17

Who will believe my verse in time to come
If it were filled with your most high deserts?
Though yet heaven knows it is but as a tomb
Which hides your life and shows not half your parts.
If I could write the beauty of your eyes,
And in fresh numbers number all your graces,
The age to come would say, "This poet lies.
Such heavenly touches ne'er touched earthly faces."
So should my papers (yellowed with their age)
Be scorned, like old men of less truth than tongue,
And your true rights be termed a poet's rage
And stretched meter of an antique song.
But were some child of yours alive that time,
You should live twice, in it and in my rhyme.

Now it is apparent why Sonnets 15 and 16 paint such divergent ways of evading death: Sonnet 17 is being set up as the synthesis that will resolve the speaker's inner conflict. In it, the speaker first pursues his full-blown role as the poet who can assure immortality through poetry. Here he looks to the future and the possible survival of the youth despite all-powerful time. Initially he questions what "the world" will think. Will it believe the speaker's account of the youth's worthiness ("high deserts," l. 2)? If there are doubts, heaven (which by rights is more just than time or the world) knows that the speaker's verses are like a tomb or monument that conceals the youth's real life by not showing half his good qualities. (Note the change from the treatment of the grave and tomb in Sonnets 1 and 4).

After this pat on his own back, the speaker reveals more concern with appearances. He praises the physical beauty of the youth, especially his face and eyes (which will later prove to be deceptive). If, says the speaker, in his logical way, he could describe all the youth's perfections, "the world" would accuse him of lying. Therefore his "yellowed" works (his poetic "papers," l. 9) would be scorned and treated "like old men of less truth than tongue" (l. 10). The youth's just deserts would be called poetic madness, like the heroic exaggeration of an old poem.

However—and here the poet triumphs—if you, he says to the youth, had a child alive in the future, you would have two enduring lives: one, in the child, the other in his poetry. Is the speaker naively disclaiming his earlier assertions of time's all-consuming destruction? Is this hubris? Is this Shakespeare's calculated preparation for the bleaker sonnets ahead?

In the couplet, time is simply ordinary time, time that can be conquered. Rhyme is the poet's great weapon, despite what he has said about yellowing pages. It is also the means by which the youth is to be won over. Its beauty is superior to his arguments.