

SONNET XCIV

They that have power to hurt, and will do none,
That do not do the thing, they most do show,
Who moving others, are themselves as stone,
Unmoved, cold, and to temptation slow:
They rightly do inherit heaven's graces,
And husband nature's riches from expense,
They are the Lords and owners of their faces,
Others, but stewards of their excellence:
The summer's flower is to the summer sweet,
Though to itself, it only live and die,
But if that flower with base infection meet,
The basest weed out-braves his dignity:
 For sweetest things turn sourest by their deeds,
 Lilies that fester, smell far worse than weeds.

The poet's conclusion from the previous Sonnet prompts the Guide to deliver his next counsel, which may help the poet to clarify his confusion. The Guide explains the nature of those who are charged with the task of guiding humanity. Such men and women have power to hurt others, but choose not to do so ("they that have power to hurt, and will do none"). They do not act in the way that others expect them to do ("that do not do the thing, they most do show"). They are able to influence others, but themselves are unswayable ("who moving others, are themselves as stone"). They are inheritors and carriers of the entire spectrum of evolutionary energy ("they rightly do inherit heaven's graces"). They are charged with preserving nature's greatest treasures ("and husband nature's riches from expense"). They are in full control of their moods ("they are the lords and owners of their faces"). Others are like ornaments of their perfection ("others, but stewards of their excellence"). They contribute to their perfection in the same way as flowers add the sweetness to the summer; they live and then die ("the summer's flower is to the summer sweet, though to itself, it only live and die"). But when such a flower is infected, it becomes worse than weed ("but if that flower with base infection meet, the basest weed outbraves his dignity"). Because when misused, the sweetest things become the sourest, like rotten lilies that smell worse than weeds ("for sweetest things turn sourest by their deeds; lilies that fester, smell far worse than weeds").

This last sentence is a warning to the poet, because he faces the danger of misusing his gifts and turning himself into a rotten lily.

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