

“FALSHOOD IS WORSE THAN HATE”: WOMEN’S INCONSTANCY IN JOHN DONNE’S POETRY

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ABSTRACT

John Donne’s status as a love poet is based on his lyrics, written throughout his life, and expressing powerful occupation in the poet’s mentality. Donne’s love poems range from intense physical love to spiritual affection and reveal diverse attitudes from scepticism to trust and consent. His love poems reflect his personal involvement with several women, some of his affairs were lifelong and conjugal, and others were passing and short-lived. Because most of his poems are based on true episodes of the poet’s secular love, they are characterized by extraordinary power, truthfulness, and earnestness. Donne believes that true love should involve both physical pleasures and spiritual emotions. This study, however, examines the inconstancy of women in Donne’s poetry in relation to his prose work “A Defence of Womens Inconstancy”. The study discloses the paradox as to the disparateness of Donne’s cold logic in the essay and the suffering of the male speaker of his poems because of the inconstancy of his mistress.

Keywords: Love, Women, Inconstancy, Suspicion, God

John Donne experienced different types of love with women and he wrote poetry about the agonies and delights of his intimate relationships with the other sex. Since the thirteenth century extended works were dedicated to the dissection of love, like Dante’s *La Vita Nuova* and Petrarch’s *Canzoniere*. Louis Martz writes that:

Donne’s love-poem stake for their basic theme the problem of the place of love in a physical world dominated by change and death. The problem is broached in dozens of different ways, sometimes implicitly, sometimes explicitly, sometimes by asserting the immortality of love, sometimes by declaring the futility of love. (169)

However, Donne’s interest in variety led him to write, in *Paradoxes and Problems*, an essay titled “A Defence of Womens Inconstancy”, where he redresses the notion of the inconstancy of women by insightful wit and pure logic:

That women are *Inconsistent*, I with nay man confess, but that *Inconstancy* is a bad quality, I against any man will maintain: For every thing as it is one better than another, so it is fuller of change; The *Heavens* themselves continually turn, the *Stars* move, the *Moon* changeth; *Fire* whirleth, *Aire* flyeth, *Water* ebbs and flows, the face of the *Earth* altereth her looks, *time* staies not; the Colour that is most light, will take most dyes: so in Men, they that have the most reason are the most alterable in their designs, and the darkest or most ignorant, do seldome change; therefore Women changing more than Men, have also more *Reason*. (PP 286)

The dominant atmosphere at the beginning of the 17th century was of doubt: only scientifically proved things were considered to be true and reliable. Donne’s poetry

is full of original imagery: all the equipment of the Renaissance research laboratory. In case a woman revealed her love, it was received with a sense of suspicion “since such an emotion has no empirical basis and the chances are that the woman ‘will be / False . . . to two, or three’ before the day is out” (Garrett 50). The age of Donne was concerned with the science of human body that is constantly altering and changing, and with metaphysics as a science that concerns the unchangeable and divine in the universe like human soul, angels, and God.

In the astronomy of Aristotle and Ptolemy they were divided by the sphere of the moon: all below was the sublunary realm; all above was the superlunary realm. Theologically they reflected the order of nature and the order of grace. In language one is a world of bodies and Individuals, the other a world of abstraction and Universals. (Williamson 28)

Hence, Women in Donne’s poetry could be related to either the superlunary realm of existence or the sublunary world, the latter being the main concern of this research. The study focuses on Donne’s cynical poems that present changeable women and the consequent suffering of the male figures. The paper sheds light on Donne’s description of the fickle woman in his poetry in comparison to his defense of women in his article “A Defence of Womens Inconstancy”.

Women’s fickleness is the topic of “Song”, where the speaker of the poem states in a satirical tone that a constant woman is unattainable. He ironically asks those who believe in her existence to:

Goe, and catche a falling starre,
Get with child a mandrake roote,
Tell me, where all past yeares are,
Or who cleft the Divels foot,
Teach me to hear Mermaids singing,
Or to keep off envies stinging,
And fine
What winde
Serves to advance an honest mind.
(PP 7-8)

The speaker bitterly argues that some impossible tasks in life are nevertheless easier to achieve than finding a beautiful woman who is true to her lover:

If thou beest borne to strange sights,
Things invisible to see,
Ride ten thousand daies and nights,
Till age snow white haies on thee,
Thou, when return’st wilt tee mee
All strange wonders that befell thee,
And sweare
No where

Lives a woman true, and faire. (PP 8)

The speaker complains that he would never find an honest woman whom he can have an intimate relationship with. A woman is constant only when she is not beautiful, and there is a slim chance that she can find a lover. The concept of an inconstant woman is set against a set of very difficult tasks to be accomplished, revealing the speaker’s despair and rejection of woman’s changeable nature. Ultimately, George Williamson writes, “Donne’s concern for ‘the honesties of love’ turned him into a rebel and atheist of love” (55). This is evident as the speaker of the poem mentions that “if thou findest one, let mee know, / Such a Pilgrimage were sweet” (PP 8). Yet he immediately changes his thoughts, stating that he “would not goe, / Though at next doore wee might meet” (PP 8). The speaker believes that if in case a woman decides to be loyal and chaste then this would last for a very short time:

And last, till you write your letter,
Yet shee
Will bee
False, ere I come, to two, or three.
(PP 8)

Women’s constancy is ephemeral and not reliable. The poem is a departure from Petrarchan tradition of the lady-goddess image. The cynical tone and paradoxes of the poem are not to be taken seriously. The poem could be considered in relation to Donne’s entire oeuvre, which is about his celebration of the passion of love. The poet explored love from every possible perspective, investigated its premise, tasted its pleasures, and accepted its woes. Donne’s poetry reflects “the work of one who has tasted every fruit in love’s orchard” (Bennett, “The Love Poetry” 134).

The inconstant woman is directly addressed in “Womans Constancy”, where the speaker tells his mistress that “now thou hast lov’d me one whole day, /

To morrow when thou leav'st, what wilt thou say?" (PP 8). Contrast to Donne's "A Defence of Womens Inconstancy", where the changing woman is considered as reasonable, the speaker of the poem describes his beloved as false and 'vaine lunatique'. She is a woman who believes that "lovers contracts [...] / Bind but till sleep [...] them unloose" (PP 8). C. S. Lewis writes his opinion concerning Donne's satirical poems:

In one sense these poems are not serious at all. Poem after poem consists of extravagant conceits woven into the preposterous semblance of an argument. The preposterousness is the point. Donne intends to take your breath away by the combined subtlety and impudence of the steps that lead to his conclusion. (118)

Donne presents a different perspective of inconstant women in "The indifferent", where the speaker of the poem cherishes their fickleness. The speaker is not concerned about women's looks, virtues, temper, and social status. He can love different kinds of women as long as they are inconstant:

I can love both faire and browne,
Her whom abundance melts, and her
whom want betraies,
Her who loves lonenesse best, and her
who maskes and plaies,
Her whom the countryform'd, and
whom the town,
Her who beleeves, and her who tries,
Her who still weepes with spungie
eyes,
And her who is dry corke, and never
cries;
I can love her, and her, and you and
you,
I can love any, so she be not true. (PP
11)

The speaker encourages women to be inconstant because men themselves are false and changeable. The speaker admits that he would never spend his entire life with one woman, because he considers this attitude as a kind of slavery: "Must I, who came to travailethorow you, / Grow your fixt subject, because you are true?" (PP12). The speaker mentions that his inconstancy

enables him to enjoy the pleasures of love. Yet the last two lines of the poem reveal the true reason of his inconstancy, as he informs his fellow men that "since you will be true, / You shall be true to them, who' are false to you" (PP 12).

In "Twicknam Garden", the speaker seeks the healing influence of true love and hence he "come[s] to seeke the spring" to "receive such balmes, as else cure everything" (PP 24-25). The speaker brought to his garden of love a serpent "that this place may thoroughly be thought / True Paradise" (PP 25). Yet he soon realises that his mistress is not true to him and he is shrouded by feelings of shame and disgrace. It would be more acceptable for him if winter ruins the beauty of this garden and frost covers the trees so they would not laugh at his foolishness:

'Twerewholsoomer for mee, that winter
did
Benight the glory of this place,
And that a grave frost did forbid
These trees to laugh, and mockemee to
my face . . . (PP 25)

The speaker desires to be transformed into "a stone mountain weeping out" his pain (PP 25). He invites lovers to come with 'christallvyals' and taste his tears "which are loves wine" (PP 25). He would then advice those lovers to try their mistresses'tears, for all passion that do not taste like the speakers own tears are false. He concludes by giving a subtle description of woman's deceitful nature:

Alas, hearts do not in eyes shine,
Nor can you more judge womans
thoughts by teares,
Than by her shadow, what she
weares.
O perverse sexe, where none is true
but shee,
Who's therefore true, because her
truth kills mee (PP25)

The woman's garden of love is a deception of her real feelings. The speaker feels ridiculed after discovering the truth about his mistress love. Women's only truth is their cruelty that kills their deceived and faithful lovers.

The fickle woman is presented as a kind of punishment to the damned person in "The Curse". The poet curses the man who deliberately attempts to

discover his love affair. The poet's curse is both terrible and original: "His only, and only his purse / May some dull heart to love dispose, / And shee yeeld then to all that are his foes" (PP 35). At the end of the poem, Donne criticises womankind, "as often in Donne—a light, epigrammatic couplet to place the poem on the witty side of passion" (Kermode 21). So the poet states that "Nature beforehand hath cursed" all women by their capricious and uncertain moods. Interestingly, however, the poem is believed to be an indirect discussion of the persecution and torture of the Catholics during the reign of Elizabeth I.

In "Jealousie", *Elegie I*, Donne writes in a cynical and satirical tone about a hypocrite wife, who would not shed tears at her husband's death. She would rather celebrate his death because that would grant her sexual freedom:

Fond woman, which would'st have
thy husband die,
And yet complain'st of his great
jealousie;
If swolne with poyson, hee layin' his
last bed,
His body with a sere-barke covered,
Drawing his breath, as thick and
short, as can
The nimblest crocheting Musitian,
Ready with loathsome vomiting to
spue
His Soule out of one hell, into a new,
.....
...
Thou would'st not weep, but
jolly, 'and frolicke bee,
As a slave, which to morrow should
be free;
Yet weep'st thou, when thou seest
him hungerly
Swallow his owne death, hearts-bane
jealousie. (PP 64)

The poem uncovers the wife's foolish dissatisfaction with her husband's jealousy, which is quite reasonable. The truth that is revealed in the poem is tense and unpleasant, but is nevertheless confronted and addressed by Donne. "The poetry does not mitigate or disguise, it enforces the crudity of the situations it portrays" (Bennett, *Five Metaphysical Poets* 18). The

poem follows the Ovidian tradition of love triangle between the wife, her husband, and her lovers. Donne mainly addresses the wife's adultery and betrayal. He reveals the unreliability of erotic love.

The speaker of *Elegie III*, "Change", argues that women's inconstancy is natural because they are "made for all men" (PP 67). The speaker justifies his argument by relating love to the physical laws of nature, which are not to follow the moral codes established by any given society. Hence, the speaker states:

Women are like Arts, forc'd unto
none,
Open to'all searchers, unpriz'd, if
unknown.
If I have caught a bird, and let him
flie,
Another fouler using these means, as
I,
May catch the same bird; and, as
these things bee,
Women are made for men, not him,
nor mee.
Foxes and goates; all beasts change
when they please,
Shall women, more hot, wily, wild
than these,
Be bound to one man, and did Nature
then
Idly make them apterto'endure than
men? (PP 67)

Ironically, the speaker himself is constant in love and he is only attracted to women who share his same nature. Yet, women's untamed lustful passions are designed "by nature, which gave it, this liberty". Therefore women, the speaker complains, can "lov'st, but Oh! Canst thou love it and mee?" (PP 67). The speaker continues asserting women's changeable nature; perceiving it as part of the natural rhythm of life. He compares women's passions to streams of water which need to continue flowing in order not to stagnate:

Waters stinckesoone, if in one place
they bide
And in the vast sea are more putrifi'd:
But when they kisse one banke, and
leaving this

Never lookebacke, but the next
bankedoekisse,
Then are they purest; Change'is the
nursery
Of musicke, joy, life, and eternity.
(PP 68)

The poem thus relates to Donne's essay "A Defence of Womens Inconstancy". The irony is that the man cannot relate to this type of women, and thus his predicament is similar to his fellow men in other poems who complain of women's inconstancy.

The theme of women's fickleness is also the subject of *Elegy VI*, "Oh, LetMeeNot Serve So". The poem is about an ending of a relationship because of the mistress's infidelity. The speaker employs the court metaphor to announce his rejection of false love affair. He rejects to maintain the relationship as if by court approval: "Oh, let meenot serve so, as those men serve / Whomhonourssmoakes at once and sterve; / Poorelyenrich't with great mens words or lookes" (PP 71). The speaker presents himself as a courtier who constantly needs the favour of the king. His mistress in this case stands for the king;she may give him her favour or leave him in poverty and need. The speaker asks to be his mistress main favourite; otherwise he would quiet her court. He mentions that he is true to her, unlike the other flatterers surrounding her:

Nor so write my name in thy loving
books
As those Idolatrous flatterers, which
still
Their Princes stiles, with many
Realmes fulfill
Whence they no tribute have, and
where no sway.
Such services I offer as shall pay
Themselves, I hate dead names: O
then let mee
Favorite in Ordinary, or no favorite
bee. (PP 71)

The speaker realises that he needs to purge his suffering and leave the woman whom he once perceived as faithful and honest: "Thy heart seem'dwaxe, and steele thy constancie" (PP 71). The speaker elaborates on his suffering in another image, where he is the channel and his mistress the stream. The stream would flow gently from the spring, producing hesitant melodies: "When I

behold a streame, which, from the spring, / Doth with doubtfull melodious murmuring, / Or in a speechlesse slumber, calmely ride" (PP 71). At the beginning, the stream couples with the channel in perfect harmony: "Her wedded channalsbosome" (PP 71). Yet later the stream is annoyed by any small obstacle or difficulty: "and then chide / And bend her browes, and swell if any bough / Do but stoop downe, or kisse her upmost brow" (PP 71). The stream ultimately finds a different path to flow into and leaves the original channel abandoned and dry:

Yet, if her often gnawing kisses
winne
The traiterousbanke to gape, and let
her in,
She rusheth violently, and doth
divorce
Her from her native, and her long-
kept course,
.....
...
She flouts the channell, who
thenceforth is drie . . . (PP 71)

The speaker is cynical of his false mistress, who is ignorant of the value of real and constant love. Hence he departs with her, not to conceive any future reunion.

Elegy VII, "Natures Lay Ideot", highlights the predicament of the lover, whether he or his mistress is the 'lay Ideot'. The mistress was found to be a remarkable student that the loverends up being inferior to her. The loverdespises the fact that his once artless mistress, whom he has taught love and its'sophitrie', ignores him for other men. The tone of the lover reveals his anguish and sarcasm;he reminds her of her older self:

Foole, thou didst
not understand
The mystique language of the eye nor
hand:
Nor couldst thou judge the difference
of the aire
Of sighes, and say, this lies, this
sounds despaire . . . (PP 72)

He points outthat her concerns were mundane and her character was naive. He also tells her how timid and hesitant she used to be:

Remember since all thy words us'd to
 bee
 To every suitor; I, if my friends agree;
 Since, household charms, thy
 husbands name to teach,
 Were all the love trickes, that thy wit
 could reach . . . (PP 72-73)

The lover, addressing his mistress, recalls how he taught her to talk properly: "And since, an hours discourse could scarce have made / One answer in thee, and that ill arraid / In broken proverbs, and torne sentences" (PP 73). He keeps referring to her past, when she was ignorant of flower arrangement:

I had not taught thee then, the
 Alphabet
 Of flowers, how they devisefully
 being set
 And bound up, might with
 speechlesse secrecie
 Deliver arrands mutely, and mutually.
 (PP 72)

The lines intend to convey the idea that "the flowers of a bouquet expressing by their arrangement a sentiment like that engraved on a ring" (Grierson 72). The mistress is thus described as being ignorant of courtly-love traditions, like arranging flowers to express her love. Ultimately, however, she is no longer the 'lay idiot', i.e., the mistress is no longer ignorant of the arts of love, nor is she innocent. She surpasses her lover's teaching and becomes available to other admirers and lovers. The lover who unwittingly trained her to become others mistress appears to be the true 'lay idiot' at the end of the poem.

In *Holy Sonnets: Divine Meditations*, sequence IX, Donne conveys his love for God in a manner similar to that of a lover to his mistress. The speaker of the poem simultaneously trusts and doubts God's mercy, as a lover wavers between the firm awareness of being loved and the frequent trepidation that love can be ended. The sonnet reveals Donne's manliness of temper:

What if this present were the worlds
 last night?
 Marke in my heart, O Soule, where
 thou dost dwell,
 The picture of Christ crucified, and
 tell

Whether that countenance can thee
 affright,

 No, no; but as in my idolatrie
 I said to all my profane mistresses,
 Beauty, of pittie, foulnesse only is
 A sign of rigour: so I say to thee,
 To wicked spirits are horrid shapes
 assign'd,
 This beauteous forme assures a
 pitious minde. (PP 270)

In this regard, Helen Gardner writes the following concerning Donne's religious poetry:

He remains a wit in his divine as in his secular verse; but the 'fierce endeavour' of his wit is tamed: the outrageous element has disappeared. His Maker is more powerfully present to the imagination in his divine poems than any mistress in his love poems. There he argues confidently, an expert in the casuistry of love. (xvi)

Also, Donne's love poetry reveals the arrogant and sensuous male figure. This is not the case in his religious poetry, which deals with the humble and spiritual worshipper. The pious male figure of the religious poetry is attempting to work out his salvation in dread and despair, haunted by the feeling of his unworthiness.

The poet expressing his love for God, with reference to the image of the lover to his changeable mistress, is also the topic of Elegy XIX, "To his Mistress Going to Be", where Donne writes:

As humorous is my contritione
 As my prophane Love, and as
 soone forgott:

 ..
 In prayers, and flattering speaches I
 court God:
 To morrow I quake with true feare of
 his rod.
 So my devout fits come and go away
 Like a fantastique Ague. (PP 275-76).

This perception of God is related to “that deep sense of the ‘otherness’ of God that runs through the Protestant Reformation fills Donne’s heart with awe. The Creator and the Governor of the Universe, God is for Donne, as for most men of his time, defined in terms of power and will” (White 128). The poem is an appeal to God to make Himself more understandable and accessible to human beings. The same demands are asked by the uncertain lover to his inconstant mistress.

In conclusion, Donne’s poetry on the inconstancy of women reflects the culture of the poet’s times and his personal experiences and circumstances which were influenced by that culture. Hence, the poetry reveals scepticism in the poet’s dealing with woman’s love. In a number of Donne’s poetry, the inconstant woman brings pain to her lover. He is aggrieved by her ruthlessness and levity; which ultimately leads him to rebel against love. In the religious poetry, Donne scrutinizes his love for God though the image of a secular love between an honest man and an untrusted woman. This kind of poetry is a keen and powerful disapproval of the enigmatic cosmic order. Both Donne’s secular and religious poetry are related to the poet’s wider scheme concerning the bond of human beings with each other and with their God. Finally, all Donne’s poems on the inconstancy of women reveal the poet’s rejection of the fickle and changeable nature of the significant other. This contradicts with his argument in “A Defence of Womens Inconstancy”, where he attempted to find some righteousness in women’s unpredictability and dishonesty.

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