

*Or shall I live your epitaph to make,
 Or you survive when I in earth am rotten,
 From hence your memory death cannot take,
 Although in me each part will be forgotten.
 Your name from hence immortal life shall have,
 Though I (once gone) to all the world must die,
 The earth can yield me but a common grave,
 When you entombed in men's eyes shall lie.
 Your monument shall be my gentle verse,
 Which eyes not yet created shall o'er-read,
 And tongues to be your being shall rehearse;
 When all the breathers of this world are dead,
 You still shall live (such virtue hath my pen)
 Where breath most breathes, ev'n in the mouths of men.*

Most commentators would eliminate this poem as a "rival poet" sonnet. There is good reason for this: no rival poet is mentioned. However, part of the speaker's struggle to hold his place in the competition involves the repeated argument that he can perpetuate his friend's existence after death: "Your monument shall be my gentle verse." (l. 9) When friction develops between the two men, as in Sonnet 80, the speaker tends to repeat his tactic of looking into the future and even praising his own poetry (which is now "gentle" for the first time), contrary to his traditional stance of humility. *Gentle* at the time implied superiority and signified more strength than it does now.

The argument builds on the axiomatic statement that one of the men must survive the other. Because, the speaker says, I shall either live to write your epitaph or you shall live on after I am rotten; death cannot destroy your memory. The speaker must die "to all the world" (l. 6), but his friend will be "entombed in men's eyes" (l. 8). In the future the eyes of yet unborn people will read and repeat the sonnets. Therefore, because of the "virtue" (power) of the speaker's pen, the friend shall live on where there is most life, "even in the mouths of men." (ll. 13-14)

Tactfully, the speaker does not extend the argument to his own reputation, which will certainly live after both are gone, even if only as an anonymous poet. Can the rival poet do better?