

*Was it the proud full sail of his great verse,
 Bound for the prize of (all too precious) you,
 That did my ripe thoughts in my brain inhearse,
 Making their tomb the womb wherein they grew?
 Was it his spirit, by spirits taught to write
 Above a mortal pitch, that struck me dead?
 No, neither he nor his compeers by night
 Giving him aid, my verse astonished.
 He nor that affable familiar ghost,
 Which nightly gulls him with intelligence,
 As victors of my silence cannot boast;
 I was not sick of any fear from thence.
 But when your countenance filled up his line,
 Then lacked I matter, that enfeebled mine.*

This last sonnet of the so-called Rival Poet series is particularly hazardous for those who wish to read the sonnets as personal statements by Shakespeare concerning real people. Arguments have become especially intense about the poet's possible identity suggested by obscure allusions, beginning with line one. For some scholars the phrase "the proud full sail of his great verse" points to George Chapman, an accomplished and well-known writer. In Chapman's popular translation of Homer, the one praised much later by John Keats, the lines of verse were lengthened to give more of a sweep to the phrasing. As attractive as this idea has been, the doubters have pointed out that the translation of Homer did not take off in "full sail" until after Shakespeare's sonnets were published.

However, the Chapmanites hasten to point out that their candidate also claimed to be guided by spirits (ll. 5-10), Homer's in particular, and that the "compeers by night" refers to a group often called the School of Night, a loose band of poets to which Chapman belonged. Nowadays the very existence of the group in any formal sense is doubted. The flood of controversy over these matters provides an object lesson in what pitfalls await those who read these sonnets as history.

Even if hard evidence concerning the rival poet should appear tomorrow, the virtue of the poem and its intriguing expression of the relationship of the characters would

remain, perhaps enriched. As an emotional whole the sonnet conveys the anxiety of the speaker as both poet and lover. Acknowledging the overwhelming power of another poet — something, by the way, that Shakespeare himself had no need of doing at this point in his career — and the threat of his friend's being won away from him, the speaker mourns the death of his own thoughts.

Emphatically the speaker denies any fear of the other poet, even granted that he might have been aided by supernatural powers. What struck the speaker dumb was the appearance of his beautiful friend in the poetry of a celebrated rival. And so the speaker affirms again his fidelity, leaving the contest between poets, if it can be called that, neither won nor lost.