

*That thou art blamed shall not be thy defect,
 For slander's mark was ever yet the fair;
 The ornament of beauty is suspect,
 A crow that flies in heaven's sweetest air.
 So thou be good, slander doth but approve
 Thy worth the greater, being wooed of time:
 For canker vice the sweetest buds doth love,
 And thou present'st a pure unstained prime.
 Thou hast passed by the ambush of young days,
 Either not assailed, or victor being charged;
 Yet this thy praise cannot be so thy praise,
 To tie up envy evermore enlarged.
 If some suspect of ill masked not thy show,
 Then thou alone kingdoms of hearts shouldst owe.*

After the sharp rebuke and warning of the preceding sonnet, the speaker softens his tone. Returning to his early poems that praise the youth's beauty without exception, he lifts the weight of blame in the first line and proceeds to rationalize this gesture. The fair youth attracts slander from the envious, but that's no fault of his. Besides, slander shows beauty off to advantage and hence becomes an "ornament." (l. 3) Suspicion is, like a crow, an ominous blot that flies about the heavens, setting off their glory.

The speaker's warning note returns in the second quatrain: the friend must be truly good in order for slander to have the positive effect the speaker has described. If the friend is genuinely good, slander will do no harm but merely show ("approve," l. 5) his virtue to be greater, since it is being sought after in an evil time, and vice is a cankerworm that seeks out the sweetest rosebuds. You, he says, present "a pure unstained prime" (l. 8) and so qualify. Or so he appears just now.

The speaker escapes from blame himself for criticizing his friend's conduct by declaring that his friend's wild youth has passed. The key word is *ambush* (l. 9), carrying on the warfare implied by slander's "mark" (l. 2), the word for a shooter's target. Almost unbelievably, the speaker

proclaims that his friend is now not “assailed” (l. 10) by the envious – or, if attacked, he always wins.

A moral caveat, however, is attached (l. 11): envy is still lying in the weeds. As often as it is tied up, it can still grow stronger and escape into “the world.” The siege of slander must be lifted – over and over. If this were not the case, the friend would own “kingdoms of hearts” (l. 14) all by himself.