

*Lord of my love, to whom in vassalage
 Thy merit hath my duty strongly knit,
 To thee I send this written ambassage
 To witness duty, not to show my wit.
 Duty so great, which wit so poor as mine
 May make seem bare, in wanting words to show it;
 But that I hope some good conceit of thine
 In thy soul's thought (all naked) will bestow it,
 Till whatsoever star that guides my moving
 Points on me graciously with fair aspect,
 And puts apparel on my tattered loving
 To show me worthy of thy sweet respect.
 Then may I dare to boast how I do love thee;
 Till then, not show my head where thou mayst prove me.*

While Sonnet 25 contrasts the world's idea of honor with the speaker's sense of honor in love, Sonnet 26 deals with the duty that true love requires. The speaker insists that he is not showing off his wit but avowing his allegiance to the lord of his love, that is, his friend. Now their relationship is described in feudal terms. The speaker voluntarily becomes the vassal of his lord because of the latter's merit, and the poem (a "written ambassage," l. 3) is the declaration of his servitude. The bond of perfect equality in love is now weakening.

The duty is so great that the speaker cannot find words to express it, but he hopes that his friend (and lord) will accept his poem, although it may seem bare, and add to it a good idea from his own soul to make it worthy. The friend's idea would come "all naked" (l. 8) from his heart and yet, paradoxically, would clothe the bareness of the speaker's verse.

This dependency, the speaker says, will continue until his own guiding star graciously shines on him at a propitious moment ("fair aspect," l. 10) and clothes his tattered love poem so as to make the speaker worthy of the friend's esteem. Only then will the speaker be able to boast of his love and appear in public

where his friend can assess his (the speaker's) worth.

This sonnet is a humble dedication to his craft as well as to his lord. It weaves conceits so elegant and intricate that they belie any impoverishment of wit. Instead, the poem suggests some insincerity on the speaker's part and an unwillingness to adhere to his own devotion to plain and direct discourse in Sonnet 21. Does he really believe in his friend's poetic superiority?