

*So oft have I invoked thee for my muse,
 And found such fair assistance in my verse
 As every alien pen hath got my use,
 And under thee their poesy disperse.
 Thine eyes, that taught the dumb on high to sing
 And heavy ignorance aloft to fly,
 Have added feathers to the learned's wing
 And given grace a double majesty.
 Yet be most proud of that which I compile,
 Whose influence is thine and born of thee.
 In others' works thou dost but mend the style,
 And arts with thy sweet graces graced be.
 But thou art all my art, and dost advance,
 As high as learning, my rude ignorance.*

As soon as the second half of the sequence is begun, the reader is introduced to a new force in his characters' lives, namely the poets described in line three as "every alien pen." Criticism of the sonnets over the years has dubbed these writers the "rival poets." Every possible identity for them has been thoroughly discussed, and, like that of the other characters, never agreed on. To be quite plain about this matter, no one knows.

What we *do* have, however, is a tantalizing account of people who, despite lacking names and histories, are fascinating and instructive. The speaker and his "muse" (the young man addressed in the opening line) maintain their friendship, and the speaker still insists that his friend has been his sole inspiration. Now, however, the friend has become the muse of many others, teaching them to sing and to fly. Established as a model of grace and beauty, he is now a tutor of the highest order, and surpasses the speaker.

What, then, can the speaker claim? In the sestet he argues that his friend should be most proud of him as a pupil because the rival poets have improved only their style by imitating the young man. (Perhaps the friend is a poet, but more likely he "mends" others' styles through his exceptional beauty, which inspires their weaker voices.) The speaker gains a rather hollow victory in this skirmish with the rivals by claiming that *all* of the speaker's value is due to having his friend as subject. Once again, the speaker writes to preserve his claim to first place in the younger man's affections.