

*O lest the world should task you to recite
 What merit lived in me that you should love,
 After my death (dear love) forget me quite,
 For you in me can nothing worthy prove,
 Unless you would devise some virtuous lie
 To do more for me than mine own desert
 And hang more praise upon deceased I,
 Than niggard truth would willingly impart.
 O lest your true love may seem false in this,
 That you for love speak well of me untrue,
 My name be buried where my body is,
 And live no more to shame nor me nor you;
 For I am shamed by that which I bring forth,
 And so should you, to love things nothing worth.*

The imaginings of Sonnet 71 are extended from the prospect of the speaker's death to what his eulogy should be. He supposes that "the world" might pressure his friend to describe his merits; however, he immediately begs again to be forgotten. Self-abasement is re-asserted in hyperbole: "you in me can nothing worthy prove / Unless you would devise some virtuous lie" (ll. 4-5). The tone is almost playful, working up to the end of the second quatrain when he calls himself "deceased I" and refers to truth as "niggard," that is, miserly. The antitheses of appearance versus reality and truth versus falsity are at work in paradoxes again: "your true love may seem false" (in the artificial hypothetical eulogy) in that "you for love speak well of me untrue." (ll. 9-10)

The playful shifts to the direct and serious at the close of the third quatrain: Let "my name be buried where my body is, / And live no more to shame nor me nor you...." (ll. 10-11) The annihilation of the speaker's ego and his assumption of his own guilt are now complete. Shame will go with him to the grave. But this is what he says, not what he truly believes. The final turn comes in the speaker's challenge to his friend. In effect, he says that if he is ashamed of his poetry ("that which I bring forth," l. 13), so should his friend. Why? He should be ashamed to love what is

worthless. The argument seems to be devastating, but is it really valid?

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the speaker is betraying himself, that he really believes that his love and his verses are worth something despite his protestations. After all, he does go on to say – and write – quite a bit more. And the next sonnet is one of the very best. It is also full of vivid images and ends on a positive note.