

*The forward violet thus did I chide:
 Sweet thief, whence didst thou steal thy sweet that smells,
 If not from my love's breath? The purple pride,
 Which on thy soft cheek for complexion dwells,
 In my love's veins thou has too grossly dyed.
 The lily I condemned for thy hand,
 And buds of marjoram had stol'n thy hair;
 The roses fearfully on thorns did stand,
 One blushing shame, another white despair;
 A third, nor red nor white, had stol'n of both,
 And to his robb'ry had annexed thy breath;
 But for his theft, in pride of all his growth,
 A vengeful canker ate him up to death.
 More flow'rs I noted, yet I none could see,
 But sweet or color it had stol'n from thee.*

Though fifteen-line sonnets were used sometimes in the Elizabethan era, this is the only one that Shakespeare wrote, and there is no apparent reason for it. If the first line is omitted — it is, after all, purely an introduction — the rest becomes quite regular. Clearly a continuation of the preceding poem, the whole is a playful rebuke to a succession of flowers for having stolen various beauties from the friend. The first “sweet thief” (l. 2) is the violet, known for its early bloom (“purple pride,” l. 3) and strong sweet odor used for perfume. The speaker charges it with having stolen its sweet smell from the friend’s breath, which is ironic because the violet was proverbially shy. The purple color of the violet’s cheek was taken from the friend’s blueblooded veins but used too crudely.

The series of flowers that follows (l. 6) condemns each for similar thieveries, and the lily heads the list. Its whiteness, taken from the friend’s hand suggests an aristocratic source because white hands showed off blue veins. The marjoram has stolen the yellow for its buds from the friend’s hair. However, when we reach the roses, we find that they are standing fearfully on thorns. (The thorns of love were thought to be inseparable from their pleasures.) Moreover, their allegorical significance is specific: red stands

for shame, white for despair. They have stolen but they will never match the beauty of their victim. A third rose (the damask) had stolen both white and red and in so doing had taken the friend's breath as well. However, he was proud, and in revenge a cankerworm devoured him.

In the couplet the speaker reverts to the plain speech of the opening line, and in an anticlimactic fashion summarizes the thefts: every flower has stolen from his friend, just as "the world" has tried to imitate the youthful paragon. The poem may well be a warning to the friend about the destructive vengeance of an envious society.