, seeming one,
 Sings this to thee: "Thou single will prove none."*

Just when all the threads seem to be in place, a new one is introduced—music, an important element in the plays but one not prominent in the sonnets. It is clear that the speaker sees musical harmony as a model for marriage, and he suddenly sees this model as a new means for winning the youth over to the cause of procreation. His speech resembles the opening lines of Orsino in *Twelfth Night*, beginning “If music be the food of love, play on.” Neither the speaker nor Orsino is delighted for very long.

One of the misperceptions about the sonnets is that they are “love poems,” as attested by persistent sales of inexpensive, unannotated editions of the sonnets under that rubric. The unwary lover may well complain that he has been sold a bill of goods when he gets to the end, if he ever gets that far.

Sonnet 8 comes close to giving a happy picture of married life, but it is not the “true concord of well tuned sounds” (l. 5) that finally prevails by the end of the sequence. Taken by itself, it would seem to be an alluring argument for marriage. If, the speaker says, the youth is not pleased by the musical harmonies, like those produced by marriage, he should listen more carefully. “Mark how one string, sweet husband to another, / Strikes each in each by mutual ordering.” (ll. 9-10)

The speaker's role as tutor is well played, sweetly convincing. Even the chiding of single life is honey-tongued. (l. 7) He conjures up an ideal father, mother and child, as a happy trio that sing as one. (The parallel to the holy trinity is inescapable, but not explicit.) Their refrain is the message ("speechless song," l. 13) as worded by the speaker: If you stay single, you will never be one (a "seeming one," l. 13) —that is, part of a united family.

*Is it for fear to wet a widow's eye
 That thou consum'st thy self in single life?
 Ah, if thou issueless shalt hap to die,
 The world will wail thee like a makeless wife,
 The world will be thy widow and still weep,
 That thou no form of thee hast left behind,
 When every private widow well may keep,
 By children's eyes, her husband's shape in mind:
 Look what an unthrift in the world doth spend
 Shifts but his place, for still the world enjoys it,
 But beauty's waste hath in the world an end,
 And kept unused the user so destroys it:
 No love toward others in that bosom sits
 That on himself such murderous shame commits.*

Like Sonnet 8, this poem moves away from the hearty visions of procreation (in Sonnet 6) and the admiration of the public (in Sonnet 7) to serious family concerns and the youth's relation to the larger world of others. The expanding vision is accompanied by tightening arguments. The final warnings move from "Thou single wilt prove none" (i.e., a happy father in Sonnet 8) to the youth's possibly committing "Murderous shame" on himself. (l. 14)—in other words, self-betrayal. The tone of voice shifts from quiet encouragement to serious threatening. And, as elsewhere, the threat involves that powerful force called "the world" (the phrase is used five times).

Like Sonnet 8, this poem begins with a concerned, almost pitying question. Here it is a question of life and death, whereas in the previous sonnet it was inexplicable sadness. From the youth's possible fear of "wetting a widow's eye" (l. 1), the image shifts to the youth's possible death as a childless man and the world's mourning for him as if it were a mateless wife. (l. 4) The world will continue to weep, because he will have left no replica of himself behind. By contrast, every true widow with children would have the happiness of looking at her husband's image in her children's eyes.

After the octave, the admonition becomes more emphatic, beginning with the imperative "Look." Understand, says the speaker, that a

spendthrift does not hurt the world; he simply circulates his wealth. Beauty, however, if wasted, dies in the world, and if it is unused (in procreation) it is destroyed forever. Finally, the youth would commit the murderous sin of not showing love for others. The speaker, as usual, is hyperbolic--almost ridiculous in his argument—but his rhetoric has emotive force—or so he hopes. The idea of showing love for others, however, is crucial in the speaker's own development because one of those others is himself.

*For shame deny that thou bear'st love to any,
 Who for thy self art so unprovident.
 Grant if thou wilt, thou art belov'd of many,
 But that thou none lov'st is most evident:
 For thou art so possessed with murderous hate
 That 'gainst thy self thou stickst not to conspire,
 Seeking that beauteous roof to ruinate,
 Which to repair should be thy chief desire:
 O change thy thought, that I may change my mind;
 Shall hate be fairer lodg'd than gentle love?
 Be as thy presence is, gracious and kind,
 Or to thy self at least kindhearted prove.
 Make thee another self for love of me,
 That beauty still may live in thine or thee.*

The speaker in Sonnet 10 takes up the cudgel again, starting with “For shame,” after charging the youth with “murderous shame” at the end of Sonnet 9. The increase in intensity is marked by repeated references to the youth’s hostility to himself, a strong restatement of the self-betrayal motif already evident in Sonnet 1 and steadily increasing thereafter.

In Sonnet 10 the youth is “unprovident” to himself (l. 2), willing to conspire against himself (l. 6), and already on the road to ruin his family’s line. (“Beauteous roof” is a metaphor for his family’s ancestry—or “house,” l. 7). He cannot love others because he is possessed with a “murderous hate” (l. 5) directed against himself. His harsh treatment of his own body is likened to letting the “roof” of his house deteriorate. Because the body is also a house for the soul, the speaker implies that the youth is leaving his soul open to ruin. This thread is important because much later (Sonnet 146) the speaker’s soul will be described as a “fading mansion” (l. 6) suggesting a parallel to the youth’s career.

In the sestet, the speaker implores the youth to change his thought (l. 9) so that he can change his own mind. The speaker’s argument for better behavior begins with a rhetorical question: “Shall hate be fairer lodg’d than gentle love?” (l. 10) (Note that *gentle* has a sexual suggestion as it did in the opening line of Sonnet 5.) The series of imperatives completing the speaker’s attack constitutes a course of self-improvement to stem the tide of self-

betrayal. This involves making his appearance ("presence," l. 11) a model for his reality. He is to be kind and gracious in fact, or at least not hate himself.

In the couplet a new motivation is urged, reminding us that the previous arguments have failed to win the youth over. Now he pleads with him to reform for *his* sake and make "another self" (l. 13): a child who will preserve beauty in the youth's offspring and in the youth himself.

With this sonnet the speaker enters in the first person for the first time. (*I* occurs in l. 9, *me* in l. 13.) His final imperative to the youth—"Make thee another self for love of me" (l. 13)—is a crucial step towards linking their feelings for each other instead of making marriage the prime concern.

*As fast as thou shalt wane, so fast thou grow'st
 In one of thine, from that which thou departest,
 And that fresh blood, which youngly thou bestow'st,
 Thou mayst call thine, when thou from youth
 convertest.
 Herein lives wisdom, beauty, and increase;
 Without this, folly, age, and cold decay.
 If all were minded so, the times should cease,
 And threescore year would make the world away:
 Let those whom nature hath not made for store,
 Harsh, featureless, and rude, barrenly perish;
 Look whom the best endowed, she gave the more,
 Which bounteous gift thou shouldst in bounty cherish.
 She carved thee for her seal, and meant thereby
 Thou shouldst print more, not let that copy die.*

The tone shifts markedly: this sonnet is far less harsh and commanding. The subject is growth, specifically that of reproduction, of new blood being passed along to a new generation. Growing is as quick as waning, the speaker maintains; as you depart, your offspring will increase. What you pass on in your youth you may call yours when you are no longer young. All of this is said rather quickly and brightly in the first quatrain, and the effect is partly produced by the feminine rhymes, which are rather rare in the sonnets.

More solemn and preacherly is the second quatrain, though no *thou's* are used. The argument is that what he is urging—procreation, still—must be sought. If not, population would dwindle, and the world would be depleted in sixty years. It is Benedick in *Much Ado About Nothing* who exclaims in a moment of self-recognition, “The world must be peopled.” Clearly, the youth of the sonnets has not had that moment.

Therefore the speaker, returning to his logical mode, wishes for a natural selection of the “best endowed” (l. 11). Nature has not chosen to keep everyone “for store” (l. 9); let the “harsh, featureless, and rude” (l. 10) perish childless. The speaker seems too harsh here, more like Falstaff in his comments on the sad lot of men he admits recruiting for cannon

fodder in the king's army. As the speaker's character develops, his inconsistencies begin to be more obvious. For the moment, he asks us to believe that those who are affluent deserve more. It is the powerful goddess nature who has made the youth a model. He is likened to an engraved seal that can reproduce that model, and therefore his image shall not die. Once more the speaker is carried away by his own superlatives. Cloning does not give him pause.

It should be noted finally that the speaker has dropped the first person pronoun and has returned to the argument of Sonnet 1, as if for safety.

*When I do count the clock that tells the time
 And see the brave day sunk in hideous night,
 When I behold the violet past prime
 And sable curls all silvered o'er with white,
 When lofty trees I see barren of leaves,
 Which erst from heat did canopy the herd,
 And summer's green all girded up in sheaves,
 Borne on the bier with white and bristly beard:
 Then of thy beauty do I question make
 That thou among the wastes of time must go,
 Since sweets and beauties do themselves forsake
 And die as fast as they see others grow,
 And nothing 'gainst time's scythe can make defense
 Save breed to brave him when he takes thee hence.*

Time, one of the strongest threads in the sonnets, now casts its shadow on the speaker's vision of the natural world. It has been apparent since Sonnet 2 that time cannot be evaded, even by the power of nature herself. The first eight lines are neatly paired but depict an almost random series of images that are connected only by their transiency: the sinking day, the fading violet, the whitened curls of hair, the barren leaves, the trussed up sheaves that resemble an old man being carried to his grave. The very randomness of these glimpses suggests the dissolution of life, the helter-skelter damage done by time.

The question raised by the mortality of all lovely things consumes the speaker, who is still appealing to the youth. He also threatens him by describing his vision of the youth among "the wastes of time" (l. 10), a phrase more devastating than the collective images of the octave. The youth, like "sweets and beauties" (l. 11) will forsake himself and die while others grow. This is the same image that is used in the opening of Sonnet 11, but the optimism has become pessimism. The swift change is not only in keeping with the idea of time, but it reflects the nature of the speaker, which is clearly mercurial.

Despite all the negatives and the first line of the couplet—"nothing 'gainst time's scythe can make defense," the speaker whips out his solution in one word: breed. The cursory closing is not very convincing in view of the case the speaker has made for the omnipotence of time. And he must know it.

*O that you were your self, but love you are
 No longer yours than you yourself here live;
 Against this coming end you should prepare,
 And your sweet semblance to some other give.
 So should that beauty which you hold in lease
 Find no determination; then you were
 Your self again after your self's decease,
 When your sweet issue your sweet form should bear.
 Who lets so fair a house fall to decay,
 Which husbandry in honor might uphold
 Against the stormy gusts of winter's day
 And barren rage of death's eternal cold?
 O none but unthrifths, dear my love you know;
 You had a father, let your son say so.*

The first suggestion of a closer relationship developing between the speaker and the youth comes in the couplet of Sonnet 10; in Sonnet 13 the single word *love* is the seedling vocative that in Sonnet 126 comes to full flower with "O thou, my lovely boy." Following Shakespeare's pronouns and assessing their significance is a tricky business. "Thou" may be more familiar than "you," or it may be the other way round. In the sonnets, it is best to take the words as interchangeable, as they became by the last decade of the sixteenth century. One thing is certain, in Sonnet 13 *you* (plus *your*, *yours*, and *yourself*) appears 17 times, *thou* not at all. Perhaps it was simply a matter of euphony, but the focus on the youth is unmistakable.

More importantly, the word *yourself* (ll. 1, 2, 7) was originally printed as two words, which reinforces the idea of the youth's two selves. The self can be the true soul, the immortal part of body and soul, or it can refer to the whole person. The sonnet's first lines, then, contain the speaker's wish that the youth were his true soul and that he could control himself. However, the youth is in charge of himself only as long as he is alive. Therefore, the argument begins, the youth must prepare for death and create another self, a "sweet semblance" (l. 4) in a child's body.

Furthermore, the speaker continues (in the second quatrain) the youth must prevent the expiration ("determination," l. 6) of that perfect

beauty, which he leases from nature. Then, he says, he will be his whole self again (in the form of a sweet child) after his body's dissolution.

The third quatrain switches to the imagery of the body as a house, picking up the thread from Sonnet 10, where the house refers to the youth's lineage. The speaker, ever the moralist, sermonizes on husbandry, the management of his estate, to hold off "death's eternal cold." (l. 12) Only a spendthrift would fail to be a good caretaker. The metaphor, of course, is aimed at procreation. Rather abruptly, the speaker says, "You had a father; let your son say so."

Because of his emphasis throughout on the youth's body, his physical beauty rather than his soul, the speaker is subordinating reality to appearances against his own advice elsewhere to be skeptical of the eyes' opinions.

*Not from the stars do I my judgment pluck,
 And yet methinks I have astronomy,
 But not to tell of good or evil luck,
 Of plagues, of dearths, or seasons' quality;
 Nor can I fortune to brief minutes tell,
 Pointing to each his thunder, rain, and wind,
 Or say with princes if it shall go well,
 By oft predict that I in heaven find.
 But from thine eyes my knowledge I derive,
 And constant stars, in them I read such art
 As truth and beauty shall together thrive,
 If from thy self to store thou wouldst convert:
 Or else of thee this I prognosticate,
 Thy end is truth's and beauty's doom and date.*

In this poem, “astronomy” (l. 2) means astrology, as it did generally in Tudor times. In the first line the speaker denies using it; in the second, he declares some talent in that field. That paradox drives the whole sonnet, the octave describing what the speaker cannot predict from the heavens, the sestet revealing what he learns from the stars. The stars, of course, are the youth’s eyes, though our knowledge of this comes by inference.

The speaker admits that he cannot foretell good or bad luck, nor the coming of calamities (plagues or famines, l. 4) or what weathers will dominate particular seasons. Neither can he predict the fortunes of princes. These instances pick up the various threads of time, the seasons, and the court (“the world”), at the same time suggesting the relative triviality of them all.

Now it is the eyes that count, and the eyes of the youth are “constant stars” (l. 10) that, read by the speaker’s eyes, provide knowledge (“art,” l. 10) (This, despite the speaker’s realization that eyes can be deceiving.) In this instance the knowledge is that truth and beauty—ideals that the youth embodies—will survive if the youth will convert his share “to store” (l. 12), that is to say, invest in the future by fathering a child.

Again the warning comes on abruptly, like a repeated shot. If the youth does not provide for his future, the speaker can “prognosticate” (l. 13) the fate of the youth’s truth and beauty—they will die. The tone is pompous and the repetition seems mechanical enough to be unconvincing. The speaker must continue his campaign.

*When I consider everything that grows
 Holds in perfection but a little moment,
 That this huge stage presenteth nought but shows
 Whereon the stars in secret influence comment;
 When I perceive that men as plants increase,
 Cheered and checked even by the self-same sky,
 Vaunt in their youthful sap, at height decrease,
 And wear their brave state out of memory;
 Then the conceit of this inconstant stay
 Sets you most rich in youth before my sight,
 Where wasteful time debateth with decay
 To change your day of youth to sullied night,
 And all in war with time for love of you
 As he takes from you, I engraft you new.*

Here the marriage campaign falters. Briefly, in this sonnet, the speaker turns to his pride as a poet. Instead of urging the youth to find immortality through progeny, the speaker turns to the old idea of gaining eternal life through poetry. The agon shifts from that of the speaker versus the youth to that of the youth (assisted by the speaker) versus time. Even if the speaker does not defeat time, he can at least make it a draw: the final line is, "As he [time] takes from you [the youth], I will engraft you new."

Combined with this contest is the battle between growth and decay. The sonnet has opened with the speaker meditating on transiency, specifically the transiency of growing things. This now is blended with two other powerful images: the metaphor of this earthly life as a huge stage, which is also used in *As You Like It* and *King Lear*, and the influence of the stars, a thread from the previous sonnet.

The idea of growth is developed in the analogy between men and plants (ll. 5-8) that are "cheered and checked even by the same sky." In youth they boast of their "youthful sap" (l. 7), but at their height they begin to diminish, finally wearing out their prime until they are forgotten. This progression parallels the seasonal cycles in Sonnets 5 and 7, thus making the image itself cyclical. The speaker's meditation concludes with a vision of the "most rich" youth on the stage of life (l. 10), then switches to the debate between time and decay over the date when the youth's bright vigor must yield to

“sullied night.” (l. 12) By the clever manipulation of complicated threads and images of battle, the speaker creates a moving panorama of all life, warring against time for the preservation of the youth in poetry. The force and scope of his imagination is, indirectly, a play for the youth’s respect and affection.

*But wherefore do not you a mightier way
 Make war upon this bloody tyrant time
 And fortify your self in your decay
 With means more blessed than my barren rhyme?
 Now stand you on the top of happy hours,
 And many maiden gardens, yet unset,
 With virtuous wish would bear your living flowers,
 Much liker than your painted counterfeit:
 So should the lines of life that life repair,
 Which this (time's pencil or my pupil pen)
 Neither in inward worth nor outward fair
 Can make you live your self in eyes of men.
 To give away your self keeps your life still,
 And you must live drawn by your own sweet skill.*

This sonnet is the second in a continuous trio that ends the first section of the sequence. It steps up the tension with the speaker's challenge to the youth to exceed his efforts in the war against time, which in Sonnet 15 ended as a draw. With the device of two balanced questions of two lines each, Shakespeare has his heavy-handed speaker repeat his argument for procreation. Some intensity is gained by using the imagery of war, but the obvious purpose is the same. Immortality through poetry has been abruptly dropped.

The images of marriage change, too. In the second quatrain, the speaker portrays the young man as standing "on the top of happy hours" (l. 5), not so subtly suggesting a triumph over time. The prospect of many marriageable virgins ("maiden gardens, yet unset," l. 6) is strikingly new, and the speaker sanctions their desires by labeling them "virtuous" (l. 7). The offspring will be, metaphorically, "living flowers" (l. 7), continuing the thread of natural growth. They are better likenesses than the youth's painted portrait, which is "counterfeit" (l. 8). The originality of the sonnet comes mainly from the imagery, especially when the youth is imagined as an artist who lives by creating his own self-portrait.

In marriage, the speaker goes on to say, the descendants will keep the youth's life alive in a way that neither time's inscriptions nor the

speaker's lesser verses could. No writing can convey to the world their inner virtue or outward beauty in as enduring a fashion as the children themselves.

The paradox of the couplet is already resolved: the youth must give of himself to preserve himself. The speaker, who has already labeled his verse "barren rhyme" (l. 4), must yield place to the youth who is the true artist, surviving through his "own sweet skill" (l. 14)—a suggestive phrase under the circumstances.

*Who will believe my verse in time to come
 If it were filled with your most high deserts?
 Though yet heaven knows it is but as a tomb
 Which hides your life and shows not half your parts.
 If I could write the beauty of your eyes,
 And in fresh numbers number all your graces,
 The age to come would say, "This poet lies.
 Such heavenly touches ne'er touched earthly faces."
 So should my papers (yellowed with their age)
 Be scorned, like old men of less truth than tongue,
 And your true rights be termed a poet's rage
 And stretched meter of an antique song.*

*But were some child of yours alive that time,
 You should live twice, in it and in my rhyme.*

Now it is apparent why Sonnets 15 and 16 paint such divergent ways of evading death: Sonnet 17 is being set up as the synthesis that will resolve the speaker's inner conflict. In it, the speaker first pursues his full-blown role as the poet who can assure immortality through poetry. Here he looks to the future and the possible survival of the youth despite all-powerful time. Initially he questions what "the world" will think. Will it believe the speaker's account of the youth's worthiness ("high deserts," l. 2)? If there are doubts, heaven (which by rights is more just than time or the world) knows that the speaker's verses are like a tomb or monument that conceals the youth's real life by not showing half his good qualities. (Note the change from the treatment of the grave and tomb in Sonnets 1 and 4).

After this pat on his own back, the speaker reveals more concern with appearances. He praises the physical beauty of the youth, especially his face and eyes (which will later prove to be deceptive). If, says the speaker, in his logical way, he could describe all the youth's perfections, "the world" would accuse him of lying. Therefore his "yellowed" works (his poetic "papers," l. 9) would be scorned and treated "like old men of less truth than tongue" (l. 10). The youth's just deserts would be called poetic madness, like the heroic exaggeration of an old poem.

However—and here the poet triumphs—if you, he says to the youth, had a child alive in the future, you would have two enduring lives: one, in the child, the other in his poetry. Is the speaker naively disclaiming his earlier assertions of time's all-consuming destruction? Is this hubris? Is this Shakespeare's calculated preparation for the bleaker sonnets ahead?

In the couplet, time is simply ordinary time, time that can be conquered. Rhyme is the poet's great weapon, despite what he has said about yellowing pages. It is also the means by which the youth is to be won over. Its beauty is superior to his arguments.

*Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
 Thou art more lovely and more temperate:
 Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
 And summer's lease hath all too short a date:
 Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
 And often is his gold complexion dimmed,
 And every fair from fair sometime declines,
 By chance or nature's changing course untrimmed:
 But thy eternal summer shall not fade,
 Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st,
 Nor shall death brag thou wandr'st in his shade,
 When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st.
 So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
 So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.*

Two questions arise at this point in the sequence. First, is there really a break here as traditional wisdom has it? Or is Sonnet 18 simply an amplification of Sonnet 17 with its growing thread of immortality through verse? Secondly, is the person addressed the same youth, the same youth but older, or a different person altogether? There are no firm answers. What is sure, however, is that the plea for progeny has ceased.

Because Sonnet 18 is one of the most frequently anthologized poems by Shakespeare, it is, more often than not, read out of context. Coming upon it in sequence, however, the reader can immediately see the drastic differences from the opening sonnets, but also obvious are the threads that regularly appear. Sonnet 18 has none of the warnings about self-betrayal and possible death that cast shadows over the first two sonnets and that persist until this burst of enthusiasm. There is no argument to persuade, only the assertion that the poet's lines are eternal.

The youth—and we shall assume that it is the same one addressed so far—is declared superior to a summer's day, which, though traditionally perfect, is subject to defects. The list runs from line three through line eight, going from the specific "rough winds" of May through the general decline of nature. The thread of nature can be traced back to beauty's rose in the second line of the sequence, whose decease is

mentioned in the line immediately following. However, in Sonnet 18 the order is reversed: the word *untrimmed*, which closes the octave, is immediately followed by "But thy eternal summer shall not fade."

This assertion at the opening of the sestet is followed by two more. First, the youth will not be dispossessed of his beauty ("fair," l. 10), nor shall death brag that the youth will wander in his kingdom (which suggests the classical Hades, not the Christian afterworld). Last comes the speaker's proud declaration of the youth's immortality assured through his own "eternal lines" (l. 12). The "lines" may be construed not only as the speaker's poetry but as the threads spun by the Fates (a traditional image), though the couplet refers only to this particular sonnet. The crucial point is that now the struggle against time has been won by both the speaker and the youth. Or so it seems to the speaker.

*Devouring time, blunt thou the lion's paws,
 And make the earth devour her own sweet brood;
 Pluck the keen teeth from the fierce tiger's jaws,
 And burn the long-lived Phoenix in her blood;
 Make glad and sorry seasons as thou fleet'st,
 And do what ere thou wilt, swift-footed time,
 To the wide world and all her fading sweets:
 But I forbid thee one most heinous crime,
 O carve not with the hours my love's fair brow,
 Nor draw no lines there with thine antique pen;
 Him in thy course untainted do allow
 For beauty's pattern to succeeding men.
 Yet do thy worst, old time; despite thy wrong
 My love shall in my verse ever live young.*

The oscillations in the speaker's attitude towards time and immortality are never more evident than they are at this juncture. Just when it seemed most doubtful that time would be conquered because of the youth's failure to marry and have children, the momentum on the side of immortality through verse began to grow, reaching a peak in Sonnet 18. But Sonnet 19 at first reverts to the fearsome ravages of "devouring time." The all-out war with time announced in Sonnet 15 is resumed.

Because of the hyperbolic violence of the opening imagery, the doubts about the speaker's power to foil time begin to grow. Just as Sonnet 18 lists the drawbacks of summer, Sonnet 19 lists all the vicious assaults that the speaker dares time to undertake. The speaker lets his imagination run wild describing mutilations of lions and tigers and the cremation of the phoenix in its own blood (a grotesque paradox since the phoenix was considered indestructible). The speaker's angry tone is built on hyperboles that culminate in the threat of an apocalypse. "And do what ere thou wilt, swift-footed time, to the wide world and all her fading sweets...." The speaker's taunt is an extension and an intensification of the boldness assumed in Sonnet 18.

But hubris is escalating. The sestet conveys this by the series of imperatives virtually shouted at time, forbidding him to carve wrinkles on the youth's forehead. (This is a thread laid down in Sonnet 2.) The speaker

also prohibits time from allowing the youth's beauty to decay because it must furnish the paragon for future generations.

These are wildly futile injunctions. Is the speaker wholly rational when he portrays time as a force that can be persuaded to exempt a single youth from dying? Perhaps feeling he has gone too far, the speaker takes a step back in the couplet—a big one confirming Sonnet 18. No matter, he says, what time does, his verses will perpetuate his love.

How credulous can the youth be at this point? Is the speaker betraying himself by exaggerating his power over time and his ability to make the youth believe in it?

*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.*

If there is a real break in the sequence, it is more likely to be seen as coming after Sonnet 19. The speaker's battle with time disappears (for the time being), and his attention turns to the youth, who is now seen as a sensual attraction, not as someone needing a prod to marry a woman and beget children. The new strength of this relation is evident in the controversial description of the youth as "the master mistress of my passion." The exact meaning is doubtful; the strength of the bond is not. What is also clear is that the male addressed is feminine of face and gentle of heart, and he is not fickle like the false women of the world. His eye is brighter but not given to flirtatious glances; it enhances whatever it looks upon. He is masculine in complexion and physique ("hue," l. 7); he commands the gazes of men and stirs women's hearts. By the end of the octave, the eye is established as a dominant thread drawn from Sonnet 1 (l. 5). As the sonnets progress, the eye will be associated more and more with false appearances as opposed to the truth of the heart.

The sestet tells a miniature tale of the youth's creation: he was first intended to be a woman by Nature, but she fell in love with him and added a penis to him "for woman's pleasure" (l. 13). There is an obvious pun in "pricked thee out" (l. 13), which would not be

offensive to Elizabethans. The tone here is quite comic: the speaker says that the new addition of the penis “defeated” (l. 11), that is, defrauded him of any sexual connection.

And so for the speaker the matter is settled; he has the love of friendship, the women have the youth’s sexual ability to give them physical pleasure. It should be noted that the word *treasure* (l. 14) was used at the time to signify the genitalia. By the end of this sonnet, sexuality has become a thread of major importance. The speaker has come to admit to himself and to the youth what his real feelings are. His behavior is another matter.

*So is it not with me as with that muse,
 Stirred by a painted beauty to his verse,
 Who heaven itself for ornament doth use,
 And every fair with his fair doth rehearse,
 Making a couplement of proud compare
 With sun and moon, with earth and sea's rich gems,
 With April's first-born flowers and all things rare,
 That heaven's air in this huge rondure hems.
 O let me, true in love, but truly write,
 And then believe me: my love is as fair
 As any mother's child, though not so bright
 As those gold candles fixed in heaven's air.
 Let them say more that like of hearsay well;
 I will not praise that purpose not to sell.*

For those well instructed in the ways of Elizabethan sonnets this one might be easier, but it is far from clear at first. One obvious purpose, however, is to poke fun at the pomposities and absurdities of the Petrarchan tradition. Sonnets were falling out of popularity by the end of the sixteenth century and Shakespeare's were late in the game. He could laugh at his art while practicing it.

The speaker declares that he is not like the poet ("muse," l. 1, is an elegant word for a poet at the time) who is inspired by a "painted beauty" (l. 2), not a natural one. He would not use sacred language ("heaven itself," l. 3) for poetic effect, nor would he make constant comparisons of his beautiful mistress and everyone else's.

Finally, the speaker embarks on a list of "couplements" (l. 5), items for poetic comparisons, such as sun and moon, earth and the jewels of the sea, and so on. The list culminates in an overblown phrase—"all things rare that heaven's air in this huge rondure hems." (ll. 7-8) The speaker condemns much but clings to his own hyperboles.

Instead, in the sestet, he vows to be true in love and write simply, describing his love "as fair as any mother's child," not "so bright as those gold candles fixed in heaven's air" (instead of simple "stars"). The speaker concludes by separating himself from those who overdo

poetic decoration; they can use gossip ("hearsay," l. 13) instead. When he says he will not praise anything if he isn't selling it, he is merely repeating a proverbial saying.

The speaker embarks on a list of "couplements," items for poetic comparisons, such as sun and moon, earth and jewels of the sea, and so on. The list culminates in an overblown phrase: "all things rare that heaven's air in this huge rondure hems." (ll. 7-8)

*My glass shall not persuade me I am old,
 So long as youth and thou are of one date;
 But when in thee time's furrows I behold,
 Then look I death my days should expiate.
 For all that beauty that doth cover thee
 Is but the seemly raiment of my heart,
 Which in thy breast doth live, as thine in me.
 How can I then be elder than thou art?
 O therefore, love, be of thy self so wary,
 As I not for my self, but for thee will,
 Bearing thy heart, which I will keep so chary
 As tender nurse her babe from faring ill.
 Presume not on thy heart when mine is slain,
 Thou gav'st me thine not to give back again.*

After his satire on the extravagant language used by previous sonneteers, Shakespeare shows how it should be done by writing a true love song in conspicuously direct diction. He also performs a tour de force by blending conventional images with some of his own key threads. The "glass" of the opening line picks up the thread of the mirror used in the opening of Sonnet 3, where the speaker tells the youth to look into his own glass to remind himself that he should marry soon. The speaker calls the youth his "mother's glass" (l. 9), and imagines him in the future looking into the mirror, which, despite his wrinkles, will show the vestiges of his "golden time" (3. 13). Thus, early on, the glass becomes a thread that connects generations and loved ones.

In Sonnet 22 the thread is extended to the speaker, who at first argues that his own youth will remain as long as the young man has his. But when the speaker sees wrinkles ("time's furrows," l. 3) in his friend's face, he will look for death to end his days. The thread of time's furrows can be traced back to Sonnet 2, which opens with the image of time digging trenches in the youth's aging forehead. When the speaker imagines the youth with wrinkles, he is, in effect, using him as a mirror. Later, in Sonnet 73, the process will be reversed when the speaker says to the youth that he can see the approach of death in his older friend's appearance. ("That

time of year thou mayst in me behold ”)

The chief theme of Sonnet 22 is that of “one soul in bodies twain,” a commonplace in Elizabethan literature. Enthusiastically, the speaker claims in the second quatrain that his friend’s beauty is “the seemly raiment” (l. 6) of his heart because the speaker’s heart is in the friend’s breast and vice versa. The speaker continues this fanciful argument by asserting that they are therefore the same and one cannot be older than the other. Moreover, they must be mutually caring: Like a “tender nurse” (l. 12) each must shield the other from illness.

With a slightly saucy warning in the couplet, the speaker declares that his friend must not count on getting his heart back when the speaker dies because, according to the tradition, when the friend gave his heart to the speaker he did so for eternity.

*As an unperfect actor on the stage,
 Who with his fear is put beside his part,
 Or some fierce thing replete with too much rage,
 Whose strength's abundance weakens his own heart;
 So I for fear of trust forget to say
 The perfect ceremony of love's rite,
 And in mine own love's strength seem to decay,
 O'ercharged with burthen of mine own love's might:
 O let my books be then the eloquence
 And dumb presagers of my speaking breast,
 Who plead for love and look for recompense
 More than that tongue that more hath more expressed.
 O learn to read what silent love hath writ;
 To hear with eyes belongs to love's fine wit.*

The increasing tenderness of the sonnets beginning with Sonnet 20 becomes even more personal in Sonnet 23, which moves through two clear-cut stages following the octave-sestet division. The octave is confessional, in keeping with the humble persona of the speaker, who likens himself to an actor with stage fright. Or, he says, he is like a fierce creature, so full of anger that the strength of his rage weakens his heart. This line is crucial because it lays down a key thread, the truth of the heart (as opposed to appearances). The speaker, like the actor, forgets to say the right words which constitute the ceremony of love, and therefore his love seems to decay.

The sestet's answer to this speechless fear lies in the speaker's writing. In a secular plea to the powers that be (ll. 9-12) he asks that his silent books replace his oral eloquence. His writings are "dumb presagers" (mute foretellers) of his "speaking breast" (l. 10). These writings, including the sonnets themselves, are pleas for love which hope for a sympathetic response. Paradoxically, they say more than his tongue can.

The last plea is to his friend; as such, it is the climax of the speaker's (and the author's) eloquence. The friend is asked "to read what silent love hath writ." (l. 13) This necessitates combining two of the senses—hearing and seeing. To hear with the eyes is the essential feature of love's intelligence. At least that is what the speaker thinks now.

*Mine eye hath played the painter and hath stelled
 Thy beauty's form in table of my heart.
 My body is the frame wherein 'tis held,
 And perspective it is best painter's art.
 For through the painter must you see his skill
 To find where your true image pictured lies,
 Which in my bosom's shop is hanging still,
 That hath his windows glazed with thine eyes:
 Now see what good turns eyes for eyes have done;
 Mine eyes have drawn thy shape, and thine for me
 Art windows to my breast, wherethrough the sun
 Delights to peep, to gaze therein on thee.
 Yet eyes this cunning want to grace their art:
 They draw but what they see, know not the heart.*

The relationship between the senses and the emotions are developed further in Sonnet 24, which establishes once and for all the primacy of the heart over the eyes. The imagery used to explain this axiom is intricate. First, the speaker says that his eye has acted as the painter of his friend's beauty and has engraved it as a picture in his heart. The speaker's body is the frame for this picture. His eye (the painter) excels in perspective, and by this means the friend must see the truth and where it resides—the painter's shop, that is, the speaker's breast. To complicate this conceit further, the poet says that the windows to the shop are glazed with the friend's eyes. The image depends on the idea that one can see one's own reflection in another's eyes, a popular image in sixteenth and seventeenth poetry.

The lesson for the friend is that their pairs of eyes can do good deeds for each other. The speaker's have drawn the friend's beautiful form, and the friend's eyes are windows to the speaker's breast. In a further flight of fancy, the speaker describes how the sun takes delight in peering through the windows to look at the friend's portrait. However, despite all the accomplishments of the eyes, they draw only appearances; they never experience the reality of the heart.

The complexity of the sonnet borders on, if it does not cross into, the realm of the obscure and the

absurd. Shakespeare has the speaker composing conceits like those decried in Sonnet 21, thereby stressing the inconsistency of his character. This is a poetic form of self-betrayal. He simply does not practice what he preaches. Modern readers may be frustrated by such tangles, but it is necessary to unravel them to appreciate the sonnets.

At the close, Shakespeare juxtaposes the elaborate and the simple to achieve dramatic effect. After three intricate quatrains, he quickly and neatly summarizes all in the couplet. A similar device can be seen in Lady Macbeth's speech after the murder of Duncan:

. . . This my hand will rather
The multitudinous seas incarnadine
Making the green one red. (II.ii. 58-60)

The polysyllabic Latinate words in the second line set off the plain and forceful monosyllables of the last.

*Let those who are in favor with their stars
 Of public honor and proud titles boast,
 Whilst I, whom fortune of such triumph bars,
 Unlooked for joy in that I honor most;
 Great princes' favorites their fair leaves spread
 But as the marigold at the sun's eye,
 And in themselves their pride lies buried,
 For at a frown they in their glory die.
 The painful warrior famoused for worth,
 After a thousand victories once foiled,
 Is from the book of honor razed quite,
 And all the rest forgot for which he toiled:
 Then happy I, that love and am beloved
 Where I may not remove, nor be removed.*

The loving intimacy of the friend and the speaker is rarely matched or sustained as it is Sonnets 21 through 25. In the last, their closeness is made more graphic by its contrast to the ways of "the world," particularly the court. The speaker speaks for himself, but his lover is plainly the indirect addressee. Let those who are fortunate, he says, boast openly of their great public honors and high ranks, while he is barred by fortune from such triumphs. However, the first quatrain concludes, the speaker enjoys an honor that he did not seek but that he thinks of most highly—the honor of being loved.

Favorites of the monarch will show to their best advantage when the ruler smiles upon them. Like flowers they will spread their leaves and blossom like marigolds in the sun, then hide their heads in the dark. But these courtiers will die in their glory when the monarch frowns. (Here the thread of the gaze reappears, both in the monarch's frown and in the sun's eye, l. 6.)

Worse off are the mighty warriors, who may have recorded a thousand victories but who, after a single defeat, have had their names stricken from the "book of honor" (l. 11). Everything good that they achieved has been forgotten. Therefore the speaker is happy in his love and that love's return. Because he cannot be deprived of this sort of honor (nor will he relinquish it), he will achieve something lasting—perhaps eternal—that has nothing to do with procreation or immortal poetry. Eternal love seems like a real possibility, and so this sonnet looks far ahead to the sentiments of Sonnet 116.

*Lord of my love, to whom in vassalage
 Thy merit hath my duty strongly knit,
 To thee I send this written ambassage
 To witness duty, not to show my wit.
 Duty so great, which wit so poor as mine
 May make seem bare, in wanting words to show it;
 But that I hope some good conceit of thine
 In thy soul's thought (all naked) will bestow it,
 Till whatsoever star that guides my moving
 Points on me graciously with fair aspect,
 And puts apparel on my tattered loving
 To show me worthy of thy sweet respect.
 Then may I dare to boast how I do love thee;
 Till then, not show my head where thou mayst prove me.*

While Sonnet 25 contrasts the world's idea of honor with the speaker's sense of honor in love, Sonnet 26 deals with the duty that true love requires. The speaker insists that he is not showing off his wit but avowing his allegiance to the lord of his love, that is, his friend. Now their relationship is described in feudal terms. The speaker voluntarily becomes the vassal of his lord because of the latter's merit, and the poem (a "written ambassage," l. 3) is the declaration of his servitude. The bond of perfect equality in love is now weakening.

The duty is so great that the speaker cannot find words to express it, but he hopes that his friend (and lord) will accept his poem, although it may seem bare, and add to it a good idea from his own soul to make it worthy. The friend's idea would come "all naked" (l. 8) from his heart and yet, paradoxically, would clothe the bareness of the speaker's verse.

This dependency, the speaker says, will continue until his own guiding star graciously shines on him at a propitious moment ("fair aspect," l. 10) and clothes his tattered love poem so as to make the speaker worthy of the friend's esteem. Only then will the speaker be able to boast of his love and appear in public

where his friend can assess his (the speaker's) worth.

This sonnet is a humble dedication to his craft as well as to his lord. It weaves conceits so elegant and intricate that they belie any impoverishment of wit. Instead, the poem suggests some insincerity on the speaker's part and an unwillingness to adhere to his own devotion to plain and direct discourse in Sonnet 21. Does he really believe in his friend's poetic superiority?

*Weary with toil, I haste me to my bed,
 The dear repose for limbs with travel tired,
 But then begins a journey in my head
 To work my mind when body's work expired.
 For then my thoughts (from far where I abide)
 Intend a zealous pilgrimage to thee,
 And keep my drooping eyelids open wide,
 Looking on darkness which the blind do see.
 Save that my soul's imaginary sight
 Presents thy shadow to my sightless view,
 Which like a jewel (hung in ghastly night)
 Makes black night beauteous and her old face new.
 Lo, thus by day my limbs, by night my mind,
 For thee, and for my self, no quiet find.*

After closeness comes separation, the separation of loved ones being a traditional part of the sonnet sequence. Where the speaker has actually traveled, we never know. Indeed, the journey may be imaginary. It is not important. But where the speaker's thoughts go is crucial. They make "a zealous pilgrimage" (l. 6) to the addressee, presumably, but not inevitably, his friend. The idea of a pilgrimage has religious overtones, but the true journey is a night vision, a work of the speaker's mind after his body's work is done. (l. 4) Though no specific details of time or place are given, Shakespeare artfully creates a scene for the reader.

The speaker says that he keeps his "drooping eyelids open wide" as he looks into the "darkness which the blind do see." (ll. 7-8) The reader's imagination is stimulated by the poetry and follows the vision of the speaker's soul. This presents the image of the beloved to his "sightless view," the basic oxymoron on which the reader's belief rests. The appearance is the reality because it arises from the soul (l. 9). This "shadow"—his lover's visage—is like a jewel hanging in terrifying darkness. The night is made radiant by the jewel (jewels were often thought to emit light), and night's ancient face (also traditional) looks fresh and new.

The result here (interestingly, there is no argument) is that the speaker, who is unquiet, sleepless in mind and body, is nevertheless able to see in the night. Despite their separation, the two friends reunite. The interaction of their imaginations has made for a stronger bond. Darkness has been negated, and there is light.

*How can I then return in happy plight,
 That am debarred the benefit of rest,
 When day's oppression is not eased by night,
 But day by night and night by day oppressed?
 And each (though enemies to either's reign)
 Do in consent shake hands to torture me,
 The one by toil, the other to complain
 How far I toil, still farther off from thee.
 I tell the day (to please him) thou art bright
 And dost him grace when clouds do blot the heaven:
 So flatter I the swart-complexioned night,
 When sparkling stars twire not, thou gild'st the even.
 But day doth daily draw my sorrows longer,
 And night doth nightly make grief's length seem stronger.*

This companion piece to Sonnet 27 gives even fewer suggestions of time and place. The speaker is "still farther off" (l. 8), but the reader learns no more. Also, the speaker's condition is more wretched because he has no vision of his friend's "shadow" to comfort him. How can he return home in a happy state when he gets no sleep? (This downward plunge of emotion will reach its lowest point at the beginning of Sonnet 29.)

Day and night oppress one another; though they are constantly at war, they happily join forces to torture the speaker. The day tortures him with hard work; the night by the miseries of toiling even further off from his beloved. The heavenly stars, whose help the speaker could hope for in Sonnet 26 (ll. 9ff.), now conspire against him.

The speaker tries to placate the day by telling him how bright he looks even though the clouds have blotted out the sky. Likewise the speaker flatters dark-complexioned night by telling him how he brightens the evening although the stars do not sparkle ("twire," l. 12).

The couplet neatly summarizes the speaker's grief by pairing the day and night again--one line for each. Daily the day draws out the speaker's sorrows, making them seem longer; nightly the night lengthens the grief to make it seem heavier. Such are the cosmic dimensions of trouble.

*When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes,
 I all alone beweepe my outcast state,
 And trouble deaf heav'n with my bootless cries,
 And look upon my self, and curse my fate;
 Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
 Featured like him, like him with friends possessed,
 Desiring this man's art and that man's scope,
 With what I most enjoy contented least;
 Yet in these thoughts my self almost despising,
 Haply I think on thee, and then my state,
 Like to the lark at break of day arising,
 From sullen earth sings hymns at heaven's gate;
 For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings
 That then I scorn to change my state with kings.*

For the first time, the speaker focuses on his own troubles with “the world,” characterizing himself as a lonely outcast. (The word *disgrace* indicates lack of favor in high places.) “The world” is epitomized in the phrase “men’s eyes” (l. 1), which are now established as both mean and fickle. Fortune is personified, in league with society to disgrace the speaker, who futilely calls on heaven for rescue. The word *deaf* applied to heaven suggests an anthropomorphic god, but this indifferent deity seems crueler than the pagan “fortune.” The speaker, who was at the height of love in Sonnet 26, has quickly descended into sorrow, now greater than that he experienced on his journey (Sonnets 27 and 28).

The octave lists the futile actions of the speaker, creating a litany of self-pity that escalates into self-hatred. What he has actually done we do not know, but his inner turmoil centers on envy (another of the Seven Deadly Sins). This, combined with his discontent even with what he enjoys most, gives evidence of serious depression.

The sestet brings a complete turnabout of emotions. The word *haply* suggests both happiness and chance (not divine intervention) and augurs positive change. The thought of his friend which magically occurs recalls

the “shadow” (vision) that presented itself like a jewel in the night in Sonnet 27 at a moment of despair. These lines imply an upward motion, one made graphic in the picture of the lark rising with the sun. In contrast to the “sullen earth” (l. 12) the lark sings hymns at heaven’s gate. (Is heaven likely to be deaf now? Such a question underscores the essentially secular nature of the poem.) What the speaker wants—and gets—is the remembrance of love, which in turn brings wealth and, finally, a superiority to kings, the highest ranking members of “the world.” The crucial thing for the speaker is not getting into heaven—or even gaining heaven’s ear—but recalling his friend’s sweet love.

*When to the sessions of sweet silent thought
 I summon up remembrance of things past,
 I sigh the lack of many a thing I sought,
 And with old woes new wail my dear time's waste;
 Then can I drown an eye (unused to flow)
 For precious friends hid in death's dateless night,
 And weep afresh love's long since canceled woe,
 And moan th'expense of many a vanished sight.
 Then can I grieve at grievances fore-gone,
 And heavily from woe to woe tell o'er
 The sad account of fore-bemoaned moan,
 Which I new pay as if not paid before.*

*But if the while I think on thee, dear friend,
 All losses are restored and sorrows end.*

Both Sonnet 29 and 30 center on the remembrance of love, its joys and anguish; but Sonnet 30 ends in broader, unqualified contentment. All losses are restored, all sorrows ended. The flood tide of grief subsides, but not without repeated lesser waves. The emotion is not exuberance (singing hymns at heaven's gate) or scorn (refusal to change places with kings); rather it is a sweet satisfaction of justice done and the wretched past put to rest.

The focus on justice and payment of debts begins with the word *sessions* (l. 1), which denotes the sittings of a court. The court that is held is not that of "the world" but that in the speaker's own mind. The injustices done to him, his losses and his failures, have caused great grief in recollection, seemingly as great as when they were new.

The speaker continues his list of woes (parallel to his array of complaints in Sonnet 29) with his lost loves, vanished sights, and grievances of long ago. Like an accountant, he tallies—and repeats—moans that he has moaned before. Extending the financial imagery, he speaks of paying debts again as if he had not paid them before.

Throughout, the speaker is vague about the "things" remembered. (In fact, this poem is more general than the preceding one.) He has

many times failed to find what he has sought, causing him to sigh. He has "old woes" (l. 4) that he can bewail again, some destruction ("waste," l. 4) of things dear to him. Particularly striking are his renewed tears "for precious friends hid in death's dateless night" (l. 6), a relatively specific description. Elsewhere Shakespeare's art of suggestion is much in evidence; the reader can feel the intense emotion without knowing details of the cause. What we feel swings again from emotional bankruptcy to renewed elation.

*Thy bosom is endeared with all hearts,
 Which I, by lacking, have supposed dead,
 And there reigns Love and all Love's loving parts,
 And all those friends which I thought buried.
 How many a holy and obsequious tear
 Hath dear religious love stol'n from mine eye,
 As interest of the dead, which now appear
 But things removed that hidden in thee lie.
 Thou art the grave where buried love doth live,
 Hung with the trophies of my lovers gone,
 Who all their parts of me to thee did give;
 That due of many now is thine alone.
 Their images I loved I view in thee,
 And thou (all they) hast all the all of me.*

The vagueness of Sonnet 30 is partially cleared up by this poem, though it creates new problems as well. The dead "precious friends" of Sonnet 30 are now discovered to be alive; the speaker has lost them to his friend, who has taken them to his bosom, the realm of Love, enriched by their hearts. These lines recall Sonnets 22 and 24, in which the speaker and his friend have traded hearts and the hearts of each live on in the other's breast.

Now the tears which drowned the speaker's eyes (Sonnet 30, l. 5) appear to be merely things hidden in the friend's bosom. There is considerable irony in the tears being called "holy and obsequious" (l. 5) and then described as stolen from the speaker's eyes by "dear religious love" (l. 6). The implication is that the speaker has worshiped, in secular fashion, these friends who have now given themselves to the young man. The friend has, in effect robbed the speaker. (Later in the sequence we will see a similar thing happen when the mistress takes away the friend.)

The logic of the next metaphor is now clear enough: the speaker says, "Thou art the grave where buried love doth live." (l. 9) We are told quite plainly that the "precious friends" are the speaker's former lovers, who are now hung like trophies in the young man's bosom, a bosom that is a tomb. The deepening emotion of the speaker may be more sorrow than anger (he seems almost incredibly forgiving) but the anger emerges with the word *trophies*,

suggesting triumph in war. At the root of their relationship is a battle for the hearts of other males.

The last lines show how great the speaker's loss has been. He sees the images of his former lovers in his youthful friend, and because he has given himself to them and they have become the conquests of the youth, the youth possesses the whole (the "all") of the speaker, too. This is not the kind of possession of the heart that the speaker depicts in Sonnets 22 through 26.

At the end of Sonnet 30 all losses are restored; at the end of Sonnet 31 they become losses again.

*If thou survive my well-contented day,
 When that churl death my bones with dust shall cover,
 And shalt by fortune once more re-survey
 These poor rude lines of thy deceased lover,
 Compare them with the bett'ring of the time,
 And though they be outstripped by every pen
 Reserve them for my love, not for their rhyme.
 Exceeded by the height of happier men.
 O then vouchsafe me but this loving thought:
 Had my friend's muse grown with this growing age,
 A dearer birth than this his love had brought
 To march in ranks of better equipage:
 But since he died and poets better prove,
 Theirs for their style I'll read, his for his love.*

Immediately after the devastations of Sonnets 30 and 31, the speaker takes up the thread of immortality through verse and gives it a new twist. The situation that he posits concerns his "well-contented day" (l. 1), the day for his appointed death when he will accept what nature has in store for him. Death is called a "churl" (l. 2), a word that recalls the epithet "tender churl" used for the youth in Sonnet 1 (l. 12) and establishes an important connecting thread. Agons exist between the speaker and both death and the youth. The speaker has tried to help the youth in his struggle to overcome death, and he now wishes the youth to help him in the quest for survival by preserving his poetry. Now the speaker's main concern is keeping his love alive through his verses, not his being outstripped by later poets, who may have superseded him in style. He makes no allusions to the loss of his friends or to his friend's luring them away.

Beginning with a vision of his own death and the survival of his friend, he imagines the friend by chance ("fortune," l. 3) looking again at his "poor rude lines (l. 4). Knowing that he is at the mercy of his friend, he asks him to preserve the poems, not for their style, but for his love. Other poets excel at "rhyme" (a metaphor for their technique, l. 7); they are "happier" (l. 8) in that they are more gifted. But the true value lies in the heart.

The speaker's humility is, in part, a ploy to keep the thread connecting him with his friend from breaking altogether. All he asks is to be granted a "loving thought" (l. 9), which he then puts into words for his friend. If, he has his friend say, the speaker's muse (his poetic capacity) had kept up with the changing times, he would have achieved more success in the world than his love alone could. (Note that the words *birth*, *ranks*, and *better equipage* suggest the world of higher society. The world's values still prevail.)

However, he continues to have the friend say, since he (the speaker) has died, and better poets have established themselves, "I will read them for their technique, but I shall read his verses for the love they show." (l. 14) It is hard not to observe that the speaker who writes so well—almost as well as Shakespeare!—has a strong sense of his own value and that the friend might not do well if he neglected the speaker's poetic success.

*Full many a glorious morning have I seen
 Flatter the mountain tops with sovereign eye,
 Kissing with golden face the meadows green,
 Gilding pale streams with heav'nly alchemy;
 Anon permit the basest clouds to ride
 With ugly rack on his celestial face,
 And from the forlorn world his visage hide
 Stealing unseen to west with this disgrace:
 Ev'n so my sun one early morn did shine
 With all triumphant splendor on my brow,
 But out alack, he was but one hour mine;
 The region cloud hath masked him from me now.
 Yet him for this my love no whit disdaineth;
 Suns of the world may stain when heav'n's sun staineth.*

The disgrace of the speaker (in Sonnet 29) here gives way to the disgrace of the friend. Both have been rejected by “the world,” but the reader is never told what has happened. Instead the speaker creates an allegory blending the threads of nature (specifically sun and cloud), “the world,” and the “sovereign eye” (l. 2). The speaker does not address the friend, but he is already sending him a message that emerges in the couplet.

The opening lines depict the morning sun (who is like a king) flattering the mountain tops (who are like courtiers dependent on the favor of his gaze). His “golden face” (l. 3) puts forth light that kisses the meadows and gilds the streams (who are like the lesser folk). But in the second quatrain, the “basest clouds” (bad companions) are permitted to blot out the sun’s heavenly beauty (the friend’s stainless reputation). Therefore he is forced to hide from the “forlorn world” (his admiring public) (l. 7). The sun, which now clearly stands for the youthful friend, must steal away to the west in disgrace. Going to the place where the sun sets will mean loss of light--the brilliance of the youth which is his power of attraction. It also implies a kind of death—the loss of social status.

The sestet becomes nostalgic for the speaker. His friend's sunlight once shone upon him, casting "triumphant splendor" on his brow (l. 10). But the friend was his for just one hour. Now he is hidden in "region cloud" (l. 12), which stands for the high-ranking figures at court, perhaps including the undesirable company. Despite the speaker's rejection, the final couplet, as it frequently does, re-asserts his love for his friend. His argument? If the sun of heaven can be "stained" (clouded over), the sun/son of the world (his friend) may be allowed a stain. Giving his friend license to sin is a way of encouraging him to come back; it is a pardon in advance.

*Why didst thou promise such a beauteous day,
 And make me travel forth without my cloak,
 To let base clouds o'ertake me in my way,
 Hiding thy brav'ry in their rotten smoke?
 'Tis not enough that through the cloud thou break
 To dry the rain on my storm-beaten face,
 For no man well of such a salve can speak,
 That heals the wound and cures not the disgrace:
 Nor can thy shame give physic to my grief;
 Though thou repent, yet I have still the loss.
 Th' offender's sorrow lends but weak relief
 To him that bears the strong offense's cross.
 Ah, but those tears are pearl which thy loves sheds,
 And they are rich, and ransom all ill deeds.*

The beginning of Sonnet 34 is based on a proverb: "Although the sun shines, leave not your cloak at home." It continues with the subject of Sonnet 33 and uses the same cloud and sun imagery, adding a traveler without his cloak—the speaker himself. He chides the sun (his friend) for promising a beautiful day but letting the "base clouds" (storms, representing bad companions) spoil his journey. These "rotten" (noxious) vapors hide the friend's "bravery" (l. 4), that is, his finery and his courageous acts, and separate him from the speaker.

The speaker chastises his friend even more severely in the second quatrain, pointing out that it is not enough to dry the rain from the traveler's face. No one will speak well of anyone who will only salve a wound but not cure the disease; the friend must remove the stigma of disgrace. Obviously, the speaker feels that his friend's disgrace has become his. The connection is underscored by Shakespeare's placing the word *disgrace* at the end of the octave as it was in Sonnet 33.

The third quatrain is even stronger. Even though you repent your shameful acts (which are never specified), that will not cure my grief—so says the speaker. Even though the friend is sorry, it is no relief from the cross that the speaker must bear because the offense is so strong.

Despite his grievances, the speaker takes a surprising turn in the couplet. The tears, he says, which his friend sheds in love for him are pearls; they are also rich and “ransom all ill deeds.” (l. 14) The emotion echoes those of the couplets in Sonnets 29 and 30, but the emphasis on wealth is unusual and difficult to explain. The repetition of forgiveness carries weight, however, in swaying the reader’s opinion of the speaker. To forgive so easily and so often must attest to his love, however misguided that might be.

*No more be grieved at that which thou hast done;
 Roses have thorns, and silver fountains mud;
 Clouds and eclipses stain both moon and sun,
 And loathsome canker lives in sweetest bud.
 All men make faults, and even I in this,
 Authorizing thy trespass with compare,
 My self corrupting salving thy amiss,
 Excusing thy sins more than thy sins are:
 For to thy sensual fault I bring in sense;
 Thy adverse party is thy advocate,
 And 'gainst my self a lawful plea commence,
 Such civil war is in my love and hate
 That I an accessory needs must be
 To that sweet thief which sourly robs from me.*

The waves of condemnation and forgiveness rise and fall throughout Sonnets 33, 34 and 35. The focus is at first on the friend's disastrous fall from grace (33.9), but it shifts ultimately to the speaker's internal war between love and hate (35.12). At the beginning of Sonnet 35 the speaker continues to soften the remorse his friend feels. Using four comparisons that center on natural imagery, the speaker argues their parallels to human behavior: All men misbehave, just as roses have thorns, silver fountains have mud, the moon and sun are stained by clouds and eclipses, and the sweetest buds harbor cankerworms. Sin is simply natural—so far.

But the speaker then takes on a larger role, that of an accomplice who admits to endorsing his friend's trespasses, even by the innocent comparisons he has just made. (l. 5) He argues now that he is corrupting himself by minimizing the sins and even excusing them more than is necessary.

The next stage of the argument against himself reaches a moment of greater self-awareness. As he says, he combines reason ("sense") with natural sympathy for his friend's sensual fault (l. 9). The sestet becomes a series of paradoxes, beginning with "Thy adverse party is thy advocate" (l. 10). The irony of using legal language to express an irrational situation is inescapable. The speaker knows what he is doing and yet does it anyway.

The legal paradoxes that give way to the civil war of love and hate end in self-condemnation. By condoning his friend's sinful acts he becomes an accessory to them. The sweet-sour oxymoron of the final line contains a sudden outburst against the friend, who as a thief robs the speaker. The tide of forgiveness has suddenly turned, but only briefly. The friend, after all, is still sweet. The speaker realizes that because he is an accomplice, his friend's betrayal is also a self-betrayal.

*Let me confess that we two must be twain
 Although our undivided loves are one.
 So shall those blots that do with me remain,
 Without thy help by me be borne alone.
 In our two loves there is but one respect,
 Though in our lives a separable spite,
 Which though it alter not love's sole effect,
 Yet doth it steal sweet hours from love's delight.
 I may not evermore acknowledge thee,
 Lest my bewailed guilt should do thee shame,
 Nor thou with public kindness honor me,
 Unless thou take that honor from thy name.
 But do not so; I love thee in such sort,
 As thou being mine, mine is thy good report.*

Here the thread of "one soul in bodies twain" is picked up and followed in what appears to be a voluntary separation. The injuries that have been suffered by the speaker remain with him and must be borne alone. Oddly, the matter of shared guilt doesn't seem to apply to the friend, who is a soul mate. If their loves are united can their disgraces be separated? The speaker's logic is shaky.

In the second quatrain he begins by asserting that in their two loves "there is but one respect." (l. 5) That is, they have nothing but mutual love and esteem. However, some spiteful force has split them. (l. 6) Though the speaker insists that this does not affect their oneness, still it steals hours of pleasure from their "love's delight." (l. 8) At this point it does not seem that the speaker wishes prudence to prevail. If their souls are true, no "separable spite" should be able to tear them apart.

But the speaker is trapped by his fear that "the world" will shame his friend if his fault is openly acknowledged. He is also afraid that if his friend should honor him with some "public kindness" it would sully his friend's reputation. The speaker concludes by asking the friend not to do him any honor. His argument? That he loves his friend so much that they are one person; therefore if the friend has a good reputation ("good report," l. 14), so will the speaker. Clearly, he has given in to "the world."

*As a decrepit father takes delight
 To see his active child do deeds of youth,
 So I, made lame by fortune's dearest spite,
 Take all my comfort of thy worth and truth.
 For whether beauty, birth, or wealth, or wit,
 Or any of these all, or all, or more,
 Entitled in their parts, do crowned sit,
 I make my love engrafted to this store:
 So then I am not lame, poor, nor despised,
 Whilst that this shadow doth such substance give
 That I in thy abundance am sufficed,
 And by a part of all thy glory live:
 Look what is best, that best I wish in thee;
 This wish I have, then ten times happy me.*

In Sonnet 36 the speaker volunteers to keep the “blots” on his friend’s character to himself and so protect the honor of his name. In Sonnet 37 he takes pride and comfort in the honors his friend has amassed, and he more than hints that because they are as one he will “by a part of all thy glory live.” (l. 12) The speaker metaphorically subordinates himself to his friend as a “decrepit father” (l. 1) who delights in what his active child is doing. Though he was, in the preceding poem, wounded by his friend’s deeds, he has pushed that aside for the present. Now he can count his blessings.

Fortune’s keenest spite has been erased by the youth’s virtue and truth (l. 4), as well as his beauty, birth, wealth and wit (l. 5). All or any of these, the speaker proclaims, are worthy of being named among his friend’s splendid attributes (“parts,” l. 7), which sit upon his head like a crown. The speaker will add his love to this treasury and thereby profit from their collective glory. Elated by this prospect, he predicts that he will no longer be “lame, poor [or] despised” —not that he was any of these things literally. These are the hyperboles of the speaker in his manic phase. More realistically in the sestet, he feels that he can live by a shadow of his friend’s substance. That will be abundance enough for him.

After the sufferings of Sonnets 35 and 36, the speaker’s fortunes seem to have changed completely. According to the logic of the couplet, this is a matter of perspective. He wants his friend to find out whatever is best, and when this wish is fulfilled the speaker will be ten times happier than before.

*How can my muse want subject to invent
 Whilst thou dost breathe, that pour'st into my verse
 Thine own sweet argument, too excellent
 For every vulgar paper to rehearse?
 O give thy self the thanks, if aught in me
 Worthy perusal stand against thy sight,
 For who's so dumb that cannot write to thee
 When thou thyself dost give invention light?
 Be thou the tenth muse, ten times more in worth
 Than those old nine which rhymers invoke;
 And he that calls on thee, let him bring forth
 Eternal numbers to outlive long date.
 If my slight muse do please these curious days,
 The pain be mine, but thine shall be the praise.*

The upward mood swing following Sonnet 35, with its deep grief over the sins of both the speaker and the friend comes to a climax of delight in Sonnet 37, where the speaker catalogues his friend's virtues, ecstatic that he can share such glory. In Sonnet 38 the speaker reverts to self-abasement. His ability to create has diminished because his own "slight muse" (l. 13) is not comparable to his friend's powers of inspiration. How, the speaker asks, can he lack subject matter ("argument," l. 3) when his friend is breathing and pouring fine ideas into the speaker's mind? The friend's "argument" (which includes the friend himself) is too good for ordinary poetry, which would repeat it over and over.

The speaker implores his friend to thank himself if the speaker creates anything that will stand up to his friend's critical eye. Who, he asks, is so dull that the friend's light cannot brighten his ideas?

In the sestet, the speaker implores the friend to become a tenth muse, a deity to rank with all nine classical goddesses, instead of just his personal muse. He would be ten times more effective than the "old nine" that inferior "rhymers" call upon. (l. 10) Whoever calls on the friend will give birth to immortal verses, lasting beyond all earthly dates. The flattery here recalls earlier sonnets (e.g., 17 and 18) which lay down the thread of immortality through verse, but in

those poems it was the speaker who confidently assured the youth of the speaker's own ability to confer that honor. Now the friend could confer it.

The couplet returns to the private muse of the speaker, who, if his poetry will please "the world" in the present hypercritical times, will give back the praise to his friend. However, the *pain*--and this word, coming at the beginning of the final line, hits sharply--will be the speaker's. It may be simply the effort of writing, but in the context of the previous poems, it is hard to avoid the double meaning. Memories of the low point of Sonnets 35 and 36 have not been obliterated.

*O how thy worth with manners may I sing,
 When thou art all the better part of me?
 What can mine own praise to mine own self bring,
 And what is't but mine own when I praise thee?
 Even for this, let us divided live,
 And our dear love lose name of single one,
 That by this separation I may give
 That due to thee which thou deserv'st alone.
 O absence, what a torment wouldst thou prove,
 Were it not thy sour leisure gave sweet leave
 To entertain the time with thoughts of love,
 Which time and thoughts so sweetly doth deceive,
 And that thou teachest how to make one twain,
 By praising him here who doth hence remain.*

Like Sonnet 38, this poem begins with two questions. Here the speaker asks why he suffers a block in trying to do justice to his friend's virtue. How can he sing the praises of someone who is the "better part" (l. 2) of himself? Since he and his friend are one, he would be praising himself. Therefore, he proposes that they should live not as one but two. By separating, the speaker can laud his friend alone, as he deserves.

But, the reader well may ask, is this step necessary? The speaker is clearly seeking self-effacement, but what pressures are put upon him? Is he still concerned about the world's opinion? Whatever the case, the speaker's elaborate argument is self-defeating: to give his friend just praise, the speaker must give up "our dear love" (l. 6).

The undercurrent of discontent in the speaker's own logic surfaces in the sestet, which is addressed not to the friend but to absence itself, as if the speaker were already alone. This absence would be a torment to him, he argues, if it did not give "sweet leave" (l. 10) to while away thoughts of love. Just as *pain* emerges suddenly at the end of Sonnet 38, the word *sour* appears here as a sharply negative adjective applied to the speaker's leisure. *Sour* is reinforced by *deceive* (l. 12), which implies that the sweetness imputed to leisure "time and thoughts" (l. 12) is not

likely to be sweet at all. The “dear love” he has cherished in his oneness is lost.

It is absence (*thou* in l. 13) that teaches the speaker how to split loving oneness in two by praising his friend, who is actually absent, as if he were present. Does absence really make the heart grow fonder? Yes, if fonder means foolish.

*Take all my loves, my love, yea take them all.
 What hast thou then more than thou hadst before?
 No love, my love, that thou mayst true love call,
 All mine was thine, before thou hadst this more;
 Then if for my love, thou my love receivest,
 I cannot blame thee, for my love thou usest,
 But yet be blamed, if thou this self deceivest
 By wilful taste of what thyself refusest.
 I do forgive thy robb'ry, gentle thief,
 Although thou steal thee all my poverty:
 And yet love knows it is a greater grief
 To bear love's wrong than hate's known injury.
 Lascivious grace, in whom all ill well shows,
 Kill me with spites, yet we must not be foes.*

The reason for the speaker's confused distress surfaces suddenly in Sonnet 40, which reveals his friend's betrayal. In one of the most dramatic switches in the whole sequence, the speaker in anger and despair gives up all his loves to his friend, who has already taken them away. (He does not, however, give up his logical mode, which is his established way of dealing with emotional problems.) Immediately he questions his friend's wisdom: what more, he asks, will his friend have that he didn't have before? Addressing him a second time as "my love," he answers his own question: You are not, my love, getting anything that you can call true love. Remember, those loves have been untrue to me. (l. 3) The insistent repetition of love (five times in three lines) underscores the speaker's desperation. How can he give any more?

After the first blast, the rhetoric cools somewhat. The last line of the first quatrain repeats the second, changing the question into a statement. Then comes an argument ironically lifting the blame from his friend: How can I blame you if you take someone I love? You are simply loving a mistress I have loved. On the other hand, you are to be blamed if you deceive yourself by willfully doing what you said you wouldn't do.

Relinquishing his anger (in the third quatrain), the speaker, calling his friend "gentle thief," as he has done before, forgives the robbery of what

little he has left—his poverty. Yet, he adds, it is easier to bear an injury caused by hate than to bear “love’s wrong” (l. 12). In the end, the speaker insists that they not be enemies, although his friend, with his lewd charm which still appears virtuous, kills him with spite.

*Those pretty wrongs that liberty commits,
 When I am sometime absent from thy heart,
 Thy beauty and thy years full well befits,
 For still temptation follows where thou art.
 Gentle thou art, and therefore to be won;
 Beauteous thou art, therefore to be assailed.
 And when a woman woos, what woman's son
 Will sourly leave her till he have prevailed?
 Aye me, but yet thou mightst my seat forbear,
 And chide thy beauty and thy straying youth,
 Who lead thee in their riot even there
 Where thou art forced to break a twofold truth:
 Hers, by thy beauty tempting her to thee;
 Thine, by thy beauty being false to me.*

As a playwright, Shakespeare knows the dramatic effect of a simple device—having a new “character” walk on stage. Suddenly the reader finds out what the speaker has already known—that there is a woman who has been wooing his friend. She, too, has been lured by the youth and beauty of the friend, who has committed “wrongs” of “liberty” (l. 1). Such acts, committed when the speaker has been absent from his friend’s heart, are licentious and surely sexual.

As usual, though perhaps with fine irony, the speaker says that such things happen at the youth’s age and that they “well befit” his years. (l. 3) Then, too, his perfection is sure to arouse temptation in others. He is someone to be won because of his gentle birth and wooed for his beauty. And, says the speaker, relying on worldly wisdom, when a woman woos, what man will leave her in disgust until he has had his way. (l. 8) Though the tone here is flippant and tart, the implied accusation is strong. The speaker reminds his friend that he might not have taken the speaker’s place (“seat,” l. 9) with the woman—his mistress, as the reader learns in the couplet.

The speaker continues his head-shaking by suggestion that the young man might have chided his own youth and beauty for leading him on to licentious behavior with both the speaker and his mistress. Therefore—the logic is implied—the friend has broken more than one bond of love: the woman’s bond of love with the speaker and his own bond of love with the speaker, too.

*That thou hast her, it is not all my grief,
 And yet it may be said I loved her dearly;
 That she hath thee, is of my wailing chief,
 A loss in love that touches me more nearly.
 Loving offenders, thus I will excuse ye:
 Thou dost love her, because thou knowst I love her,
 And for my sake ev'n so doth she abuse me,
 Suff'ring my friend for my sake to approve her.
 If I lose thee, my loss is my love's gain,
 And losing her, my friend hath found that loss;
 Both find each other, and I lose both twain,
 And both for my sake lay on me this cross.
 But here's the joy, my friend and I are one;
 Sweet flatt'ry, then she loves but me alone.*

Our expectations are again exploded. It is surprising that the speaker treats so lightly the loss of his mistress to his friend. And how can the speaker say that he loved the woman dearly? The casual "and yet it must be said" (l. 2) does not suggest lasting love. Most startling of all is that the speaker plainly states that he bewails the loss of his friend much more: it touches him "more nearly" (l. 4). Perhaps all would have been clearer if we knew the woman better; her presence was revealed for the first time only half a sonnet earlier.

The drama is accentuated in the second quatrain when the forgiving speaker readily excuses the "loving offenders" (l. 5) with a rationalization that lasts the rest of the sonnet. (The proportions that Shakespeare chooses for his revelations and his arguments are telling.) Unable to let loose his emotions completely, he resorts to dubious sophistry to lessen the blows. He says that his friend loves his mistress because he knows the speaker loves her. Such logic strains anyone's credulity. Yet the speaker makes matters worse by asserting that the mistress is "abusing" (deceiving) him for his own benefit by allowing his friend to try her out ("approve," l. 8) as a mistress. (Shakespeare repeats the phrase "for my sake" to stress the bitter irony. [ll. 7-8])

The sophistry gathers momentum in the third quatrain when the speaker labors to prove that everyone wins. If he loses his friend, his mistress gains. If he loses his mistress, his friend has

“found that loss” (l. 10). If they find each other and the speaker loses “both twain” (a phrase that stresses separation), the speaker says that it is for his sake (l. 12) that they lay a cross on him.

The turn of the couplet is ecstatic. Sophistry triumphs: Because the speaker and his friend are one, the mistress loves only the speaker. “Sweet flattery,” indeed.

*When most I wink then do my eyes best see,
 For all the day they view things unrespected;
 But when I sleep, in dreams they look on thee,
 And darkly bright, are bright in dark directed.
 Then thou, whose shadow shadows doth make bright,
 How would thy shadow's form form happy show
 To the clear day with thy much clearer light,
 When to unseeing eyes thy shade shines so?
 How would (I say) mine eyes be blessed made,
 By looking on thee in the living day,
 When in dead night thy fair imperfect shade
 Through heavy sleep on sightless eyes doth stay?
 All days are nights to see till I see thee,
 And nights bright days when dreams do show thee me.*

After the desperate, angry revelations of the speaker's betrayal by both friend and mistress, the next sonnets mourn the collapse of the relationships in a stylized virtuosic fashion. During the preceding ordeal, the speaker has amply demonstrated his capacity for using rhetoric to justify closing his eyes, turning the other cheek, and glossing over the betrayals. Now he is separated, perhaps physically, from his affairs and has little to do but exercise his skill in working out conceits. It is almost as if he is stepping up the pace to ease his pain.

Sonnet 43 has a paradox in almost every line. Oxymorons (concentrated paradoxes) raise their heads almost mechanically. For example, "darkly bright" (l. 4) and "unseeing eyes" that see (l. 8) are followed by "sightless eyes" to which the friend's shade appears (l. 12) and "nights bright days" (l. 14). Oxymoron is combined with chiasmus (in line four) when "darkly bright" is followed immediately by "bright in dark," reversing the order of the adjectives. Other figures and devices abound, and seeking them out, though pleasant, rather overwhelms the sadness. Still it is in character for the speaker to verbalize in this bravura fashion, and there is some pathos in his having to fall back on his skill in verse, which now may – or may

not – give promise of immortality.

Despite rhetorical distractions, the grief of the speaker comes through and now he sees truly. Ironically, it is in sleep and darkness that his vision clears; his dreams show the real “thee” in the final, revelatory line. What is absent is the joy of two souls joined as one, quite a jarring contrast to the close of Sonnet 42.

*If the dull substance of my flesh were thought,
 Injurious distance should not stop my way,
 For then despite of space I would be brought,
 From limits far remote, where thou dost stay.
 No matter then although my foot did stand
 Upon the farthest earth removed from thee,
 For nimble thought can jump both sea and land,
 As soon as think the place where he would be.
 But ah, thought kills me that I am not thought
 To leap large lengths of miles when thou art gone,
 But that so much of earth and water wrought,
 I must attend time's leisure with my moan.
 Receiving naught by elements so slow
 But heavy tears, badges of either's woe.*

Sonnets 44 and 45 are meant to be read together—like one poem of twenty-eight lines—and therefore have a more spacious feel. They depend on a large symmetrical scheme based on the old four elements: Sonnet 44 centers on earth and water (the heavy elements) and Sonnet 45 balances these with the lighter ones—air and fire. Much is made of space and motion, as well. Though metaphors abound as usual, the conceits are not as contorted with paradox as they are in Sonnet 43.

The speaker addresses his friend (their mistress seems to have disappeared from the landscape), who is distant and cannot easily be reached because the speaker is held back by the heaviness of flesh. If “dull substance” (l. 1) were thought, he says, transportation would be instantaneous. The speaker would be able to overcome space and distance and reach his friend even if his feet stood at the other end of the earth. “Nimble thought can jump both sea and land” (l. 7) and leave dull flesh (traditionally made of earth and water) far behind.

In the sestet of Sonnet 44, the speaker reverts to the playful tone of earlier poems. His nimble jump comes to a jolting stop: “But, ah, thought kills me that I am not thought.” (l. 9) The pace slows down after the alliterative “leap large lengths of miles,” and the sonnet ends with the weight of earth and water, elements so slow that they yield nothing but “heavy tears” (l. 14)—earth being heavy and water being wet, like tears.

*The other two, slight air and purging fire,
 Are both with thee, wherever I abide;
 The first my thought, the other my desire;
 These present-absent with swift motion slide:
 For when these quicker elements are gone
 In tender embassy of love to thee,
 My life being made of four, with two alone
 Sinks down to death, oppressed with melancholy.
 Until life's composition be recured
 By those swift messengers returned from thee,
 Who even but now come back again assured
 Of thy fair health, recounting it to me.
 This told, I joy, but then no longer glad,
 I send them back again and straight grow sad.*

The second poem of the two is, like the first, a tour de force. As a complement, it concentrates on speed and lightness. The movement takes off quickly, and its airyness contrasts neatly with the pained slowness of Sonnet 44. Much of the effect is produced by splitting up the lines. Sonnet 45 has ten broken lines (evidenced in the punctuation), whereas Sonnet 44 has only three. The lighter elements ("slight air and purging fire" [l. 1]) are "with" the friend, whereas earth and water are with the speaker. But all persons were thought to be made of all four elements, and so the speaker has his share: his air is thought and his fire is desire. (l. 3) These are sent to his friend as ambassadors of love, and when they leave, the speaker, weighed down by melancholy, sinks towards death.

The sestet plays with the notion that air and fire are messengers and when they return with news of the friend's good health, the speaker's own balance of all four elements ("composition") is restored ("recured"). (l. 9) Although the couplet insists that the joyous restoration is temporary and that he must send the lighter elements back again, his improvement impresses the reader. Still, *sad* is the last word. Oscillation prevails.

*Mine eye and heart are at a mortal war,
 How to divide the conquest of thy sight;
 Mine eye, my heart thy picture's sight would bar,
 My heart, mine eye the freedom of that right.
 My heart doth plead that thou in him dost lie
 (A closet never pierced with crystal eyes)
 But the defendant doth that plea deny,
 And says in him thy fair appearance lies.
 To 'cide this title is impaneled
 A quest of thoughts, all tenants of the heart,
 And by their verdict is determined
 The clear eye's moiety and the dear heart's part.
 As thus: mine eye's due is thy outward part,
 And my heart's right, thy inward love of heart.*

The bitter trauma described in Sonnet 42 when the speaker acknowledges the loss of his lovers (and pretends to find joy in the fact) is followed by a period of separation beginning with the sleeplessness of Sonnet 43 and continuing with the four-elements poems (44 and 45) that suggest (but do not prove) a physical distance. The emotions have quieted somewhat and the rhetoric has become less complex. Both poems end in melancholy but the word *joy* – last found in the couplet of Sonnet 42 – reappears in Sonnet 45 in the same position: the fourth word in line 13. (This use of *joy* looks back to the dramatic use of *pain* in the last line of Sonnet 38.)

Sonnet 46 takes another step into the realm of cooler emotion marked by the use of a common thread in the sonnet tradition, the battle between the eye and the heart. The language is cooler, too, leaning heavily on legal imagery and the concept of property rights. The speaker's eye and heart are trying to decide which is entitled to the greater share of the conquest of the friend's sight. This is puzzling. How can the conquered divide the spoils of the victor? The answer lies in the third line, where it is the picture of the friend that is being fought over. The eye wants to bar the heart from the sight of the picture, and the heart wants to deny the eye "the freedom of that right," *freedom* being a privilege, such as access to a place not open to the public.

In a miniature trial scene (the sestet), the heart pleads that the friend is within him and that he is like a treasure chest ("closet," l. 6) which cannot be pierced, even by sharp eyes. However, the defendant (the eyes) denies the plea, declaring that the friend's beauty is rightly his. To decide ("cide," l. 9) ownership, a panel is formed – a jury of thoughts, which the landlord heart has as tenants. This jury will determine the part due to each.

The speaker predicts that the eyes' share would be the friend's looks and the heart's would be the "inward love of heart." (l. 14) The playful tone of this sonnet indicates a lightening of the speaker's grief. The thoroughly predictable conclusion is a far cry emotionally from the agonies at the ends of Sonnets 40 through 42.

*Betwixt mine eye and heart a league is took,
 And each doth good turns now unto the other.
 When that mine eye is famished for a look,
 Or heart in love with sighs himself doth smother,
 With my love's picture then my eye doth feast
 And to the painted banquet bids my heart.
 Another time mine eye is my heart's guest,
 And in his thoughts of love doth share a part.
 So either by thy picture or my love,
 Thy self away, are present still with me,
 For thou no farther than my thoughts canst move,
 And I am still with them and they with thee.
 Or if they sleep, thy picture in my sight
 Awakes my heart, to heart's and eye's delight.*

The gradual calming of the waves in Sonnet 46 is completed in Sonnet 47. These sonnets, like 44 and 45, are a pair employing complementary images: Sonnet 46 describes how the speaker's eye and heart are warring over the right to see the friend's picture. In Sonnet 47, the eye and heart have come to a peaceful agreement, now sharing the speaker's portrait of his love. They do good turns for each other, too. If the speaker's eye is hungry for a look at the friend, it may feast upon the picture and invite the heart to enjoy the "painted banquet" (l. 6). At another time, the eye may become the guest of the heart and share his "thoughts of love" (l. 8), the thoughts that constituted the jury in Sonnet 46 (l. 10).

In this conciliatory mode, the speaker turns to address his friend more directly. Whether it is through his picture (seen by his eye) or his love (felt by his heart), his friend will still be with him. The tone begins to swell to a joyous paradox, the presence found in absence: "thou not farther than my thoughts canst move." (l. 11) These thoughts of love remain with the speaker and therefore with his friend. If, however, they should sleep, the portrait of the friend or the dream of him—matters of the eye—will awaken the speaker's heart to the delight of both heart and eye. The sadness at the end of Sonnet 45 is supplanted by joy—for the time being.

*How careful was I when I took my way,
 Each trifle under truest bars to thrust,
 That to my use it might unused stay
 From hands of falsehood in sure wards of trust?
 But thou, to whom my jewels trifles are,
 Most worthy comfort, now my greatest grief,
 Thou best of dearest and my only care,
 Are left the prey of every vulgar thief.
 Thee have I not locked up in any chest,
 Save where thou art not, though I feel thou art,
 Within the gentle closure of my breast,
 From whence at pleasure thou mayst come and part;
 And even thence thou wilt be stol'n, I fear,
 For truth proves thievish for a prize so dear.*

After the promise of peace between eye and heart and the friend's comforting return at the close of Sonnet 47, a note of fear creeps in like that of the cuckold-to-be. Since the speaker has already lost both his loves, that would be most logical, but then to whom is this sonnet addressed? Has the friend returned to the speaker or is this a new love? What has happened since the loss recorded in Sonnet 42? Presumably, the old positive relationship has been renewed.

What we learn is that in preparation for a journey—real or imagined—the speaker was careful to lock up every trifle in his safe (“under truest bars,” l. 2) so that no one else could steal his jewels. The jewels, however, are trifles compared with his friend, who is, paradoxically, his truest comfort and his greatest care. And yet, as the speaker says, he has left his friend “the prey of every vulgar thief” (l. 8), implying any other predatory lover.

Picking up the thread of presence-through-absence, he states that his friend, though not locked up in any safe place, is “within the gentle closure of [his] breast,” but not in any physical sense. (l. 11) He may, however, come and go whenever he wishes. And, most importantly, the speaker may summon him up in his thoughts at will.

The speaker's bitterness returns in the couplet, breaking the serenity of the preceding sonnet completely. The pleasure of the friend's company will cease if he is stolen, and honesty cannot be counted on when the treasure is so valuable.

Against that time (if ever that time come)
When I shall see thee frown on my defects,
Whenas thy love hath cast his utmost sum,
Called to that audit by advis'd respects;
Against that time when thou shalt strangely pass
And scarcely greet me with that sun, thine eye,
When love, converted from the thing it was,
Shall reasons find of settled gravity;
Against that time do I ensconce me here
Within the knowledge of mine own desert,
And this my hand, against my self uprear,
To guard the lawful reasons on thy part:
To leave poor me, thou hast the strength of laws,
Since why to love I can allege no cause.

In Sonnet 48, the speaker worries about his friend's being stolen; in Sonnet 49, the speaker becomes even gloomier as he looks to the time when his defects will offend his friend and there will be no reason for his friend to stay. The story of these two sonnets begins in the past tense (the speaker's journey), continues through the present (the granting of the friend's freedom), and concludes with a vision of the bleak future (the friend's departure).

Like a knell, each quatrain begins with "Against that time." The speaker imagines the stages of the breakup, and in his role as "poor me" (l. 13) tries to shore up the ruins. In the first stage, threads of legal and financial imagery surface, beginning with the final audit of the friend's love, which casts its "utmost sum" (l. 3) for carefully weighed reasons ("advis'd respects," l. 4). The implication is that the audit will go against the speaker.

In the second stage, the speaker imagines that his friend, in looking out for his own interests, will become estranged and scarcely glance at him with that sun, his eye. (l. 6) The friend will find even greater reasons for leaving because the love itself will have changed completely.

And so, in the third stage, the speaker must fortify himself in the knowledge of what he truly

deserves and accept his loneliness. He sees himself like a witness swearing an oath. He raises his hand against himself and in so doing shows his awareness of his own part in his destruction. Ostensibly, he wishes to attest to the "lawful reasons" (l. 12) for his friend's departure. And if his scenario for the breakup should be true, his self-pity will be justified. We can, as he wishes, experience the dramatic pathos even though it has not occurred. And we know that this is another desperate attempt on the speaker's part to retain his love.

*How heavy do I journey on the way,
 When what I seek (my weary travel's end)
 Doth teach that ease and that repose to say
 Thus far the miles are measured from thy friend.
 The beast that bears me, tired with my woe,
 Plods dully on to bear that weight in me,
 As if by some instinct the wretch did know
 His rider lov'd not speed being made from thee:
 The bloody spur cannot provoke him on,
 That sometimes anger thrusts into his hide,
 Which heavily he answers with a groan,
 More sharp to me than spurring to his side;
 For that same groan doth put this in my mind:
 My grief lies onward and my joy behind.*

The thread of the journey returns in Sonnets 50 and 51. But unlike the earlier poems of separation, which stress the presence of the lover even in absence, these two focus on actual travel and the relation between horse and rider. The speaker as traveler is sad indeed (the reason has been made clear in Sonnet 49). He is heavy with thoughts of his future, and he is heavily answered by his beast, who groans at being spurred. (Shakespeare chooses to use *beast* in the fifth line of each sonnet and *horse* does not occur until line nine of Sonnet 51. There it is compared unfavorably with desire. Finally, just before the couplet, it becomes an inferior jade.) The speaker and the beast are paired in Sonnet 50, the former dominating the first quatrain and the latter the second. The first has the traveler at rest soliloquizing on the physical distance, not the mental presence of his friend: "Thus far the miles are measured from thy friend." (l. 4)

The beast, a kind of alter ego, is as tired of the speaker's woe as the speaker is. Despite bearing the weight of woe, he plods on sullenly. As if by instinct, the beast (now called a "wretch," l. 7) knows that the speaker doesn't want to speed because that carries him farther from his friend.

In the third quatrain, the speaker reports that his bloody spur, which he sometimes angrily thrusts into the beast's side, has no effect. Instead, the spurring makes him groan, and this is more painful to the rider than the spurring is to the beast. In the couplet, the groaning reminds the speaker of the fact that his joy is behind him and only grief is ahead.

*Thus can my love excuse the slow offense
 Of my dull bearer, when from thee I speed.
 From where thou art, why should I haste me thence?
 Till I return, of posting is no need.
 O what excuse will my poor beast then find
 When swift extremity can seem but slow?
 Then should I spur though mounted on the wind;
 In winged speed no motion shall I know.
 Then can no horse with my desire keep pace;
 Therefore desire (of perfect love being made)
 Shall neigh no dull flesh in his fiery race,
 But love, for love, thus shall excuse my jade:
 *Since from thee going he went willful slow,
 Towards thee I'll run and give him leave to go.**

As to be expected, speed takes precedence over slowness in this companion poem. The speaker declares that it is his love that excuses his dull beast's slowness on the way out. Arguing his case, he asks his absent friend, if I have been with you, why should I hurry away? Only when I return is great speed ("posting," l. 4) needed.

Now, he asks, sidestepping his own responsibility, how can my "poor beast" (l. 5) find any excuse when even the greatest speed will seem too slow? Then, even if he were taking off on the wind, the speaker would spur (as if on his beast), and feel no motion as he flies off on wings. Now he is going off with the speed of desire, which not even a good horse could match. Since his desire is created by the most perfect love, no dull flesh will weigh him down in his "fiery race." (l. 11)

The speaker can now excuse his nag ("jade," l. 12) for the sake of love. As he says in the conclusion, because the beast was willfully slow, he will run to his friend and let his nag walk. At this point, letting the poor jade walk will be a kindness and perhaps recompense for the speaker's evasion of responsibility. After all, his argument was weak; had he got on with his journey he would have returned sooner!

*So am I as the rich, whose blessed key
 Can bring him to his sweet up-locked treasure,
 The which he will not every hour survey,
 For blunting the fine point of seldom pleasure.
 Therefore are feasts so solemn and so rare,
 Since coming in the long year, set
 Like stones of worth they thinly placed are,
 Or captain jewels in the carcanet.
 So is the time that keeps you as my chest,
 Or as the wardrobe which the robe doth hide,
 To make some special instant special blessed
 By new unfolding his imprison'd pride.
 Blessed are you, whose worthiness gives scope;
 Being had to triumph, being lacked to hope.*

Now, having returned to the proximity of his friend, the speaker, in an effusion of joy, compares himself to a wealthy man who can, with a key, open up his sweet treasure. Though he can act at will, he does not want to gaze at it too often for that would dull the pleasure. The speaker supports this idea by comparing it to having feast days infrequently. Such days, in turn, are compared to precious jewels set at wide intervals, or to conspicuous gems on ornamental collars known as carcanets. (l. 8)

The string of similes continues into the sestet. Just as precious is the time that keeps the friend in the speaker's chest. Or it is like a valuable garment hidden away in a wardrobe, something to be brought out on very special occasions and unfolded to beholders as a matter of pride.

The irony of all these riches being described so enthusiastically is that they can be enjoyed best only for a short period of time. Is the speaker simply making the best of his limited opportunities to be with his friend? The last phrase of the sonnet reveals the truth: although the friend's virtue ("worthiness," l. 13) makes bliss possible, its absence leaves only hope. The friend is blessed and the speaker is lucky if he can share in the glory for a moment, but if the speaker is denied the opportunity, all is lost but hope. His position may be like that of a wealthy man, but it is brief and perhaps precarious.

*What is your substance, whereof are you made,
 That millions of strange shadows on you tend?
 Since everyone hath, every one, one shade,
 And you, but one, can every shadow lend:
 Describe Adonis, and the counterfeit
 Is poorly imitated after you;
 On Helen's cheek all art of beauty set,
 And you in Grecian tires are painted new:
 Speak of the spring and foison of the year,
 The one doth shadow of your beauty show,
 The other as your bounty doth appear,
 And you in every blessed shape we know.
 In all external grace you have some part,
 But you like none; none you, for constant heart.*

In his typically dramatic fashion, Shakespeare piques the reader's interest by asking a question that begets others and is not fully answered until the end of the following sonnet. The initial mystery is the nature of the youth's "substance," the pure and permanent ideal that is so crucial to Renaissance Platonism. In the sonnets, as elsewhere in the literature of the period, "shadow" is opposed to substance, and Shakespeare toys with various meanings of the words as he toys with his readers and the youth he addresses. Who are the millions of shadows that accompany the youth? In the Platonic tradition all beings—indeed, all worldly things—are transient and therefore shadows. Only the abstract ideal—a blend of beauty, truth and goodness—is real and therefore permanent. Throughout the sonnets, the youth's beauty is ideal, but as the speaker continually reminds him, he himself is transient. The "strange shadows" (l. 2) are teasingly ambiguous. At first, they seem to be other human beings that follow the youth, aspiring to be like him or simply admiring him. But later (l. 3), the "shade" of every one appears to be the shadow cast by all individuals. And then (l. 4), the reader is faced with the notion that the youth and only the youth can provide an earthly image (a shadow) to emulate. Paradoxically, though but one person, the youth fuses beauty, truth and goodness and so

embodies and disseminates all the various earthly virtues.

The sliding series of notions about shadows becomes clearer in the second quatrain when specific images are cited. First the speaker asserts that if anyone tried to describe Adonis (a mythical mortal and therefore a kind of shadow as well as an ideal of male beauty), he would fail: the image would be “counterfeit” (l. 5). Why? The speaker cleverly shifts ground by contending that anyone attempting to portray Adonis would fail because he would inevitably turn to the youth as a model.

The speaker advances his argument by imagining someone trying to enhance Helen of Troy’s beauty by cosmetic artifice. To do this, the person would paint the youth in Grecian garments. Hence the youth would be confirmed as the reflection of the ideal on earth. Not only human forms but the most beautiful seasons—spring and fall—become shadows of the ideal. From these, the speaker moves upwards to the transcendent whole where “we” (the millions of earthly shadows) perceive the youth “in every blessed shape we know.” (l. 12)

In the couplet the first quatrain’s cloudiness begins to clear. The shadows the youth can lend to all others are reflections of his grace: “In all external grace you have some part,” says the speaker. As if this praise weren’t lofty enough, the speaker caps it with the compliment supreme: In this world of ever-shifting shadows, the youth is alone; no one is like him in “constant heart.” So ends the hyperbole. Other discoveries are to come.

*O how much more doth beauty beauteous seem
 By that sweet ornament which truth doth give.
 The rose looks fair, but fairer we it deem
 For that sweet odor which in it doth live:
 The canker blooms have full as deep a dye
 As the perfumed tincture of the roses,
 Hang on such thorns, and play as wantonly,
 When summer's breath their masked buds discloses:
 But for their virtue only is their show,
 They live unwooded and unrespected fade,
 Die to themselves. Sweet roses do not so;
 Of their sweet deaths are sweetest odors made:
 And so of you, beauteous and lovely youth,
 When that shall vade, by verse distils your truth.*

In his continuing efforts to woo the friend despite evidence of his infidelity, the speaker falls back on compliments, but compliments that hint at flaws and imply a warning. The opening lines urge the young man to consider what real beauty is and how beauty may be enhanced by truth. Truth implies fidelity and truth is not mere ornament but an essential ideal. To instruct his friend, he draws a comparison between two kinds of rose. Since the young man has been associated with the rose from the beginning of the sequence, the comparison becomes a kind of fable for him. The implied question is, which road will the young man take in life and what model will he follow?

The first rose is the damask, noted for its fragrance; the other is the canker (or dog rose), which is odorless. Both are richly colored, both have thorns, and both play "wantonly" (in a sensual fashion) as they come to full flower. (ll. 7-8) The "virtue" or strength of the canker is mere show. (l. 9) Cankers "live unwooded," (l. 10), fade and die. But the damask roses are sweet and live on as perfume: "Of their sweet death are sweetest odors made." (l. 13)

The couplet ends the story with a prediction as well as a moral. The moral has already emerged in the fate of the canker roses that are all show and therefore shadows, not substance. The youth's beauty may

fade ("vade," l. 14) like the roses' but his truth, which reflects the Platonic ideal, will be distilled by the speaker's poetry. (The sonnet is the perfect instrument for, and an example of, distilling the truth.) As usual, the speaker is subtly establishing his own powers of preservation and so making himself desirable if not indispensable.

*Not marble nor the gilded monuments
 Of princes shall outlive this pow'rful rhyme,
 But you shall shine more bright in these contents
 Than unswept stone, besmeared with sluttish time.
 When wasteful war shall statues overturn
 And broils root out the work of masonry,
 Nor Mars his sword nor war's quick fire shall burn
 The living record of your memory.
 'Gainst death, and all oblivious enmity
 Shall you pace forth; your praise shall still find room,
 Even in the eyes of all posterity
 That wear this world out to the ending doom.
 So till the judgment that your self arise,
 You live in this, and dwell in lover's eyes.*

The next step up the ladder to immortality is the speaker's, as the first two lines assert the power of the poet's "rhyme." The solidity of marble and princely monuments is an illusion—a shadow—but the friend (addressed in line three) will gain light more lasting than any shadow or tombstone "besmeared"—made illegible—by uncaring time.

The second quatrain goes on to illustrate the same theme with images of warfare: statues overturned, masonry structures uprooted by the broils of battle, the assault of the war god Mars with his sword, and sudden conflagrations. Artfully, the speaker works towards the climax of this single sentence quatrain: none of these horrifying attacks can destroy "the living record" of the youth's memory.

The third quatrain begins by firmly asserting his friend's invulnerability to death and any enmity that threatens oblivion. The speaker vividly creates an image of the youth emerging unscathed from the onslaught. Then, he says, "shall you pace forth." (l. 10) Though no mention has been made of martial successes, the speaker, as poet, has managed to suggest them. Not only does his friend appear as hero, his future reputation is guaranteed. It will last till doomsday when even the world will have worn out.

Thus the poet reaffirms his role of eternal preserver, the savior of a hero. Hyperbole will win, the speaker trusts, because admirers will keep the youth alive when they hear of his exploits. The admirers, of necessity, are admirers of the poet. More than one salvation is assured.

*Sweet love, renew thy force; be it not said
 Thy edge should blunter be than appetite,
 Which but today by feeding is allayed,
 Tomorrow sharp'ned in his former might.
 So, love, be thou, although today thou fill
 Thy hungry eyes, ev'n till they wink with fullness,
 Tomorrow see again, and do not kill
 The spirit of love with a perpetual dullness:
 Let this sad int'rim like the ocean be
 Which parts the shore where two contracted new
 Come daily to the banks, that when they see
 Return of love, more blest may be the view;
 As call it winter, which being full of care,
 Makes summer's welcome, thrice more wished, more rare.*

The speaker's crescendo of praise for the youth has suddenly stopped. In the interval between sonnets something has happened; enthusiasm's edge has been blunted but how this came about we are not told. Perhaps the speaker does not know. In the first phrase he invokes "sweet love"—the force of eros, not a person, though the two may be blended. Desire has failed indeed, which is more of an affliction than the arrows of Cupid. However, the speaker hopes that the "spirit of love" will return "tomorrow," and the hunger of sight will not turn into "perpetual dullness." (ll. 7-8)

The figures of speech used by Shakespeare are ingenious variations on those employed in Sonnet 1, where they are inaugurated in the description of the youth, whom he describes as "contracted to [his] own bright eyes" (l. 5) and doomed to be a "glutton" by not marrying and procreating. In Sonnet 56, it is the speaker's "hungry eyes" (l. 6) that are endangered by gluttony. Subtly the synesthesia suggests that the sins of lust and gluttony have fused and become more deadly than they were in the beginning of the sequence.

In the sestet, the tone changes as sad despair (the prospect of love

killed by “perpetual dullness,” l. 8) fades and hope increases for the return of love. In the metaphor of the parting ocean, love is embodied in two persons newly contracted to each other (unlike the youth contracted to himself in Sonnet 1) who daily come to the opposite shores of the tidal waters that have separated them. Now nearer, they see the return of love, a view more blessed than before.

Rather abruptly, the couplet shifts the image from the ocean’s banks to the seasons, specifically the return of summer after winter. This might seem to pull the line of thought apart if it were not for the echo of the “gaudy spring” of Sonnet 1 (l. 10) associated with the youth who is its “herald.”

Sonnet 56 illustrates the wave-like motion of the sequence as a whole: the surges of emotion, the variations on recurring images established early on, the threads that tie the individual poems together but also move the narrative ahead.

*Being your slave, what should I do but tend
 Upon the hours and times of your desire?
 I have no precious time at all to spend,
 Nor services to do till you require.
 Nor dare I chide the world without end hour
 Whilst I (my sovereign) watch the clock for you,
 Nor think the bitterness of absence sour,
 When you have bid your servant once adieu.
 Nor dare I question with my jealous thought
 Where you may be, or your affairs suppose,
 But like a sad slave stay and think of nought
 Save where you are how happy you make those.
 So true a fool is love, that in your will
 (Though you do any thing) he thinks no ill.*

At first this sonnet seems disjunctive, but the very word *desire*, even though it is the youth's, promises the return of the speaker's "sweet love." Two ironies attend this happy reunion: one is the slavery of the speaker and the threat to his own "precious time" (l. 3). The imagery of time initiated in Sonnet 2 takes over in the second quatrain, further linking this group of sonnets to the body of the sequence, and leading into the theme of absence (l. 7).

The picture the speaker paints of himself is not that of a happy shadow. Though partly voluntary, his "slavery" is that of a drudge. Crucial, too, is the phrase "world without end" (l. 5), which implies both doom and the tyranny of society. The speaker watches the clock for his sovereign, who is engaged in "affairs" (l. 10) that may be worldly matters but perhaps even hint at other liaisons. Who are "those" (l. 12) whom the master makes happy instead of his slave?

All this culminates in the couplet, where the speaker dubs himself a fool, which could mean a dear one as well as a dupe, and gives his name as will. (The pun is generally accepted as Shakespeare's self-identification, and is reinforced by the more obvious and insistent use of his name in Sonnet 135). Less commented upon is the endless forgiveness of the true lover that the speaker says he is. This is consonant with the Christian humility shown by turning the other cheek. It is also a subtle connection with the word *blest* in line twelve of the preceding sonnet. The self-styled fool may indeed be wise after all. But all religious implications are not to be taken as definitive.

*That god forbid, that made me first your slave,
 I should in thought control your times of pleasure,
 Or at your hand th'account of hours to crave,
 Being your vassal bound to stay your leisure.
 O let me suffer (being at your beck)
 Th' imprisoned absence of your liberty
 And patience tame, to suff'rance bide each check,
 Without accusing you of injury.
 Be where you list, your charter is so strong
 That you your self may privilege your time
 To what you will; to you it doth belong,
 Your self to pardon of self-doing crime.
 I am to wait, though waiting so be hell,
 Not blame your pleasure, be it ill or well.*

Although the speaker reaffirms his role as slave to his young master, his voice is rougher than in Sonnet 57. Certainly it is far less willingly submissive than that of the speaker in Sonnet 26, who addresses the youth as "lord of my love" and does not chafe at his vassalage. In Sonnet 57, he tolerates the bitterness of his sovereign's absence and in the couplet quite tenderly forgives in advance any license his friend may take. In Sonnet 58, the thinly veiled resentment is deeper: the "sad slave" of Sonnet 57 (l. 11) has become a vassal "imprisoned" by the absent friend's "liberty" (l. 6), a word which here implies sexual freedom. The negative attitude of the speaker reaches its climax at the end of the third quatrain when he bitterly grants the youth the right to pardon his own crimes. Obviously the speaker has no other choice.

In the couplet, the sado-masochistic venom of the speaker breaks out, as it does periodically in the sequence. The tone is that of sour irony:

I am to wait, though waiting so
 be hell,
 Not blame your pleasure, be it ill
 or well.

At this point we may look ahead to the more famous Sonnet 144, which begins "Two loves I have, of comfort and despair," in which the man "right fair" is the "better angel" (l. 3). Our look raises some questions along with our eyebrows. What man is meant? Is there more than one? If he is the same as that in Sonnet 58, has he actually been

corrupted? If so, how can he remain the good angel?

Whatever answers we give, the truth remains that the speaker's attitude towards the youth continues to oscillate, and forgiveness, however grudging, is always possible because of the speaker's obsession. The explanation for this obsession lies in the opening phrase of Sonnet 58. It is the god (Cupid, not the Christian deity) that has enslaved the speaker, and he is helpless.

*If there be nothing new, but that which is
 Hath been before, how are our brains beguiled,
 Which, lab'ring for invention, bear amiss
 The second burthen of a former child.
 O that record could with a backward look,
 Ev'n of five hundred courses of the sun,
 Show me your image in some antique book,
 Since mind at first in character was done,
 That I might see what the old world could say
 To this composed wonder of your frame:
 Whether we are mended, or where better they,
 Or whether revolution be the same.
 O sure I am, the wits of former days
 To subjects worse have given admiring praise.*

At first the reader is baffled by the abrupt shift from the speaker's hell—he is a slave awaiting his friend's pleasure—to the speaker's quiet musing on the old idea that there is nothing new under the sun. Taking that idea as a premise in his argument, he asserts that if there is nothing now that has not been before, then people are foolish in trying to invent when all they can produce is a replica of the past.

In the second quatrain, the speaker becomes specific. How fine it would be, he says, if I could go back even five hundred years in searching books for an image that would look like you and find out what "the old world" (l. 9) might say about the wonderful appearance of your body ("frame," l. 10). Who is better off, those of earlier times or we, your contemporaries? Or is it just pure repetition?

Once more, the speaker comes back from abrasive irony directed towards his friend to discourse on his beauty. However, this time, in the couplet, he undercuts the compliments on a larger scale. He sounds as if he is all admiration, but when he declares that the "wits of former days" have given praise to worse subjects, his own praise sounds fainter.

*Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore,
 So do our minutes hasten to their end,
 Each changing place with that which goes before,
 In sequent toil all forwards do contend.
 Nativity, once in the main of light,
 Crawls to maturity; wherewith, being crown'd,
 Crooked eclipses 'gainst his glory fight
 And time that gave doth now his gift confound.
 Time doth transfix the flourish set on youth
 And delves the parallels in beauty's brow,
 Feeds on the rarities of nature's truth,
 And nothing stands but for his scythe to mow.
 And yet to times in hope my verse shall stand,
 Praising thy worth, despite his cruel hand.*

Again the dominant thread of time appears, but now the speaker looks forward rather than back, and the emphasis is on the friend's loss of youthful glory rather than his success in competition with male beauties of the past. The wrinkles and decay so graphically rendered in Sonnet 2 are echoed here: Time doth transfix [i.e., destroy] the flourish set on youth, / And delves the parallels [furrows] in beauty's brow. (ll. 9-10)

This sonnet also looks ahead to Sonnet 116. But when we turn from [Time] feeds on the rarities of nature's truth, / And nothing stands but for his scythe to mow. . . . (ll. 11-12) to the familiar opening of Sonnet 116's sestet Love's not time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks / Within his bending sickle's compass come . . . we notice how abstract and negative Sonnet 60 is by comparison.

Similarly, the couplet is clearly not so forceful as those in the earlier and later sonnets cited. The overall effect weakens the idea of immortality through the poet's verse, which had been so firmly asserted in the couplets of Sonnets 18 and 55. These comparisons reveal how subtly Shakespeare prepares for the low points in the speaker's relationship with his friend. His state is shifting from hope to anxiety.

The imagery complements the emotions. In the famous opening lines, the minutes of our lives are likened to waves hastening to the shore. There is a turmoil in their

forward motion that suggests human struggles for survival. The waves also symbolize the emotional surges of the sonnets themselves. Another device used by Shakespeare is that of condensing the rise and fall of human life into a few lines; here, in the second quatrain, he begins with nativity, goes on to maturity, and then closes with man's losing fight against time: time "that gave [life] doth now his gift confound [destroy]." (l. 8)

*Is it thy will thy image should keep open
 My heavy eyelids to the weary night?
 Dost thou desire my slumbers should be broken,
 While shadows like to thee do mock my sight?
 Is it thy spirit that thou send'st from thee
 So far from home into my deeds to pry,
 To find out shames and idle hours in me,
 The scope and tenor of thy jealousy?
 O no, thy love, though much, is not so great.
 It is my love that keeps mine eye awake,
 Mine own true love that doth my rest defeat,
 To play the watchman ever for thy sake.
 For thee watch I, whilst thou dost wake elsewhere,
 From me far off, with others all too near.*

After two sonnets that gain emotional and intellectual force by projecting the image of the beloved first back into time and then far ahead into the future with the threat of time's cruelty, Shakespeare shifts the scene to the present. The movement is wave-like and is enriched by re-reading Sonnets 27 and 43 with their extraordinary night visions of his absent friend.

Now the speaker is in his bedroom beset by insomnia. The vision of his friend's perfection is now tormenting him. Is this your will? the speaker asks. Anxiety seizes him. Perhaps his friend sends his shadows to break his sleep. Do you, in your intense jealousy, he asks, send your spirit to search out my shameful acts and idleness? The speaker's usual happy admiration of his friend's beauty has been replaced by fear for loss of his friend's affection.

In the sestet, however, the speaker takes over the responsibility for his insomnia. It is his "own true love" that destroys his rest. He has dared to declare his love to be greater than his friend's is for him. (l. 9) Now he reverses his field, asserting a kind of dominance by playing the "watchman" of his friend – for his friend's sake. The speaker's jealousy now begins to loom, as he imagines following the actions of his friend far away. In his role as watchman, he would warn people of danger, a fact

evident in the last, climactic phrase: there are “others all too near.” Potential lovers leap to mind.

However, the phrase cuts more than one way: behind the fact of mutual jealousy just revealed lies “the world”—the opinion of the many whose presence and probable disapproval would put pressure on their lives.

*Sin of self-love possesseth all mine eye,
 And all my soul, and all my every part;
 And for this sin there is no remedy,
 It is so grounded inward in my heart.
 Methinks no face so gracious is as mine,
 No shape so true, no truth of such account,
 And for my self mine own worth do define,
 As I all other in all worths surmount.
 But when my glass shows me my self indeed,
 Beated and chopped with tanned antiquity,
 Mine own self-love quite contrary I read;
 Self so self-loving were iniquity.
 'Tis thee (my self) that for my self I praise,
 Painting my age with beauty of thy days.*

The opening of Sonnet 62 gives the reader a jolt. Where has the speaker's humility gone? He begins by confessing the sin of self-love, the same sin he chided the youth for in Sonnet 1. At first the tone seems to have darkened since it has carried over from Sonnet 61. The sin he imputes to himself has no remedy because it is grounded in the heart—the seat of true emotion—as opposed to the eyes. But the serious self-indictment of the opening, which ends in despair and elicits pathos, suddenly turns in the next quatrain to braggadocio quite out of character. Can it be that he really believes no face or shape to be as gracious as his own? The reader begins to tumble to the comic usurpation of the friend's virtues, especially when he declares at the end of the octave that the worth he sees in himself surmounts that of everyone else. The hyperbole of his self-description is too absurd to be believed.

The third quatrain gives the sonnet another twist by reverting to the speaker's previous insistence on his age and its attendant decay. (This, by the way, is the traditional pose of Elizabethan sonneteers, no matter what their ages.) His mirror now shows his true self. His face is dramatically described as "Beated and chopped with tanned antiquity." (l. 10) Therefore the speaker reverses his opinion of himself as a paragon. His self-love now becomes an "iniquity." (l. 12)

The couplet takes a final turn by making the youth—now wittily

addressed as “my self”—the object of praise. The visual effect on the reader is almost comic: In the final line the speaker repairs the ravages of time on his face by “painting” it with his friend’s youthful beauty. The tours de force of this sonnet are clever in their use of the four-part structure, but even more so in the dramatic portrayal of the speaker, who fuses self-love and self-deprecation but returns to the continuing adoration of his idol. Adonis is back on his pedestal.

*Against my love shall be as I am now,
 With time's injurious hand crushed and o'erworn,
 When hours have drained his blood and filled his brow
 With lines and wrinkles, when his youthful morn
 Hath traveled on to age's steepy night,
 And all those beauties whereof now he's king
 Are vanishing, or vanished out of sight,
 Stealing away the treasure of his spring;
 For such a time do I now fortify
 Against confounding age's cruel knife,
 That he shall never cut from memory
 My sweet love's beauty, though my lover's life.
 His beauty shall in these black lines be seen,
 And they shall live, and he in them still green.*

Once more, Shakespeare plunges us into the future. However, in a subtly dramatic shift, the sonnet is not addressed to the friend; in fact, the lines are a true soliloquy. No longer is the speaker worried about his friend's marriage and procreation. He is envisioning a darker time when his friend will be as "crushed and o'erworn" as the speaker is now. (l. 2) Time is indeed the villain, and the imagery is strongly suggestive of death--the deaths of *both* men. The friend's waning hours will have "drained his blood" (l. 3); his beauties will not only be vanishing but "vanished out of sight" (l. 7); age's "cruel knife" will be "confounding" (l. 10), a word denoting total destruction. At the close of the poem, that cruel knife will not cut the lover's beauty from memory but it surely will cut off his life.

Just barely, in the couplet, the possibility of survival sneaks through "these black lines" of poetry in which the friend's beauty will appear as "green." The threat here, in contrast to the affirmations of Sonnets 60 and 62, almost gets the upper hand over the hopes for immortality.

Furthermore, the tone and imagery echoes Sonnet 2 in its fears of forty winters that will "dig deep trenches" in "beauty's field" (l. 2), but overall Sonnet 63 portrays more violence. The beauty of the friend's days that caps Sonnet 62 so positively is replaced by his beauties' vanishing, "stealing away the treasure of his spring." (l. 8) The brightness of Sonnet 18's summer's day is dimmed now. Death has become more imminent.

*When I have seen by time's fell hand defaced
 The rich proud cost of outworn buried age,
 When sometime lofty towers I see down razed,
 And brass eternal slave to mortal rage;
 When I have seen the hungry ocean gain
 Advantage on the kingdom of the shore,
 And the firm soil win of the wat'ry main,
 Increasing store with loss and loss with store;
 When I have seen such interchange of state,
 Or state itself confounded, to decay,
 Ruin hath taught me thus to ruminat:
 That time will come and take my love away.
 This thought is as a death, which cannot choose
 But weep to have that which it fears to lose.*

Shakespeare extends his treatment of time in this sonnet by putting the speaker's fears for the eventual death of his friend in three larger perspectives: first, the destruction of man-made structures, however rich or lofty; second, the territorial war between the kingdoms of ocean and land; and third, the ruinous mutability of greatness in general. Each of the quatrains employs threads and images used separately elsewhere.

The first quatrain recalls Sonnet 55, which begins "Not marble nor the gilded monuments / Of princes shall outlive this pow'rful rhyme," but here ends with assertion that even brass, a supposedly everlasting metal, is transient, "a slave to mortal rage" (l. 4). This relates to the thread of slavery in Sonnet 58, where the speaker's imprisonment is likened to waiting in hell (l. 13), and will be taken up again when the mistress reappears.

The second quatrain, which begins with the image of the "hungry ocean", carries on the thread of gluttony, which began in the very first sonnet (ll. 7, 13). The idea of time making "the earth devour her own sweet brood" (Sonnet 19, l. 2) is yet another connection. The idea of store and loss is implicit in Sonnet 1, where it is linked to gluttony, hoarding and the waste of youthful treasure. (ll. 12-14). Sonnet 2 carries this thread forward in the second and third quatrains, which stress the treasure of the youth's lusty days

and his need not to be niggardly when he might prosper through procreation.

The third quatrain with its more abstract “interchange of state” (l. 9), decay and ruin is a continuation of the ravages of time that are established as a dominant thread in Sonnet 2. Like the first quatrain, it has much in common with Sonnet 55. Ruin, the speaker says, has taught him to ruminate on the friend’s eventual death, and his thought is like a death. (l. 13) However, the consolations of immortality through living memory in verse that are so strong in Sonnet 55 are not to be found here.

*Since brass, nor stone, nor earth, nor boundless sea,
 But sad mortality o'ersways their power,
 How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea,
 Whose action is no stronger than a flower?
 O how shall summer's honey breath hold out
 Against the wrackful siege of batt'ring days
 When rocks impregnable are not so stout,
 Nor gates of steel so strong but time decays?
 O fearful meditation: where, alack,
 Shall time's best jewel from time's chest lie hid?
 Or what strong hand can hold his swift foot back?
 Or who his spoil or beauty can forbid?
 O none, unless this miracle have might,
 That in black ink my love may still shine bright.*

It should be no great surprise now that in Sonnet 65 the paradox of black ink making love shine bright returns, wave-like, as a re-incarnation of the black lines of Sonnet 63, which preserve the lover's perpetual green. The famous opening, "Since brass, nor stone, nor earth, nor boundless sea" carries over three images from Sonnet 64 and combines them with *stone* to give exceptional strength to the stressed syllables. The "mortal rage" of Sonnet 64 is echoed in the rage of "sad mortality" in lines two and three of Sonnet 65. As a dramatic contrast, Shakespeare introduces the flower as the last word in the first quatrain. Note that the word *flower* puts a weak syllable at the end of the line; "a rose" would not have the same touch of pathos. It also gives a strong contrast to the rhyming word *power*.

In the second quatrain, "summer's honey breath" (an allusion to Sonnet 18) is at war with "batt'ring days," a parallel to the war between land and sea in Sonnet 64. The phrase "rocks impregnable" is given weight by the trisyllabic word and occurs in the same position as "sad mortality" in line two, thus creating another subtle parallel to the imagery of warfare. "Wrackful siege" and "batt'ring days" are resisted by "gates of steel," but there is no contest. The quatrain closes with the triumph of mortality: "Time decays" everything. (l. 8) All four phrases have the same syllabic rhythm: stressed, unstressed,

stressed — a kind of counterpoint to the iambic meter.

The sestet begins with the speaker's fear: his friend ("time's best jewel") is under threat from time, the athletic thief of life, whose spoil is beauty. This time nothing can save the friend from death, unless there is a miracle. Once more the ink is black, but now it may preserve the light of love. The threat, though the same as that in Sonnet 64, seems stronger. However, the reward of the miracle is love's untarnished and imperishable glory. After the five questions in the body of the poem comes something resembling hope.

*Tir'd with all these, for restful death I cry,
 As to behold desert a beggar born,
 And needy nothing trimmed in jollity,
 And purest faith unhappily forsworn,
 And gilded honor shamefully misplaced,
 And maiden virtue rudely strumpeted,
 And right perfection wrongfully disgraced,
 And strength by limping sway disabled,
 And art made tongue-tied by authority,
 And folly (doctor-like) controlling skill,
 And simple truth miscalled simplicity,
 And captive good attending captain ill.*

*Tir'd with all these, from these I would be gone;
 Save that to die, I leave my love alone.*

Another plunge of emotion, another shift in focus, and a new structure that is not based quatrains but on a long list of complaints – in fact, a screed. The speaker does not address anyone (and he has not addressed his friend since Sonnet 62), and there is no mention of his "love" until the last three words.

Perhaps the most self-centered and self-pitying of the sonnets, this poem begins and ends with a world-weary death wish. The turn of the last line – another surprise – proclaims that the speaker's only reason not to commit suicide is that he would leave his love alone. This is strange because his love has often deserted him, and, as Sonnet 67 reveals, his friend has rejoined bad company. Had this poem been addressed directly to his "love," it would be emotional blackmail.

However, the substance of the sonnet is a line-by-line harangue against the world, and the attack is both stinging and comprehensive. At first it seems to lack focus, but the connecting thread here is injustice. It begins with a worthy person ("desert," 1. 2) born in beggary, and it ends with a good slave abused by an evil master (an obvious barb directed against his friend). The thread of slavery can be traced back to Sonnet 58 (and to Sonnet 20's "master mistress"), where the speaker makes it clear that he cannot be other than a slave because a god (Cupid, surely) decreed that his love should be his master.

It should be noted, finally, that the major theme of betrayal appears in line four, where the speaker laments "purest faith unhappily forsworn." The word *forsworn* occurs frequently in Shakespeare's works with the basic meaning of breaking one's word, but often implying desertion as well. Keeping this sonnet in mind enriches the effect of Sonnet 73's well-known conclusion.

*Ah, wherefore with infection should he live,
 And with his presence grace impiety,
 That sin by him advantage should achieve
 And lace itself with his society?
 Why should false painting imitate his cheek,
 And steal dead seeing of his living hue?
 Why should poor beauty indirectly seek
 Roses of shadow since his rose is true?
 Why should he live, now nature bankrupt is,
 Beggared of blood to blush through lively veins?
 For she hath no exchequer now but his,
 And proud of many, lives upon his gains.
 O him she stores to show what wealth she had
 In days long since, before these last so bad.*

The tirade against the world and the times intensifies in Sonnet 67. Immediately the tone is darkened by the word *infection*, which applies primarily to morals. The speaker's weariness shifts to vigorous denunciation of corrupt society and his friend's taking part in it. Still defending his friend, the speaker claims that the world has gained an advantage by his friend's gracious presence. Fashionable society tries to imitate the young man's ideal beauty, which is real, by using cosmetics, but it only manages to apply to its cheeks roses that look dead – hence “roses of shadow” (l. 8)

Each quatrain is an indignant rhetorical question, throwing the blame not on the speaker's friend but on the world's impious behavior. The third quatrain, however, shifts attention to the unique position of the friend and Nature. Now that the friend is lost to social predators, Nature is bankrupt; there are no more like him and there are no resources in Nature's treasury beyond his existence. There is no point in letting him expire if he cannot be replaced. Therefore Nature keeps him back, storing him to prove that she owned his beauty (her wealth) in past times.

Once more, Shakespeare employs hyperboles, fantasies and rhetorical questions to praise the young man's beauty and condemn the sinful world, now in a struggle with Nature to own his ideal beauty. Note that the friend may be the victim, more of an icon to be stolen by false society than the true individual he is. In brief, this poem takes a long step into the realm of complete disillusion.

*Thus is his cheek the map of days outworn,
 When beauty lived and died as flow'rs do now,
 Before these bastard signs of fair were born
 Or durst inhabit on a living brow
 Before the golden tresses of the dead,
 The right of sepulchers, were shorn away,
 To live a second life on second head
 Ere beauty's dead fleece made another gay:
 In him those holy antique hours are seen
 Without all ornament, itself and true,
 Making no summer of another's green,
 Robbing no old to dress his beauty new;
 And him as for a map doth nature store,
 To show false art what beauty was of yore.*

Shakespeare again shows his ingenuity in creating variations on a theme by taking the substance of Sonnet 67 and changing its atmosphere and emotional impact through stunning imagery. His friend is still the model of classical beauty, but only his cheek is mentioned specifically; the brow and the hair belong to others. The touch of the macabre comes in the focus on wig-making, in which the wig is made an emblem of loss. Wigs are “bastard signs” (l. 3) of beauty. “The golden tresses of the dead” by rights should go to the grave unshorn, not given “a second life on a second head.” (ll. 5, 7) The imagery is ghoulish in its implication of grave robbery. In the octave, the word *dead* appears twice, and *died* occurs once – all in conjunction with beauty. Everything seems faded, shorn of glory, living only in sad recollections.

The sestet begins with “holy and antique hours,” those times when “he” has manifested in true, unornamented beauty. The “summer” of line eleven harkens back to Sonnet 18, cleverly linked now to the false or stolen beauty of “another’s green.” Without specifically labeling this deteriorating world as sinful, Shakespeare makes it seem so, especially when the word *robbing* pops up in line twelve.

When “he” returns in the couplet, the sonnet comes full circle with the idea of the friend (who is not addressed) as a map for Nature to show the difference between “false art” (l. 14) and the true beauty of “days outworn” (l. 1). In Sonnet 67 the friend was Nature’s exchequer--a treasure; now he is subtly diminished from treasure to map.

*Those parts of thee that the world's eye doth view
 Want nothing that the thought of hearts can mend.
 All tongues (the voice of souls) give thee that due,
 Utt'ring bare truth, ev'n so as foes commend.
 Thy outward thus with outward praise is crowned;
 But those same tongues that give thee so thine own,
 In other accents do this praise confound
 By seeing farther than the eye hath shown.
 They look into the beauty of thy mind,
 And that in guess they measure by thy deeds;
 Then, churls, their thoughts (although their eyes
 were kind)
 To thy fair flow'r add the rank smell of weeds:
 But why thy odor matcheth not thy show,
 The soil is this, that thou dost common grow.*

An abrupt shift in attitude occurs when the speaker reverts to addressing his friend directly, and comes to a climax in a sharp chastisement of him. The form is part argument, part descriptive narrative. The microscene of the first quatrain imagines "the world" gazing in approval at the outward aspects of the friend. His excellent "parts" need no amendment from the hearts of others, a contention that breeds skepticism because the heart has been established as the source of truth as opposed to the eyes. But the speaker continues with the statement that all tongues, which are "the voice of souls" (l. 3), praise the friend's outward self with the kind of truth that enemies would use--an ambiguous compliment.

The next quatrain makes this ambiguity apparent when the praise is confounded--turned upside down--by those same tongues. The world's gaze shifts to another microscene, which looks beyond external graces into the beauty of the young man's mind. The opening of the sestet thus becomes savagely ironical, as the world sees by the friend's deeds what his mind really contains. Their thoughts are churlish, though their gazes are approving. (The word *churl* occurs in Sonnet 1 in the phrase "tender churl" (l. 12) applied to

the young man as a chastisement by the speaker.)

There is a cumulative argument against the friend at this point based on his corruption. Though the deeds are not named, the preceding sonnets make it clear that they are moral, and probably sexual, offenses. When the speaker says that the flower of the young man has the odor of weeds, he unleashes his own stored up rancor. The worst blow is the last: the uncommon friend has become "common."

*That thou art blamed shall not be thy defect,
 For slander's mark was ever yet the fair;
 The ornament of beauty is suspect,
 A crow that flies in heaven's sweetest air.
 So thou be good, slander doth but approve
 Thy worth the greater, being wooed of time:
 For canker vice the sweetest buds doth love,
 And thou present'st a pure unstained prime.
 Thou hast passed by the ambush of young days,
 Either not assailed, or victor being charged;
 Yet this thy praise cannot be so thy praise,
 To tie up envy evermore enlarged.
 If some suspect of ill masked not thy show,
 Then thou alone kingdoms of hearts shouldst owe.*

After the sharp rebuke and warning of the preceding sonnet, the speaker softens his tone. Returning to his early poems that praise the youth's beauty without exception, he lifts the weight of blame in the first line and proceeds to rationalize this gesture. The fair youth attracts slander from the envious, but that's no fault of his. Besides, slander shows beauty off to advantage and hence becomes an "ornament." (l. 3) Suspicion is, like a crow, an ominous blot that flies about the heavens, setting off their glory.

The speaker's warning note returns in the second quatrain: the friend must be truly good in order for slander to have the positive effect the speaker has described. If the friend is genuinely good, slander will do no harm but merely show ("approve," l. 5) his virtue to be greater, since it is being sought after in an evil time, and vice is a cankerworm that seeks out the sweetest rosebuds. You, he says, present "a pure unstained prime" (l. 8) and so qualify. Or so he appears just now.

The speaker escapes from blame himself for criticizing his friend's conduct by declaring that his friend's wild youth has passed. The key word is *ambush* (l. 9), carrying on the warfare implied by slander's "mark" (l. 2), the word for a shooter's target. Almost unbelievably, the speaker

proclaims that his friend is now not “assailed” (l. 10) by the envious – or, if attacked, he always wins.

A moral caveat, however, is attached (l. 11): envy is still lying in the weeds. As often as it is tied up, it can still grow stronger and escape into “the world.” The siege of slander must be lifted – over and over. If this were not the case, the friend would own “kingdoms of hearts” (l. 14) all by himself.

*No longer mourn for me when I am dead
 Than you shall hear the surly sullen bell
 Give warning to the world that I am fled
 From this vile world with vilest worms to dwell.
 Nay, if you read this line, remember not
 The hand that writ it, for I love you so
 That I in your sweet thoughts would be forgot,
 If thinking on me then should make you woe.
 O if (I say) you look upon this verse
 When I (perhaps) compounded am with clay,
 Do not so much as my poor name rehearse,
 But let your love even with my life decay,
 Lest the wise world should look into your moan
 And mock you with me after I am gone.*

This sonnet and the next mark the sharp descent of the speaker into the slough of despond and the vision of his own death. His self-effacement begins with an injunction to his friend not to mourn any longer than it takes his death knell to warn the world of his flight. The “surly, sullen bell” (l. 2) announces his sudden departure, his haste conveying his contempt for “this vile world” (l. 4). Although nothing has happened to suggest impending death, the poem is phrased to hint that it is a farewell note, perhaps implying suicide. There is not a little similarity to Hamlet in his soliloquies. Indeed, the *if*s of lines five and nine indicate that the poem is a very private meditation. The word *perhaps* (l. 10) makes the whole situation putative.

Any angry thoughts the speaker had about his friend (in Sonnet 69) are wiped away by his friend's *potential* woe. The paradox of the speaker is clear: Don't remember me “for I love you so / That I in your sweet thoughts would be forgot, / If thinking on me then would make you woe.” (ll. 6-8)

The pathos builds as the speaker's self-esteem is obliterated and he enjoins his friend to not even say his name. Worst of all, the speaker *says* he wants his friend's love to die when the speaker does. All this hyperbole is, it must be emphasized, hypothetical. Nothing has actually occurred.

What makes this sonnet more than a self-pitying moan is the twist in the speaker's motivation in the couplet. His real reason for caring has to do with the world's opinion. The world, sarcastically labeled "wise," may, after the speaker's death, mock the lofty young man for consorting with such a low person. The world, though vile, is powerful. The real tragedy, then, is that the fear of public opinion results in the suppression of the individual's deepest feelings.

*O lest the world should task you to recite
 What merit lived in me that you should love,
 After my death (dear love) forget me quite,
 For you in me can nothing worthy prove,
 Unless you would devise some virtuous lie
 To do more for me than mine own desert
 And hang more praise upon deceased I,
 Than niggard truth would willingly impart.
 O lest your true love may seem false in this,
 That you for love speak well of me untrue,
 My name be buried where my body is,
 And live no more to shame nor me nor you;
 For I am shamed by that which I bring forth,
 And so should you, to love things nothing worth.*

The imaginings of Sonnet 71 are extended from the prospect of the speaker's death to what his eulogy should be. He supposes that "the world" might pressure his friend to describe his merits; however, he immediately begs again to be forgotten. Self-abasement is re-asserted in hyperbole: "you in me can nothing worthy prove / Unless you would devise some virtuous lie" (ll. 4-5). The tone is almost playful, working up to the end of the second quatrain when he calls himself "deceased I" and refers to truth as "niggard," that is, miserly. The antitheses of appearance versus reality and truth versus falsity are at work in paradoxes again: "your true love may seem false" (in the artificial hypothetical eulogy) in that "you for love speak well of me untrue." (ll. 9-10)

The playful shifts to the direct and serious at the close of the third quatrain: Let "my name be buried where my body is, / And live no more to shame nor me nor you...." (ll. 10-11) The annihilation of the speaker's ego and his assumption of his own guilt are now complete. Shame will go with him to the grave. But this is what he says, not what he truly believes. The final turn comes in the speaker's challenge to his friend. In effect, he says that if he is ashamed of his poetry ("that which I bring forth," l. 13), so should his friend. Why? He should be ashamed to love what is

worthless. The argument seems to be devastating, but is it really valid?

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the speaker is betraying himself, that he really believes that his love and his verses are worth something despite his protestations. After all, he does go on to say – and write – quite a bit more. And the next sonnet is one of the very best. It is also full of vivid images and ends on a positive note.

*That time of year thou mayst in me behold
 When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
 Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
 Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.
 In me thou seest the twilight of such day
 As after sunset fadeth in the west,
 Which by and by black night doth take away,
 Death's second self, that seals up all in rest.
 In me thou seest the glowing of such fire
 That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,
 As the death bed whereon it must expire,
 Consumed with that which it was nourished by.
 This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong,
 To love that well, which thou must leave ere long.*

Sonnet 73 is one of those few in the sequence that have been given an independent life by publishers and the general reading public. Its prominence is due to the character of our own "world," one still dominated by romanticism when it comes to love. Textbooks of literature omit this poem only at their peril, and teachers delight to teach it. Readers who have heard of Shakespeare as a writer of fine "love poems" pluck small attractive volumes from bookstore shelves, despite the lack of notes or explanatory essays. Students are often smitten by this particular poem out of context because of its vivid nature images, its intense emotions, and its faith in love despite the threat of separation in death.

Scholars and poets have been delighted to discover that the poem is also beautifully constructed, chiefly in the use of quatrains that deal with increasingly briefer periods of time: autumn, as a time of year, is followed by twilight, a time of day, and the glowing of a fire shortly to disappear. The ashes of the speaker's youth are likened to a deathbed where the fire of life which nourished him will also consume him.

Putting this sonnet, which is usually read as a single poem,

into the context of the whole, we perceive that it comes close to the center, just after a group of very gloomy musings. Though the topic of impending death continues, the tone changes drastically, ending on a positive note. As we have often seen – and heard, the speaker becomes more forceful in the final couplet: here, the friend is addressed in a series of thick-clustered consonants, and three of the first four syllables are emphatically stressed. The key word *strong* anchors the rest of the line. The bond between speaker and addressee that had been seriously weakened just prior to this is now reaffirmed.

One more surprise occurs in the last line. The speaker does not talk about his own leaving, but switches to his friend's departure. This has at least two different effects: it suggests a sweet self-effacement of the speaker in thinking primarily of his friend's faithfulness. But it also raises a question: for what will his friend leave? The reader may well ask – and be encouraged to do so by the author – is this poem aimed at binding the friend to the speaker in the face of loosening ties? And how well is that well which he asserts? Is it perhaps a fantasy in the stream of the preceding sonnets?

In short, what has been taken as a clearcut affirmation of love in the couplet turns out to be, in light of the friend's previous unfaithfulness, a last effort to hold on to a doubtful lover.

*But be contented when that fell arrest
 Without all bail shall carry me away;
 My life hath in this line some interest,
 Which for memorial still with thee shall stay.
 When thou reviewest this, thou dost review
 The very part was consecrate to thee.
 The earth can have but earth, which is his due;
 My spirit is thine, the better part of me.
 So then thou hast but lost the dregs of life,
 The prey of worms, my body being dead,
 The coward conquest of a wretch's knife,
 Too base of thee to be remembered.
 The worth of that is that which it contains,
 And that is this, and this with thee remains.*

The intricate shifts of focus and emotion come to a kind of climax in the section that begins with this sonnet; it is a climax that threatens to be a conclusion. There is also a new beginning in store with the introduction of the so-called "rival poets" in Sonnet 78. The sonnets in between are transitional. In Sonnet 74 the theme of immortality comes to an apparent resolution when the speaker decides how he will best be remembered after his death. There is an upswing of mood when in the first line the speaker tells his friend to be contented. Some "interest" (value) in the speaker's "line" (his poetry) will remain with his friend (ll. 3-4), and that will be spiritual, appearing in the poems when his friend rereads them. Here the speaker talks not about black ink and the preservation of his public person, but "the better part of me" (l. 8) — his soul, fused with his friend's. Clearly, the body is "only the dregs of life," (l. 9), good only as food for worms. Though these themes have been established earlier, there is a transcendence here that betokens resurrection.

The opening lines depict death as an arrest without bail. Later (l. 11), it is "the coward conquest of a wretch's knife." So it is, poetically, a fusion of crime and punishment. Interestingly enough, what saving grace the verses have is the "interest" which will stay as a memorial, and this key financial image carries us back to the opening sonnets, showing, finally, what true worth is.

The emphasis is on affirmation, an avowal of faith. The very word *consecrate* (l. 6) has an air of sanctity, raising the sonnets themselves to the realm of the Platonic ideal. Perhaps the speaker has not betrayed himself after all. Now we can hear "Let me not to the marriage of true minds admit impediments" (Sonnet 116) coming in the distance. We scarcely notice that the speaker is revoking his appeal to his friend to forget him. We soon forget, too, the seeds of doubt sown at the close of Sonnet 73. Shakespeare makes his speaker all too human in his ups and downs of feeling, his inconsistencies and apparent contradictions. There are more struggles to come.

*So are you to my thoughts as food to life,
 Or as sweet season'd show'rs are to the ground;
 And for the peace of you I hold such strife
 As 'twixt a miser and his wealth is found:
 Now proud as an enjoyer, and anon
 Doubting the filching age will steal his treasure;
 Now counting best to be with you alone,
 Then bettered that the world may see my pleasure;
 Sometime all full with feasting on your sight,
 And by and by clean starved for a look;
 Possessing or pursuing no delight,
 Save what is had or must from you be took.
 Thus do I pine and surfeit day by day;
 Or gluttoning on all, or all away.*

The opening simile likens the friend to the speaker's thoughts, "as food to life." The sonnet then proceeds to list alternative comparisons and compound them with other similes and antitheses. The oscillations between polar opposites that constitute the basic motion of the sonnets are here squeezed into one poem, creating the effect of a fast-moving pendulum. The speaker's divided mind weaves a fresh fabric with well-established threads, beginning with food and culminating with "gluttoning" in the couplet. Other threads in the first quatrain are those of the seasons (l. 2), strife or agon (l. 3), and the miser or niggard (l. 4).

The second quatrain enriches the fabric by depicting alternating emotions in a line-for-line and now-then pattern. Carrying over the miser motif from line four, the speaker sees himself as both an enjoyer of, and worrier about, his treasure—namely his friend. Peace alone with him is "best" (l. 7) but even better when the speaker can show off his friend to "the world." The food imagery is combined with sight ("feasting on your sight," l. 9) and developed by its opposite—starvation for a look. The quickness of the shifts takes on a frenetic quality that reflects the anxiety of the speaker as lover.

In this midsection of the sequence, the seeds are also sown for the future. Just as Sonnet 74, with its emphasis on spirit and its sharing of souls (l. 8) looks forward to Sonnet 116's "marriage of true minds," Sonnet 75 hints at Sonnet 129 in the phrase

“possessing or pursuing” (l. 11), which gains even more interest when expanded later into “mad in pursuit and in possession so” (l. 9). The latter shows the speaker in a much more desperate and jealous mode. Finally, to round out the couplet of Sonnet 75, the thread of gluttony surfaces again, anticipating Sonnet 146, with its injunction “Within be fed, without be rich no more.” (l. 12)

Overall, Sonnet 75, in its nervous ups and downs, implies a troubled psyche, the manic insisting on all or nothing and threatening descent into depression. The emotions may be jagged, but the syntax and structure are under tight control.

*Why is my verse so barren of new pride?
 So far from variation or quick change?
 Why with the time do I not glance aside
 To new-found methods, and to compounds strange?
 Why write I still all one, ever the same,
 And keep invention in a noted weed,
 That every word doth almost tell my name,
 Showing their birth and where they did proceed?
 O know, sweet love, I always write of you,
 And you and love are still my argument:
 So all my best is dressing old words new,
 Spending again what is already spent:
 For as the sun is daily new and old,
 So is my love still telling what is told.*

Sonnet 76 stops the sequence in mid-career, as the speaker's takes time to contemplate his own poetic achievement. The tone and the technique are emblematic of the traditional self-deprecation assumed by sonneteers.

The poem begins with three mournful questions. The first two fill out two lines precisely, and the third occupies the whole second quatrain. The thought takes steps corresponding to the form, beginning with a lament for the speaker's loss of originality and followed immediately by a parallel two-line query with just about the same idea: why am I suffering from writer's block? (When in doubt, repeat!) The third amplifies the idea, eking out the quatrain with a clever paraphrase. For example, in complaining of his own repetition, he speaks about keeping "invention in a noted weed" (l. 6), that is to say, his imagination is wearing the same old verbal clothes.

He's right, but all the same, his wording is remarkable. Moreover, he describes his style as so familiar that "every word doth almost tell my name." (l. 7) Such a clue makes the reader ask who the author really is. Oddly enough, the only contemporary description of the sonnets comes from one Francis Meres, a literary critic, who in 1598 mentions the circulation of Shakespeare's "sugred" (sugared) sonnets among his friends. Presumably, they would have a clear idea of what seems now to be obscure. They would also have recognized his

style and appreciated his facility in conceits appropriate to the genre.

Shakespeare's excuse for repetition comes in the sestet where he addresses his friend and turns this sonnet into yet another compliment. His "argument" (theme) is the same but he is "dressing old words new" (l. 11). *Dressing* harks back to *weed* in line six and subtly links it to the appearance versus reality motif. Money, too, is used as the basis for a clever pun in the neatly balanced line: "Spending again what is already spent" (l. 12). The couplet seems all the more cogent for it not only transforms the cliché about the sun into a paradox (l. 13), but in the end epitomizes the love theme to seal his argument: "For as the sun is daily new and old, / So is my love still telling what is told."

*Thy glass will show thee how thy beauties wear,
 Thy dial how thy precious minutes waste;
 The vacant leaves thy mind's imprint will bear,
 And of this book this learning mayst thou taste.
 The wrinkles which thy glass will truly show,
 Of mouthed graves will give thee memory;
 Thou by thy dial's shady stealth mayst know
 Time's thievish progress to eternity.
 Look what thy memory cannot contain;
 Commit to these waste blanks and thou shalt find
 Those children nursed, delivered of thy mind.
 These offices, so oft as thou wilt look,
 Shalt profit thee, and much enrich thy book.*

Of the critic Kenneth Burke it has been said that he began his classes in fiction by asking his students first to open the book in hand to its exact midpoint and look for the central theme. The assumption is classical: good narratives are arranged symmetrically. The procedure works well with the five-act structure of Shakespeare's plays, which regularly have at their center a crucial decision or act by the protagonist. For example, in act three of *Othello*, the hero kneels with Iago and swears allegiance to him, rejecting Cassio and Desdemona. After that comes the descent into pathos.

Sonnet 77 marks a departure in the speaker's advice to his friend on the way to counteract time and perpetuate ideal beauty. He tells him to commit his thoughts to blank pages ("vacant leaves," l. 3) of his memorandum book, perhaps one already given to him by the speaker. Indirectly he urges his friend to follow in his footsteps by writing down what "memory cannot contain" (l. 9) and nursing the children of his brain. These will replace the offspring of the marriage urged in the first seventeen sonnets. In effect, the speaker encourages his friend (who may also be a poet), to carry on the poetic search for truth and so to evade time's ravages.

The opening lines of the sonnet deal with three things, often thought to be gifts from the speaker: a mirror, a clock and a notebook. These are associated, respectively, with beauty, time and ideas — all of which are threads laid

down early on. The speaker is continuing his role as mentor, but he is more like an equal to the young man now and his thoughts and those of his friend seem to be merging. The speaker suggests that his friend's ideas, after being recorded, will, through his "offices" (the contemplation of his own ideas), enrich his book. The mirror, the clock, and the written thoughts – all blend into a *memento mori*, like the skull some monks of antiquity used as an inkwell to remind them of their mortality.

*So oft have I invoked thee for my muse,
 And found such fair assistance in my verse
 As every alien pen hath got my use,
 And under thee their poesy disperse.
 Thine eyes, that taught the dumb on high to sing
 And heavy ignorance aloft to fly,
 Have added feathers to the learned's wing
 And given grace a double majesty.
 Yet be most proud of that which I compile,
 Whose influence is thine and born of thee.
 In others' works thou dost but mend the style,
 And arts with thy sweet graces graced be.
 But thou art all my art, and dost advance,
 As high as learning, my rude ignorance.*

As soon as the second half of the sequence is begun, the reader is introduced to a new force in his characters' lives, namely the poets described in line three as "every alien pen." Criticism of the sonnets over the years has dubbed these writers the "rival poets." Every possible identity for them has been thoroughly discussed, and, like that of the other characters, never agreed on. To be quite plain about this matter, no one knows.

What we *do* have, however, is a tantalizing account of people who, despite lacking names and histories, are fascinating and instructive. The speaker and his "muse" (the young man addressed in the opening line) maintain their friendship, and the speaker still insists that his friend has been his sole inspiration. Now, however, the friend has become the muse of many others, teaching them to sing and to fly. Established as a model of grace and beauty, he is now a tutor of the highest order, and surpasses the speaker.

What, then, can the speaker claim? In the sestet he argues that his friend should be most proud of him as a pupil because the rival poets have improved only their style by imitating the young man. (Perhaps the friend is a poet, but more likely he "mends" others' styles through his exceptional beauty, which inspires their weaker voices.) The speaker gains a rather hollow victory in this skirmish with the rivals by claiming that *all* of the speaker's value is due to having his friend as subject. Once again, the speaker writes to preserve his claim to first place in the younger man's affections.

*Whilst I alone did call upon thy aid,
 My verse alone had all thy gentle grace,
 But now my gracious numbers are decayed.
 And my sick muse doth give another place.
 I grant (sweet love) thy lovely argument
 Deserves the travail of a worthier pen,
 Yet what of thee thy poet doth invent,
 He robs thee of and pays it thee again.
 He lends thee virtue, and he stole that word
 From thy behavior; beauty doth he give
 And found it in thy cheek; he can afford
 No praise to thee but what in thee doth live.
 Then thank him not for that which he doth say,
 Since what he owes thee, thou thyself dost pay.*

The anxiety of the speaker is stated in straightforward fashion in the first quatrain of this sonnet as he laments the time when he was the only one whose poetry had all the “gentle grace” of his friend. Now he pronounces his current verses to be “decayed.” Alarmingly, his muse is sick, and he has been supplanted by another poet.

In the second quatrain the speaker concedes that the friend deserves the praise of a poet worthier than himself, but he argues that the rival poet robs the friend of his beauty simply to pay it back again. Furthermore, the rival has bestowed on his friend the virtue which the speaker had already extolled in his friend’s behavior. In brief, the rival is simply imitating the speaker.

The logic of the speaker’s attack on his rival comes to a climax in the couplet: the friend should not thank the rival for his praise because the rival actually owes the friend for all the good things he has given him.

As before, the speaker’s self-effacing manner is used to gain his friend’s favor; now that he has lost that favor, the speaker has to work even harder. His jealousy has grounds and they cannot be brushed aside easily. And yet – and here the pathos comes – the old tricks to charm his friend are not working. The speaker doesn’t have the force to stem the tides of emotion swirling around him.

What becomes apparent in this sonnet, and this central section generally, is that the speaker is condemning his rival for depending wholly for success on the virtue and beauty of his friend. To go back to the earlier sonnets now – Sonnet 38 is a good instance – we find the speaker using the same approach he now criticizes in his rival.

*O how I faint when I of you do write,
 Knowing a better spirit doth use your name,
 And in the praise thereof spends all his might,
 To make me tongue-tied speaking of your fame.
 But since your worth (wide as the ocean is)
 The humble as the proudest sail doth bear,
 My saucy bark (inferior far to his)
 On your broad main doth willfully appear.
 Your shallowest help will hold me up afloat,
 Whilst he upon your soundless deep doth ride;
 Or (being wracked) I am a worthless boat,
 He of tall building and of goodly pride.
 Then if he thrive and I be cast away,
 The worst was this: my love was my decay.*

The speaker continues in his depression with a melodramatic gesture; he is fainting because a better poet ("spirit," l. 2) is lauding the young man so much that the speaker has become "tongue-tied" in talking of the young man's fame (l. 4). He persists in feeling inferior despite his previous contentions that all the other poets are simply imitators. (These are the "alien pens" of Sonnet 78.)

The self-deprecations in the second quatrain involve nautical metaphors that some readers have seen as an allusion to the Spanish Armada, but this is unlikely because tall Spanish ships were defeated by storms and the smaller English war vessels. The friend in this miniature allegory is as great in virtue as the ocean is wide. He is so gracious he can carry sails both humble and proud. In a humorous play on the ship metaphor, the speaker sees himself as a "saucy bark" (l. 7), a small boat inferior to his rival's. He also styles himself as "willful," in need of the friend's "shallowest help" while the rival rides smoothly on the friend's "soundless deep." (ll. 8-10).

The extravagance of these conceits makes the overall effect almost comic. Shakespeare makes the speaker walk a tightrope – or perhaps a plank? – by simultaneously eliciting admiration for his own skill, contempt for his own inferiority, and pathos arising from the loss of his lover. In the couplet he concludes that the worst of it all was that his love was his "ruin" (decay, l. 14). Does he mean his own love or his friend's?

What develops in this sonnet, then, is a churning jealousy evident in the speaker's desperate belief that the "shallowest help" (l. 9) from his friend will resolve his problem. The speaker feels betrayed. His friend has helped his enemy, the rival poet, and broken faith with the speaker. Is the speaker a sadder but a wiser man? That is the chief subject of the second half of the sequence.

*Or shall I live your epitaph to make,
 Or you survive when I in earth am rotten,
 From hence your memory death cannot take,
 Although in me each part will be forgotten.
 Your name from hence immortal life shall have,
 Though I (once gone) to all the world must die,
 The earth can yield me but a common grave,
 When you entombed in men's eyes shall lie.
 Your monument shall be my gentle verse,
 Which eyes not yet created shall o'er-read,
 And tongues to be your being shall rehearse;
 When all the breathers of this world are dead,
 You still shall live (such virtue hath my pen)
 Where breath most breathes, ev'n in the mouths of men.*

Most commentators would eliminate this poem as a "rival poet" sonnet. There is good reason for this: no rival poet is mentioned. However, part of the speaker's struggle to hold his place in the competition involves the repeated argument that he can perpetuate his friend's existence after death: "Your monument shall be my gentle verse." (l. 9) When friction develops between the two men, as in Sonnet 80, the speaker tends to repeat his tactic of looking into the future and even praising his own poetry (which is now "gentle" for the first time), contrary to his traditional stance of humility. *Gentle* at the time implied superiority and signified more strength than it does now.

The argument builds on the axiomatic statement that one of the men must survive the other. Because, the speaker says, I shall either live to write your epitaph or you shall live on after I am rotten; death cannot destroy your memory. The speaker must die "to all the world" (l. 6), but his friend will be "entombed in men's eyes" (l. 8). In the future the eyes of yet unborn people will read and repeat the sonnets. Therefore, because of the "virtue" (power) of the speaker's pen, the friend shall live on where there is most life, "even in the mouths of men." (ll. 13-14)

Tactfully, the speaker does not extend the argument to his own reputation, which will certainly live after both are gone, even if only as an anonymous poet. Can the rival poet do better?

*I grant thou wert not married to my muse,
 And therefore mayst without attaint o'erlook
 The dedicated words which writers use
 Of their fair subject, blessing every book.
 Thou art as fair in knowledge as in hue,
 Finding thy worth a limit past my praise,
 And therefore art enforced to seek anew
 Some fresher stamp of the time-bett'ring days.
 And do so, love, yet when they have devised
 What strained touches rhetoric can lend,
 Thou truly fair wert truly sympathized
 In true plain words by thy true-telling friend.
 And their gross painting might be better used
 Where cheeks need blood; in thee it is abused.*

Again the speaker tries to convince his friend that his plain style is better than that of other poets, who are attempting to capture the friend's superlative beauty by using contorted rhetorical flourishes. Using his own rhetorical devices, the speaker first concedes that his friend has no obligation (like that of *marriage*, l. 1) to like the speaker's poetry and therefore can suffer no dishonor (*attaint*, l. 2) by reading (*o'erlook*, l. 2) the dedicatory words that writers (the rival poets) lavish on the friend's beauty. Their "blessing" (l. 4) is ironic.

The argument proceeds by setting down as a premise that the friend's mental superiority is as great as his physical beauty ("hue," l. 5). The friend's moral virtue ("worth," l. 6) the speaker has found to be beyond description. Therefore writers are now compelled to seek new styles, such as are suitable to the improving times. The striking phrase *time-bettering days* smells of the same irony as *blessing*, and both are placed at the end of their respective quatrains for emphasis.

The Q.E.D. tone continues at the start of the sestet. "Go along with the other poets, if you must," the speaker says, "but just remember when you read their pompous rhetoric, that you were truly praised by me." The conspicuous repetition of *truly* and *true* (ll. 11-12) has a lightly humorous hauteur, suggesting that the speaker's argument is incontrovertible. This is confirmed by the couplet, which comes right out with "gross painting" (l. 13) to characterize the rivals' praises. "You," concludes the speaker, "need no 'blood' for your cheeks." You are perfect as you are. *I shall not gild your lily.*

*I never saw that you did painting need,
 And therefore to your fair no painting set;
 I found (or thought I found) you did exceed
 The barren tender of a poet's debt:
 And therefore have I slept in your report,
 That you your self being extant well might show
 How far a modern quill doth come too short,
 Speaking of worth, what worth in you doth grow,
 This silence for my sin you did impute,
 Which shall be most my glory, being dumb,
 For I impair not beauty, being mute,
 When others would give life, and bring a tomb.
 There lives more life in one of your fair eyes
 Than both your poets can in praise devise.*

An undercurrent of desperation to keep his friend's love flows through Sonnet 83. I could have done, the speaker seems to say, what my rivals have done by way of "painting" — that is, embellishing — the friend's beauty. As in Sonnet 82, the speaker argues his case cleverly. First, he tells his friend, I never believed you weren't perfect; therefore I indulged in no painting.

At this point, however, some doubt creeps in when he admits that he *thought* he found nothing to detract from the young man's beauty. (l. 3) A poet, he says, is obliged to praise his idol, but since he thought at first that the friend's beauty exceeded all expectations, he didn't feel it necessary to sing his praise: "And therefore I have slept in your report [refrained]." (l. 5) The speaker reinforces his argument by rephrasing lines three and four: Since you are living ("extant," l. 6) you yourself can show by your presence how a trivial poet ("a modern quill," l. 7) falls short of praising you in his verses.

In the sestet there is a little eye-opener for the reader. The friend has charged the speaker with sinning against him by his silence. (l. 9) Now the speaker can cap his argument with a paradox: I am not impairing your beauty by being mute. Quite the contrary, my silence is my greatest glory. My rivals want to pump more life into you, but their praises are like tombstones. (l. 12)

The couplet brings the speaker's barb home. One of his friend's eyes has

more life than both poets can create. Back comes some of the speaker's humility as he puts himself in the same category as his rivals. Is he purposely inconsistent? In the previous sonnet he has bragged about telling the truth and shunning "gross painting." Plainly, he likes to play the virtuoso even more.

*Who is it that says most which can say more
 Than this rich praise, that you alone are you,
 In whose confine immured is the store,
 Which should example where your equal grew?
 Lean penury within that pen doth dwell,
 That to his subject lends not some small glory,
 But he that writes of you, if he can tell
 That you are you, so dignifies his story.
 Let him but copy what in you is writ,
 Not making worse what nature made so clear,
 And such a counterpart shall fame his wit,
 Making his style admired everywhere.
 You to your beauteous blessings add a curse,
 Being fond on praise, which makes your praises worse.*

Celebrating the uniqueness of the one addressed is scarcely a rare activity in the Sonnets, and Shakespeare again demonstrates the bravura changes he can ring on the subject. The intricate opening question is yet another search for the highest praise of the young man's beauty. The answer, "you alone are you" (l. 2), is an abridgment of previous arguments in favor of letting the subject carry the poetry. The image of the youth's beauty as treasure is a thread that can be traced back to Sonnet 2. However, the emphasis shifts here to the rival poets who are gaining their glory by exercising their pens in praising the paragon of beauty.

Those critics who believe that the rival poets are legion win support from the implied contention that any poet can dignify his story by telling "you are you" (l. 8) and that all they need to do is "copy what in you is writ." (l. 9) If such poets will simply avoid the pitfall of making nature worse, they can become famous for their wit and style. But then comes the couplet.

The repetition of familiar views is abruptly cut off. Just as we think the usual unalloyed praise is coming, the speaker reveals the curse that comes with the young man's blessings. The rose has a thorn after all--a big one: the friend is vain. He is overattached to ("fond on," l. 14) flattery.

Therefore the rival poets' praise is contaminated by their subject's pride.

What readers must now realize is that the speaker is suffering from envy of his competition, as well as pride in his own talent, and both are deadly sins.

*My tongue-tied muse in manners holds her still,
 While comments of your praise, richly compiled,
 Reserve their character with golden quill
 And precious phrase by all the muses filed.
 I think good thoughts, whilst others write good words
 And like unlettered clerk still cry amen
 To every hymn that able spirit affords
 In polished form of well-refined pen.
 Hearing you praised, I say 'tis so, 'tis true,
 And to the most of praise add something more,
 But that is in my thought, whose love to you
 (Though words come hindmost) holds his rank before.
 Then others, for the breath of words respect;
 Me for my dumb thoughts, speaking in effect.*

As if to lighten the charge of vanity in Sonnet 84, the speaker shifts to a teasing tone. He has called upon his private “muse” — not the friend himself — but finds “her” (the muse is seldom given a gender) to be “tongue-tied.” (l. 1) Other poets have made rich compilations of praise for his friend in their characteristic style as if writing with a golden pen. (ll. 2-3) Their precious phrases are finely sharpened by “all the muses” (l. 4). Shakespeare, and his speaker, were well aware that poetry needed only one of the classical nine muses, so the first quatrain ends with a joke.

A little stab of the speaker’s hauteur in line five compares his “good thoughts” with the other poets’ “good words.” The latter phrase suggests Hamlet’s reply to Polonius’ question about what he reads: “Words, words, words.” The speaker’s jocular irony continues through the second quatrain with the simile of the illiterate clerk, who agrees with every hymn that is elegantly phrased. (Clerks were used to give amens as signals for the congregations to respond. And they were supposed to be educated.)

Still teasing, the speaker says that he acts like the ignorant clerk by exclaiming how true the praises of the rival poets are. He adds his own frosting to the cake of praise — in his silent thoughts. Once more, the speaker argues the superiority of his own love despite the fact that his words “come hindmost” (l. 12). The

phrase refers both to the relative success of the speaker's sonnets in the world and to the fact that the vogue of sonnets was on the wane.

The couplet encapsulates what has gone before, adding the clever idea that what other sonneteers' readers pay attention to is "the breath of words" (l. 13), their mere utterance and their airy substance. The concluding paradox is a logical and syntactical parallel to line thirteen. The speaker's "dumb thoughts" (l. 14) are in effect spoken ones.

*Was it the proud full sail of his great verse,
 Bound for the prize of (all too precious) you,
 That did my ripe thoughts in my brain inhearse,
 Making their tomb the womb wherein they grew?
 Was it his spirit, by spirits taught to write
 Above a mortal pitch, that struck me dead?
 No, neither he nor his compeers by night
 Giving him aid, my verse astonished.
 He nor that affable familiar ghost,
 Which nightly gulls him with intelligence,
 As victors of my silence cannot boast;
 I was not sick of any fear from thence.
 But when your countenance filled up his line,
 Then lacked I matter, that enfeebled mine.*

This last sonnet of the so-called Rival Poet series is particularly hazardous for those who wish to read the sonnets as personal statements by Shakespeare concerning real people. Arguments have become especially intense about the poet's possible identity suggested by obscure allusions, beginning with line one. For some scholars the phrase "the proud full sail of his great verse" points to George Chapman, an accomplished and well-known writer. In Chapman's popular translation of Homer, the one praised much later by John Keats, the lines of verse were lengthened to give more of a sweep to the phrasing. As attractive as this idea has been, the doubters have pointed out that the translation of Homer did not take off in "full sail" until after Shakespeare's sonnets were published.

However, the Chapmanites hasten to point out that their candidate also claimed to be guided by spirits (ll. 5-10), Homer's in particular, and that the "compeers by night" refers to a group often called the School of Night, a loose band of poets to which Chapman belonged. Nowadays the very existence of the group in any formal sense is doubted. The flood of controversy over these matters provides an object lesson in what pitfalls await those who read these sonnets as history.

Even if hard evidence concerning the rival poet should appear tomorrow, the virtue of the poem and its intriguing expression of the relationship of the characters would

remain, perhaps enriched. As an emotional whole the sonnet conveys the anxiety of the speaker as both poet and lover. Acknowledging the overwhelming power of another poet — something, by the way, that Shakespeare himself had no need of doing at this point in his career — and the threat of his friend's being won away from him, the speaker mourns the death of his own thoughts.

Emphatically the speaker denies any fear of the other poet, even granted that he might have been aided by supernatural powers. What struck the speaker dumb was the appearance of his beautiful friend in the poetry of a celebrated rival. And so the speaker affirms again his fidelity, leaving the contest between poets, if it can be called that, neither won nor lost.

*Farewell, thou art too dear for my possessing,
 And like enough thou knowst thy estimate,
 The charter of thy worth gives thee releasing;
 My bonds in thee are all determinate.
 For how do I hold thee but by thy granting,
 And for that riches where is my deserving?
 The cause of this fair gift in me is wanting,
 And so my patent back again is swerving.
 Thy self thou gav'st, thy own worth then not knowing,
 Or me, to whom thou gav'st it, else mistaking;
 So thy great gift, upon misprision growing,
 Comes home again, on better judgment making.
 Thus have I had thee as a dream doth flatter;
 In sleep a king, but waking no such matter.*

The abruptness of the farewell in this sequence is not an unfamiliar technique in the sonnets. Shakespeare creates a dramatic effect that arouses narrative interest by making the reader ask questions. What, precisely, has happened? How much time has elapsed? Is the friend present or absent? This sonnet, like a number of others, could be a verse letter that was never sent. The truth is that we don't know whether any of these sonnets were read by the person(s) to whom they were addressed – if they ever existed.

At first, all that the reader is allowed to know is that the speaker declares that his friend is free: "My bonds in thee are all determinate [terminated]." (l. 4) The speaker's argument is humble: the friend knows his worth and that gives him the right to be released. Their relationship depends wholly on the riches freely given by his friend, but because the speaker does not deserve such riches, the privilege ("patent," l. 8) returns to his friend. At this point the reader has a right to suspect that the friend has already left of his own accord as the speaker knew he might in Sonnet 73 (ll. 13-14).

The sestet reveals a little more because it affirms the men's mutual love, which began when the friend was yet unaware of his own worth. Then, too, when the friend gave himself to the speaker, he did not know the speaker fully. The friend's

great gift turned out to be a mistake (“misprision,” l. 11) and now on second – and better – thought he “comes home again” (l. 12). In other words, he detaches himself from the speaker.

At the end of the poem, the speaker wakens sadly; he has flattered himself that he was “a king” (l. 140), but now that the dream is over, he knows that he is no such thing. This is tragedy in the making: the speaker thought he had done the right thing to hold his lover, but it turned out to be just the opposite. The full flowering of the tragedy is apparent in the remaining sonnets.

*When thou shalt be disposed to set me light,
 And place my merit in the eye of scorn,
 Upon thy side against myself I'll fight,
 And prove thee virtuous, though thou art forsworn.
 With mine own weakness being best acquainted,
 Upon thy part I can set down a story
 Of faults concealed, wherein I am attainted:
 That thou in losing me shall win much glory.
 And I by this will be a gainer too,
 For bending all my loving thoughts on thee,
 The injuries that to my self I do,
 Doing thee vantage, double vantage me.
 Such is my love, to thee I so belong,
 That for thy right, my self will bear all wrong.*

The farewell in Sonnet 87 is no more said than the door is re-opened. As they often do, the emotional tides in the sequence move swiftly. Moreover, there is an important disclosure: the speaker says, with strong rhetorical emphasis at the end of the first quatrain, that his friend has betrayed him. This establishes that the ironic word *king* at the end of Sonnet 87 may apply just as much to the friend as to himself. Here is an example of Shakespeare's mastery of psychology as he explores the duelling emotions in the speaker's mind. In a paradoxical dramatic action, though he knows that his friend has proved treacherous, he vows to defend him. He will fight against himself and prove his friend virtuous as well. This is hard for the reader to swallow at first, but cannot everyone understand how irrational and unstable love can be?

In another surprise, the speaker announces that he can tell the secret sins he himself has committed (facts unspecified as usual) and so punish himself – and help his friend – by taking the blame. The speaker seems to have reached a peak of unwitting self-betrayal. He convinces himself that the damages he does to himself will not only be to his friend's advantage but doubly so to himself. (l. 13) After all, to use his own logic, he still considers himself to be his friend's soulmate.

The speaker's masochism may be difficult to understand, but still we pity him. The emotions evoked by the situation and the poetry are like those elicited in mid-career of a Shakespearean tragedy. The die is cast. The happy ending envisioned by the speaker in the couplet will be impossible.

*Say that thou didst forsake me for some fault,
 And I will comment upon that offense.
 Speak of my lameness, and I straight will halt,
 Against thy reasons making no defense.
 Thou canst not, love, disgrace me half so ill
 To set a form upon desired change,
 As I'll my self disgrace, knowing thy will;
 I will acquaintance strangle and look strange,
 Be absent from thy walks, and in my tongue
 Thy sweet beloved name no more shall dwell,
 Lest I, too much profane, should do it wrong
 And haply of our old acquaintance tell.
 For thee, against myself I'll vow debate,
 For I must ne'er love him whom thou dost hate.*

It is important to keep in mind that the opening words "Say that" make the whole utterance hypothetical. If his friend should charge him with "some fault" (l. 1), he would not defend himself. Not only will he accept any sin imputed to him, he will even disgrace himself and show his master that he is a willing slave. Should his friend speak of his lameness (l. 3), he would immediately "halt" (limp). Some past readers have contended that Shakespeare himself must have been lame, but now that position is rarely held. We must overcome our natural willing suspension of disbelief and not equate what the speaker says with what Shakespeare himself experienced or felt.

Still addressing his friend as "love" (l. 5), in the second quatrain the speaker carries his familiar hyperbolic mode to a greater extreme when he says that he will discredit himself twice as much as his friend would, *if* his friend were to dictate exactly what he wanted the speaker's reform to be. (l. 6) Some readers have felt that the phrase "thy will" (l. 7) is a pun on Shakespeare's name, but it makes better sense to take it simply as the friend's desire, especially in view of the next line. Not all entendres are double.

Piling on the humility, the speaker promises to pretend not to know his friend, to leave the places he frequents, and – worst of all – to resist saying his name. A modern

reader may think the speaker protests too much, but it is important to hear the crescendo of pathos the speaker is building. The words “beloved name” and “profane” (ll. 10-11) make clear the holiness of their relationship, at least in the speaker’s eyes. But there is also an implied threat that the speaker might reveal what they have done together. (ll. 11-12)

The ax falls in the couplet. The speaker swears that he will “debate” against himself. Logic forces him to declare – bitterly, we infer – that he cannot love himself because his friend hates him.

*Then hate me when thou wilt, if ever, now,
 Now while the world is bent my deeds to cross,
 Join with the spite of fortune, make me bow,
 And do not drop in for an after-loss.
 Ah, do not, when my heart hath 'scaped this sorrow,
 Come in the rearward of a conquered woe;
 Give not a windy night a rainy morrow,
 To linger out a purposed overthrow.
 If thou wilt leave me, do not leave me last,
 When other petty griefs have done their spite;
 But in the onset come, so shall I taste
 At first the very worst of fortune's might,
 And other strains of woe, which now seem woe,
 Compared with loss of thee will not seem so.*

Just when the reader thinks the worst has happened – that the friend has come to hate the speaker – emotions take another plunge. What is worse than the rift is that the speaker seems to welcome the catastrophe; “if ever, now.” (l. 1) As usual, he professes a logical approach: it is better to face the worst woe now because then the minor griefs that follow will be more bearable. Of course, the speaker’s ultimate aim is to recover his love and what he really wants now is to prevent any further erosion of their relationship. His method seems to be directly contrary to common sense. “Don’t make things even worse,” we are tempted to exclaim after reading the opening injunction: “Then hate me when thou wilt.”

Echoing Sonnet 29, in which he contemplates his “disgrace with fortune and men’s eyes,” he speaks of his mistreatment by “the world” and, in his masochistic fashion, pleads with his friend to join in fortune’s spite and not wait until after the initial body blows. Because we the readers have no knowledge of the external facts, we cannot tell whether he is paranoid or truly persecuted.

The perverse logic of the main body of the poem leads to a conclusion tantamount to “Please hit me while I’m down, not later, because it won’t hurt so much.” This is made plausible by the eloquence of “Give not a windy night a rainy morrow,”

(l. 7) one of those aphoristic gems that stud the sonnets.

The opening clause of the sestet, "If thou wilt leave me," in the context presages defeat, not a happy event. Still, the speaker wants to salvage what he can. Talking about his war with "the world," he calls his social misfortunes "petty griefs." (l. 10) However, this simply underscores the magnitude of the friend's hatred. The rhetorical strategy is clear: the speaker wishes to shame his friend with a logical indictment, proving to him that his behavior is worse than that of "the world."

*Some glory in their birth, some in their skill,
 Some in their wealth, some in their bodies' force,
 Some in their garments, though new-fangled ill,
 Some in their hawks and hounds, some in their horse;
 And every humor hath his adjunct pleasure,
 Wherein it finds a joy above the rest.
 But these particulars are not my measure;
 All these I better in one general best:
 Thy love is better than high birth to me,
 Richer than wealth, prouder than garments' cost,
 Of more delight than hawks or horses be:
 And having thee, of all men's pride I boast;
 Wretched in this alone, that thou mayst take
 All this away, and me most wretched make.*

At first we seem to be thrown into another world. The subject is personal pride, specifically what various men prize the most. It's an interesting list, given in virtually anti-climactic order: social class, special ability, wealth, bodily strength, clothes ("though newfangled ill," an irresistible jab at fashion), and prestigious animals – hawks, hounds, and horses. Clearly this list presents the values of "the world," which has been in the sonnets as a whole a force to be both satirized and feared.

The second quatrain is transitional, abstract, and climactic. Every temperament ("humor," l. 5) has its own pleasure which gives the greatest joy. But the speaker flatly rejects this measure of value, and asserts his superiority to "the world" in one "general best." (l. 8) This, he announces at the opening of the sestet, is the love of his friend, whom he now addresses directly. Then he declares that he is both richer and happier than the privileged folk cited in the first quatrain. In having his friend, he can boast of what is more valuable than other men's pride.

At the back of his mind the speaker must have kept the maxim "pride cometh before a fall," because in the couplet he confesses to being "wretched" because his friend might take away his pride and joy – and make him the most wretched one of all.

*But do thy worst to steal thy self away,
 For term of life thou art assured mine,
 And life no longer than thy love will stay,
 For it depends upon that love of thine.
 Then need I not to fear the worst of wrongs,
 When in the least of them my life hath end.
 I see a better state to me belongs
 Than that which on thy humor doth depend.
 Thou canst not vex me with inconstant mind,
 Since that my life on thy revolt doth lie.
 O what a happy title do I find,
 Happy to have thy love, happy to die!
 But what's so blessed fair that fears no blot?
 Thou mayst be false, and yet I know it not.*

The speaker's reasonings become more desperate as he oscillates from bold confidence to nervous insecurity. On the one hand, he maintains that his friend is his for life (l. 2), but the life endangered is his own. When he says that "life no longer than thy love will stay" (l. 3), he skates on the edge of suicide. The implied threat that we have seen before flashes out momentarily at the end of the first quatrain, when he says that everything depends on "that love of thine."

At one moment his love is eternal; at the next, it is likely to be snuffed out by the smallest transgression of his friend. The friend himself seems to be faithful at times, but – perhaps – unfaithful at others. (We see him only through the speaker's eyes, of course.) In line seven, the speaker takes another tack. He claims he is really better off as he is – as the faithful lover – than if he lives dependent on his friend's caprices. He further declares that those caprices cannot annoy him, an assertion that is surprising and unconvincing. However, the reason (in line 9) turns out to be familiar: "my life on thy revolt doth lie." This is plainly emotional blackmail.

The last quatrain ends with a grotesquely ironic cry of joy. The speaker is happy to have possession ("title," l. 11) of his love, and he is also happy to die. The paradox makes it all well; he will win even if he loses. But not so fast. The couplet raises a red flag. What was formerly

considered perfect ("blessed fair," l. 13) – and this applies to both the friend and the love between the two men – now comes into serious question: Not only may the friend be subject to defection, defection may have already occurred. In that case, the happiness becomes a fool's paradise.

*So shall I live, supposing thou art true,
 Like a deceived husband, so love's face,
 May still seem love to me, though alter'd new:
 Thy looks with me, thy heart in other place.
 For there can live no hatred in thine eye;
 Therefore in that I cannot know thy change.
 In many's looks, the false heart's history
 Is writ in moods and frowns and wrinkles strange;
 But heaven in thy creation did decree
 That in thy face sweet love should ever dwell;
 Whate'er thy thoughts or thy heart's workings be,
 Thy looks should nothing thence but sweetness tell.
 How like Eve's apple doth thy beauty grow,
 If thy sweet virtue answer not thy show.*

The doubts continue, and the language testifies to their increased intensity. Now the gap between appearance and reality widens. If the speaker is to continue to live, he must suppose that his friend is faithful. The simile of the deceived husband in the second line sets the dismal tone. Nothing could be worse than becoming a cuckold, but the speaker would have to settle for that. No one knows for certain that the friend has betrayed anyone. However, the seed has been planted in the speaker's mind as it was in Othello's. There is no Iago here — except within. The probability of the beautiful face reflecting the true state of the friend's heart has been shaken.

In the second quatrain the speaker stoutly insists that "there can live no hatred in thine eye" (l. 5), but hatred has been detected before in no uncertain terms. (Sonnet 89) Emotional forces are in full swing, and the shifts are reflected in phrases like "the false heart's history" and "moods and frowns and wrinkles strange." (ll. 7-8) The speaker has not as yet seen the evidence, but he will be looking for it.

The logical progression of thought that the speaker supposes himself to have is canceled — briefly and dramatically — in the sestet, where the heavenly beauty of his friend comes back into his mind. It is beauty, he says, "that in thy face sweet love [shall] ever dwell." (l. 10) All of the third quatrain is devoted to the sweetness of this divine appearance,

and the assertion is so emphatic that it seems to wipe away all the doubts.

But the benign aspect of Eros vanishes in the couplet. Now the youth's beauty threatens to become like Eve's apple. The Christian strictures blot out the guiltless pagan responses. We are left to contemplate what fate might loom if the speaker discovers that apparent virtue is not confirmed by reality.

*They that have pow'r to hurt and will do none,
 That do not do the thing they most do show,
 Who, moving others, are themselves as stone,
 Unmoved, cold, and to temptation slow:
 They rightly do inherit heaven's graces,
 And husband nature's riches from expense;
 They are the lords and owners of their faces,
 Others but stewards of their excellence.
 The summer's flow'r is to the summer sweet,
 Though to itself it only live and die,
 But if that flow'r with base infection meet,
 The basest weed outbraves his dignity.*

*For sweetest things turn sourest by their deeds;
 Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds.*

Read in context, Sonnet 94, one of the most famous, clearly reveals another step in the speaker's growing jealousy. Like some other well-known sonnets (116 and 129, for example), it is not addressed to anyone, but takes on a tone and an argumentative stance appropriate to a sermon. And that sermon, which is also a meditation, is aimed at his friend, whose potential is described in the first line: "They that have pow'r to hurt and will do none." As models of behavior, they do not need to do what they can do best just to show off, and though they arouse others, they can remain unmoved, coolly objective, and not easily tempted.

Such paragons deserve heaven's grace. They also conserve nature's resources by resisting spendthrift ways. Instead of being mere "stewards of their excellence," they are rulers of their own appearances. The word *faces* (l. 7) is surprising, but it connects with the previous sonnet.

The sestet is a short allegory, like an *exemplum* used to point the moral in a medieval sermon. And the imagery picks up threads from Sonnet 1: the "summer's flower" (l. 9) connects with beauty's rose, its human counterpart. It will stay sweet though it lives and dies alone. (Living and dying alone is the fate the speaker warns the youth about in Sonnet 1.) The flower in Sonnet 94 is threatened, too; it may meet with "base infection" (a disease, l.

11), and so sink lower than the “basest weed” (l. 12). The parallel to the speaker’s friend is obvious, but more threatening than the imagery in Sonnet 1.

The logical aphorism of the couplet warns against “sweetest things” turning sour in their deeds, and condenses the moral into a single forceful line: “Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds.” By the end of the sequence—Sonnets 153 and 154—the threat turns into a reality: the speaker has contracted a venereal disease. The imagery of infection in Sonnet 94 is a preview; it also suggests that the friend may be the source of contamination.

*How sweet and lovely dost thou make the shame
Which, like a canker in the fragrant rose,
Doth spot the beauty of thy budding name.
O in what sweets dost thou thy sins enclose:
That tongue that tells the story of thy days,
(Making lascivious comments on thy sport)
Cannot dispraise but in a kind of praise,
Naming thy name, blesses an ill report.
O what a mansion have those vices got,
Which for their habitation chose out thee,
Where beauty's veil doth cover every blot
And all things turns to fair that eyes can see.
Take heed, dear heart, of this large privilege;
The hardest knife ill used doth lose his edge.*

The wave of attack on the friend's shame begins to break now. *Shame* concludes the first line and *sins* the end of the quatrain, emphasizing the aggressive tone. So far we have learned nothing concrete about the nature of the sins, but their destructive force is given visual form by the simile of the cankerworm eating the fragrant rose. Because the friend is, on the surface, so sweet and lovely, his inner nature is now a more marked and sinister contrast. The implied image of eating, which echoes Sonnet 1, suggests moral deterioration, and we remember the threat of the "tender churl" becoming a glutton. The speaker's early fears are being realized.

Now the friend is more vulnerable. The world, which makes a weapon of gossip, makes an appearance in the second quatrain in the metaphorical guise of a tongue. Rumors are spreading concerning the friend's "sport," a word suggesting sexual license in Shakespeare's time. However, the odd thing is that the youth's name and reputation are hard to smear. "Naming thy name blesses an ill report." (l. 8)

At the turn of the sestet, the speaker cries out against the injustice of it all. The youth's beauty is a mansion that harbors vices. But strangely, the speaker makes the vices responsible; they were the ones who chose their habitation. (l. 10) Thus the blame is shifted to them and away from the

friend. Beauty is still a veil that hides moral blemishes and turns them into worthiness, at least so far as the eye can see.

A final thrust comes in the couplet. The speaker warns his "dear heart" that the power of privilege, if misused, will work against him. The friend may become, like a knife, a harmful weapon and lose his edge. The sonnet as a whole is the speaker's way of saying that his friend is threatened both from the outside ("the world") and from within (his own dissolute impulses).

*Some say thy fault is youth, some wantonness,
 Some say thy grace is youth and gentle sport;
 Both grace and faults are loved of more and less;
 Thou mak'st faults graces that to thee resort:
 As on the finger of a throned queen,
 The basest jewel will be well esteemed,
 So are those errors that in thee are seen
 To truths translated and for true things deemed.
 How many lambs might the stern wolf betray,
 If like a lamb he could his looks translate?
 How many gazers mightst thou lead away
 If thou wouldst use the strength of all thy state?
 But do not so; I love thee in such sort,
 As thou being mine, mine is thy good report.*

The difference between “some wantonness” (l. 1) and “gentle sport” (l. 2) is slight (both connote sexual dalliance), but clearly the latter has a purer air about it. The world is at it again, judging the worthiness of their cynosure – the friend. Though quite distinct, his graces and the faults are loved by both the higher and lower members of society (the “more and less” of line three). This is no problem because he easily turns his faults into graces.

The second quatrain elaborates on this idea with a simile drawn from court behavior. As the “basest jewel” will still be valued if worn on the finger of a queen, so errors found in the young friend may be turned into “truths” by the great world. His position will be sustained by privilege.

In the last quatrain, Shakespeare switches tactics – but not topic – by a miniature fable about lambs and a wolf. The stern wolf could “betray” more lambs if he could make his looks as innocent as a lamb’s. The “gazers” (courtiers) might be led astray in numbers, like lambs, if the paragon friend, like the wolf, would use his powers to the full extent.

The couplet is the same as that which ends Sonnet 36 and may not be intended here. The phrase “thou being mine” (l. 14) does not seem appropriate because in this section the speaker is scarcely in control. Still, the fact that the speaker is dependent on the good reputation (“report”) of his friend supports the plea: “But do not so.” (l. 13) The situation here is more urgent than that in Sonnet 36; the bad reputation of his friend would be his, too. The tone is not humble as in Sonnet 36 and he does not offer to take the blame.

*How like a winter hath my absence been
 From thee, the pleasure of the fleeting year?
 What freezings have I felt, what dark days seen?
 What old December's bareness everywhere?
 And yet this time removed was summer's time,
 The teeming autumn big with rich increase,
 Bearing the wanton burthen of the prime,
 Like widowed wombs after their lords' decease.
 Yet this abundant issue seemed to me
 But hope of orphans and unfathered fruit;
 For summer and his pleasures wait on thee,
 And thou away, the very birds are mute;
 Or if they sing, 'tis with so dull a cheer,
 That leaves look pale, dreading the winter's near.*

Abruptly, the time and the tone have changed. By condensing and blending two time schemes, one actual and the other mental, Shakespeare makes a static situation more dramatic. After the bitter antagonism of the preceding poems, the distancing of the two men is quietly, but sadly, contemplated by the speaker. The actual time of their separation was summer (l. 5), but it has seemed like winter. The friend is addressed as "the pleasure of the fleeting year" (l. 2), but has the separation lasted twelve months? As in the plays, the time scheme is sometime hard to determine, but the fluidity of the seasons adds to the richness of the imagery. When "summer's time" has "dark days" and "freezings" like December's, the emotion is noticeably heightened. (l. 3)

Autumn was "teeming," carrying the "wanton burden" of spring's sexual activity. (l. 7) But this abundance reminded the speaker of the state of "widowed wombs after their lords' decease" (l. 8), and the reader is reminded of the speaker's urging the youth's marriage and procreation in the early sonnets. Now the vision of autumnal plenty has become the miserable "hope of orphans and unfathered fruit" (l. 10). Summer's pleasures will not return until the men are reunited.

With the couplet the mental cycle of the winter begun in line one comes near its conclusion. And yet even this is mixed when the mute birds of line twelve are allowed a song of dull cheer. The merging of the seasons creates a disorder that parallels the disorder in the men's relationship.

*From you have I been absent in the spring,
 When proud pied April (dressed in all his trim)
 Hath put a spirit of youth in everything,
 That heavy Saturn laughed and leapt with him.
 Yet nor the lays of birds, nor the sweet smell
 Of different flow'rs in odor and in hue,
 Could make me any summer's story tell,
 Or from their proud lap pluck them where they grew.
 Nor did I wonder at the lily's white,
 Nor praise the deep vermillion in the rose;
 They were but sweet, but figures of delight
 Drawn after you, you pattern of all those.
 Yet seemed it winter still, and you away,
 As with your shadow I with these did play.*

The disparity between the speaker's inner seasons and the outward reality continues. The overall coloration of this sonnet is much more cheerful than the preceding poem's grim, wintry broodings. Though the speaker has been absent in the spring, his depiction of "proud-pied April" dressed in all his finery gives a buoyancy to the tone that spreads out to both the speaker and the reader. The lighthearted spirit of youth pervades the poem for the moment. Even "heavy Saturn" (l. 4) laughs and leaps. And since Saturn is associated with sad old age, one can see a parallel between his pairing with April and the speaker's pairing with his younger friend.

But the happy miniature allegory ends with the first quatrain. Now the sweet things of spring do not inspire the speaker to tell a "summer's story" (l. 6). The phrase is arresting because of Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, a play in which an unfortunate child declares that "a sad tale's best for winter." Like the sonnets, *The Winter's Tale* focuses on betrayal, specifically the supposed betrayal of one man by another, resulting in a serious tragedy.

The second quatrain shifts from the colorful and dramatic personifications of April and Saturn to a pleasant but rather abstract description of the birds and flowers. The uninspired speaker is not yet moved to tell a romantic tale, nor, more significantly, is he spurred to

pluck the flowers from the “proud lap . . . where they grew” (l. 8). Inevitably this has sexual overtones, and Shakespeare has tactically placed it at the end of the octave.

In the last quatrain, the color returns; the lily is white, the rose a deep vermilion. These, however sweet, were but the “figures” — that is, the images — of delight, which are drawn after the pattern of the speaker’s friend. (l. 12)

In the couplet, we learn that winter still rules the speaker’s mood and his friend is still absent. It is the final line that reveals the emotions he feels. The speaker has played with the flowers as he has played with the friend’s shadow. This shadow is a mental picture, but it can also refer to a portrait, and the suggestion of masturbation cannot be wished away.

*The forward violet thus did I chide:
 Sweet thief, whence didst thou steal thy sweet that smells,
 If not from my love's breath? The purple pride,
 Which on thy soft cheek for complexion dwells,
 In my love's veins thou has too grossly dyed.
 The lily I condemned for thy hand,
 And buds of marjoram had stol'n thy hair;
 The roses fearfully on thorns did stand,
 One blushing shame, another white despair;
 A third, nor red nor white, had stol'n of both,
 And to his robb'ry had annexed thy breath;
 But for his theft, in pride of all his growth,
 A vengeful canker ate him up to death.
 More flow'rs I noted, yet I none could see,
 But sweet or color it had stol'n from thee.*

Though fifteen-line sonnets were used sometimes in the Elizabethan era, this is the only one that Shakespeare wrote, and there is no apparent reason for it. If the first line is omitted — it is, after all, purely an introduction — the rest becomes quite regular. Clearly a continuation of the preceding poem, the whole is a playful rebuke to a succession of flowers for having stolen various beauties from the friend. The first “sweet thief” (l. 2) is the violet, known for its early bloom (“purple pride,” l. 3) and strong sweet odor used for perfume. The speaker charges it with having stolen its sweet smell from the friend’s breath, which is ironic because the violet was proverbially shy. The purple color of the violet’s cheek was taken from the friend’s blueblooded veins but used too crudely.

The series of flowers that follows (l. 6) condemns each for similar thieveries, and the lily heads the list. Its whiteness, taken from the friend’s hand suggests an aristocratic source because white hands showed off blue veins. The marjoram has stolen the yellow for its buds from the friend’s hair. However, when we reach the roses, we find that they are standing fearfully on thorns. (The thorns of love were thought to be inseparable from their pleasures.) Moreover, their allegorical significance is specific: red stands

for shame, white for despair. They have stolen but they will never match the beauty of their victim. A third rose (the damask) had stolen both white and red and in so doing had taken the friend's breath as well. However, he was proud, and in revenge a cankerworm devoured him.

In the couplet the speaker reverts to the plain speech of the opening line, and in an anticlimactic fashion summarizes the thefts: every flower has stolen from his friend, just as "the world" has tried to imitate the youthful paragon. The poem may well be a warning to the friend about the destructive vengeance of an envious society.

*Where art thou, muse, that thou forget'st so long
 To speak of that which gives thee all thy might?
 Spend'st thou thy fury on some worthless song,
 Dark'ning thy pow'r to lend base subjects light?
 Return, forgetful muse, and straight redeem
 In gentle numbers time so idly spent;
 Sing to the ear that doth thy lays esteem
 And gives thy pen both skill and argument.
 Rise, resty muse, my love's sweet face survey
 If time have any wrinkle graven there;
 If any, be a satire to decay,
 And make time's spoils despised everywhere.
 Give my love fame faster than time wastes life;
 So thou prevent'st his scythe and crooked knife.*

The wave of hatred has subsided, and as usual when a new emotional swell is beginning, the muse is re-invoked. Here the muse is apostrophized three times, at the beginning of each quatrain. In the first, the muse is an intermediary whom the speaker chides for forgetting the friend who “gives thee all thy might” (l. 2). Instantly, the power hierarchy has shifted, boosting the friend back up to the top. Obviously the speaker is rebuking himself (as well as the muse) for writing on lesser matters than the friend. Why, he asks, do you waste your inspiration (and your anger) on lesser poems and darken your power “to lend base subjects light.” By this time it is evident that the muse invoked is the speaker’s own and not a separate being.

In the second quatrain, the self-chastisement continues. Now the tone is gentler, and “gentler numbers” (softer verses) are called for. (l. 6) When the muse is told to “sing,” recollections of the classical epics come rushing to mind. There is a dignity and an impersonality about this section. Is the ear that the muse is asked to sing to the speaker’s or the friend’s? Perhaps both, as a token of reunion.

The “resty” muse addressed in the next quatrain is slothful—slow to act. (Another of the Seven Deadly Sins makes an appearance.) This muse is asked to peruse the face of the friend and look for the wrinkles

in his brow, a thread traceable back to Sonnet 2. If he finds any, the speaker asks him to be a “satire” (satirist) to decay and drive them out. This will make “time’s spoils” (l. 12) the laughing stock of “the world.”

Most importantly, the speaker’s personal muse is implored to bring fame to his friend faster than time can erode his life. Suddenly the threatening image of death appears, his dual weapons doubling the urgency of the speaker’s plea.

*O truant muse, what shall be thy amends
 For thy neglect of truth in beauty dyed?
 Both truth and beauty on my love depends;
 So dost thou too, and therein dignified.
 Make answer, muse, wilt thou not haply say,
 Truth needs no color with his color fixed,
 Beauty no pencil, beauty's truth to lay;
 But best is best, if never intermixed?
 Because he needs no praise, wilt thou be dumb?
 Excuse not silence so, for't lies in thee,
 To make him much outlive a gilded tomb,
 And to be praised of ages yet to be.
 Then do thy office, muse; I teach thee how
 To make him seem, long hence, as he shows now.*

The invocations to the muse continue with the same quatrain construction as that Sonnet 100. At first the “truant” muse is charged with neglect and asked how it will make up for this. The speaker says that his friend’s truth has been “dyed” in beauty (l. 2, *dyed* having no modern negative connotations). Rather the truth and beauty merge in neo-Platonic fashion, and the speaker’s love depends on this. The muse depends on this, too, for dignifying his inspiration.

The speaker, in the second quatrain, asks, rather archly, whether the muse would not answer his charge in the words he supplies in the next three lines. “Truth needs no color” (l. 6)—that is, beautification—because his is permanent, and beauty needs no brush (“pencil” meant brush in Shakespeare’s time) to paint the truth. The “best,” like Platonic goodness, must never be adulterated.

The speaker then, in his own voice, asks if the muse will be silent just because the friend, who embodies the ideal, needs no praise. No, silence cannot be justified on those grounds. It is the muse’s responsibility to make the friend outlive his tomb, and to be celebrated in future times.

There is a playful tone to all of this. The speaker tells the muse what to do and even puts words in its mouth, words that he claims have failed him. In the couplet the speaker says he will teach the muse its duty, which is to make the friend “seem” in the future what he “shows” himself to be now.

*My love is strengthened though more weak in seeming;
 I love not less, though less the show appear.
 That love is merchandised, whose rich esteeming
 The owner's tongue doth publish everywhere.
 Our love was new, and then but in the spring,
 When I was wont to greet it with my lays,
 As Philomel in summer's front doth sing,
 And stops her pipe in growth of riper days.
 Not that the summer is less pleasant now
 Than when her mournful hymns did hush the night,
 But that wild music burthens every bough,
 And sweets grown common lose their dear delight.
 Therefore, like her, I sometime hold my tongue
 Because I would not dull you with my song.*

The paradox that opens Sonnet 102 connects with the preceding poem largely by the thread of appearance versus reality. The words *seem* and *show* both occur in the last line of Sonnet 101 and *seeming* and *show* appear in the first and second lines, respectively, of Sonnet 102. But the differences between the two poems are more striking: the former is devoted to apostrophes to the muse; the latter does not even mention the muse but consists of an argument addressed to the friend and explaining the speaker's silence. Arguing that his love is stronger though it appears weaker, the speaker claims that reticence is better than "merchandized" love, which is hawked everywhere.

The bulk of the sonnet is devoted to nostalgia for the early days of the pair's love when the speaker greeted the springtime with his songs. These, like those of Philomel (the nightingale), were stronger then than in summer when Philomel stopped her pipe. It is not, the speaker says, that summer is less pleasant than when Philomel's "mournful hymns did hush the night" but that "wild music burdens every bough." (ll. 10-11) The reason is that love ceases to be as sweet as it was.

In the larger context of the poetry, Philomel, whose famous myth juxtaposes the extremes of pain and ecstasy, represents the reality of love, which is tinged with sorrow. The argument concludes with the speaker's declaration that he will

hold his tongue like the nightingale because he does not want to bore his friend with his song. But his song is his poem, and he is already singing it. And so there is the appearance—that the speaker is keeping mute and rationalizing it, and there is the reality—that the speaker is serenading in his finest strains to win back what may be slipping away.

*Alack, what poverty my muse brings forth,
 That, having such a scope to show her pride,
 The argument all bare is of more worth
 Than when it hath my added praise beside.
 O blame me not if I no more can write!
 Look in your glass and there appears a face
 That overgoes my blunt invention quite,
 Dulling my lines and doing me disgrace.
 Were it not sinful then, striving to mend,
 To mar the subject that before was well?
 For to no other pass my verses tend,
 Than of your graces and your gifts to tell;
 And more, much more than in my verse can sit,
 Your own glass shows you when you look in it.*

After the brief excursion into the happy past and the lush poetry focused on the music of the nightingale, the speaker returns to his lament for the poverty produced by his muse. Sonnet 102 is a backward moving eddy; Sonnet 103 pushes the wave of unadulterated praise onward through the next section of the sequence. The power of the poet is gathering momentum again, but not before the speaker has denounced his inability to render his "argument" (his theme, which is his friend) and the praise he has failed to deliver. The nadir is reached when he throws up his hands: "O, blame me not if I no more can write!" (l. 5)

The mood shifts gradually as the poem progresses. At first, when the speaker enjoins his friend to look into his mirror, he returns to his awe for his friend's beauty, which is better than anything the speaker's "blunt invention" (clumsy imagination) can discover. (l. 7) Picking up the thread of dullness from the last line of Sonnet 102, he uses it to humble himself: the face of his friend has appeared, "Dulling my lines and doing me disgrace." (l. 8)

The sestet brings the question that constitutes the logical conclusion. Wouldn't it be sinful to mar the subject (the friend's beauty) by trying to improve it? The speaker claims to have no other purpose in his poetry than to depict his friend's gifts and graces. The need for self-punishment has passed. As he writes, his muse is reviving. The crucial instrument is the mirror, for that is what the poet says must be held up to nature. Shakespeare has Hamlet say it, too, and he is following a long tradition that goes all the way to Plato.

*To me, fair friend, you never can be old,
 For as you were when first your eye I eyed,
 Such seems your beauty still: Three winters cold
 Have from the forests shook three summers' pride;
 Three beauteous springs to yellow autumn turned
 In process of the seasons have I seen,
 Three April perfumes in three hot Junes burned,
 Since first I saw you fresh, which yet are green.
 Ah yet doth beauty like a dial hand
 Steal from his figure, and no pace perceived;
 So your sweet hue, which methinks still doth stand,
 Hath motion, and mine eye may be deceived:
 For fear of which, hear this, thou age unbred,
 Ere you were born was beauty's summer dead.*

Now the speaker holds the mirror up to his friend in one of the most eloquent eulogies imaginable. If beauty is in the eye of beholder, this sonnet is the great confirmation of the subjectivity of the speaker's admiration for his "fair friend." In a return to his earlier waves of enthusiasm, the speaker insists on the perdurance of his friend's beauty, though the word *seems* (l. 3) may give the reader pause. But the strength of the previous line with its clever phrase "when first your eye I eyed" overwhelms all doubt of love at first sight. As a whole, the sonnet confirms the speaker's belief in everlasting Platonic beauty.

By contrast, the seasonal imagery depicts the mutability of natural beauty. The number three used to delimit the pair's friendship is not necessarily literal. Some critics have thought so, but more likely it is the magic number arbitrarily used by poets. When the speaker arrives at the telling phrase "three hot Junes burned" (l. 7), there is a sad climax in the weather's betrayal. All the seasons, however lovely, are shown in their decay. But the preceding vivid descriptions also show the richness of the natural cycle, and though there are warning signs, the speaker recalls to his friend the time when "first I saw you fresh, which yet are green" (l. 8).

The sestet takes a turn to the future—and for the worse. The elaborate conceit of beauty likened

to a clock's hand stresses the slow but inevitable passage of time. The hand moves so slowly that it seems to steal from number to number with no noticeable progress ("no pace perceived," l. 10). The friend's "sweet hue" (handsome appearance) may look fixed but the speaker's eyes may be deceived.

The couplet takes another turn: this time the speaker addresses the era to come, announcing to it that before those living in the future were born, summer's beauty (the friend) was dead. This startling concept shows the acuity of the speaker. He has found a new way to aver that his friend's death, though inevitable, has left his beauty intact and unlikely ever to be matched. And thus the speaker has returned to almost pure admiration of his friend. What's more, his muse has been revived.

*Let not my love be called idolatry,
 Nor my beloved as an idol show,
 Since all alike my songs and praises be
 To one, of one, still such, and ever so.
 Kind is my love today, tomorrow kind,
 Still constant in a wondrous excellence;
 Therefore my verse to constancy confined,
 One thing expressing, leaves out difference.
 Fair, kind and true is all my argument,
 Fair, kind and true, varying to other words;
 And in this change is my invention spent,
 Three themes in one, which wondrous scope affords.
 Fair, kind and true have often lived alone,
 Which three, till now, never kept seat in one.*

Because of the word *idolatry* and the prominent use of threes, readers have been tempted to find religious significance in this sonnet. But as we saw in Sonnet 104, the use of threes in poetry was part of the tradition. Inevitably in a Christian context three suggests the Holy Trinity, but, as in Shakespeare's plays, the secular dominates the religious. Here the speaker plays with another supposition: no one has necessarily called his love for his friend idolatry, but he imagines such a situation. His tone varies from playful to serious, in keeping with his argument. He cannot be condemned as idolatrous, and his loved one cannot be condemned as an idol because that implies pagan pluralism. No, he says, I sing of one and one only. Boldly he insists that all he writes is "To one, of one, still such, and ever so." (l. 4) This is unquestionably intended as a parody of the Christian Gloria. Indeed, to the devout it might seem blasphemous.

Sonnet 105 is not addressed specifically to the friend, and the focus is on what constitutes the ideal person. As the speaker says, his "argument" (l. 9) is that his verses are "to constancy confined" (l. 7). His sole purpose is to celebrate the lasting virtues of his love, who is "fair, kind, and true" (ll. 9-10), and all three traits blend into one as do the Trinity and the Platonic ideals. Plato's ideals were beauty, truth and goodness; Shakespeare's "fair" is synonymous with beauty, but

kindness is his own version of goodness. His variations in wording from the traditional triads end his search for needed changes. By creating his new triad and making his friend the paragon he raises his love to the highest pinnacle of the ideal. And his friend is unique; never before have these virtues been present in one person.

The irony is lurking in the background. His friend has not always been kind or constant, as we already know.

*When in the chronicle of wasted time
 I see descriptions of the fairest wights
 And beauty making beautiful old rhyme
 In praise of ladies dead and lovely knights,
 Then in the blazon of sweet beauty's best,
 Of hand, of foot, of lip, of eye, of brow,
 I see their antique pen would have expressed
 Ev'n such a beauty as you master now.
 So all their praises are but prophecies
 Of this our time, all you prefiguring,
 And for they looked but with divining eyes,
 They had not skill enough your worth to sing:
 For we, which now behold these present days,
 Have eyes to wonder but lack tongues to praise.*

Having looked towards the future in Sonnet 104 and contemplated the present in Sonnet 105, the speaker reverts here to the past and paints a picture of that ideal embodied in "ladies dead and lovely knights." In the histories of the past ("wasted time," l. 1), he has found descriptions of the most splendid people ("wights," l. 2). Their beauty makes the old poetry even more beautiful. The speaker draws a parallel between the portrayals of the ancient bards "in the blazon of sweet beauty's best" and what he is trying to capture in his friend. The blazon is a catalogue associated with heraldry and is a common type of list in sonnets of the 1590's. Here the iambic beat accentuating *hand, foot, lip, eye* and *brow* suggests the ticking off of a list.

The compliment to his friend is enhanced by making him the ultimate paragon prefigured in the prophecies of the old poets. The climax comes at the end of the octave when, finally, the friend is addressed: he is now the master. That is to say, he has all aspects of beauty at his beck and call. The praise is further amplified when the speaker declares that the earlier bards saw only with "divining eyes" (l. 10); they were inadequate or imperfect seers. Besides, they did not have talent enough to sing his praises properly. Thus the speaker is cleverly implying that poetic vision has greatly improved in his own time.

However—and this caps the compliment—he says in the final lines that we, the contemporary poets, can wonder at the youth’s looks and accomplishments but we don’t have the ability (“tongues,” l. 14) to do him justice. Immediately we are struck by the fact that justice—and a bit more—is what the speaker has been doing since the beginning, often through eloquent hyperbole. Once more, his humility conceals his actual pride in his eulogies, which will certainly continue.

*Not mine own fears nor the prophetic soul
 Of the wide world, dreaming on things to come,
 Can yet the lease of my true love control,
 Supposed as forfeit to a confined doom.
 The mortal moon hath her eclipse endured,
 And the sad augurs mock their own presage;
 Incertainties now crown themselves assured,
 And peace proclaims olives of endless age.
 Now with the drops of this most balmy time
 My love looks fresh, and death to me subscribes,
 Since spite of him I'll live in this poor rhyme,
 While he insults o'er dull and speechless tribes.
 And thou in this shalt find thy monument,
 When tyrants' crests and tombs of brass are spent.*

Still riding the wave of euphoria, the speaker returns to his convictions that (a) the lease of his true love's life can be extended by his poetic efforts and (b) like his friend he will live on in his verses in spite of death. In between these affirmations, in the second quatrain, the speaker recites the recent public events that might have resulted in disaster and failed expectations, yet have concluded happily.

What events these were has been the cause of much controversy; the truth is that they could have ranged from the defeat of the Spanish Armada (1588) to the accession of James I after the death of Queen Elizabeth (1603). But by divesting the events of specific reference, Shakespeare has focused the reader's attention on the emotions attending potential cataclysms. Peace with its olive branches is the last of these events and the harbinger of an "endless age" (l. 8). The nay-sayers among the prophets ("augurs," l. 6) deride their own prophecies.

The "wasted time" of Sonnet 106 is superseded by current crises in the larger world which is "dreaming on things to come" (l. 2) By the end, the Tudor reigns of trouble have given way to a "balmy time," and this, in turn, has resulted in an optimism that envelops the speaker and his friend and leads to the defiance of death. In Sonnet 106, the friend is described as

mastering beauty; in Sonnet 107, the speaker brags that death “subscribes” (submits, l. 10), to him as poet. The humility of the speaker in characterizing his own poetry as “this poor rhyme” (l. 11) undercuts his self-described triumphs, but this is temporary.

The couplet concludes with a repetition of the speaker’s belief in the immortality bestowed by his poetry, and so the poet is elevated above the tyrants’ crests, which, like the “tombs of brass,” will come to an end (be “spent,” l. 14). A new—and better—time will prevail, preserving his friend’s monument.

*What's in the brain that ink may character,
 Which hath not figured to thee my true spirit?
 What's new to speak, what now to register,
 That may express my love or thy dear merit?
 Nothing, sweet boy, but yet, like prayers divine,
 I must each day say o'er the very same,
 Counting no old thing old (thou mine, I thine),
 Even as when first I hallowed thy fair name;
 So that eternal love in love's fresh case
 Weighs not the dust and injury of age,
 Nor gives to necessary wrinkles place,
 But makes antiquity for aye his page,
 Finding the first conceit of love there bred,
 Where time and outward form would show it dead.*

Though this sonnet is very tender—the friend is addressed as “sweet boy” (l. 5) for the only time in the sequence—it is really quite thoughtful. The exuberance and optimism of Sonnet 107 gives way to a meditation on age and decay. Sonnet 108 begins with the speaker’s nagging question concerning his capacity for finding new expressions of his own “true spirit” (l. 2) and his friend’s “dear merit” (l. 4). And thus the speaker continues his uneasy search for “what’s new to speak” (l. 3).

In the second quatrain, though he calls his praises just the same each day, he uses a religious simile, “like prayers divine” (l. 5), to describe them, and ends with the recollection of the time “when first I hallowed thy fair name.” The word *hallowed* gives a new sanctity to his love for his friend, and the clause as a whole echoes the Lord’s Prayer. How does this square with Sonnet 105, in which he declares that his love is not idolatry? Such a love as this might well incur the wrath of the devout.

And so the eternal love returns in a fresh guise. It does not worry about dust or wrinkles or the other injuries of age. Now, instead of slighting the visions and prophecies of ancient times (as in Sonnet 106), the speaker makes antiquity his “page” (l. 12), both his servant and his book. This is a swing towards the conservative and another assertion of his mastery. Most important, his search recovers his first conception (“conceit,” l. 13) of love, which has only the appearance of being dead.

*O never say that I was false of heart,
 Though absence seemed my flame to qualify;
 As easy might I from myself depart
 As from my soul, which in thy breast doth lie:
 This is my home of love; if I have ranged,
 Like him that travels I return again,
 Just to the time, not with the time exchanged,
 So that my self bring water for my stain.
 Never believe, though in my nature reigned
 All frailties that besiege all kinds of blood,
 That it could so preposterously be stained
 To leave for nothing all thy sum of good:
 For nothing this wide universe I call,
 Save thou my Rose; in it thou art my all.*

The drama of this sonnet centers on the speaker's confession that he has strayed, and this time his "absence" is plainly sexual infidelity. In the earlier sonnets that describe his various travels this has never been as clear as it is here. That his absence is not like previous travels is strongly implied in a key simile: "Like him that travels, I return again." (l. 6) That his absence is an emotional separation is evident in the opening lines, in which he disclaims falseness of heart. Unfortunately for the speaker, the rest of the sonnet belies this. He even says to his friend that his flame—that is, his sexual ardor—may seem to indicate a lessening of love. To forestall criticism by his friend, he repeats former avowals that they are one soul and that his friend's breast is his "home of love" (l. 5). If this is true, his absence must have been of another sort.

To reassure his friend, the speaker says in the second quatrain that he has returned punctually and has not changed during his absence (l. 7). Therefore he is bringing his own absolution for his "stain"—his nameless sin (l. 8). How convincing can this logic be? In the third quatrain, he asks, in advance, that his friend not believe that the speaker, though he succumbed to all his weaknesses, could be so badly "stained" that he left the goodness of his friend "for nothing" (l. 12).

In a clever turn, the speaker, in a grand hyperbole, protests that the “wide universe” is nothing—except for his friend: “my Rose.” This picks up the thread laid down in Sonnet 1 (l. 2) and makes it the ultimate compliment. The final clause clinches his case with a paradox: the friend is his “all” in the all-encompassing universe. But is this credible? He was absent from his friend, so he must have entered that wide universe of “nothing.” The speaker betrays himself with his sophistry.

*Alas, 'tis true I have gone here and there,
 And made myself a motley to the view,
 Gored mine own thoughts, sold cheap what is most dear,
 Made old offenses of affections new.
 Most true it is that I have looked on truth
 Askance and strangely; but by all above,
 These blenches gave my heart another youth,
 And worse essays prov'd thee my best of love.
 Now all is done, save what shall have no end;
 Mine appetite I nevermore will grind
 On newer proof to try an older friend,
 A god in love, to whom I am confined.
 Then give me welcome, next my heav'n the best,
 Ev'n to thy pure and most, most loving breast.*

Like Sonnet 109, this poem promises to reveal more than it actually does; yet it is dramatic, too. "Alas, 'tis true" signals a confession, and we learn—however vaguely—of actions the speaker regrets. In going "here and there" (l. 1) he has made himself a "motley" (a clown) to the "view" ("the world") (l. 2). He has defiled ("gored") his own thoughts, cheapened what was valuable, and repeated the same infidelities with new infatuations. (ll. 3-4)

Though cloudy, the picture is clarified somewhat in the second quatrain because the speaker accuses himself of falsity in playing fast and loose with truth. He also swears that his strayings ("blenches," l. 7) gave him youthful pleasure and that the worst of them made clear that his love for his friend was the best. Now, he says in the third quatrain, I have done with that and shall be eternally faithful. He vows never to test his friend's love by experimenting—or, as he puts it, "grinding" (sharpening) his appetite—with other objects of attraction.

His "older friend" (l. 11) is, of course, the young man whom the speaker calls "a god in love," the one he worships. The speaker asks, in the couplet, to be welcomed back to the best person (next to heaven) and his "pure" and "most loving breast." "Pure" is a clever adjective: it absolves his friend from unfaithfulness, at the same time lightening, if not erasing, his own sins.

*O for my sake do you wish fortune chide,
 The guilty goddess of my harmful deeds,
 That did not better for my life provide
 Than public means which public manners breeds.
 Thence comes it that my name receives a brand,
 And almost thence my nature is subdued
 To what it works in, like the dyer's hand.
 Pity me then, and wish I were renewed,
 Whilst like a willing patient I will drink
 Potions of eisel 'gainst my strong infection.
 No bitterness that I will bitter think,
 Nor double penance to correct correction.
 Pity me then, dear friend, and I assure ye
 Ev'n that your pity is enough to cure me.*

Quite surprisingly, the speaker, who has been humble to the point of masochism, blames the “guilty goddess” Fortune for his sins. (l. 2) He also asks his friend – not a priest – to pity him and grant him absolution. In fact, he concludes by saying that his friend’s pity is enough to “cure” him. (l. 14)

The sonnet begins as a plea to his “dear friend” (l. 13) to chide Fortune, who did not provide better for the speaker’s life. Some critics think that this refers to Shakespeare’s career in the theater, which had a bad name, but this is not necessarily so. Even if the “public means” did refer to the stage, it does not mean that Shakespeare is the speaker. All we can safely say is that the speaker feels a stigma (“brand,” l. 5) for the lowering of his manners, which are “public,” like his occupation. Because of this, his character has been shaped by what he does, just as the dyer’s hand takes on the color of his medium. (l. 7)

As a result, the speaker feels justified in asking for pity; he also asks his friend to wish him “renewed” (l. 8) He then promises to be a “willing patient” (l. 9), who will even drink vinegar (“eisel,” l. 10) to cure his serious infection. (This particular drink was supposed to ward off the plague.) In addition, he will not find its bitterness to be bitter, nor will he flinch from “double penance” if it will correct his behavior. (l. 12)

Instead of diving into depression, the speaker calls upon his friend to cure him with pity in such a confident tone that the mood swings upward, buoyed up even higher by the feminine rhyme in the couplet. What the speaker cannot see is that troubles are looming in the future, when he will need a cure more physical than pity.

*Your love and pity doth th'impression fill,
 Which vulgar scandal stamped upon my brow,
 For what care I who calls me well or ill,
 So you o'er-green my bad, my good allow?
 You are my all the world, and I must strive
 To know my shames and praises from your tongue;
 None else to me, nor I to none alive,
 That my steeled sense o'er-changes right or wrong.
 In so profound abysm I throw all care
 Of others' voices, that my adder's sense
 To critic and to flatt'rer stopped are:
 Mark how with my neglect I do dispense;
 You are so strongly in my purpose bred
 That all the world besides me thinks y'are dead.*

After just saying in Sonnet 111 that his friend's pity would be enough to cure him, the speaker in the first line of Sonnet 112 adds love, shifting the focus from his love for the friend to the friend's love for him. The love and pity together have already filled up the brand impressed ("stamped," l. 2) on his brow by public scandal. Now the speaker can toss off the rabble's cries both for and against him. All will be well if his friend will acknowledge his good points and so gloss over ("o'er-green," l. 4) his faults.

As we have seen, "the world" of the sonnets is a powerful judge, a social force to be reckoned with. Now the speaker defies it, shakes it off, and replaces it with his friend: "You are my all the world." (l. 5) (This statement will come back to haunt him when the woman of the sonnets appears.) In most worshipful terms he vows to learn which of his acts have been shameful and which laudable. No one else, he says, will tell me — and I will tell no one else — when to stand firm or when to change my values. With his usual hyperbole, he goes so far as to say that he will toss all worries about the world's opinion into such an abyss that his "adder's sense" (snakes were thought to be deaf) will silence all his detractors and flatterers.

To conclude, the speaker brags to his friend how he will foil the public's attacks simply by

neglecting them. You, he says, have so completely mastered me that I see the world as dead. At this point, then, the speaker thinks he has conquered the world by adhering solely to his lover.

The use of *bred* and *dead* as rhyme words in the couplet (a feature of Sonnet 108 as well) may have an ominous sound (in contrast to the rhymes of Sonnet 111), but we are left to ponder what might happen.

*Since I left you, mine eye is in my mind,
 And that which governs me to go about
 Doth part his function, and is partly blind,
 Seems seeing, but effectually is out:
 For it no form delivers to the heart
 Of bird, of flow'r, or shape which it doth latch;
 Of his quick objects hath the mind no part,
 Nor his own vision holds what it doth catch:
 For if it see the rud'st or gentlest sight,
 The most sweet favor or deformedst creature:
 The mountain, or the sea, the day, or night,
 The crow, or dove, it shapes them to your feature.
 Incapable of more, replete with you,
 My most true mind thus maketh mine untrue.*

An especially complex conceit concerning the accuracy of the speaker's vision – whether of mind or eye – is developed in this sonnet and the next. Now that the speaker has left his lover and “the world,” his vision is split. Part of it functions as usual, but part is blind: it seems to see but in effect it does not. (ll. 3-4) The blind part does not deliver to his heart (the seat of emotional truth) the natural forms of objects like birds or flowers – whatever the eye happens to seize on (“latch,” l. 6). The mind takes no heed of fleeting live objects; any that it does happen to catch it cannot hold.

The speaker is concerned because no matter what he beholds, “the rud'st or gentlest sight” (l. 9), it is distorted and made to look like his friend. Whether he sees a mountain or the sea, the day or the night, a crow or a dove, it is always the same. This phenomenon, even allowing for hyperbole, is fantastic. Addressed as it is to his friend, this goes far beyond the extravagant compliments paid to him before. In fact, they seem more the product of emotional disorder caused by his absence from his friend. Later on we get a better idea of why this is happening.

For now, we have to be contented with the speaker's own diagnosis in the couplet. He is so full of his friend that he cannot absorb more images. Therefore he does not see truly. The poem ends with a paradox: the true mind makes the eye untrue.

*Or whether doth my mind being crowned with you
 Drink up the monarch's plague, this flattery?
 Or whether shall I say mine eye saith true
 And that your love taught it this alchemy,
 To make of monsters and things indigest
 Such cherubins as your sweet self resemble,
 Creating every bad a perfect best
 As fast as objects to his beams assemble?
 O 'tis the first, 'tis flatt'ry in my seeing,
 And my great mind most kingly drinks it up.
 Mine eye well knows what with his gust is 'greeing,
 And to his palate doth prepare the cup.
 If it be poisoned, 'tis the lesser sin
 That mine eye loves it and doth first begin.*

The speaker contemplates his alternative forms of vision: is it a matter of flattery or alchemy? Is his mind like a king crowned by his friend's affection, and drinking up flattery, "the monarch's plague"? (l. 2) Or is his eye true sight, its alchemy – taught him by his friend's love – capable of changing monsters into cherubim resembling his friend? (l. 6) Can the eye create perfection out of ugliness as fast as eyebeams light up objects? (It was a belief in Elizabethan times that the eyes sent out rays that lit up things about them.)

Of these alternatives, it is the first that the speaker eagerly embraces. Surprisingly, it is flattery, which his "great mind" drinks up in kingly fashion. No poison taster is summoned. Instead, he argues, his eye knows what agrees with his taste ("gust," l. 11) and can prepare his own cup to suit his palate. This seems dangerous. However, the speaker reasons that should the cup be poisoned he will be responsible for killing himself. This will be a "lesser sin" (l. 13) because his eye loves it (sees it as truth), and has done so from the beginning.

The playfulness of this sophistry cannot be ignored. The exuberance of the speaker shows in the extravagance of his language and is used to justify his infatuation. (l. 10) He understands the truth and the truth includes the fact that the flattery of being loved by an idol of perfection is too wonderful to be dismissed. Who can resist being crowned a king by his king?

*Those lines that I before have writ do lie,
 Ev'n those that said I could not love you dearer.
 Yet then my judgment knew no reason why
 My most full flame should afterwards burn clearer.
 But reckoning time, whose millioned accidents
 Creep in 'twixt vows, and change decrees of kings,
 Tan sacred beauty, blunt the sharp'st intents,
 Divert strong minds to th' course of alt'ring things:
 Alas, why fearing of time's tyranny,
 Might I not then say now I love you best,
 When I was certain o'er incertainty,
 Crowning the present, doubting of the rest?
 Love is a babe; then might I not say so,
 To give full growth to that which still doth grow.*

Now the direction of the speaker's praise becomes clearer – and almost comical. His opening assertion that everything he has said about his friend has been a lie would lead the reader to believe that he is about to denounce him. But no. In rejecting earlier hyperboles he is merely clearing the way for greater ones. In chastising himself he calls it a lie to say, "I could not love you dearer." (l. 2) But immediately he exonerates himself by arguing that he could not have known "My most full flame should afterwards burn clearer." (l. 4)

The second quatrain picks up the thread of time the tyrant, whose "millioned accidents" (l. 5) link him to fortune. As twin deities they are even stronger than "the world." The dark tinge deepens. Time's many chance events result in broken vows, and even kings' decrees are altered. We are strongly reminded of the speaker's metaphor in Sonnet 114 likening his friend's love to the crowning of the speaker as king. (Note, too, his phrase "crowning the present," l. 12, which reinforces the connection.)

Sacred beauty, like that of the friend, is made dark ("tan," l. 7). Strong purposes are frustrated (the will to conquer in love would be an example), and the "course of alt'ring things" turns even the strongest of minds. (l. 8) In this line there is an echo of Sonnet 18,

in which even the fairest beauties of nature sometimes fail, "by chance, or nature's changing course, untrimmed." (l. 8) But at that time the speaker could assure his friend of immortality through the poet's verses.

In Sonnet 115, the passage of time has caused another fluctuation. The certainty of Sonnet 18 becomes the certainty of uncertainty. (l. 11) Now the speaker wants to say that *this* time he loves his friend in a new and superior fashion. But can this be the final peak? The speaker extricates himself for the time being by arguing via another metaphor that since "love is a babe," it will always grow. (l. 13) Here the future irony is apparent. If, as he says, he cannot say "Now I love you best," he is simply ignoring the fact that the "full growth" (l. 14) of his love may be blighted by time.

*Let me not to the marriage of true minds
 Admit impediments. Love is not love
 Which alters when it alteration finds
 Or bends with the remover to remove.
 O no, it is an ever fixed mark
 That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
 It is the star to every wand'ring bark,
 Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.
 Love's not time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
 Within his bending sickle's compass come.
 Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
 But bears it out ev'n to the edge of doom:
 If this be error and upon me proved,
 I never writ, nor no man ever loved.*

This famous, emphatically positive poem contains nine negatives, three of them in the last line. It is also in contradictory juxtaposition with the preceding sonnet, whose beginning confesses to previous lies, whereas Sonnet 116 begins and ends with avowals of truth. Pairing them illustrates the paradoxes of permanent change and permanence despite change.

In Sonnet 115 the speaker tries to explain his own confusion about the varying degrees of love (and hate) that he has experienced and their changes over a period of time. In Sonnet 116, he emphatically asserts that true love never alters. "Love is not love / Which alters when it alteration finds." (ll. 2-3) This comment on the vicissitudes that threaten love is at the heart of the whole sequence, the fabric of which is fluctuating emotions.

The speaker in Sonnet 115 has told us that he was "certain o'er uncertainty." (l. 11) In Sonnet 116, he announces his firm belief in love's stability. The threats of time and old age have disappeared. Even sensuality has been set aside. The marriage is that of true minds, not bodies. "Rosy lips and cheeks" (l. 9) can be victims of time's sickle, but love lasts "even to the edge of doom" (l. 12). For the first time in the sequence, immortality does not depend on procreation or poetry. And time itself is defeated. It cannot make a "fool" (a toy) of love (l. 9)

and it cannot last longer because at the day of
doom all time will cease.

One crucial fact about this poem is that it is not
addressed to the friend, unlike the vast majority of
the sonnets so far. The implication is clear: the
perdurance of love does not depend on him.

*Accuse me thus: that I have scanted all
 Wherein I should your great deserts repay,
 Forgot upon your dearest love to call,
 Whereto all bonds do tie me day by day,
 That I have frequent been with unknown minds,
 And given to time your own dear-purchased right,
 That I have hoisted sail to all the winds
 Which should transport me farthest from your sight.
 Book both my wilfulness and errors down
 And on just proof surmise accumulate,
 Bring me within the level of your frown,
 But shoot not at me in your wakened hate,
 Since my appeal says I did strive to prove
 The constancy and virtue of your love.*

In this sonnet the reader is jolted back into the reality that he has experienced before. The momentary idealism of Sonnet 116 is wiped out with the stroke of a pen. Instead of the positive picture created from a series of negatives, there is a parade of imperatives that begins with the first word — *Accuse* — and comes to a climax in the speaker's plea, "But shoot not at me in your wakened hate" (l. 12).

The first three words of the poem augur the old masochism, this time laying out for his friend the grounds on which he can be chastised. I have, he says begrudged ("scanted all," l. 1) the debts I owe you; I have forgotten to call upon "your dearest love" (l. 3), to which I am tied each day; and I have kept low company — "unknown minds" (l. 5), he calls them, in sharp contrast to the "true minds" of Sonnet 116. He has also wasted time he should have spent with his dear friend, who has prior claims. Finally, he has failed by "hoisting sail to all the winds" (l. 7) and going farthest from his friend's sight. (There is clearly a connection with the "wand'ring bark" of the preceding poem and the earlier thread of travel.)

In the third quatrain, the speaker asks to be "booked" for all his arbitrary acts, admitting that his friend has the right to become suspicious because of his wanderings ("errors," l. 9). Then, melodramatically, he commands that the young man "bring [him] within the level of [his] frown" (l. 11), the

level being the aim and range of a weapon. (Originally it was an archery term.) But, quickly turning away from his command, he adds, in effect, "Please don't shoot." There is an admixture of lightheartedness here that alters what might be a very grim tone.

The poem ends with a rather lame "appeal" (the last of the legal terms) when the speaker claims to have been merely testing his friend's constancy in love. The case against and for the speaker's plea and the force of his injunctions for his own punishment are too weak to be taken very seriously, yet the negative undercurrent cannot be ignored.

*Like as to make our appetites more keen
 With eager compounds we our palates urge,
 As to prevent our maladies unseen,
 We sicken to shun sickness when we purge.
 Ev' n so, being full of your ne'er cloying sweetness,
 To bitter sauces did I frame my feeding;
 And sick of welfare, found a kind of meetness
 To be diseased ere that there was true needing.
 Thus policy in love t' anticipate
 The ills that were not, grew to faults assured,
 And brought to medicine a healthful state,
 Which rank of goodness would by ill be cured.
 But thence I learn and find the lesson true,
 Drugs poison him that so fell sick of you.*

The speaker's apologetic strain continues in a series of images involving gluttony and disease. Gluttony looks back to the first sonnet; disease towards the end. In contrast to Sonnet 116, the conceits are puzzlingly intricate and insistently unpleasant. The first quatrain consists of two similes, two lines each, dealing with eating and illness respectively. The first simile describes how we sharpen our appetites with "eager compounds" (sour or bitter sauces); the second tells how we fend off possible sickness ("maladies unseen," l. 3) by purging, a common practice in Tudor times.

Similarly, says the speaker (in the second quatrain), he changed his eating habits to include "bitter sauces" (l. 6), a metaphor for mixing with low company. This, he contends, was to forestall an overdose of his lover's "ne'er-cloying sweetness." (l. 5) He was "sick of welfare" (that is, faring well) and thought it would be beneficial to become "diseased" (l. 8), before a truly serious illness came on.

As clever as all this verbal trickery is, it does not constitute a solid argument for the speaker's straying, and he must admit it. His "policy" (strategy, with the connotation of shrewdness) to prevent "ills" in love has backfired. (ll. 9-10) He now knows that he has committed sins ("faults assured") and therefore must have taken "medicine" for a "healthful state." (l. 10) That the speaker would fear "rank"

(excessive – even putrid) goodness (l. 12) does not bode well for his relationship. His friend has not seemed anything but perfect before. Has the idealistic marriage of true minds been undermined?

The moral stated in the couplet seems almost too simple and the tone is harsh. The blame has shifted to his friend with surprising speed.

*What potions have I drunk of siren tears,
 Distilled from limbecks foul as hell within,
 Applying fears to hopes and hopes to fears,
 Still losing when I saw my self to win?
 What wretched errors hath my heart committed,
 Whilst it hath thought itself so blessed never?
 How have mine eyes out of their spheres been fitted
 In the distraction of this madding fever?
 O benefit of ill, now I find true
 That better is by evil still made better.
 And ruined love when it is built anew
 Grows fairer than at first, more strong, far greater.
 So I return rebuked to my content,
 And gain by ill's thrice more than I have spent.*

With renewed hope the speaker's mood swings upward.

Chastised for his errors, he now finds the "benefit of ill" (l. 9). The medical imagery of Sonnet 118 slides into a metaphor based on alchemy. The strange potions of "siren tears" (l. 1) drunk by the speaker are distilled from "limbecks" (l. 2), chemical retorts that are fiendishly foul inside. As a result of their enchantment his fears change to hopes and vice versa. He thought that he was winning when actually he was losing. (This passage may well point ahead to the seductive dark mistress in the later sonnets.)

Now the speaker realizes that he was living in a fool's paradise. He was committing sins by following his heart, he says. (l. 5) But does this square with the logic which got him into trouble in the preceding sonnet? There he was reasoning his way to ruin. Both errors are examples of self-betrayal, now admitted. His eyes give him trouble, too, because in his infatuation his eyeballs start from their sockets. (ll. 7-8)

The sestet is as joyous as the octave is wretched. A new axiom is laid down: "better is by evil still made better." (l. 10) Once more, the speaker's mind is clouded by ill-founded optimism. But the new motto — a suspect paradox — will serve the speaker for the time being. The ruined love rebuilt will be fairer, stronger, and greater. A secular purgatory has been graphically imagined, perhaps through alchemy?

The couplet reflects the speaker's new complacency. He is content to be rebuked – and who did most of the rebuking? He feels that he has gained benefits worth three times more than the efforts he has expended.

*That you were once unkind befriends me now,
 And for that sorrow, which I then did feel,
 Needs must I under my transgression bow,
 Unless my nerves were brass or hammered steel.
 For if you were by my unkindness shaken,
 As I by yours, y' have passed a hell of time,
 And I, a tyrant, have no leisure taken
 To weigh how once I suffered in your crime.
 O that our night of woe might have rememb'red
 My deepest sense, how hard true sorrow hits,
 And soon to you as you to me then tend'red
 The humble salve which wounded bosoms fits!
 But that your trespass now becomes a fee;
 Mine ransoms yours, and yours must ransom me.*

This sonnet has a new emotional air about it, at first a conciliatory tone based on the revelation of the friend's unkindness, which, paradoxically, "befriends" the speaker. Because of that unkindness, the friend has a debt to pay him. Though this poem is relatively direct, we are never told what the unkindness is. Specifics must yield to feelings and argument. The sorrow that the speaker has felt for his own "transgression" (l. 3) is now balanced by his friend's bad behavior. If his friend were flawless, he argues, he would have to "bow" to him, unless his sinews ("nerves," l. 4) were brass or steel. But that is not the case.

The pattern of logic begins to unfold with "For if" at the start of the second quatrain. The speaker posits the idea that if his friend were shaken just as much by his unkindness as he has been by his friend's, the friend would have suffered hellishly. Reversing his earlier role of slave, the speaker had assumed the role of tyrant because he had not had time to reflect on how he himself had suffered from his friend's crime.

The speaker mourns that he might have remembered "our night of woe" (l. 9), which could be a quarrel or just a period of estrangement. Then the feeling of true sorrow had hit him hard. Nevertheless their mutual wounds were also quickly healed by the

“salve” (balm, l. 12) of humility. The wording, especially *bosoms* (l. 12), underscores the closeness of the two men and the intensity of their emotions.

The poem is at base a persuasive argument. Yet we never know whether the young man was won over, that he accepted the speaker’s apology as readily as the speaker accepted his. Though the tone of the couplet is lighter, a touch of the tyrant reappears in the last phrase: your trespass “must ransom me.” The note of warning may be detected.

*'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?
 Or on my frailties why are frailer spies,
 Which in their wills count bad what I think good?
 No, I am that I am, and they that level
 At my abuses, reckon up their own:
 I may be straight though they themselves be bevel.
 By their rank thoughts my deeds must not be shown,
 Unless this general evil they maintain:
 All men are bad and in their badness reign.*

A reflective sonnet, not addressed to anyone, and one with a decidedly bitter taste. The contrast to the preceding intimate poem is marked – so marked that there seems to be no connection. Yet a link appears when the speaker describes himself as having “sportive blood” (l. 6), that is to say, a roving, sensual nature, playful in its sexuality. He also confesses to “frailties” (l. 7), which in this context suggest sexual misbehavior. (Like that of Gertrude in *Hamlet*.)

Another paradox begins this sonnet. Who would expect that it is better to be vile than just to be thought so? The speaker's argument is a response to “the world” (the “others” of lines four and five), which has been critical of both the truly vile and the irreproachable. Why, he asks, should the observers who look at him with false and guilty eyes worry about the speaker's errant ways? These spies are frailer than he is. They also condemn as bad what he thinks of as good. How can they assume the role of judges?

The speaker declares his independence in no uncertain terms: “I am that I am.” (l. 9) For the moment, he is freed from the tyranny of public opinion. The manifesto continues with the charge that “they” aim (“level,” l. 9) to attack the speaker's abuses before looking at their own. The speaker may be straight even though “they” are crooked. Therefore his actions must

not be seen through their corrupt ("rank," l. 12) eyes.

The *reductio ad absurdum* of the couplet is the speaker's final salvo: In order for their attacks to be considered just, they must assume that "all men are bad and in their badness reign." That is, their badness allows them license to dominate.

*Thy gift, thy tables, are within my brain
 Full characterized with lasting memory,
 Which shall above that idle rank remain
 Beyond all date ev'n to eternity.
 Or at the least, so long as brain and heart
 Have faculty by nature to subsist,
 Till each to razed oblivion yield his part
 Of thee, thy record never can be missed.
 That poor retention could not so much hold,
 Nor need I tallies my dear love to score.
 Therefore to give them from me was I bold
 To trust those tables that receive thee more.
 To keep an adjunct to remember thee,
 Were to import forgetfulness in me.*

This sonnet picks up the thread of “tables” (pocket memorandum books), which were often given as presents. The friend’s book mentioned in Sonnet 77 may well have been such a gift. In Sonnet 122, the speaker talks about a gift of “tables” given to him by his friend, perhaps in an exchange. Now the issue is the endurance of memory and written records, part of the larger thread of time.

We learn that the speaker has boldly given away his tables (l. 11) because, he claims, they were already indelibly written in his brain (l. 2). This argument would be more convincing if the speaker did not also brag that his memory would last “beyond all date, even to eternity.” (l. 4) But his boast is immediately qualified: at least the memory will last as long as “brain and heart” (l. 5) survive in nature, and until oblivion erases all records (l. 7).

The table, he argues, is a “poor retention” (l. 9) because it couldn’t hold nearly as much as he remembers. The speaker needs no “tallies” (counting devices) to “score” (chalk up) the “dear love” he has for his friend. (l. 10) In short, he says in the couplet, he needs no memory aid (“adjunct”). If he did, it would prove that he was forgetful of his friend. The sophistry of this argument is delightful, but the implied negation of immortality through poetry is significant.

*No, Time, thou shalt not boast that I do change!
 Thy pyramids built up with newer might
 To me are nothing novel, nothing strange;
 They are but dressings of a former sight.
 Our dates are brief, and therefore we admire
 What thou dost foist upon us that is old,
 And rather make them born to our desire
 Than think that we before have heard them told.
 Thy registers and thee I both defy,
 Not wond'ring at the present, nor the past;
 For thy records and what we see doth lie,
 Made more or less by thy continual haste.
 This I do vow, and this shall ever be:
 I will be true despite thy scythe and thee.*

The sudden negative address to Time is a dramatic shift from the intimate memories of the speaker's friend in Sonnet 122. Both poems are concerned with records of the past, but on different scales and in different tones. The power of Time is now slighted, even threatened; this is quite the opposite of the opening sonnets of the sequence (numbers 2 and 19, for example), though the seeds of defiance are sown there, too.

The speaker vows that he will not change. Time, he says, has built new pyramids mightier than the old, but not better. (This may refer to actual structures built in London, but the important point is that these monuments, no matter how grand, are imitative.) They may seem novel to the world (l. 3), but Time is simply passing them off as such. In actuality they are "dressings" of former buildings. (l. 4) In the second quatrain the speaker argues that because our lives are short we (the world) admire what is foisted off on us as old (l. 6), instead of making things "born to our desire." (l. 7)

The sestet is a cry of defiance. The speaker is not in love with Time's old records ("registers," l. 9) nor is he in awe of things present. All that Time has done lies because it is made greater or less by his haste, which constantly changes everything. Whatever we may think of this causality and the speaker's logic, we can understand his skepticism, which seems to be deepening.

In the couplet, the speaker loops back to his loved one. No matter how Time's sharp scythe may threaten, the speaker will be true. Or so he believes at this point. How true has *he* been?

*If my dear love were but the child of state,
 It might for fortune's bastard be unfathered,
 As subject to time's love, or to time's hate,
 Weeds among weeds, or flow'rs with flow'rs gathered.
 No, it was builded far from accident;
 It suffers not in smiling pomp nor falls
 Under the blow of thrall'd discontent,
 Whereto th' inviting time our fashion calls:
 It fears not policy, that heretic,
 Which works on leases of short numb'ed hours,
 But all alone stands hugely politic,
 That it nor grows with heat nor drowns with show'rs.
 To this I witness call the fools of time,
 Which die for goodness, who have lived for crime.*

If we read this sonnet as an extension and a revision of Sonnet 116, we can see the ambivalence which now supersedes the plain assertion of true love as "the marriage of true minds," outlasting time itself. In Sonnet 124, one of the most intricately woven in the whole sequence, the speaker's "dear love" – not the person but the emotion, as the "it" at the beginning of line two shows – is imagined as "a child of state." *State* can mean fortune. It can also mean the body politic. The speaker plays on both. (Keep in mind that, as in Sonnet 116, the speaker is not addressing anyone. The tone in 124 is just as firm and authoritative. For example, both have forceful *No*'s opening the second quatrain.)

The first quatrain can be read like this: if my superior kind of love were subject to fortune and the caprices of "the world," it would be the bastard child of chance with no father to care for it. This false love would be at the mercy of both time's love and time's hate. (l. 3) It would be merely a weed among weeds (ready to be cut down) or a lucky flower to be gathered for a bouquet. In either case, however, its life would be brief.

True love would not be built in a place liable to chance ("accident," l. 5); it would not suffer from disdainful worldly show, nor would it live in danger of blows like a slave ("thrall'd discontent,"

l. 7). The link between the courtly world of pomp and slavery makes for a bitter tone. Thralldom to court customs, the speaker says, is the fate to which “our” fashion, the seductive present time, beckons.

Returning to “It” (dear love) in the first line of the third quatrain, the speaker declares that it has no fear of “policy.” Like “state,” policy has more than one meaning. Here it implies sinful malice—hence, in this miniature allegory, a heretic, an immoral scoffer. The next metaphor (l. 10) likens policy to a predator who buys up short leases to make money on foreclosures. This is a marked contrast to steadfast love, which is not heretical but “hugely politic.” The trick is that *politic* has positive connotations that *policy* does not. “Hugely politic” would be in this context “greatly wise.” The “dear love” is alone, above all the affairs of “the world,” and it neither “grows with heat, nor drowns with showers.” (l. 12)

To understand the couplet, compare it to lines five and six of Sonnet 116. The parallel is close, but the couplet diverges significantly. The “fools of time” (124. 13) are not the same as “time’s fool” (116. 9). In Sonnet 124 the fools are those who “die for goodness, [but] have lived for crime.” (l. 14) The speaker, like a judge, calls the fools of time (including the present) as witnesses to the fact that it is better to be true (and honest) than to live a criminal’s life and then seek to gain pardon for one’s sins by a deathbed conversion.

*Were't ought to me I bore the canopy,
 With my extern the outward honoring,
 Or laid great bases for eternity,
 Which proves more short than waste or ruining?
 Have I not seen dwellers on form and favor
 Lose all, and more by paying too much rent,
 For compound sweet forgoing simple savor,
 Pitiful thrivers, in their gazing spent?
 No, let me be obsequious in thy heart,
 And take thou my oblation, poor but free,
 Which is not mixed with seconds, knows no art,
 But mutual render only me for thee.
 Hence, thou suborned informer, a true soul,
 When most impeached, stands least in thy control.*

In this, the next to last sonnet of the middle section of the sequence, many threads are looped together especially the court, the material world, and deceptive appearances. At first the poem seems to be a meditation, but with yet another “No” (in l. 9), we find the speaker addressing his friend again. He begins with a supposition: would it mean anything to me if I had borne or were to bear the canopy (presumably in a procession of courtly pomp)? Such a post would be an outward honor, but the word *extern* suggests superficiality. His true self might not be in full rapport with such courtly display. The other action in the first quatrain, laying “great bases for eternity” (l. 3), would imply erecting a monument, and we have already experienced the speaker’s contempt for such attempts at immortality.

The speaker goes on to ask — rhetorically — whether he has not witnessed the downfall of worldly folk who rely on their external behavior to win favor in high circles, but who lose all their investment (their “rent”) in such groveling. Instead of plain honesty (“simple savor,” l. 7), they have counted on cloying flattery.

In the third quatrain, the speaker ironically turns such obsequiousness to his advantage. The only object worthy of

devotion is his friend, to whom he offers his "oblation" (l. 10), a form of praise associated with religious offerings. (This picks up the thread of idolization.) His offering is pure ("not mixed with seconds," l. 11). It is poor but free, not like the slavishness of courtly behavior, and it doesn't use trickery ("art," l. 11). In other words, it is real, not false. And it is a boon to both speaker and friend, though the speaker is giving only himself to his friend. (l. 12) Calling this act "mutual" is one of the speaker's more strained hyperboles.

The couplet raises a problem: who is the "suborned informer" (l. 13), a traitor who has lied? The "thou" seems to be parallel to that in line ten, but this would be an implausible indictment of his friend here. An alternative reading is that the speaker is now addressing an unknown person who slandered the speaker. If this is the case, the speaker is a "true soul" (l. 13), who rises above such accusations and maintains his probity.

*O thou, my lovely boy, who in thy pow'r
 Dost hold time's fickle glass, his sickle hour;
 Who hast by waning grown, and therein show'st
 Thy lover's withering, as thy sweet self grow'st.
 If nature (sovereign mistress over wrack)
 As thou goest onwards, still will pluck thee back,
 She keeps thee to this purpose: that her skill
 May time disgrace and wretched minute kill.
 Yet fear her, O thou minion of her pleasure;
 She may detain, but not still keep her treasure.
 Her audit (though delayed) answered must be,
 And her quietus is to render thee.*

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Consensus has designated this Sonnet as the last in the long central section of the sequence: numbers 18 through 126 – more than two-thirds of the whole. And the sonnet has about it the air of an ending, including a warning and two lines that are simply empty space embraced by parentheses. The address is unique; “my lovely boy” is used nowhere else in the sequence. However, it is scarcely a revealing phrase, echoing, as it does, a succession of endearing addresses. It is a counterpoise to the “tender churl” of Sonnet 1 and carries nostalgic overtones, overlooking the unpleasantnesses of the past.

The friend, who is the boy grown older, is now seen as someone who has power over time, with his hourglass (fickle because its sands are running out) and his scythe (the “sickle hour” of death). The speaker reaffirms his friend’s power, but he does not attribute it immortality through verse. Rather he resorts to paradox: the friend by growing older (“waning,” l. 3) is growing more mature, thereby making his lovers seem to wither. The plural “lovers” deftly suggests that the speaker is aware of his friend’s infidelities.

The second quatrain shifts to nature, who is ominously described as the queen of destruction. As the friend lives on, says the speaker, she will try to hold off his decay to show her power and even disgrace time, her master.

Suddenly the warning comes. The speaker addresses his friend as a minion of nature's pleasure; she is to be feared because the friend, who was just described as powerful in the first quatrain, cannot count on nature's support. She can "detain" him but not keep him as her "treasure." (l. 10) Her "audit" – that is, her accounting to her master time – may be delayed but must at last be done. Her "quietus" (final settlement) forces her to render up the youth to all-consuming time. He will be cut off as the couplet is cut off from the sonnet.

*In the old age black was not counted fair,
 Or if it were it bore not beauty's name.
 But now is black beauty's successive heir,
 And beauty slandered with a bastard shame,
 For since each hand hath put on nature's pow'r,
 Fairing the soul with art's false borrowed face,
 Sweet beauty hath no name, no holy bow'r,
 But is profaned, if not lives in disgrace.
 Therefore my mistress' eyes are raven black,
 Her eyes so suited, and they mourners seem
 As such who, not born fair, no beauty lack,
 Sland'ring creation with a false esteem.
 Yet so they mourn, becoming of their woe,
 That every tongue says beauty should look so.*

The clearcut break from Sonnet 126 makes itself known in the first lines, which announce the theme of “black” versus “fair,” almost the equivalent of our modern “brunette” versus “blonde.” The long medieval tradition of the heroine as golden-haired (“fair”) began to break up in the Renaissance, though it has persisted as an archetype up to and beyond *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. Shakespeare refers to the speaker’s mistress as “dark” and he is not the first Elizabethan sonneteer to do so. Indeed, from the poem itself we learn that the idea of black as beautiful is the current fashion.

Critics have long referred to the speaker’s mistress as the “Dark Lady,” but this title must be abandoned. She is never referred to as a lady, nor does she act like one. In Sonnet 127, *black* is used three times; *dark* is not used at all. Furthermore, the mood has shifted; the issue of black versus fair is treated lightly – almost satirically. The mistress is not yet a character; she is an appearance. The speaker delights in creating a comic argument: Because old-fashioned beauty (being fair) has been “slandered with a bastard shame” (l. 4), and is “profaned” (not idolized), his mistress must have eyes of “raven black” (l. 9). Whereas the traditional mistress in sonnets was placed on a pedestal and worshipped, this one has no religious dimension. She is a creation of “the world”: “every tongue says beauty should look so.” (l. 14)

The thread of appearance versus reality is joined with that of "the world" by the stress on cosmetics. In the second quatrain the speaker tells us that "each hand" (everyone) has taken over "nature's power" (l. 5) by applying "art" (paint) to ordinary faces. Simple beauty is displaced. Ironically, the speaker does not choose simple beauty (the fair), but takes the "foul" (black) like everyone else. Her eyes are "raven black" (l. 9) and are praised as "mourners" in the speaker's conceit (l. 10).

The whole sonnet smacks of the mock-heroic tradition, which inverts high and low. This tenor is pursued in Sonnets 130 and 131, though it is significantly modified. The steps leading down from euphoria begin.

*How oft when thou, my music, music play'st
 Upon that blessed wood whose motion sounds
 With thy sweet fingers when thou gently sway'st
 The wiry concord that mine ear confounds,
 Do I envy those jacks that nimble leap
 To kiss the tender inward of thy hand,
 Whilst my poor lips, which should that harvest reap,
 At the wood's boldness by thee blushing stand.
 To be so tickled they would change their state
 And situation with those dancing chips,
 O'er whom thy fingers walk with gentle gait,
 Making dead wood more blest than living lips.
 Since saucy jacks so happy are in this,
 Give them thy fingers, me thy lips to kiss.*

This sonnet, and the next, are decidedly different from Sonnet 127, which was an amusing introduction to the last section. Instead of a clever meditation on changing fashions of beauty, we have a pretty – and rather suggestive – compliment to a keyboard musician of unspecified sex.

Because it constitutes an elegant plea for physical intimacy, its language seems completely different from that used to address the friend. It is much more what a modern reader would expect when opening up a book of “love sonnets.” The sweetness begins in the first line, when the person addressed is called “my music.” Both the motion of the musician and the harmony of pleasant sounds are made palpable. The jacks which leap nimbly towards the player’s hands are the devices that pluck the strings, and the speaker envies them for their boldness, while he stands by – blushing. So far, all seems innocent.

However, the jacks so vividly personified desire to be “tickled” (l. 9) and wish to change places with the keys, “those dancing chips” (l. 10) over which the player’s fingers walk so gently. (Shakespeare, as most commentators agree, is not wholly accurate in his keyboard terminology. Is that a problem or an asset here?) The player’s touches make the keys’ “dead wood more blest than living lips.” (l. 12) The sanctifying effect of the kiss combines the physical and the spiritual, as does the sonnet embedded in *Romeo and Juliet* (I.v.93-

110) in a way very different from the earlier sonnets in the sequence.

The couplet carries the undercurrent of sex even further. The “jacks,” which in Elizabethan slang can mean both men and penises, are happy with the touch of fingers. The speaker asks for lips instead. The sonnet need not be read this way, but the double entendre is almost inevitable. When the plurality of men involved with the mistress becomes clear later, this reading becomes even more plausible.

*Th' expense of spirit in a waste of shame
 Is lust in action, and till action, lust
 Is perjured, murderous, bloody, full of blame,
 Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust,
 Enjoyed no sooner but despised straight;
 Past reason hunted, and no sooner had,
 Past reason hated as a swallowed bait,
 On purpose laid to make the taker mad.
 Mad in pursuit, and in possession so;
 Had, having, and in quest to have, extreme;
 A bliss in proof and proved, a very woe;
 Before, a joy proposed; behind, a dream.
 All this the world well knows yet none knows well,
 To shun the heav'n that leads men to this hell.*

While Sonnet 128 depicts a civilized, intimate situation in which thoughts of sex play a pleasant part, Sonnet 129 dramatically denounces lust in its rawest state. Together they portray the extremes of controlled and lawless sensuality, emblemized by music and sweet concord on the one hand and brainless savagery on the other. In Sonnet 129, "lust in action" is defined as the expenditure of "spirit," (vital power, in general; semen, specifically) in a "waste of shame" (l. 1). This is a wild contrast to the acceptable touching and the wished-for kisses in Sonnet 128.

Next comes a helter-skelter outpouring of negative adjectives to describe the chaos bred by instinct. (ll. 3-4) The first is *perjured*, which denotes breaking an oath—a form of betrayal—and implies general corruption. For emphasis, the idea is recapitulated in the last phrase of the list: "not to trust." Lust also gives great promise, but as soon as it is enjoyed it betrays its promise of complete satisfaction and is "despised straight." (l. 5)

Lust is also irrational and acts like a poison, a "swallowed bait" (l. 7) taken by an animal who is trapped by an unknown hand—a devilish design. Always mad, whether in pursuit or in possession, it is also extreme, never moderate as virtue should be. The list of lust's attributes closes with two before-

and-after contrasts: the bliss of the act versus the woe of the result and the joy of expectation versus the shattered dream of its aftermath.

In probably the most intensely dramatic of all the couplets, the speaker reaches the highest pitch of his denunciation with a warning. It is "the world" that knows the right path, but it forever fails to follow its own advice: "to shun the heaven that leads men to this hell." (l. 14) This self-betrayal is inevitable, and the last word *hell* reminds the reader that lust is one of the Seven Deadly Sins.

*My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;
 Coral is far more red than her lips' red;
 If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
 If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.
 I have seen roses damasked, red and white,
 But no such roses see I in her cheeks,
 And in some perfumes is there more delight
 Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.
 I love to hear her speak, yet well I know
 That music hath a far more pleasing sound.
 I grant I never saw a goddess go;
 My mistress when she walks treads on the ground.
 And yet by heav'n I think my love as rare
 As any she belied with false compare.*

Reading Sonnets 129 and 130 together gives both more depth. Sonnet 130 is a graphic series of particulars that parody the Petrarchan tradition, which sublimated lust. The speaker satirizes the conventional traits in a long list, contending that his mistress has none of them. Most preceding sonneteers held the ideal mistress to be fair (blonde), have eyes brighter than the sun, lips redder than coral, breasts whiter than snow, cheeks surpassing roses, breath sweeter than perfume, and a voice more harmonious than music. Finally, the speaker's mistress is not a goddess who walks on air; instead she simply treads the ground. The Petrarchan tradition was stale by Shakespeare's time, as already shown in Sonnet 127: "black" (brunette) is now in vogue, and the speaker in that poem claims a superiority for the blackness of his mistress because it is natural and not artificial.

Sonnet 129, in revolt against tradition, shows the unpoetic nature of the lust that underlies the speaker's attraction to a naturally "black" mistress. Sonnet 130 derides the Petrarchan conventions, but the speaker still asserts the equal beauty of his own beloved. The speaker does not understand that bragging about such a beauty shows both succumbing to his lust and capitulation to the values of "the world." He is driven by conflicting forces and he is trying hard to reconcile these with his values.

*Thou art as tyrannous so as thou art,
 As those whose beauties proudly make them cruel;
 For well thou know'st to my dear dotting heart
 Thou art the fairest and most precious jewel.
 Yet in good faith some say that thee behold,
 Thy face hath not the pow'r to make love groan;
 To say they err I dare not be so bold,
 Although I swear it to my self alone.
 And to be sure that is not false I swear
 A thousand groans but thinking on thy face;
 One on another's neck do witness bear:
 Thy black is fairest in my judgment's place.
 In nothing art thou black save in thy deeds,
 And thence this slander as I think proceeds.*

As if to underscore the speaker's adherence to tradition, which he pretends to scorn in Sonnet 130, Shakespeare has him address his mistress as "tyrannous." The Petrarchan idol was tyrannous to a fault, as the speaker acknowledges in line two. He also claims (ll. 3-4) that she knows that he, in his "dear dotting heart," holds her as a precious jewel. (Has he forgotten or dismissed his friend? We shall find out, but not immediately.)

In a surprising turn (in the second quatrain), the speaker slyly lets it drop that "some" say his mistress' face is not one that would cause a potential lover to groan (in true Petrarchan fashion). The joking tone continues as the speaker, in an aside, confesses that he would not contradict those "some" (members of "the world," no doubt) although he might say to himself that they were right. In a hyperbolic protest of truthfulness, he says that he would give "a thousand groans" in rapid succession ("one on another's neck," l. 11) in just thinking of her face. With this wild statement, the speaker concludes that black is still the fairest in his judgment.

With another twist, the insincerity of the groans and his sworn allegiance to his mistress is confirmed in the couplet. The speaker declares that she is not at all black — except in her deeds! As if this weren't devastating enough, he adds that the "slander" of the "some," *he thinks*, arises from the judgment of her deeds. This is revenge for her tyranny, indeed, canceling all his praise.

*Thine eyes I love, and they as pitying me,
 Knowing thy heart torment me with disdain,
 Have put on black and loving mourners be,
 Looking with pretty ruth upon my pain.
 And truly not the morning sun of heav'n
 Better becomes the gray cheeks of the east,
 Nor that full star that ushers in the ev'n
 Doth half that glory to the sober west
 As those two mourning eyes become thy face:
 O let it then as well beseem thy heart
 To mourn for me since mourning doth thee grace,
 And suit thy pity like in every part.
 Then will I swear beauty herself is black,
 And all they foul that thy complexion lack.*

This sonnet's ending revises the verdict at the close of Sonnet 131: "In nothing art thou black save in thy deeds." (l. 13) The deeds are forgotten as the poem slips back into the mood and imagery of the first poem in this section (Sonnet 127). Because the mistress' "raven black" eyes (127. 9) return and still seem to be in mourning, the initial thread is carried forward, but the focus and emotions change. Sonnet 132 seems to be smooth, sober and unflinching in its loyalty to the woman. It also confirms the speaker's oath to praise the beauty of blackness (see Sonnet 130) if the mistress gives in to his plea for pity. Now he thinks that the mourning eyes which become her face (l. 9) show that her heart pities him.

It is important to remember at this point that the eye-heart dichotomy is a thread that subtly reappears in the first two lines. The mistress' eyes pity the speaker but her heart torments him with disdain. In earlier sonnets the eyes were often false, but not the heart. Now the appearance versus reality thread is deftly strengthened. Because the mistress' eyes "have put on black" (l. 3), they are like mourners, whose apparel (an appearance) can be removed. However, what the speaker needs is not visual appearance but the reality of a true heart.

The second quatrain is a long comparison of the eyes to celestial lights. The light of morning (with a pun on mourning) becomes the "gray cheeks of the east" (l. 6), and the evening star (Hesperus) ushers glory

in to the "sober west" (l. 8). The mistress' mourning eyes become her face more than the celestial lights become the sky; however, all these lights are transitory appearances. The speaker asks for pity from her heart, which in the Petrarchan tradition is frequently a veiled request for sexual favor. But relief from sexual urgency is also transient, as Sonnet 129 makes very clear.

In the couplet, the speaker refocuses on external beauty and follows "the world" in preferring black. If, he says, the mistress will pity him, he will swear beauty itself to be black and those women foul that do not have his mistress' black complexion. What the speaker forgets is a pair of axioms from key sonnets. In Sonnet 18 he instructed the youth that the sun's glory is often dimmed and that "every fair from fair sometime declines." (ll. 6-7) And in Sonnet 116, he warned that the true lover does not "bend with the remover to remove." (l. 4) The speaker needs to heed his own advice, as the end of the sequence makes abundantly clear.

*Beshrew that heart that makes my heart to groan
 For that deep wound it gives my friend and me;
 Is't not enough to torture me alone,
 But slave to slav'ry my sweet'st friend must be?
 Me from my self thy cruel eye hath taken,
 And my next self thou harder hast engrossed.
 Of him, my self and thee I am forsaken,
 A torment thrice threefold thus to be crossed.
 Prison my heart in thy steel bosom's ward,
 But then my friend's heart let my poor heart bail;
 Whoe'er keeps me, let my heart be his guard;
 Thou canst not then use rigor in my jail.
 And yet thou wilt, for I being pent in thee,
 Perforce am thine and all that is in me.*

The undercurrents of Sonnet 132 scarcely prepare us for the groans, wounds, torture and slavery of Sonnet 133. The friend is brought back in line two as the third party in a triangle; he appears as someone already seriously hurt by the mistress who has stolen him from the speaker. The surprise comes to the reader, not to any of the three parties. They now know each other intimately.

The story is one of theft, bondage and imprisonment. The cruel eye of the mistress – now harshly deceptive – has snatched the friend (“me” of l. 5) from “my self” (l. 5) and bound the friend more firmly to her (l. 6). As a result, the speaker is betrayed not only by the mistress but also by himself. (He and his friend are still one.) He is also thwarted (“crossed,” l. 8) and tortured in “thrice threefold” ways – a typical hyperbole, but one that suggests promiscuity.

In the third quatrain the speaker makes a strange request. He wants to be imprisoned in his mistress’ heart of steel (she was not persuaded by his plea for pity in Sonnet 132). And he wants his heart to serve as bail for his friend’s. In a quixotic gesture he also offers his heart to be the guardian of “whoe’er keeps me” (l. 11). As if this were not bizarre enough, he argues that the mistress cannot use cruelty (“rigor,” l. 120) on his heart in her jail. He is already there.

The speaker immediately retracts this conclusion in the couplet. Why? Because, he says, if I am “pent” (jailed) in you, I am therefore thine and whatever is in me – including the friend, my other self – is yours, too.

*So now I have confessed that he is thine,
 And I my self am mortgaged to thy will,
 My self I'll forfeit so that other mine
 Thou wilt restore to be my comfort still:
 But thou wilt not, nor he will not be free,
 For thou art covetous, and he is kind;
 He learned but surety-like to write for me,
 Under that bond that him as fast doth bind.
 The statute of thy beauty thou wilt take,
 Thou usurer that put'st forth all to use,
 And sue a friend came debtor for my sake;
 So him I lose through my unkind abuse.
 Him have I lost, thou hast both him and me:
 He pays the whole, and yet I am not free.*

This sonnet starts out as a statement of fact in legal terms, which persist throughout the poem. First the speaker tells the mistress that she has won over the friend, and declares himself mortgaged to the mistress. She may do with him what she will, the word *will* implying sexual domination.

Note: The word *will* must be understood to have a number of meanings throughout this sonnet and the next two. Treating the word as a pun on Shakespeare's name is appropriate later, but here that makes no sense because the speaker cannot be mortgaged to himself.

Now that he has admitted that his friend is bound to the mistress too, he wants to make a bargain for his friend's freedom. He will forfeit himself if she will restore "that other mine" (the friend) to him as a "comfort" (ll. 3-4). In other words, the speaker needs to make his soul whole again.

How quickly is this proposal dropped! The speaker caves in, making his slavery complete. He accuses the mistress of being "covetous" (l. 6): her deadly sin is greed because she wants to retain absolute control over *two* men, easily exceeding the Petrarchan tradition. The speaker calls his friend "kind" despite the unspecified unkindnesses mentioned in earlier sonnets. Now he is kind because he has given security for the speaker by binding himself to

the mistress, though that was obviously not successful.

In the third quatrain, the speaker gives in again: the mistress will use the power ("the statute," l. 9) of her beauty freely by acting as a usurer, who puts out all possible money at exorbitant rates. Specifically, she has sued his friend for becoming a debtor on his behalf. Whether these debts are sexual or not, we are not told. Are there other plausible explanations? The upshot is that the speaker takes on the guilt. The "unkind abuse" (l. 12) may refer to the mistress' abuse of him, his friend's deception, or his own "unkindness" mentioned earlier. That they are all guilty to some degree is plain.

The couplet restates the two men's slavery to their joint mistress. However, in the last line the speaker credits the "whole" sacrifice to his friend--a hyperbolic magnanimity indeed. Sadly (but not angrily?) the speaker is not yet free. Like all legal battles -- and Elizabethans were notoriously litigious -- this one is expensive.

*Whoever hath her wish, thou hast thy will,
 And will to boot, and will in overplus;
 More than enough am I that vex thee still,
 To thy sweet will making addition thus.
 Wilt thou, whose will is large and spacious,
 Not once vouchsafe to hide my will in thine?
 Shall will in others seem right gracious,
 And in my will no fair acceptance shine?
 The sea, all water, yet receives rain still,
 And in abundance addeth to his store;
 So thou being rich in will add to thy will,
 One will of mine to make thy large will more.
 Let no unkind, no fair beseechers kill;
 Think all but one, and me in that one will.*

Sonnet 135 is startling for a number of reasons: First, the completely different portrayals of sexual and emotional relationships between this and previous poems; the formal address and groveling submission of Sonnet 134 are replaced by intimate bawdy language in open sexual pursuit and witty, confident argument. Second, the overwhelming plays on the word *will* (much discussed by scholars): the word can mean any drive in general or lust in particular; it can be slang for the sexual organs, both male and female; and it can be a shortened form of William. Suddenly the speaker, who has always been nameless, is now "Will," as the last line of Sonnet 136 affirms. If Shakespeare is revealing himself as the author, this is a very strange way to do it indeed. In Sonnet 134, we saw an abject speaker bound to a cruel mistress, which is consistent with the preceding narrative. In Sonnets 135 and 136, we find a Will punning his way to sexual domination of a desirable and willing woman. Can either he or she be the same? One cannot help wondering whether these sonnets are inserted arbitrarily.

That said, we can take the sonnet in context using the meanings of *will* as best suit the sequence. In the opening line the speaker declares that no matter what desires other women have fulfilled, you, the mistress, have got your way (will in l. 1), and me as well, and superlative sexual satisfaction on top of that (l. 2). I am man enough to keep pursuing you and so enhance your desire. (ll. 3-4) Will you, who have a strong sexual urge, refuse to merge my

desire with yours? (Because *will* can refer to both the male and female genitals in Elizabethan slang, line six implies sexual intercourse.) Shall sexual advances by others seem pleasing to you while mine are not? (ll. 7-8)

Here the speaker switches to a persuasive simile: The sea, which is all water, is always willing to receive more rain because it merely increases its wealth. Therefore you who are rich in sexual desire will simply gain by adding my desire to yours. (l. 11) Do not by unkindness cut off other suitors; just think of all of them equal to only one – that one am I. The implication is that the speaker is confident of his sexual prowess and she will no longer need others.

*If thy soul check thee that I come so near,
 Swear to thy blind soul that I was thy Will,
 And will, thy soul knows, is admitted there;
 Thus far for love my love-suit sweet fulfill.
 Will will fulfill the treasure of thy love,
 Ay, fill it full with wills, and my will one.
 In things of great receipt with ease we prove,
 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 some-thing sweet to thee.
 Make but my name thy love, and love that still;
 And then thou lov'st me for my name is Will.*

In this continuance of Sonnet 135, the speaker anticipates the mistress' possible retreat from his aggressive intimacy. His fear, perhaps feigned, that the woman's soul would hold her back certainly is at odds with the tyrannical mistress of Sonnet 131 (and Petrarchan tradition). Undaunted, he says that if her soul has doubts, she should swear to it that he is what she desires ("thy Will," l. 2), and as her soul knows, desire should be admitted. Sweet, he urges, go thus far to fulfill my love-suit for love's sake.

Desire on both their parts will fill love's treasury (slang for the vagina). Yes, says the speaker, you may fill it full of desires and my desire can be one of them. Then he rationalizes the procedure: In matter of great numbers it is easy to prove that one might as well be none. In other words, one more lover won't matter.

In the sestet the tone shifts from seductive to plaintive. The speaker now wants to be "untold" (not counted) even though he becomes one of her "store's account" (her collection of lovers). All he asks is that even if she counts him as nothing, she will deem him something dear.

In the couplet his request is more specific: if you make my name your love, then you will love me because my name is Will. If the "will" here is a pun on sexual desire, it indicates that her love involves sexual desire as well.

One thing is certain about these two sonnets — the friend does not appear. And if there is no triangle, it is hard to argue that they follow from Sonnets 133 and 134. The characters, insofar as we get to know them in the space of twenty-eight lines, do not carry over from the previous poems, though they may be different sides of the same people. Clearly, in Sonnet 137, addressed to Cupid, the earlier mistress returns as foul and false as ever.

*Thou blind fool, Love, what dost thou to mine eyes
 That they behold and see not what they see?
 They know what beauty is, see where it lies,
 Yet what the best is, take the worst to be.
 If eyes corrupt by over-partial looks
 Be anchored in the bay where all men ride,
 Why of eyes' falsehood hast thou forged hooks
 Whereto the judgment of my heart is tied?
 Why should my heart think that a several plot
 Which my heart knows the wide world's common place?
 Or mine eyes, seeing this, say this is not
 To put fair truth upon so foul a face,
 In things right true my heart and eyes have erred,
 And to this false plague are they now transferred.*

After all the amorous advances of Sonnets 135 and 136 (nicknamed the "Will Sonnets") and keen hopes of satisfaction, the speaker — is he really the same? — addresses Cupid as "Thou blind fool, Love," and re-enters the realm of pessimism in Sonnets 131 through 134. The speaker also returns to the paradox of seeing and yet not seeing. He indicts himself for taking the worst appearance for the best although his eyes "know what beauty is [and] see where it lies." (l. 3)

The second quatrain continues his harangue against his eyes, which are corrupted by prejudice ("overpartial looks," l. 5) and "anchored in the bay where all men ride" (l. 6) The metaphor suggests promiscuity by likening the woman to a bay and "all men" to ships that ride upon her. "Cupid," the speaker asks, "why have you forged the hooks of attraction from my eyes' falseness?"

Now, revising the role of the heart, the speaker says that its judgment is swayed by the eyes and therefore it is not the seat of reality and truth that it has been. Otherwise the heart would not think that the mistress was his private property. Instead, it would perceive that she was "the wide world's common place." (l. 10) In plain English, a whore. Still questioning Cupid, the speaker asks him why he didn't say "this is

not" (l. 11), thus evading his own mistake in taking foul for fair.

The couplet also puts the blame on the heart (which, surprisingly, is now "right true" again), and on the erring eyes. Using the passive voice in the last line, the speaker absolves himself of any guilt in their transference to "this false plague" (the mistress, who may well have a venereal disease).

*When my love swears that she is made of truth,
 I do believe her though I know she lies,
 That she might think me some untutored youth,
 Unlearned in the world's false subtleties.
 Thus vainly thinking that she thinks me young,
 Although she knows my days are past the best,
 Simply I credit her false-speaking tongue:
 On both sides thus is simple truth suppressed.
 But wherefore says she not she is unjust?
 And wherefore say not I that I am old?
 O love's best habit is in seeming trust,
 And age in love loves not to have years told.
 Therefore I lie with her, and she with me,
 And in our faults by lies we flattered be.*

This clever sonnet is addressed solely to the reader, whom the speaker lets in on his secret for success in love. Like many of the argumentative discourses, it begins with a paradox: When his mistress swears that she is faithful ("made of truth," l. 1), he believes her even though he knows she lies. He does not want her to think that he is unsophisticated, though, as it becomes clear, he is. The world with its "false subtleties" (l. 4) is behind this deception.

In the second quatrain the argument for suppressing truth advances. The speaker "vainly" (l. 5) – in both senses – thinks that his mistress thinks that he is young, despite the fact that she knows his "days are past the best" (l. 6).

Note: It is well to re-read Sonnet 73 at this point and compare the speaker's assertion there that his days are autumnal. He is grateful to the young man, whom he believes to love him anyway. Sonnet 138 has nothing of this directness and naivety.)

The mistress lies about her feelings, and the speaker "simply" (l. 7) believes her. Therefore, on both sides is the "simple" (l. 8) truth suppressed. Obviously the speaker has taken on some of the world's false subtlety himself.

In the third quatrain he asks why his mistress doesn't just say that she is "unjust" (l. 9) and why he doesn't admit to being old. The specious

reason is that love's most successful mode ("habit," l. 10) is in keeping up the appearance of truth. The speaker may say that "age in love loves not to have years told," (l. 12), which has some pragmatic truth in it, but it is scarcely in keeping with Sonnet 73 or Sonnet 116 (ll. 2-3).

The argument concludes with a Q.E.D. couplet, a sophistry in support of lying. When the speaker says he lies with his mistress (and she with him), he means lying in both senses. The tone is smug, but betrayal ("our faults," l. 14) underlies the mutual flattery carried on by lies. Flattery seems to have worked – so far.

*O call me not to justify the wrong
 That thy unkindness lays upon my heart;
 Wound me not with thine eye but with thy tongue;
 Use pow'r with pow'r and slay me not with art.
 Tell me thou lov'st elsewhere; but in my sight,
 Dear heart, forbear to glance thine eye aside.
 What need'st thou wound with cunning when thy might
 Is more than my o'erpressed defense can bide?
 Let me excuse thee; ah, my love well knows
 Her pretty looks have been mine enemies,
 And therefore from my face she turns my foes,
 That they elsewhere might dart their injuries.
 Yet do not so, but since I am near slain,
 Kill me outright with looks, and rid my pain.*

The delight of mutual flattery by trading lies has already ended, and mutual recriminations have begun. The speaker, turning from addressing the reader directly, pleads with his mistress not to ask him to justify her wrongdoings. (That would be self-betrayal.) Her “unkindness” — the same word was applied to the mutual betrayals of the speaker and his friend in Sonnet 120 — has laid a wrong upon his heart. He also asks her not to wound him with her eye (which, unlike the heart’s truth, works by deception) but — surprisingly — with her tongue. He does not want to die from her artfulness but by her power.

The speaker therefore wants direct spoken truth (“Tell me thou lov’st elsewhere,” l. 5), not the cunning side glances of flirtation so common in the courtly world. She has, he contends, no need of cunning because her strength can easily overthrow his defenses.

Despite all this, he wants to excuse her. But she knows that her artful looks have been his foes; therefore she diverts them to other men she wants to conquer. (Clearly, she wants to make him jealous and she knows how to do it.)

The speaker’s final appeal in the couplet is a negative command: “Yet do not so” (l. 13). This is followed by an almost comical bitter conclusion. The logic is that because he is already nearly slain by her

darting eyes, he might as well be fatally stabbed by them and so be rid of his pain. This can be construed as a parody of the Petrarchan lovers, but it is also serious, a dramatic contrast to the preceding poem.

*Be wise as thou art cruel; do not press
 My tongue-tied patience with too much disdain,
 Lest sorrow lend me words and words express
 The manner of my pity-wanting pain.
 If I might teach thee wit, better it were,
 Though not to love, yet love to tell me so;
 As testy sick men, when their deaths be near,
 No news but health from their physicians know.
 For if I should despair I should go mad,
 And in my madness might speak ill of thee.
 Now this ill-wresting world is grown so bad,
 Mad sland'ers by mad ears believed be.
 That I may not be so, nor thou belied,
 Bear thine eyes straight, though thy proud heart go wide.*

Instead of desperate servility, the speaker adopts a more aggressive attitude, telling the mistress to be as wise as she is cruel and warning her not to try his patience with her haughty ways. Her behavior will force his "pity-wasting pain" (l. 4) to express itself in words. His patience has made him "tongue-tied" (l. 2), but he is already speaking out. Sorrow is lending him words that show how he suffers.

As he is prone to do, the speaker softens his tone almost immediately and gently proposes to teach the mistress wisdom. If you cannot love me, he says, you can still take delight in telling me so. (l. 6) He likens himself to a testy sick man who, near death, won't take any news from his doctor unless it is good.

The speaker falls back into his forlorn mode but he does not completely give up his threats and there are touches of cynicism in the sestet. He also advances an argument that he hopes will be convincing: If he is forced to despair, he will go mad, and if he goes mad he might speak ill of her. The speaker gains leverage by citing "the ill-wresting world" — the world that twists the truth (l. 11). The situation is so bad that a mad slanderer (such as he might become)

would be believed by the “mad ears” (l. 12) of the world.

The speaker closes his argument with a direct injunction: if you want to avoid being slandered, look straight ahead. Be honest and don’t flirt with sidelong glances, even though your proud heart is roaming.

*In faith I do not love thee with mine eyes,
 For they in thee a thousand errors note;
 But 'tis my heart that loves what they despise,
 Who in despite of view is pleased to dote.
 Nor are mine ears with thy tongue's tune
 delighted,
 Nor tender feeling to base touches prone,
 Nor taste, nor smell, desire to be invited
 To any sensual feast with thee alone:
 But my five wits nor my five senses can
 Dissuade one foolish heart from serving thee,
 Who leaves unswayed the likeness of a man,
 Thy proud heart's slave and vassal wretch to be.
 Only my plague thus far I count my gain,
 That she that makes me sin awards me pain.*

Another surprise occurs in Sonnet 141 when the speaker declares that his heart – not his eyes or other senses – is what enslaves him to his mistress: “’tis my heart that loves what they [the senses] despise.” (l. 3) His eyes see the truth now, noting a “thousand errors” (l. 2) in her appearance, whereas in Sonnet 137 his eyes are portrayed as corrupted, seeing beauty though the mistress is in reality foul; both the heart and eyes have erred (l. 13).

The octave of Sonnet 141 is an orderly list of the deficiencies of the mistress’ appeal to the five senses: the eyes (l. 1), the ears (l. 5), touch (l. 6) taste and smell (l. 7). None of the senses can arouse desire for “any sensual feast with [her] alone.” (l. 9) At this point we are permitted to wonder how the speaker and the mistress might finally unite if her eyes wander and his eyes fail to dote. It is the heart now, but the heart has erred before and may do so again. Ultimately, it is the speaker who cannot understand what is wrong or give a coherent explanation.

Instead, the speaker imagines adding the five wits (kinds of intelligence) to the five senses, but even these collective personifications cannot persuade the heart to overcome its slavery. And so the speaker is left as a shadow of a man who remains the vassal of the proud mistress’ heart. (ll. 11-12)

The paradox with which the reader is left is that the speaker’s sole gain is a “plague” (implying disease). The cruel one has not only made him sin but has given him pain as well. His disease is madness. It may not be venereal now, but it will be eventually.

*Love is my sin, and thy dear virtue hate,
 Hate of my sin, grounded on sinful loving.
 O but with mine compare thou thine own state
 And thou shalt find it merits not reproof;
 Or if it do, not from those lips of thine
 That have profaned their scarlet ornaments
 And sealed false bonds of love as oft as mine,
 Robbed others' beds' revenues of their rents.
 Be it lawful I love thee as thou lov'st those
 Whom thine eyes woo as mine importune thee.
 Root pity in thy heart that when it grows,
 Thy pity may deserve to pitied be.
 If thou dost seek to have what thou dost hide,
 By self example mayst thou be denied.*

The paradox that begins Sonnet 142 is much more provocative than that which closes Sonnet 141. Moreover, the assertive tone of Sonnet 140 returns with this strong reproof of the mistress. The speaker first defends himself and his "sinful loving" (l. 2), finding her "virtue" to be hatred of his sin. Then, boldly, he declares that if she would compare his sinful state with her own, his would not deserve any criticism.

Pursuing his attack, he adds that if his actions merit reproof, it could not come plausibly from her lips ("scarlet ornaments," l. 6), which have "sealed false bonds of love" more often than he has. Most seriously, he charges that she has robbed the beds of wives who lawfully deserve the sexual attentions of their husbands. These charges are put, successively, in metaphors of religion (l. 6), law (l. 7), and finance (l. 8), giving rhetorical force to his accusations.

In the third quatrain, the speaker returns to the wooing through the eyes of Sonnets 139 and 140: if it is lawful – and it is clear that it is not – the speaker loves the mistress as much as she loves those she flirts with. Now the injunction ending this quatrain shifts to the need for pity: "Root pity in thy heart, that, when it grows, / Thy pity may deserve to pitied be." (ll. 11-12) These are some of the most persuasive words in this section of the sequence and create more feeling for the speaker than do his moans for his own condition. The weaker closing couplet is a repetition of the threat that if the mistress cannot find pity in her heart she, when her turn comes, will be denied it.

*Lo, as a careful housewife runs to catch
 One of her feathered creatures broke away,
 Sets down her babe and makes all swift dispatch
 In pursuit of the thing she would have stay,
 Whilst her neglected child holds her in chase,
 Cries to catch her whose busy care is bent
 To follow that which flies before her face,
 Not prizing her poor infant's discontent:
 So run'st thou after that which flies from thee,
 Whilst I, thy babe, chase thee afar behind;
 But if thou catch thy hope, turn back to me,
 And play the mother's part: kiss me, be kind.
 So will I pray that thou mayst have thy will,
 If thou turn back and my loud crying still.*

The reader approaching this sonnet right after reading the preceding three will be surprised at the shift in situation, tone and technique, even if the subject is the same. Instead of a cruel mistress whose chief virtue is hate, there is, in an epic simile that occupies the whole octave, a triangle that consists of a housewife, a "feathered creature" (l. 2) and a baby. A barnyard incident seems to have taken over from court scandals and broken oaths. However, a miniature allegory is in the making, and the comedy created smacks of travesty.

The basic story sounds innocent enough: A housewife, in a frantic chase, hastens after one of her feathered creatures that has broken away. Her child, whom she has set down negligently, tries to "hold her in chase" (l. 5), but she is too keenly bent on following "that which flies before her face." As a result, her child's pathetic plight is disregarded.

Little clues reveal the allegory: no chicken or other fowl is specified. Only the feathers count. And the phrases just quoted suggest the following love triangle: the speaker who holds his mistress "in chase," a courtly lover who flees, wearing the fashionable feathers of the time, from the face of the third party, the mistress who fears to lose him and cares not about her child. Of course the sestet reveals that the speaker is the woman's "babe" and what he wants is affection. "Play the mother's part," he says (l. 12), and kiss me once you have caught your "hope,"

(l. 11) that is, the straying lover in his feathers.

This sonnet has the same plea for pity voiced by the speaker in Sonnet 142, but the tragedy has been traded in for comic relief – at least for the moment. The speaker ends by praying that the mistress will get her way (her “will”) if she turns back to him and stops his tears.

*Two loves I have of comfort and despair,
 Which like two spirits do suggest me still:
 The better angel is a man right fair;
 The worser spirit a woman colored ill.
 To win me soon to hell my female evil
 Tempteth my better angel from my side
 And would corrupt my saint to be a devil,
 Wooing his purity with her foul pride.
 And, whether that my angel be turn'd fiend,
 Suspect I may, yet not directly tell;
 But being both from me, both to each friend,
 I guess one angel in another's hell.
 Yet this shall I ne'er know, but live in doubt,
 Till my bad angel fire my good one out.*

Addressing no particular person, the speaker takes a moment to step back from his situation, assess his "two loves," speculate on their current relationship, and anticipate their futures. The tone is firm and objective until the very end. That the two loves are portrayed as angels (or spirits), each trying to win over the speaker, follows the pattern of medieval morality plays, in which an everyman figure is torn between good (an angel) and evil (a devil) and must make his crucial choice. But there are major changes.

Our speaker, who is like an everyman in many ways, reveals that the worser spirit ("a woman colored ill," l. 4) is luring him to hell by tempting the better angel away from his side and turning the male angel into a devil. She is now wooing his pure virtue with her foul pride.

The sestet looks towards the future, which the speaker can only guess at. But he suspects that since they are both away from him and friends to each other, one angel (the "man right fair" of l. 2) is in the "hell" (slang for the vagina) of the woman "colored ill."

Now the tone becomes vindictive. The speaker expresses doubt, but the last line gives him away: he will know the truth about his "loves" when the bad angel fires the good one out. This wording may indicate the dismissal of the man by the mistress, but it also implies that the end result will be venereal disease. Punishment will come in both this world and the next.

*Those lips that Love's own hand did make
 Breathed forth the sound that said, "I hate,"
 To me that languished for her sake.
 But when she saw my woeful state,
 Straight in her heart did mercy come,
 Chiding that tongue that ever sweet
 Was used in giving gentle doom,
 And taught it thus anew to greet:
 "I hate" she altered with an end,
 That followed it as gentle day
 Doth follow night, who like a fiend
 From heav'n to hell is flown away.*

*"I hate" from "hate" away she threw,
 And saved my life, saying, "Not you."*

At first this sonnet seems to be an unlikely presence in the sequence, partly because it is unique in having eight, not ten, syllables per line. More importantly it shows a tender side to the mistress, who has been cruel in the Petrarchan tradition – so cruel that she was called “my female evil” in the preceding poem. Though this poem seems inconsistent, it is rather the same mixture of contradictory feelings that has marked the sonnets dealing with the speaker’s friend. The story is the speaker’s and he now shows how the “comfort and despair” which are assigned to two different persons in Sonnet 144 can be found together in the mistress just as they have been in the young man.

Sonnet 145 begins with the mistress’ hate and ends with her mercy. By showing how the emotions can suddenly shift, Shakespeare gives us a more realistic treatment of love than is found in the traditional stereotypes of most previous sonnet sequences. The opening lines describing the woman’s lips “that Love’s own hand did make” recall the same intimacy found in Sonnet 128, where the mistress is addressed as “my music” and her “tender” hand has “gentle” fingers. (ll. 1, 6, 11) Moreover, that sonnet ends with the speaker’s request, “Give . . . me thy lips to kiss.”

After the mistress has breathed “I hate” (l. 2), she changes in mid sentence when she sees the speaker’s woeful state, and the same pity she was urged to cultivate before now wells up from her heart. The poem takes a neat turn in the couplet

when she “saves [his] life” by adding “not you” to “I hate.” Just prior to this, the speaker likens night to a fiend who has flown away to hell. (ll. 11-12) This clearly echoes the description of the bad angel in Sonnet 144 who turns into a fiend and lures the good angel into her hell. In Sonnet 145 she throws her hateful fiendish side away, and so saves the speaker.

*Poor soul, the center of my sinful earth,
 these rebel pow'rs that thee array.
 Why dost thou pine within and suffer dearth,
 Painting thy outward walls so costly gay?
 Why so large cost having so short a lease,
 Dost thou upon thy fading mansion spend?
 Shall worms, inheritors of this excess,
 Eat up thy charge? Is this thy body's end?
 Then, soul, live thou upon thy servant's loss,
 And let that pine to aggravate thy store;
 Buy terms divine in selling hours of dross,
 Within be fed, without be rich no more:
 So shalt thou feed on death, that feeds on men,
 And death once dead, there's no more dying then.*

This famous sonnet sits, like an island of introspection, among the poems of love and hate, cruelty and mercy, comfort and despair. No lover – neither friend nor mistress – is addressed or even mentioned, only the “poor soul,” which suddenly replaces the heart at the center of his “sinful earth.” He chastises it as if it were his prodigal son fallen into dissolute spendthrift ways. The basic conflict is that between the spiritual and the material, quite unlike that of Sonnet 144, though both concern the soul.

First, the speaker rebukes his soul for spending so much on its “outward walls.” (l. 4) It has fallen from grace because of pride, arrayed as it is by “rebel pow'rs” (l. 2), suggesting satanic forces. The speaker, who, after all, should own his own soul, asks it why it spends so much on its fading exterior (the “mansion” that is his body). At death, only worms will inherit the costly excesses.

The speaker concludes his argument by instructing the soul to use the body as a servant. Let the body's wealth dwindle, he says, and thereby increase your own “store.” (l. 10) Buy time in heaven by selling wasteful “hours of dross” (l. 11), and give up external splendor so that you can be fed instead of suffering dearth (l. 3).

It is evident by this time that he speaker is aware of his self-betrayal. The abrupt (and dramatic) shift

away from the sonnets concerning the mistress underlines his internal struggle. He has been false to his own notions of morality. Such a recognition scene is a traditional feature in tragedies from *Oedipus Rex* through *Hamlet* and *King Lear*.

Note: The gap at the beginning of line two indicates that the Quarto mistakenly repeated "my sinful earth" here. The right words are unknown.

*My love is as a fever, longing still
 For that which longer nurseth the disease,
 Feeding on that which doth preserve the ill,
 Th' uncertain sickly appetite to please:
 My reason, the physician to my love,
 Angry that his prescriptions are not kept,
 Hath left me, and I desperate now approve,
 Desire is death, which physic did except.
 Past cure I am, now reason is past care,
 And frantic mad with ever more unrest,
 My thoughts and my discourse as madmen's are,
 At random from the truth vainly expressed.
 For I have sworn thee fair, and thought thee bright,
 Who art as black as hell, as dark as night.*

That the speaker is addressing anyone is not evident until the final couplet, and even there the reader cannot be sure that the "thee" refers to the mistress or the friend. Perhaps it is a purposeful ambiguity: the speaker is talking about his love as a disease and a madness, and his main concern is his own desperate condition. Instead of a longing for a cure, he hopes for whatever will "nurse" the disease. (l. 2) The fever feeds on whatever preserves the illness (or the evil of desire itself) in an effort to please the intermittently ("uncertain," l. 4) sickly appetite.

The speaker's reason, which is personified as the doctor for that disease called love, has been roused to anger because his prescriptions have not been followed. And so the doctor has left; the speaker is so desperate that he now realizes that "desire is death" (l. 8) and that medicine could not cure it.

Therefore the speaker is past cure and reason can no longer care. The speaker has gone into a frenzy and gets no rest. His thoughts and talk are those of a madman; they wander away from truth and seek in vain for sensible expression.

The outburst in the couplet is a virtual curse on the one addressed because the bright and beautiful appearance has proved false: "black as hell [and] dark as night." Unhappily, it is the speaker who has failed to act on his previous betrayals. Indeed, he insists on pursuing his disease, and disease becomes the dominant thread at the close of the sequence.

*O me! What eyes hath Love put in my head,
Which have no correspondence with true sight?
Or if they have, where is my judgment fled,
That censures falsely what they see aright?
If that be fair wheron my false eyes dote,
What means the world to say it is not so?
If it be not, then love doth well denote,
Love's eye is not so true as all men's: no,
How can it? O how can love's eye be true,
That is so vexed with watching and with tears?
No marvel then though I mistake my view,
The sun itself sees not till heav'n clears.
O cunning Love, with tears thou keep'st me blind,
Lest eyes, well seeing, thy foul faults should find.*

The content of this sonnet is similar to that of Sonnet 147 and follows the thread of many prior poems that deplore the faulty sight of lovers' eyes. But the tone is sad wonderment rather than anger. Like Sonnet 147, it does not address the person apostrophized until the couplet. Here Cupid ("Love," l. 1) is immediately blamed for putting into the speaker's head new eyes "which have no correspondence with true sight" (l. 2). Or, if this is not so, the speaker asks, what has happened to my judgment which should have corrected false sight?

In a crafty fashion the speaker also asks, if the lying eyes dote on some "fair" person, how can "the world" say it isn't so? If it is not, then love can in truth point out ("denote," l. 7) that love's eyes are not so true as other men's are.

After this complicated bit of logic, the speaker clarifies his meaning by asking, how can love's eyes be true if they are so painfully distressed by watching and tears? It follows that it is no wonder his vision is obscured. "The sun itself sees not till heaven clears." (l. 12) For once the speaker defends, not humiliates, himself as an ordinary lover.

At the close, the speaker calls on Cupid ("cunning Love," l. 13), charging him that he keeps the speaker blind because if he weren't he would see the "foul faults" of the mistress (or the friend). Cupid has been hovering in the background of the whole sequence and now becomes a major thread to be paired with disease in the final sonnets.

*Canst thou, O cruel, say I love thee not,
 When I against my self with thee partake?
 Do I not think on thee when I forgot
 Am of my self, all tyrant for thy sake?
 Who hateth thee that I do call my friend,
 On whom frown'st thou that I do fawn upon?
 Nay, if thou lour'st on me do I not spend
 Revenge upon my self with present moan?
 What merit do I in my self respect
 That is so proud thy service to despise,
 When all my best doth worship thy defect,
 Commanded by the motion of thine eyes?
 But love, hate on, for now I know thy mind:
 Those that can see, thou lov'st, and I am blind.*

After the moans of self-pity in Sonnet 148 the speaker goes on a rhetorical attack, ironically pretending to support the mistress' cruel disdain for him. His argument now depends on feigned self-abasement, beginning with a question: How can you say I don't love you when I always take your side if you abuse me? After this come five other questions, and each quatrain ends with one. Their cumulative force strengthens as the poem builds to a final indictment.

The second question (the second half of the first quatrain) is also acidic: Don't I think about you when I forget myself and become (like you) a complete tyrant? The third — just one line — says in effect that he would turn against anyone she happened to hate. In the fourth — also just one line — the speaker asks whether he fawns upon anyone she frowns upon, implying that he fawns on her. And, fifth, he asks if he doesn't take revenge on himself by moaning when she glowers ("lour'st," l. 7) at him.

The last quatrain is all one question which is the climax of servility. The speaker swallows his own pride; seeing nothing in himself to praise, he demeans himself by doing what she asks. All his best efforts are put into worshipping her faults as her eyes command him to do. (This recalls how he has condemned her wandering glances.)

In a kind of mock resignation, the speaker tells the mistress to continue hating him because then he will truly know her mind. The last line is a crushing irony: she loves those that see her clearly; therefore, because he is blind, she does not love him. The process of self-recognition continues. The rhetorical questions have been meant to demolish the mistress' case against him, but instead he must conclude his argument by blowing up his own defense.

*O from what pow'r hast thou this pow'rful might,
 With insufficiency my heart to sway,
 To make me give the lie to my true sight,
 And swear that brightness doth not grace the day?
 Whence hast thou this becoming of things ill,
 That in the very refuse of thy deeds
 There is such strength and warrantise of skill,
 That in my mind thy worst all best exceeds?
 Who taught thee how to make me love thee more,
 The more I hear and see just cause of hate?
 O though I love what others do abhor,
 With others thou shouldst not abhor my state:
 If thy unworthiness raised love in me,
 More worthy I to be belov'd of thee.*

Once more the subject and the argument are those of immediately preceding sonnets, and once more the tone is different. The lamentation of Sonnet 148 and the angry protest of 149 give way to wonder and serious persuasiveness. Shakespeare shows his skill at taking a single situation and turning it about to suggest the changing attitudes of the speaker. The contrasts among the three poems make for subtle drama.

Here the speaker's wrath has softened. The first rhetorical question cannot be answered; the power from which the mistress derives hers is a mystery, and the speaker is in awe of it. He is serious, not scathingly ironic, in asking how her unworthiness ("insufficiency," l. 2) could sway his heart. He has been touched so strongly that his sight has been distorted, and he has been forced to swear that brightness is not as beautiful as her darkness.

Next (in the second quatrain) he asks again how she could ever make ugly things look attractive with such strength in the meanest of her deeds ("refuse," l. 6) that he could, in his own mind, be made to see her worst aspects exceed the best of all others.

Finally, he asks her who taught her how to make him love her more despite what she had done to provoke hate. After this, the argument takes over: Just because, he says, I love in you what others ("the world" is implied) abhor, you should not (like "the world") abhor *my* state. If your corruptness aroused love in me, I should be more worthy of your love. There may be irony in this, but it is much more winning than that in Sonnet 149.

*Love is too young to know what conscience is,
 Yet who knows not conscience is born of love?
 Then, gentle cheater, urge not my amiss,
 Lest guilty of my faults thy sweet self prove.
 For thou betraying me, I do betray
 My nobler part to my gross body's treason;
 My soul doth tell my body that he may
 Triumph in love; flesh stays no farther reason,
 But rising at thy name doth point out thee
 As his triumphant prize; proud of this pride,
 He is contented thy poor drudge to be,
 To stand in thy affairs, fall by thy side.
 No want of conscience hold it that I call
 Her love, for whose dear love I rise and fall.*

Now the tone changes to the light-hearted bawdiness appropriate to the occasion, and the occasion is the final triumph of the body over the soul, which seemed unlikely in previous sonnets. The speaker begins with an aphorism: "Love is too young to know what conscience is." This is not unbridled license because he adds immediately that everyone knows that "conscience is born of love." (l. 2) Despite the ambiguity of *love* and the questionable truth of the pronouncements, a certain lightness and charm carries the idea along.

The cruel mistress now becomes a "gentle cheater" (a phrase reminiscent of the "tender churl" applied to the youth in Sonnet 1), and the speaker urges her to refrain from citing his sins. If she doesn't she may show that she is guilty of the same ones. Just as you have betrayed me, he says, I betray my "nobler part" (his soul) by my "gross body's treason." (l. 6) Recognition of his self-betrayal seems virtually complete.

The next surprise comes when the speaker's soul tells his body that he (the body) may triumph in love. Sexual union may be consummated. Then, topping that, the flesh responds immediately – it doesn't need another argument (it "stays no farther reason," l. 8); but rising at the mistress' name, points her out as his "triumphant prize" (l. 10). Now the speaker turns back wittily to his previous complaints of slavery. Only this time he (the penis, specifically) is proud, and content to be the mistress'

“poor drudge” (l. 11). Like a good soldier he will “stand” in her affairs and “fall” by her side.

In the couplet, the speaker turns to the audience and declares that when he calls his mistress his “love” it is not because he has no conscience. Rather he rises and falls because of her “dear love.” This is a contradiction of the opening aphorism. The speaker has seemed aware that he is blind (see Sonnet 149, for example), but here he does not acknowledge his lack of conscience.

*In loving thee thou know'st I am forsworn,
 But thou art twice forsworn to me love swearing,
 In act thy bed-vow broke and new faith torn,
 In vowing new hate after new love bearing.
 But why of two oaths' breach do I accuse thee,
 When I break twenty? I am perjured most,
 For all my vows are oaths but to misuse thee,
 And all my honest faith in thee is lost:
 For I have sworn deep oaths of thy deep kindness;
 Oaths of thy love, thy truth, thy constancy,
 And to enlighten thee gave eyes to blindness,
 Or made them swear against the thing they see.
 For I have sworn thee fair: more perjured eye,
 To swear against the truth so foul a lie.*

The final admission of betrayals by both the speaker and the mistress begins with an emphatic paradox: "In loving thee thou know'st I am forsworn." A wave of despair and indignation reaches its crest after alternating surges of love and hate. Sonnet 150 depicts a relatively positive view of the speaker's love, but Sonnet 151 reveals the instability of it. The woman praised in Sonnet 150 becomes a "gentle cheater" after all; the speaker betrays himself, and the body in all its bawdiness triumphs over the soul. Has the speaker's blindfold been lifted for good?

The revelations of Sonnet 152 are breathtaking. The speaker plays a nasty game of who has betrayed whom more often and more ruinously. He begins by confessing that he is "forsworn" (perjured) in loving his mistress, to whom he speaks. He has not necessarily broken his marriage vows, but that may be so. More likely it is the friend, the "better angel" of Sonnet 144, who has been betrayed. The speaker accuses the woman of being "twice forsworn" (l. 2) because she has broken her "bed-vow" (marriage oath) by adultery ("in act," l. 3) and has broken faith with the speaker by turning from loving to hating him.

Then, surprising us even more, the speaker says that he has no right to make accusations when he himself has broken twenty oaths. Is this yet another hyperbole? He also claims that he is "perjured most" (l. 6)

because all his oaths are “but to misuse” her (l. 7). *Misuse* here means to misrepresent her, because, as we learn next, he has sworn “deep oaths of thy deep kindness” and oaths of “thy love, thy truth, thy constancy” – all of which turned out to be false.

Furthermore, to make her shine brightly (“enlighten thee,” l. 11), he exchanged his eyes for blindness or made them swear to see what they did not. He has sworn (falsely) that she is “fair” (l. 13), implying in both appearance and morality. Therefore he is more perjured in sight (his “eye,” with a pun on “I”) “to swear against the truth so foul a lie.”

The speaker has, yet again, shouldered the greater blame; he betrays himself by not seeing that his own actions are governed by his sexual drive, not his conscience.

*Cupid laid by his brand and fell asleep.
 A maid of Dian's this advantage found,
 And his love-kindling fire did quickly steep
 In a cold valley fountain of that ground,
 Which borrowed from this holy fire of love
 A dateless lively heat, still to endure,
 And grew a seething bath, which yet men prove
 Against strange maladies a sovereign cure.
 But at my mistress' eye love's brand new fired,
 The boy for trial needs would touch my breast.
 I, sick withal, the help of bath desired,
 And hither hied, a sad distempered guest:
 But found no cure; the bath for my help lies
 Where Cupid got new fire: my mistress' eyes.*

Long ago, the last two sonnets were not considered part of the sequence; some scholars pronounced them non-Shakespearian and struck them from the canon. That is no longer the case, but sometimes they are slighted and sometimes editors seem to tire when they reach them. Why are there two sonnets on the same subject, some ask. Those readers who have followed this volume this far, especially those who have scrutinized the last six sonnets, will, I trust, be more sympathetic. The premise here is that if Shakespeare really wrote the poems as they appear in the Quarto, he probably had a reason.

One reason is that the love affairs of the characters can be seen in the perspective of myth. The love triangle is as old as devouring Time himself, and it is the agon of the love-god Cupid and Diana, the goddess of chastity, that endures. In Sonnet 153 a maiden in the retinue of Diana sees an "advantage" (opportunity, l. 2) and seizes it. When Cupid falls asleep, she steals his brand, the torch which was his weapon against chastity. (Cupid's brand preceded his bow and arrow, which appeared in later stories.) This torch is the "holy fire of love, / a dateless lively heat, still to endure." (ll. 5-6) When the maiden takes the brand, she plunges it into a cold fountain nearby. This becomes a "seething bath" (l. 7) that men still test ("prove," l. 7) as a potent cure for "strange maladies" (l. 8).

The speaker reports that the brand was re-kindled by his mistress' eyes. As a trial of its power, Cupid touches it to the speaker's breast. (Note that Cupid is a boy, and it was a boy who first touched the speaker.) He sickens from it and looks for help from a bath (not the English city of that name, as some have thought, but a bath or tub used as a relief from syphilis and other diseases). However, he finds no cure.

Rather glibly, the speaker declares that his help could come only from the place where Cupid found new fire — his mistress' eyes. After all that has been said previously about the falsity of eyes and the foolishness of his infatuation, this is surprising. But the point is clear: the speaker, like other men, is always led back by desire despite disease. The threads of Cupid and disease are firmly knotted.

*The little Love-God lying once asleep,
 Laid by his side his heart-inflaming brand,
 Whilst many nymphs that vowed chaste life to keep
 Came tripping by; but in her maiden hand,
 The fairest votary took up that fire,
 Which many legions of true hearts had warmed,
 And so the general of hot desire
 Was sleeping, by a virgin hand disarm'd.
 This brand she quenched in a cool well by,
 Which from love's fire took heat perpetual,
 Growing a bath and healthful remedy
 For men diseased; but I, my mistress' thrall,
 Came there for cure, and this by that I prove:
 Love's fire heats water, water cools not love.*

FINIS.

The second Cupid sonnet tells what seems at first to be the same story as that in Sonnet 153. The sleeping "little Love-god" (l. 1) leaves his brand beside him when a band of "nymphs" who have vowed chastity (quite ironically) trip by. The purest of these seizes the torch and by her "virgin hand" (l. 8) disarms "the general of hot desire" (l. 7). The cool well in which she quenches the brand takes "heat perpetual" from the fire of love and turns the water into a bath, a "healthful remedy" (l. 11) for diseased men. So far, nearly the same, but the tone created by the phrases just cited seems lighter than that in the preceding poem. Quiet resignation supplants desperation and anger.

And there are key differences in the narrative. This time Cupid does not have his brand re-kindled by the mistress' eyes; there is no trial of the brand's power by touching it to the speaker's breast, and the mistress' eyes are not a potential cure. The speaker simply becomes the mistress' "thrall" (slave, l. 12) again. When the speaker goes to the bath there is no cure: "Love's fire heats water, water cools not love." (l. 14) The implication is that there will always be lust which no virgin hand can suppress. In the agon between Diana and Cupid, "the general of hot desire" (l. 7) with his "legions of true hearts" (l. 6) will always conquer and men will be his slaves.

The speaker has not learned his own lesson about appearances and so

manages to betray himself again. Cupid is not at fault. The love he kindles is, in Sonnet 153, “this holy fire of love” (l. 5), and the well in Sonnet 154 “from Love’s fire [takes] heat perpetual” (l. 10). The sentiment shared by these two poems underscores the idea that the heart is more reliable than the eyes. (The “mistress’ eyes” are the last words of Sonnet 153.)

A Note on the Text

Anyone examining the Quarto of 1609 can see at a glance how confusing the typography can be, and although the text may be deciphered, that process is far from being comfortable. Hence all modern editions have been brought into line with the spellings and conventions of today. Making the sonnets both easily accessible and completely faithful to the original is impossible. My main goal is to make the text readable in our time. Like all other editors, I have included some earlier emendations and made silent corrections, especially in punctuation. We do not know Shakespeare's wishes in these matters. Authors were not usually consulted by printers during that time, and the compositors were given free rein to punctuate at will. No facts have been established concerning the transmission of the text from Shakespeare to Thomas Thorpe, the publisher. No manuscript of any Shakespearian plays or poems has survived.

Capitalization was especially erratic, and I have removed what seems unnecessary or distracting. Some few capitals I have kept to make clear certain personifications, like that of the Rose in the first sonnet. (Although the 1609 edition capitalizes and italicizes the word throughout, I have limited its appearance.) The word *time* usually has an element of personification, but the word was printed with a lower case or capital *t* with no concern for that. Except for the beginning of each line of each sonnet, there is no regular use of the capital letter in the original. I have compromised and used a few capitals for clarity--for *nature* and *fortune*, for example. And I have not failed to follow the traditional capitalization of proper names, especially those of the pagan deities--*Love-god* as well as *Cupid*.

Punctuation also varies considerably. The colon, for example, is used fairly frequently; the semi-colon less so. In trying to keep both marks useful for modern readers, I have often interchanged the two. Dashes were never used. (Parentheses were, quite sparingly. I have kept almost all, contrary to other editors.) Yes, a few exclamation points exist and make sense! There might well have been more. Do the question marks function as they do today? Almost always. Apostrophes (not strictly a matter of punctuation) are used to signify dropped letters, e.g., *unus'd* (4.13) and *'gainst* (throughout). However, the apostrophe to indicate a possessive was often dropped, as in the title: SHAKESPEARES SONNETS.

The title, by the way, is used as a running head throughout, a typographical device that supports the notion of unity. All the sonnets are numbered--as in the original--one of the soundest indications that the poems were meant to be treated as a continuous whole.

Selected Editions of the Sonnets

- 1609 First Quarto: *Shake-speares Sonnets*, published by Thomas Thorpe
The first and most important text.
- 1640 *Poems: Written by Wil. Sh.* Edited and published by John Benson. A garbled version of the Quarto, with other poems, not by Shakespeare.
- 1709 *Works of William Shakespeare*. Ed. Nicholas Rowe. The first collected edition (includes the Sonnets).
- 1790 *Plays and Poems*. Vol. 10 of the collected works edited by Edmond Malone. The first truly modern scholarly edition of the Sonnets.
- 1832 *Poems*. (Aldine Poets) Ed. Alexander Dyce. Important version for Victorians.
- 1864 *Works*. (Globe Edition) Ed. W. G. Clark and W. A. Wright. Standard version of Shakespeare on into the twentieth century.
- 1944 *The Sonnets* (A New Variorum Edition), 2 vol., ed. Hyder E. Rollins. A compendious version, still much admired for thoroughness, accuracy and sound thinking.

Later and current editions of note:

- 1964 *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, ed. W. G. Ingram and Theodore Redpath.
- 1977 *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, ed. Stephen Booth. Reproduces the original 1609 Quarto alongside his own modernized version.
- 1996 *The Sonnets*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans.
- 1997 *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones.
- 1997 *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets*, ed. Helen Vendler. Reproduces 1609 Quarto.
- 2002 *The Complete Sonnets and Poems*, ed. Colin Burrow.
- 2004 *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (Folger Shakespeare Library), ed. Mowat and Werstine.

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