

*If there be nothing new, but that which is
 Hath been before, how are our brains beguiled,
 Which, lab'ring for invention, bear amiss
 The second burthen of a former child.
 O that record could with a backward look,
 Ev'n of five hundred courses of the sun,
 Show me your image in some antique book,
 Since mind at first in character was done,
 That I might see what the old world could say
 To this composed wonder of your frame:
 Whether we are mended, or where better they,
 Or whether revolution be the same.
 O sure I am, the wits of former days
 To subjects worse have given admiring praise.*

At first the reader is baffled by the abrupt shift from the speaker's hell—he is a slave awaiting his friend's pleasure—to the speaker's quiet musing on the old idea that there is nothing new under the sun. Taking that idea as a premise in his argument, he asserts that if there is nothing now that has not been before, then people are foolish in trying to invent when all they can produce is a replica of the past.

In the second quatrain, the speaker becomes specific. How fine it would be, he says, if I could go back even five hundred years in searching books for an image that would look like you and find out what "the old world" (l. 9) might say about the wonderful appearance of your body ("frame," l. 10). Who is better off, those of earlier times or we, your contemporaries? Or is it just pure repetition?

Once more, the speaker comes back from abrasive irony directed towards his friend to discourse on his beauty. However, this time, in the couplet, he undercuts the compliments on a larger scale. He sounds as if he is all admiration, but when he declares that the "wits of former days" have given praise to worse subjects, his own praise sounds fainter.