

*Music to hear, why hear'st thou musick sadly,
 Sweets with sweets war not, joy delights not joy:
 Why lov'st thou that which thou receiv'st not gladly,
 Or else receiv'st with pleasure thine annoy?
 If the true concord of well tuned sounds,
 By unions married, do offend thine ear,
 They do but sweetly chide thee, who confounds
 In singleness the parts that thou shouldst bear.
 Mark how one string, sweet husband to another,
 Strikes each in each by mutual ordering,
 Resembling sire and child and happy mother,
 Who all in one, one pleasing note do sing:
 Whose speechless song, being many, seeming one,
 Sings this to thee: "Thou single will prove none."*

Just when all the threads seem to be in place, a new one is introduced—music, an important element in the plays but one not prominent in the sonnets. It is clear that the speaker sees musical harmony as a model for marriage, and he suddenly sees this model as a new means for winning the youth over to the cause of procreation. His speech resembles the opening lines of Orsino in *Twelfth Night*, beginning “If music be the food of love, play on.” Neither the speaker nor Orsino is delighted for very long.

One of the misperceptions about the sonnets is that they are “love poems,” as attested by persistent sales of inexpensive, unannotated editions of the sonnets under that rubric. The unwary lover may well complain that he has been sold a bill of goods when he gets to the end, if he ever gets that far.

Sonnet 8 comes close to giving a happy picture of married life, but it is not the “true concord of well tuned sounds” (l. 5) that finally prevails by the end of the sequence. Taken by itself, it would seem to be an alluring argument for marriage. If, the speaker says, the youth is not pleased by the musical harmonies, like those produced by marriage, he should listen more carefully. “Mark how one string, sweet husband to another, / Strikes each in each by mutual ordering.” (ll. 9-10)

The speaker's role as tutor is well played, sweetly convincing. Even the chiding of single life is honey-tongued. (l. 7) He conjures up an ideal father, mother and child, as a happy trio that sing as one. (The parallel to the holy trinity is inescapable, but not explicit.) Their refrain is the message ("speechless song," l. 13) as worded by the speaker: If you stay single, you will never be one (a "seeming one," l. 13) —that is, part of a united family.