23

As an unperfect actor on the stage,
Who with his fear is put beside his part,
Or some fierce thing replete with too much rage,
Whose strength's abundance weakens his own heart;
So I for fear of trust forget to say
The perfect ceremony of love's rite,
And in mine own love's strength seem to decay,
O'ercharged with burthen of mine own love's might:
O let my books be then the eloquence
And dumb presagers of my speaking breast,
Who plead for love and look for recompense
More than that tongue that more hath more expressed.
    O learn to read what silent love hath writ;
    To hear with eyes belongs to love's fine wit.

The increasing tenderness of the sonnets beginning with Sonnet 20 becomes even more personal in Sonnet 23, which moves through two clear-cut stages following the octave-sestet division. The octave is confessional, in keeping with the humble persona of the speaker, who likens himself to an actor with stage fright. Or, he says, he is like a fierce creature, so full of anger that the strength of his rage weakens his heart. This line is crucial because it lays down a key thread, the truth of the heart (as opposed to appearances). The speaker, like the actor, forgets to say the right words which constitute the ceremony of love, and therefore his love seems to decay.

The sestet's answer to this speechless fear lies in the speaker's writing. In a secular plea to the powers that be (ll. 9-12) he asks that his silent books replace his oral eloquence. His writings are "dumb presages" (mute foretellers) of his "speaking breast" (l. 10). These writings, including the sonnets themselves, are pleas for love which hope for a sympathetic response. Paradoxically, they say more than his tongue can.

The last plea is to his friend; as such, it is the climax of the speaker's (and the author's) eloquence. The friend is asked "to read what silent love hath writ." (l. 13) This necessitates combining two of the senses—hearing and seeing. To hear with the eyes is the essential feature of love's intelligence. At least that is what the speaker thinks now.