

*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.