

TWO POEMS BY JOHN DONNE

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In John Donne's two poems, "Song," and "The Indifferent," he speaks of love with the idea that infidelity is a reliable and inseparable part of it. However, in "Song," the persona Donne takes on laments this fact, while the lover in "The Indifferent" revels in it. In these two poems we see two different reactions to the same assumption.

In "Song," the poet speaks of the infidelity of women with bitterness and despair. There is the implication that a former lover has betrayed him, and now he will not believe that *any* woman could be true. He tells the reader that it is easier to "Go and catch a falling star" (Donne 1) than to find a faithful woman. In contrast, the speaker in "The Indifferent," while still assuming that infidelity is an innate part of love, celebrates the fact, and even chides his lady for expecting fidelity. He claims that for him, part of the beauty of love is that it is all encompassing. Under what he perceives to be the natural order of things, he may "...twenty [lovers] know..." (Donne 15), and enjoy the different benefits of each. He calls variety "...love's sweetest part..." (Donne 20); the stereotypical young man, he loves his freedom.

However, there is also an element of bitterness in the words of "The Indifferent"'s speaker. The reader senses that perhaps the speaker only embraces infidelity because he feels he can do nothing to change it, even if he wanted to. After three stanzas of basking in the "freedom" of love, he closes by saying that those who will be true, "...shall be true to them, who are false..." (Donne 27) Reading the poem, we wonder if the real reason for the speaker's praise of inconstancy is that he was once in the position of the speaker in "Song;" he may have been one of those "heretics in love" (Donne 24) who sought loyalty, did not find it, and became a fool in his own eyes. Despite all of his bluster, the speaker in "The Indifferent" may have been at one

time a lover who sought constancy, and his acceptance of infidelity may be his recourse to being rejected.

The two speakers' different views of love naturally lead to different views of their respective objects of love. The lover in "The Indifferent" scoffs at the woman who demands fidelity, which he claims is unnatural and contrary to tradition. "Will no other vice content you?" (Donne 10) he asks. He tells her that, as her ancestors did not fall prey to the vice of fidelity, she should not; fidelity is not an achievable goal, and seeking it will only lead to unhappiness. He implies, in this poem, that he simply does not understand why faithfulness would appeal to anyone; he does not understand what motivates his lover. This desire for faithfulness is, of course, the same thing which motivates the speaker in "Song," who - not naming a specific lover - refers to womankind in general as faithless and fickle. Like the speaker in "The Indifferent," the speaker in "Song" chides women, but for the opposite reason. He complains, rather, that women will be false. Though with different motivations, neither of the speakers in these two poems is content with womankind.

The speaker in "The Indifferent" has a very high opinion of himself. He portrays himself as a great lover, and says he "...can love any, so she be not true" (Donne 9). He recites an interminable list of the sorts of women he can love. He is capable of and willing to do anything, he would have us believe. On the other hand, the speaker in "Song" is despondent and unwilling to put out any effort to try to find a faithful woman. Such a mission would be hopeless, he says, and he will not waste his energy on something bound to fail. Since a faithful woman could not be found, he says, he "...would not go" (Donne 21) in search of her. Neither is he willing to accept anything less than a trustworthy lover - so while the speaker in "The Indifferent" ends up

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loving all women, and gaining as much happiness as he can find, the speaker in “Song” ends up alone and despondent, loving none.

Both the speakers take for granted that there is no such thing as fidelity in love, but they have different reactions to this conclusion. The speaker in “The Indifferent” revels in the flexibility he gains from the infidelity of lovers, and rejoices in his freedom; the speaker in “Song” mourns his loss and retreats from the realm of love. Neither speaker, though, is entirely happy with his present situation. The speaker in “The Indifferent” complains because his beloved demands fidelity, and the speaker in “Song” complains because he believes he cannot find a faithful woman. Despite their different approaches to the same situation, each man is discontented with his situation.

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