

*Cupid laid by his brand and fell asleep.
 A maid of Dian's this advantage found,
 And his love-kindling fire did quickly steep
 In a cold valley fountain of that ground,
 Which borrowed from this holy fire of love
 A dateless lively heat, still to endure,
 And grew a seething bath, which yet men prove
 Against strange maladies a sovereign cure.
 But at my mistress' eye love's brand new fired,
 The boy for trial needs would touch my breast.
 I, sick withal, the help of bath desired,
 And hither hied, a sad distempered guest:
 *But found no cure; the bath for my help lies
 Where Cupid got new fire: my mistress' eyes.**

Long ago, the last two sonnets were not considered part of the sequence; some scholars pronounced them non-Shakespearian and struck them from the canon. That is no longer the case, but sometimes they are slighted and sometimes editors seem to tire when they reach them. Why are there two sonnets on the same subject, some ask. Those readers who have followed this volume this far, especially those who have scrutinized the last six sonnets, will, I trust, be more sympathetic. The premise here is that if Shakespeare really wrote the poems as they appear in the Quarto, he probably had a reason.

One reason is that the love affairs of the characters can be seen in the perspective of myth. The love triangle is as old as devouring Time himself, and it is the agon of the love-god Cupid and Diana, the goddess of chastity, that endures. In Sonnet 153 a maiden in the retinue of Diana sees an "advantage" (opportunity, l. 2) and seizes it. When Cupid falls asleep, she steals his brand, the torch which was his weapon against chastity. (Cupid's brand preceded his bow and arrow, which appeared in later stories.) This torch is the "holy fire of love, / a dateless lively heat, still to endure." (ll. 5-6) When the maiden takes the brand, she plunges it into a cold fountain nearby. This becomes a "seething bath" (l. 7) that men still test ("prove," l. 7) as a potent cure for "strange maladies" (l. 8).

The speaker reports that the brand was re-kindled by his mistress' eyes. As a trial of its power, Cupid touches it to the speaker's breast. (Note that Cupid is a boy, and it was a boy who first touched the speaker.) He sickens from it and looks for help from a bath (not the English city of that name, as some have thought, but a bath or tub used as a relief from syphilis and other diseases). However, he finds no cure.

Rather glibly, the speaker declares that his help could come only from the place where Cupid found new fire – his mistress' eyes. After all that has been said previously about the falsity of eyes and the foolishness of his infatuation, this is surprising. But the point is clear: the speaker, like other men, is always led back by desire despite disease. The threads of Cupid and disease are firmly knotted.