

1. *Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?*

1. This is taken usually to mean 'What if I were to compare thee etc?' The stock comparisons of the loved one to all the beautiful things in nature hover in the background throughout. One also remembers Wordsworth's lines:

*We'll talk of sunshine and of song,  
And summer days when we were young,  
Sweet childish days which were as long  
As twenty days are now.*

Such reminiscences are indeed anachronistic, but with the recurrence of words such as 'summer', 'days', 'song', 'sweet', it is not difficult to see the permeating influence of the Sonnets on Wordsworth's verse.

2. *Thou art more lovely and more temperate:*

2. The youth's beauty is more perfect than the beauty of a summer day. *more temperate* - more gentle, more restrained, whereas the summer's day might have violent excesses in store, such as are about to be described.

3. *Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,*

3. May was a summer month in Shakespeare's time, because the calendar in use lagged behind the true sidereal calendar by at least a fortnight. *darling buds of May* - the beautiful, much loved buds of the early summer; favourite flowers.

4. *And summer's lease hath all too short a date:*

4. Legal terminology. The summer holds a lease on part of the year, but the lease is too short, and has an early termination (*date*).

5. *Sometime* = on occasion, sometimes; *the eye of heaven* = the sun. This links forward to a comparison in a later sonnet:

5. *Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,*

*Against that time when thou shalt strangely pass  
And scarcely greet me with that sun thine eye, 49*

The sun of heaven, and the beloved's sun could both scorch and hide itself from the lover. (See the next line).

6. *And often is his gold complexion dimmed,*

6. *his gold complexion* = his (the sun's) golden face. It would be dimmed by clouds and on overcast days generally.

7. *And every fair from fair sometime declines,*

7. All beautiful things (*every fair*) occasionally become inferior in comparison with their essential previous state of beauty (*from fair*). They all decline from perfection. See the use of *fair* in Sonnet 1.

8. *By chance, or nature's changing course untrimmed:*



9. *But thy eternal summer shall not fade,*

10. *Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st,*

11. *Nor shall death brag thou wander'st in his shade,*

12. *When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st,*

8. By chance accidents, or by the fluctuating tides of nature, which are not subject to control, *nature's changing course untrimmed*. *untrimmed* - this can refer to the ballast (trimming) on a ship which keeps it stable; or to a lack of ornament and decoration. The greater difficulty however is to decide which noun this adjectival participle should modify. Does it refer to nature, or chance, or every fair in the line above, or to the effect of nature's changing course? KDJ adds a comma after *course*, which probably has the effect of directing the word towards all possible antecedents. She points out that *nature's changing course* could refer to women's monthly courses, or menstruation, in which case *every fair* in the previous line would refer to every fair woman, with the implication that the youth is free of this cyclical curse, and is therefore more perfect.

9. Referring forwards to the eternity promised by the ever living poet in the next few lines, through his verse.

10. Nor shall it (your eternal summer) lose its hold on that beauty which you so richly possess. *ow'st* = ownest, possess. By metonymy we understand 'nor shall you lose any of your beauty'.

11. Several half echoes here. The biblical ones are probably '*Oh death where is thy sting? Or grave thy victory?*' implying that death normally boasts of his conquests over life. And Psalms 23.3.: '*Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil*' In classical literature the shades flitted helplessly in the underworld like gibbering ghosts. Shakespeare would have been familiar with this through Virgil's account of Aeneas' descent into the underworld in Aeneid Bk. VI. Death was depicted as a blustering braggart in Euripides' play *Alcestis*.

12. *in eternal lines* = in the undying lines of my verse. Perhaps with a reference to progeny, and lines of descent, but it seems that the procreation theme has already been abandoned.

*to time thou grow'st* - you keep pace with time, you grow as time grows.

13. *So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,*

14. *So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.*

13. For as long as humans live and breathe upon the earth, for as long as there are seeing eyes on the earth.

14. That is how long these verses will live, celebrating you, and continually renewing your life. But one is left with a slight residual feeling that perhaps the youth's beauty will last no longer than a summer's day, despite the poet's proud boast.

### Previous Sonnet

This is one of the most famous of all the sonnets, justifiably so. But it would be a mistake to take it entirely in isolation, for it links in with so many of the other sonnets through the themes of the descriptive power of verse; the ability of the poet to depict the fair youth adequately, or not; and the immortality conveyed through being hymned in these 'eternal lines'. It is noticeable that here the poet is full of confidence that his verse will live as long as there are people drawing breath upon the earth, whereas later he apologises for his poor wit and his humble lines which are inadequate to encompass all the youth's excellence. Now, perhaps in the early days of his love, there is no such self-doubt and the eternal summer of the youth is preserved forever in the poet's lines. The poem also works at a rather curious level of achieving its objective through dispraise. The summer's day is found to be lacking in so many respects (too short, too hot, too rough, sometimes too dingy), but curiously enough one is left with the abiding impression that 'the lovely boy' is in fact like a summer's day at its best, fair, warm, sunny, temperate, one of the darling buds of May, and that all his beauty has been wonderfully highlighted by the comparison.

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1. To be in disgrace with fortune is presumably to be not favoured by her (taking fortune to be the goddess of 111).

*O! for my sake do you with Fortune chide,  
The guilty goddess of my harmful deeds,  
That did not better for my life provide  
Than public means which public manners breeds.*

Disgrace is a term which would more usually be applied to a demotion or removal from office. Or to a final humiliation and loss of status. Antony on being defeated by Augustus envisages

*The inevitable prosecution of  
Disgrace and horror, AC.IV.13.65-6.*

In this sonnet the word seems to relate more to a failure to achieve status in the first instance, rather than to a subsequent deprivation.

To be *in disgrace (in) men's eyes* - this possibly

refers to some form of public disapprobation, either real or imaginary. What the disgrace was we cannot say. It could be the mere fact of being associated with the theatre, which by many preachers of the day, and by all Puritans, was considered to be a great den of iniquity and a source of many evils. See the passage at the bottom of this page illustrative of Puritan distrust.

2. *I all alone bewEEP my outcast state,*

3. *And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,*

4. *And look upon myself, and curse my fate,*

5. *Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,*

2. *beweep* = weep for, bewail; Like *bewail* and *beseem*, the word has an archaic and biblical flavour. *my outcast state* = my condition of being a social outcast. The condition is probably exaggerated for the sake of effect, and to emphasise that the speaker sees everything in a gloomy light. Fortune has turned against him and he feels that he does not belong any more to society.

3. *deaf heaven* - Heaven (God) turns a deaf ear to his complaints and laments. The parallel is drawn with Job in the Old Testament, who was cast out on a dung heap and bewept his mournful state. *bootless* = to no avail, achieving nothing.

4. *And look upon myself* - as the outcast contemplates his own fallen state.

*curse my fate* - another echo from the Book of Job in the Bible: *After this Job opened his mouth and cursed his day. And Job spake and said: Let the day perish wherein I was born, and the night in which it was said, 'There is a man child conceived'. Let that day be darkness, let not God regard it from above, neither let the light shine upon it. etc. Job.III.1-4.*

5. Wishing myself to be like one who is more richly endowed with all manner of blessings, including wealth.

6. *Featured like him, like him with friends possessed,*

7. *Desiring this man's art, and that man's scope,*

8. *With what I most enjoy contented least;*

9. *Yet in these thoughts my self almost despising,*

10. *Haply I think on thee, and then my state,*

11. *Like to the lark at break of day arising*

12. *From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven's gate;*

6. *Featured like him, like him* = with features like this person, like this second person having friends, like this third, desiring his skills (line 7) etc.

7. *this man's art* = the skill that one particular person has; *that man's scope* = the capability, range, mental ability that another particular person has.

8. It is unspecified what he most enjoys, but evidently, in his despondency, things which ought to give him enjoyment do not do so. The implication is that he no longer enjoys the love of his beloved, although that idea is countermanded by the final couplet.

9. *in these thoughts* = while I am engaged in these thoughts *myself almost despising* - and almost considering myself to be despicable for being so cast down.

10. *Haply* = by chance, by a happy stroke of luck; *my state* = my mental state, with a suggestion also that his fortune, or the state of affairs in which he finds himself, improves.

11. There is an echo of this in Cym.II.iii.20-1  
*Hark! hark the lark at heaven's gate sings,  
And Phoebus 'gins arise...*

12. *sullen* = gloomy, dark, miserable; *From sullen earth* - the phrase may be taken both with this and with the preceding line. The lark rises from sullen earth, and it also sings hymns which rise up from the earth to the gate of heaven, or, as it sings, it rises from earth towards heaven.

*sings* - the subject is the lark, but

also the poet's soul, which has been liberated by his thinking of his beloved.

*13. For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings*

13. *thy sweet love remembered* = when I have called to mind your love, when your sweet love springs up again in my memory.

*14. That then I scorn to change my state with kings.*

14. Although the primary meaning is that 'I am happier than a king could be, and therefore have no wish to swap places with him' there is a hint of the political meaning of state, i.e. nation state, as in 64:  
*When I have seen such interchange of state,  
Or state itself confounded to decay;  
Hence, 'even though I were to be offered the possession of a kingdom, I would not exchange the happiness of knowing you for that supposedly superior state'.*

#### Previous Sonnet

It is uncertain whether the state of disgrace referred to in this sonnet is a real or imaginary one, for we have no external evidence of a dip in Shakespeare's fortunes which might have contributed to an attack of melancholy and a subsequent castigation of fate as the perpetrator. It is tempting to relate works to periods in an author's life. Certainly the years in which Shakespeare wrote *Lear* and *Timon of Athens* seem not to have been the happiest of times, but it is almost impossible to correlate particular events in his life, and the possible emotional crises that they could have produced, with publication dates, or known dates of production of his plays. (See further notes on SonnetXXIX.)

The sorrow quoted here might be more rhetorical than real, being part of the sonnet tradition, in which many misfortunes contrive to make the lover unhappy. It also serves to highlight the great joy which ends the poem, when he thinks once more on his beloved, as in the psalms, and rises above the clouds.

was often a monk. Examples are the Anglo-Saxon chronicle, and Bede's 'History of the Church of England'. Shakespeare relied heavily on Holinshed's Chronicle History of England (first published 1577) for many of his history plays. There were other chronicles of English history which Shakespeare would probably also have in mind in this reference, most notably John Stow's "Annales, or a General Chronicle of England from Brute unto this present year of Christ, 1580", published in 1580, with other editions in 1592, 1601 and 1605.

*wasted time* = time which is past, hence destroyed, wasted. A reversal of the normal expression, Time the destroyer. *waste* derives from the Latin word, *vastare*, to lay waste in warfare, to destroy. Time in its progress figuratively creates deserts of forgotten people and nations.

2. *I see descriptions of the fairest wights,*



Some costumes of past times.  
For enlarged image, click [here](#).

3. *And beauty making beautiful old rhyme,*

4. *In praise of ladies dead and lovely knights,*

2. *wights* = men and women. (OED.2). An archaic word even in Shakespeare's time, though favoured by Spenser. Shakespeare uses it in Gower's speech in Pericles, Gower being the type of archaic poet (c.1330-1408):  
*That whoso asked her for his wife,*

*His riddle told not lost his life.  
So for her many a wight did die,*  
Per.Prologue.37-9.

*the fairest wights* = the most beautiful men and women. We can assume that even in Shakespeare's day the age of chivalry seemed far distant and was peopled imaginatively with men and women of extraordinary beauty and fabulous costumes. (See the illustration.)

3. The descriptions of the beauty of old times beautifies the verse of the old chronicles. The earliest chronicles were written in verse, and were probably recited at gatherings accompanied by music.

4. *dead* - refers both to the ladies

5. *Then, in the blazon of sweet beauty's best,*

6. *Of hand, of foot, of lip, of eye, of brow,*

7. *I see their antique pen would have expressed*



Venice AD 1338. From a manuscript in the Bodleian Library. Bod Misc 264.

For enlarged image, click [here](#).

and lovely knights. Emphasises that they all lived long ago.

5. *blazon* = emblazoning, A description, painting, or record of any kind; esp. a record of virtues or excellencies. (OED.4). The term is heraldic, and to emblazon was to adorn something with heraldic devices, or with descriptions.

*sweet beauty's best* = the best of all beautiful things (persons), both in the sense of the best parts of them, and the most choice examples from among them.

6. A further description of the blazon of sweet beauty - hands, feet, lips, eyes, brows could all be singled out for special mention. These are also of course the parts the attributes of which are most praised by sonneteers. See for example 130:

*My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun* etc.

7. *their antique pen* = the style and subject matter of the writers of the ancient chronicles. *would have expressed* = would potentially, if they were to be writing now, portray you etc.; would have described you, if you were alive then.

*antique* in addition to the meaning of 'ancient and old-fashioned' also had overtones of 'fantastic, ludicrous and grotesque'. (Onions 1986, pp. 8-9).

The implication of lines 1-8 seems to be: 'The poets of old who wrote the chronicles were much better at portraying beauty than present day writers, and would have made a far better job of describing you than any modern writer. That is apparent

from a reading of the blazons of beauty that they have left us. Had our lovely youth been alive in those times, with the beauty he now has, they would have risen wonderfully to the challenge of describing him'.

*expressed* = described, portrayed. See the previous sonnet:

*Therefore my verse to constancy confined,  
One thing expressing, leaves out difference.*

8. *master* = possess, have in one's control.

9. *their praises* = the chroniclers' praise of beautiful people. Insofar as they praised beautiful people then living, they were mistaken, for their praise really related to you, although you were not then alive. Consequently all their praises were prophetic of your beauty, which now exists, but was not available at the time to them, even though they praised the semblance of it.

10. See the line above. Their descriptions of beauty were prefigurations of your beauty.

11. *for that they looked but with* = because they only looked with *divining eyes* = eyes which look into the future

9-11 SB sees in these lines a possible identification of the beautiful youth with Christ

12. *skill* - this is an emendation of Q's *still*. It is widely accepted, although *still* has been defended. If it is retained one probably has to understand some additional word such as 'knowledge' or 'understanding' to complete the meaning. 'They still lacked the

8. *Even such a beauty as you master now.*

9. *So all their praises are but prophecies*

10. *Of this our time, all you prefiguring;*

11. *And for they looked but with divining eyes,*

12. *They had not skill enough your worth to sing:*

13. *For we, which now behold these present days,*

14. *Have eyes to wonder, but lack tongues to praise.*

### Previous Sonnet

Other sonnets, such as 55, have looked forward to a time when the youth will live on through the verse of the poet: Sonnet 17 even considers that the record of the youth's outstanding beauty will not be believed by future generations:

*Who will believe my verse in time to come,  
If it were fill'd with your most high deserts?*

This sonnet however looks back to a time when knights and ladies led lives of romance and mystery, a time which chroniclers have recorded for posterity in descriptions which appear to foreshadow in some sense the youth's excelling beauty. The writers of past ages were aware, through some sort of divination, of a beauty that surpassed all others. Yet they did not know the youth, who was not yet born. Their songs therefore were mere prefigurings of his worth and glory, which now is appreciated, even though the present day poets lack the skill to sing of him adequately.

necessary understanding to sing of your true worth'. Endorsement of *skill* is found in two early manuscript copies of this sonnet. (See JK. p.443).

13. *For we* - this has the meaning of 'but we', since it contrasts the awareness of the present age with the myopia of the past.

*which* = who

14. Although we wonder at your beauty, we lack the poetic talent to sing of it adequately. The poet modestly belittles his own efforts, but the poem itself seems to contradict what he here declares.