Let those who are in favor with their stars
Of public honor and proud titles boast,
Whilst I, whom fortune of such triumph bars,
Unlooked for joy in that I honor most;
Great princes’ favorites their fair leaves spread
But as the marigold at the sun’s eye,
And in themselves their pride lies buried,
For at a frown they in their glory die.
The painful warrior famoused for worth,
After a thousand victories once foiled,
Is from the book of honor razed quite,
And all the rest forgot for which he toiled:
Then happy I, that love and am beloved
Where I may not remove, nor be removed.

The loving intimacy of the friend and
the speaker is rarely matched or
sustained as it is Sonnets 21 through 25.
In the last, their closeness is made more
graphic by its contrast to the ways of “the
world,” particularly the court. The
speaker speaks for himself, but his lover
is plainly the indirect addressee. Let those
who are fortunate, he says, boast openly
of their great public honors and high
ranks, while he is barred by fortune from
such triumphs. However, the first
quatrain concludes, the speaker enjoys an
honor that he did not seek but that he
thinks of most highly—the honor of being
loved.

Favorites of the monarch will show to
their best advantage when the ruler
smiles upon them. Like flowers they will
spread their leaves and blossom like
marigolds in the sun, then hide their
heads in the dark. But these courtiers will
die in their glory when the monarch
frowns. (Here the thread of the gaze
reappears, both in the monarch’s frown
and in the sun’s eye, l. 6.)

Worse off are the mighty warriors, who
may have recorded a thousand victories
but who, after a single defeat, have had
their names stricken from the “book of
honor” (l. 11). Everything good that they
achieved has been forgotten. Therefore
the speaker is happy in his love and that
love’s return. Because he cannot be
deprived of this sort of honor (nor will he
relinquish it), he will achieve something
lasting—perhaps eternal—that has
nothing to do with procreation or
immortal poetry. Eternal love seems like
a real possibility, and so this sonnet looks
far ahead to the sentiments of Sonnet 116.