Being your slave, what should I do but tend
Upon the hours and times of your desire?
I have no precious time at all to spend,
Nor services to do till you require.
Nor dare I chide the world without end hour
Whilst I (my sovereign) watch the clock for you,
Nor think the bitterness of absence sour,
When you have bid your servant once adieu.
Nor dare I question with my jealous thought
Where you may be, or your affairs suppose,
But like a sad slave stay and think of nought
Save where you are how happy you make those.

So true a fool is love, that in your will
(Though you do any thing) he thinks no ill.

At first this sonnet seems disjunctive,
but the very word desire, even
though it is the youth’s, promises the
return of the speaker’s “sweet love.” Two
ironies attend this happy reunion: one is
the slavery of the speaker and the threat
to his own “precious time” (l. 3). The
imagery of time initiated in Sonnet 2 takes
over in the second quatrain, further
linking this group of sonnets to the body
of the sequence, and leading into the
theme of absence (l. 7).

The picture the speaker paints of himself
is not that of a happy shadow. Though
partly voluntary, his “slavery” is that of a
drudge. Crucial, too, is the phrase “world
without end” (l. 5), which implies both
doom and the tyranny of society. The
speaker watches the clock for his
sovereign, who is engaged in “affairs” (l.
10) that may be worldly matters but
perhaps even hint at other liaisons. Who
are “those” (l. 12) whom the master makes
happy instead of his slave?

All this culminates in the couplet, where
the speaker dubs himself a fool, which
could mean a dear one as well as a dupe,
and gives his name as will. (The pun is
generally accepted as Shakespeare’s self-
identification, and is reinforced by the
more obvious and insistent use of his
name in Sonnet 135). Less commented
upon is the endless forgiveness of the true
lover that the speaker says he is. This is
consonant with the Christian humility
shown by turning the other cheek. It is
also a subtle connection with the word
blest in line twelve of the preceding
sonnet. The self-styled fool may indeed be
wise after all. But all religious
implications are not to be taken as
definitive.