

*My tongue-tied muse in manners holds her still,  
 While comments of your praise, richly compiled,  
 Reserve their character with golden quill  
 And precious phrase by all the muses filed.  
 I think good thoughts, whilst others write good words  
 And like unlettered clerk still cry amen  
 To every hymn that able spirit affords  
 In polished form of well-refined pen.  
 Hearing you praised, I say 'tis so, 'tis true,  
 And to the most of praise add something more,  
 But that is in my thought, whose love to you  
 (Though words come hindmost) holds his rank before.  
     Then others, for the breath of words respect;  
     Me for my dumb thoughts, speaking in effect.*

As if to lighten the charge of vanity in Sonnet 84, the speaker shifts to a teasing tone. He has called upon his private “muse” — not the friend himself — but finds “her” (the muse is seldom given a gender) to be “tongue-tied.” (l. 1) Other poets have made rich compilations of praise for his friend in their characteristic style as if writing with a golden pen. (ll. 2-3) Their precious phrases are finely sharpened by “all the muses” (l. 4). Shakespeare, and his speaker, were well aware that poetry needed only one of the classical nine muses, so the first quatrain ends with a joke.

A little stab of the speaker’s hauteur in line five compares his “good thoughts” with the other poets’ “good words.” The latter phrase suggests Hamlet’s reply to Polonius’ question about what he reads: “Words, words, words.” The speaker’s jocular irony continues through the second quatrain with the simile of the illiterate clerk, who agrees with every hymn that is elegantly phrased. (Clerks were used to give amens as signals for the congregations to respond. And they were supposed to be educated.)

Still teasing, the speaker says that he acts like the ignorant clerk by exclaiming how true the praises of the rival poets are. He adds his own frosting to the cake of praise — in his silent thoughts. Once more, the speaker argues the superiority of his own love despite the fact that his words “come hindmost” (l. 12). The

phrase refers both to the relative success of the speaker's sonnets in the world and to the fact that the vogue of sonnets was on the wane.

The couplet encapsulates what has gone before, adding the clever idea that what other sonneteers' readers pay attention to is "the breath of words" (l. 13), their mere utterance and their airy substance. The concluding paradox is a logical and syntactical parallel to line thirteen. The speaker's "dumb thoughts" (l. 14) are in effect spoken ones.