

*My love is as a fever, longing still  
 For that which longer nurseth the disease,  
 Feeding on that which doth preserve the ill,  
 Th' uncertain sickly appetite to please:  
 My reason, the physician to my love,  
 Angry that his prescriptions are not kept,  
 Hath left me, and I desperate now approve,  
 Desire is death, which physic did except.  
 Past cure I am, now reason is past care,  
 And frantic mad with ever more unrest,  
 My thoughts and my discourse as madmen's are,  
 At random from the truth vainly expressed.  
     For I have sworn thee fair, and thought thee bright,  
     Who art as black as hell, as dark as night.*

That the speaker is addressing anyone is not evident until the final couplet, and even there the reader cannot be sure that the "thee" refers to the mistress or the friend. Perhaps it is a purposeful ambiguity: the speaker is talking about his love as a disease and a madness, and his main concern is his own desperate condition. Instead of a longing for a cure, he hopes for whatever will "nurse" the disease. (l. 2) The fever feeds on whatever preserves the illness (or the evil of desire itself) in an effort to please the intermittently ("uncertain," l. 4) sickly appetite.

The speaker's reason, which is personified as the doctor for that disease called love, has been roused to anger because his prescriptions have not been followed. And so the doctor has left; the speaker is so desperate that he now realizes that "desire is death" (l. 8) and that medicine could not cure it.

Therefore the speaker is past cure and reason can no longer care. The speaker has gone into a frenzy and gets no rest. His thoughts and talk are those of a madman; they wander away from truth and seek in vain for sensible expression.

The outburst in the couplet is a virtual curse on the one addressed because the bright and beautiful appearance has proved false: "black as hell [and] dark as night." Unhappily, it is the speaker who has failed to act on his previous betrayals. Indeed, he insists on pursuing his disease, and disease becomes the dominant thread at the close of the sequence.