

*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.