

*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.