

*Two loves I have of comfort and despair,
 Which like two spirits do suggest me still:
 The better angel is a man right fair;
 The worser spirit a woman colored ill.
 To win me soon to hell my female evil
 Tempteth my better angel from my side
 And would corrupt my saint to be a devil,
 Wooing his purity with her foul pride.
 And, whether that my angel be turn'd fiend,
 Suspect I may, yet not directly tell;
 But being both from me, both to each friend,
 I guess one angel in another's hell.
 Yet this shall I ne'er know, but live in doubt,
 Till my bad angel fire my good one out.*

Addressing no particular person, the speaker takes a moment to step back from his situation, assess his “two loves,” speculate on their current relationship, and anticipate their futures. The tone is firm and objective until the very end. That the two loves are portrayed as angels (or spirits), each trying to win over the speaker, follows the pattern of medieval morality plays, in which an everyman figure is torn between good (an angel) and evil (a devil) and must make his crucial choice. But there are major changes.

Our speaker, who is like an everyman in many ways, reveals that the worser spirit (“a woman colored ill,” l. 4) is luring him to hell by tempting the better angel away from his side and turning the male angel into a devil. She is now wooing his pure virtue with her foul pride.

The sestet looks towards the future, which the speaker can only guess at. But he suspects that since they are both away from him and friends to each other, one angel (the “man right fair” of l. 2) is in the “hell” (slang for the vagina) of the woman “colored ill.”

Now the tone becomes vindictive. The speaker expresses doubt, but the last line gives him away: he will know the truth about his “loves” when the bad angel fires the good one out. This wording may indicate the dismissal of the man by the mistress, but it also implies that the end result will be venereal disease. Punishment will come in both this world and the next.