Sir Henry Wotton was the great courtier and diplomat of the age of James. Venetian ambassador, foreign-service trouble-shooter, and finally elder statesmen, he knew all the eminent personages of his age, including the men of letters. He was a friend of Donne, of Jonson, and of the youthful Milton; Izaak Walton, an old acquaintance, wrote his life.

The queen of Bohemia, in the following lyric, was Elizabeth, daughter of James I of England, who in 1613 had married Frederick V, Elector Palatine (i.e., he was both prince of a south German province, the Palatinate, and Elector of the old Holy Roman Empire). In 1619 and 1620 Frederick was, briefly, king and his wife queen of Bohemia. “Mistress” used with people of this distinction implies simply the feminine of “master”; though Wotton, who was a wit, probably accepted and rejoiced in the connotation of “love object,” too. The poem was evidently written about 1620, but first appeared in print in a collection of Wotton’s incidental writings, called Reliquiae Wottonianae (1651).

On His Mistress, the Queen of Bohemia

You meaner beauties of the night,
That poorly satisfy our eyes
More by your number than your light,
You common people of the skies,
What are you when the sun\(^1\) shall rise?

You curious chanters of the wood,
That warble forth Dame Nature’s lays,
Thinking your voices understood
By your weak accents; what’s your praise
When Philomel\(^2\) her voice shall raise?

You violets, that first appear,
By your pure purple mantles known,
Like the proud virgins of the year,
As if the spring were all your own,
What are you when the rose is blown?

So when my Mistress shall be seen
In form and beauty of her mind,
By virtue first, then choice,\(^3\) a Queen,
Tell me, if she were not designed
The eclipse and glory of her kind?

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1. In place of “sun,” some texts read “moon.”
2. Philomela, the nightingale.
3. I.e., by nature first, then by dynastic, matrimonial “accident.”