

*'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.