

*Lo, as a careful housewife runs to catch
 One of her feathered creatures broke away,
 Sets down her babe and makes all swift dispatch
 In pursuit of the thing she would have stay,
 Whilst her neglected child holds her in chase,
 Cries to catch her whose busy care is bent
 To follow that which flies before her face,
 Not prizing her poor infant's discontent:
 So run'st thou after that which flies from thee,
 Whilst I, thy babe, chase thee afar behind;
 But if thou catch thy hope, turn back to me,
 And play the mother's part: kiss me, be kind.
 So will I pray that thou mayst have thy will,
 If thou turn back and my loud crying still.*

The reader approaching this sonnet right after reading the preceding three will be surprised at the shift in situation, tone and technique, even if the subject is the same. Instead of a cruel mistress whose chief virtue is hate, there is, in an epic simile that occupies the whole octave, a triangle that consists of a housewife, a "feathered creature" (l. 2) and a baby. A barnyard incident seems to have taken over from court scandals and broken oaths. However, a miniature allegory is in the making, and the comedy created smacks of travesty.

The basic story sounds innocent enough: A housewife, in a frantic chase, hastens after one of her feathered creatures that has broken away. Her child, whom she has set down negligently, tries to "hold her in chase" (l. 5), but she is too keenly bent on following "that which flies before her face." As a result, her child's pathetic plight is disregarded.

Little clues reveal the allegory: no chicken or other fowl is specified. Only the feathers count. And the phrases just quoted suggest the following love triangle: the speaker who holds his mistress "in chase," a courtly lover who flees, wearing the fashionable feathers of the time, from the face of the third party, the mistress who fears to lose him and cares not about her child. Of course the sestet reveals that the speaker is the woman's "babe" and what he wants is affection. "Play the mother's part," he says (l. 12), and kiss me once you have caught your "hope,"

(l. 11) that is, the straying lover in his feathers.

This sonnet has the same plea for pity voiced by the speaker in Sonnet 142, but the tragedy has been traded in for comic relief – at least for the moment. The speaker ends by praying that the mistress will get her way (her “will”) if she turns back to him and stops his tears.