

*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.