

SONNET CLIII

Cupid laid by his brand and fell asleep,
A maid of *Dian*'s this advantage found,
And his love-kindling fire did quickly steep
In a cold valley-fountain of that ground:
Which borrowed from this holy fire of love,
A dateless lively heat still to endure,
And grew a seething bath which yet men prove,
Against strange maladies a sovereign cure:
But at my mistress' eye love's brand new-fired,
The boy for trial needs would touch my breast,
I sick withal the help of bath desired,
And thither hied a sad distempered guest.
 But found no cure, the bath for my help lies,
 Where *Cupid* got new fire; my mistress' eyes.

Sonnets 153 and 154 are an allegorical conclusion of the poet's quest. This conclusion consists of two sequential encounters with Dan Cupid, the little love-god. In Shakespeare's presentation Cupid's role is limited to triggering only ordinary, i.e., sensual and emotional love. Cupid's interference is greatly diminished at the moment when the poet's inner faculties are purified. It is only then that he may become immune to Cupid's influence. In other words, the poet's confusion and despair that were caused by his encounter with the Black Lady may be overcome by the symbolic disarming of Cupid. The scenes with Cupid presented in Sonnets 153 and 154 are based on the same episode. Namely, Cupid put down his torch and fell asleep. One of Diana's maidens took advantage of this situation, took Cupid's love-inducing torch and plunged it in a cold spring ("and his love-kindling fire did quickly steep in a cold valley-fountain of that ground"). The spring acquired heat from the fire of the torch ("which borrowed from this holy fire of love, a dateless lively heat still to endure"). And the babbling water of the spring became an all powerful cure for love-affected men ("and grew a seething bath which yet men prove against strange maladies a sovereign cure"). Through the Black Lady's eyes, Cupid was able to rekindle his torch ("but at my mistress' eye love's brand new-fired"). Then, he decided to test it on the poet ("the boy for trial needs would touch my breast"). The poet became infected with sensual love and sought remedy in the soothing bath ("I sick withal the help of bath desired, and thither hied a sad distempered guest"). But he found no cure. He thinks that the cure for his love-sickness is where Cupid got his fire from, i.e., in the Lady's eyes ("the bath for my help lies, where Cupid got new fire; my mistress' eyes"). This conclusion is in agreement with the poet's previous observation, i.e., the Lady's eyes are a mirror reflection of his inner state (see Sonnet 132). As long as his inner state is impure, he remains vulnerable to Cupid's torch. The poet assumes that by improving his inner state he may be cured from his love-sickness.

(Excerpt from "Shakespeare Sonnets or How heavy do I journey on the way" by Wes Jamroz)