O how much more doth beauty beauteous seem
By that sweet ornament which truth doth give.
The rose looks fair, but fairer we it deem
For that sweet odor which in it doth live:
The canker blooms have full as deep a dye
As the perfumed tincture of the roses,
Hang on such thorns, and play as wantonly,
When summer’s breath their masked buds discloses:
But for their virtue only is their show,
They live unwooed and unrespected fade,
Die to themselves. Sweet roses do not so;
Of their sweet deaths are sweetest odors made:
And so of you, beauteous and lovely youth,
When that shall vade, by verse distils your truth.

In his continuing efforts to woo
the friend despite evidence of
his infidelity, the speaker falls back
on compliments, but compliments
that hint at flaws and imply a
warning. The opening lines urge
the young man to consider what
real beauty is and how beauty may
be enhanced by truth. Truth
implies fidelity and truth is not
mere ornament but an essential
ideal. To instruct his friend, he
draws a comparison between two
kinds of rose. Since the young man
has been associated with the rose
from the beginning of the
sequence, the comparison becomes
a kind of fable for him. The
implied question is, which road
will the young man take in life and
what model will he follow?

The first rose is the damask, noted
for its fragrance; the other is the
canker (or dog rose), which is
odorless. Both are richly colored,
both have thorns, and both play
“wantonly” (in a sensual fashion)
as they come to full flower. (ll. 7-8)
The “virtue” or strength of the
canker is mere show. (l. 9) Cankers
“live unwooed,” (l. 10), fade and
die. But the damask roses are
sweet and live on as perfume: “Of
their sweet death are sweetest
odors made.” (l. 13)

The couplet ends the story with a
prediction as well as a moral. The
moral has already emerged in the
fate of the canker roses that are all
show and therefore shadows, not
substance. The youth’s beauty may
fade ("vade," l. 14) like the roses’ but his truth, which reflects the Platonic ideal, will be distilled by the speaker’s poetry. (The sonnet is the perfect instrument for, and an example of, distilling the truth.) As usual, the speaker is subtly establishing his own powers of preservation and so making himself desirable if not indispensable.