

*Say that thou didst forsake me for some fault,
 And I will comment upon that offense.
 Speak of my lameness, and I straight will halt,
 Against thy reasons making no defense.
 Thou canst not, love, disgrace me half so ill
 To set a form upon desired change,
 As I'll my self disgrace, knowing thy will;
 I will acquaintance strangle and look strange,
 Be absent from thy walks, and in my tongue
 Thy sweet beloved name no more shall dwell,
 Lest I, too much profane, should do it wrong
 And haply of our old acquaintance tell.
 For thee, against myself I'll vow debate,
 For I must ne'er love him whom thou dost hate.*

It is important to keep in mind that the opening words "Say that" make the whole utterance hypothetical. If his friend should charge him with "some fault" (l. 1), he would not defend himself. Not only will he accept any sin imputed to him, he will even disgrace himself and show his master that he is a willing slave. Should his friend speak of his lameness (l. 3), he would immediately "halt" (limp). Some past readers have contended that Shakespeare himself must have been lame, but now that position is rarely held. We must overcome our natural willing suspension of disbelief and not equate what the speaker says with what Shakespeare himself experienced or felt.

Still addressing his friend as "love" (l. 5), in the second quatrain the speaker carries his familiar hyperbolic mode to a greater extreme when he says that he will discredit himself twice as much as his friend would, *if* his friend were to dictate exactly what he wanted the speaker's reform to be. (l. 6) Some readers have felt that the phrase "thy will" (l. 7) is a pun on Shakespeare's name, but it makes better sense to take it simply as the friend's desire, especially in view of the next line. Not all entendres are double.

Piling on the humility, the speaker promises to pretend not to know his friend, to leave the places he frequents, and – worst of all – to resist saying his name. A modern

reader may think the speaker protests too much, but it is important to hear the crescendo of pathos the speaker is building. The words “beloved name” and “profane” (ll. 10-11) make clear the holiness of their relationship, at least in the speaker’s eyes. But there is also an implied threat that the speaker might reveal what they have done together. (ll. 11-12)

The ax falls in the couplet. The speaker swears that he will “debate” against himself. Logic forces him to declare – bitterly, we infer – that he cannot love himself because his friend hates him.