

*Those pretty wrongs that liberty commits,
 When I am sometime absent from thy heart,
 Thy beauty and thy years full well befits,
 For still temptation follows where thou art.
 Gentle thou art, and therefore to be won;
 Beauteous thou art, therefore to be assailed.
 And when a woman woos, what woman's son
 Will sourly leave her till he have prevailed?
 Aye me, but yet thou mightst my seat forbear,
 And chide thy beauty and thy straying youth,
 Who lead thee in their riot even there
 Where thou art forced to break a twofold truth:
 Hers, by thy beauty tempting her to thee;
 Thine, by thy beauty being false to me.*

As a playwright, Shakespeare knows the dramatic effect of a simple device—having a new “character” walk on stage. Suddenly the reader finds out what the speaker has already known—that there is a woman who has been wooing his friend. She, too, has been lured by the youth and beauty of the friend, who has committed “wrongs” of “liberty” (l. 1). Such acts, committed when the speaker has been absent from his friend’s heart, are licentious and surely sexual.

As usual, though perhaps with fine irony, the speaker says that such things happen at the youth’s age and that they “well befit” his years. (l. 3) Then, too, his perfection is sure to arouse temptation in others. He is someone to be won because of his gentle birth and wooed for his beauty. And, says the speaker, relying on worldly wisdom, when a woman woos, what man will leave her in disgust until he has had his way. (l. 8) Though the tone here is flippant and tart, the implied accusation is strong. The speaker reminds his friend that he might not have taken the speaker’s place (“seat,” l. 9) with the woman—his mistress, as the reader learns in the couplet.

The speaker continues his head-shaking by suggestion that the young man might have chided his own youth and beauty for leading him on to licentious behavior with both the speaker and his mistress. Therefore—the logic is implied—the friend has broken more than one bond of love: the woman’s bond of love with the speaker and his own bond of love with the speaker, too.