

*Why is my verse so barren of new pride?
 So far from variation or quick change?
 Why with the time do I not glance aside
 To new-found methods, and to compounds strange?
 Why write I still all one, ever the same,
 And keep invention in a noted weed,
 That every word doth almost tell my name,
 Showing their birth and where they did proceed?
 O know, sweet love, I always write of you,
 And you and love are still my argument:
 So all my best is dressing old words new,
 Spending again what is already spent:
 For as the sun is daily new and old,
 So is my love still telling what is told.*

Sonnet 76 stops the sequence in mid-career, as the speaker's takes time to contemplate his own poetic achievement. The tone and the technique are emblematic of the traditional self-deprecation assumed by sonneteers.

The poem begins with three mournful questions. The first two fill out two lines precisely, and the third occupies the whole second quatrain. The thought takes steps corresponding to the form, beginning with a lament for the speaker's loss of originality and followed immediately by a parallel two-line query with just about the same idea: why am I suffering from writer's block? (When in doubt, repeat!) The third amplifies the idea, eking out the quatrain with a clever paraphrase. For example, in complaining of his own repetition, he speaks about keeping "invention in a noted weed" (l. 6), that is to say, his imagination is wearing the same old verbal clothes.

He's right, but all the same, his wording is remarkable. Moreover, he describes his style as so familiar that "every word doth almost tell my name." (l. 7) Such a clue makes the reader ask who the author really is. Oddly enough, the only contemporary description of the sonnets comes from one Francis Meres, a literary critic, who in 1598 mentions the circulation of Shakespeare's "sugred" (sugared) sonnets among his friends. Presumably, they would have a clear idea of what seems now to be obscure. They would also have recognized his

style and appreciated his facility in conceits appropriate to the genre.

Shakespeare's excuse for repetition comes in the sestet where he addresses his friend and turns this sonnet into yet another compliment. His "argument" (theme) is the same but he is "dressing old words new" (l. 11). *Dressing* harks back to *weed* in line six and subtly links it to the appearance versus reality motif. Money, too, is used as the basis for a clever pun in the neatly balanced line: "Spending again what is already spent" (l. 12). The couplet seems all the more cogent for it not only transforms the cliché about the sun into a paradox (l. 13), but in the end epitomizes the love theme to seal his argument: "For as the sun is daily new and old, / So is my love still telling what is told."