

*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.