

*So is it not with me as with that muse,
 Stirred by a painted beauty to his verse,
 Who heaven itself for ornament doth use,
 And every fair with his fair doth rehearse,
 Making a couplement of proud compare
 With sun and moon, with earth and sea's rich gems,
 With April's first-born flowers and all things rare,
 That heaven's air in this huge rondure hems.
 O let me, true in love, but truly write,
 And then believe me: my love is as fair
 As any mother's child, though not so bright
 As those gold candles fixed in heaven's air.
 Let them say more that like of hearsay well;
 I will not praise that purpose not to sell.*

For those well instructed in the ways of Elizabethan sonnets this one might be easier, but it is far from clear at first. One obvious purpose, however, is to poke fun at the pomposities and absurdities of the Petrarchan tradition. Sonnets were falling out of popularity by the end of the sixteenth century and Shakespeare's were late in the game. He could laugh at his art while practicing it.

The speaker declares that he is not like the poet ("muse," l. 1, is an elegant word for a poet at the time) who is inspired by a "painted beauty" (l. 2), not a natural one. He would not use sacred language ("heaven itself," l. 3) for poetic effect, nor would he make constant comparisons of his beautiful mistress and everyone else's.

Finally, the speaker embarks on a list of "couplements" (l. 5), items for poetic comparisons, such as sun and moon, earth and the jewels of the sea, and so on. The list culminates in an overblown phrase—"all things rare that heaven's air in this huge rondure hems." (ll. 7-8) The speaker condemns much but clings to his own hyperboles.

Instead, in the sestet, he vows to be true in love and write simply, describing his love "as fair as any mother's child," not "so bright as those gold candles fixed in heaven's air" (instead of simple "stars"). The speaker concludes by separating himself from those who overdo

poetic decoration; they can use gossip (“hearsay,” l. 13) instead. When he says he will not praise anything if he isn’t selling it, he is merely repeating a proverbial saying.

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