Song: to Celia

By

Ben Jonson

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Song: to Celia [“Drink to me only with thine eyes”]

BY BEN JONSON

Drink to me only with thine eyes,
And I will pledge with mine;
Or leave a kiss but in the cup,
And I'll not look for wine.
The thirst that from the soul doth rise
Doth ask a drink divine;
But might I of Jove's nectar sup,
I would not change for thine.

I sent thee late a rosy wreath,
Not so much honouring thee
As giving it a hope, that there
It could not withered be.
But thou thereon didst only breathe,
And sent'st it back to me;
Since when it grows, and smells, I swear,
Not of itself, but thee.

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ABOUT BEN JONSON

Jonson was a skilful satirist of contemporary society, producing *Volpone* for the stage in 1606 and *The Alchemist* in 1610. It is highly likely that Shakespeare would

have appeared in a production of another of Jonson's plays, *Every Man in His Humour*, and, in spite of their professional rivalry, Jonson appeared to hold Shakespeare in high regard. His tribute written on the death of Shakespeare contains the often quoted line 'He was not of an age but for all time.'
Witty, sociable and scornful of ignorance, Jonson attracted an influential circle of friends and admirers known as the 'Tribe of Ben', which included members of the nobility and other writers.

Jonson's poetry is informed by his classical learning; among his well-known poems is his elegant countryhouse poem 'To Penshurst'. He could also, however, write with touching simplicity in poems such as'My Picture Left in Scotland' and those written on the death of his children.

BACKGROUND TO THE POEM

The poem, addressed to the Celia of the title, is an elaborate appeal for her love and a pledging of the speaker's for her. He first asks for a number of very small tokens of her love for him – he says a look, or a kiss left in a cup, would be enough – then asks her to quench the 'thirst that from the soul doth rise' before declaring that he wouldn't swap anything for a taste of her 'nectar'. What do you think of his argument so far?

In the second stanza, we start to wonder whether the speaker's love for Celia is unrequited. He talks about having sent her a 'rosy wreath', but we soon learn that she 'sent'st it back'. In a perhaps too-clever twist, he asserts that his sending of the wreath was 'not so much honouring' Celia, but more to have it blessed with everlasting life. Even though she 'didst only breathe' on the wreath, the speaker swears it now 'grows, and smells' of Celia rather than itself. What do you think of his argument now? What do you think Celia might have to say in return?

'Song: to Celia' by Ben Jonson is a two stanza poem which is separated into sets of eight lines. This piece follows a consistent and structured pattern of rhyme which conforms to the pattern of abcbabcb defeeefe.
The choice to use this rhyme scheme allowed the poet to unite lines which are scattered in their indention and length. The repeated use of "-ee" as an ending has been utilized to emphasize lines four, five, and six in the second stanza. These lines are the climax of the speaker's narrative and provide a fitting ending to the piece.

Summary of *Song: to Celia*

'Song: to Celia' by Ben Jonson describes the deep love which exists between the speaker and his lover and how it transcends normal bounds.
The poem begins with the speaker suggesting that his lover "Drink to" him with only her eyes. He will reciprocate this act by, with his own eyes, pledging himself to her. This wordless communication is extremely intimate and is a suiting introduction to the dynamic which exists between the two.
The poet is invested in comparing his love, and the indulgent way he participates in it, to drinking. He could find her love, if she placed it there, within a wine glass. In the last part of this stanza he says that the thirst he has for love could only be sated by the strongest, and most divine of drinks.
In the second stanza the speaker describes an interaction which he instigated. This situation is utilized as a perfect representation of how he sees his lover and how they communicate with one another.
He sends her a "rosy wreath" and instead of keeping it, she sends it back to him after breathing on it. The speaker declares that the smell of the plant has been supplanted by the smells of his lover.

Analysis of *Song: to Celia*

Stanza One

Drink to me only with thine eyes,

And I will pledge with mine;

Or leave a kiss but in the cup,

And I'll not look for wine.

The thirst that from the soul doth rise

Doth ask a drink divine;

But might I of Jove's nectar sup,

I would not change for thine.

The first stanza of this piece begins with the speaker asking that his lover "Drink" to him with only her "eyes." These first lines define the emotional depths of their partnership.

The speaker wants his lover to devote herself entirely to him and with her eyes, indulge in him as she would a drink. The next line describes what it is he will give back to her if she chooses to commit herself fully. He will "pledge" himself to her

with his own eyes. This wordless communication is quite intimate. The poet is allowing the reader into the world of this speaker.
Additionally, a reader should take note of the fact that the characters in the poem are not well-defined. The speaker's emotions are on display but there are no lines devoted to who he is or who his lover is. This choice allows any type of reader to cast their own experiences onto the text. One will, ideally, be able to relate to the emotions the couple experiences.
The speaker moves on from the idea of communicating through glances in the next lines as he tells his lover she is welcome to "leave a kiss…in the cup." It is here that he will look for her, knowing full well there will be no wine to drink. The poet has chosen to connect the indulgence of drink with that of love. These two acts, ways of being, and emotional states are one in the same.
In the following lines he states the "thirst" for love which exists within the soul can only be quenched by a "drink divine." It is only something like "Jove's nectar," or the drink of the gods, which could sate his thirst. In contrast to this statement he says that if he could indulge in "nectar" that he would not change for "thine." His emotions for his lover would not change.

Stanza Two

I sent thee late a rosy wreath,
Not so much honouring thee
As giving it a hope, that there
It could not withered be.
But thou thereon didst only breathe,
And sent'st it back to me;
Since when it grows, and smells, I swear,
Not of itself, but thee.

In the second stanza the speaker begins by describing how of "late," or lately, he sent his lover a "rosy wreath." This was an action which was deeply thought through and meaningful to both of them. In the following lines he describes why he made the choice to send her this gift and what he meant by it.
The speaker chose the "wreath" as a gift not for his lover's sake, but for that of the wreath. He professes his choice stemmed from a desire to give the wreath hope that it "could not withered be" in her presence.
This hyperbolic scenario has a deeply romantic intention. He wants his lover to see how highly he regards her. It is as if she could stave off death in anything or anyone around her. She revitalizes everything near her.

The speaker's lover did not react to the wreathe as he expected. She did not keep it as a monument to their love but instead chose to send it back to him after breathing on it. She did this intentionally, knowing how he would be impacted by it.
When he wreath came back to him, he smelled it and declared that it did not smell like it did before. It now smelled of "thee," his lover. Through these depictions of their love the speaker is hoping to both flatter his lover and improve their relationship further. *'Song: to Celia'* is a true love poem which is wholly dedicated to the promotion and continuation of a relationship.

Critical Overview

When *The Forest*, containing "Song: To Celia," was published in 1616, it affirmed Jonson's position as one of the court's most distinguished poets. That same year, Jonson was appointed poet laureate of England. In addition, his nearly two decades of celebrated writing were capped that year with the appearance of his massive folio *Workes*, a fitting testimony to his illustrious reputation and his marked influence on other poets of the age.

"Song: To Celia," Jonson's favorite of all of his lyrics, quickly became his most admired poem. It was put to music later in the century by an anonymous composer, after which it became a popular song in public houses. The poem has continued to enjoy a reputation as one of Jonson's finest lyrics.

John Addington Symonds, in his 1886 study of Jonson, argues that the poem, one of five by Jonson that he names, is a masterpiece "in purely lyric composition" and has "a quality which is definite and individual. No one before him wrote pieces of the sort so terse, so marked by dominant intelligence, so aptly fitted for their purpose." He concludes that, along with those of Shakespeare, Jonson's lyrics "struck the key-note of the seventeenth century."

Claude J. Summers, in his *Classic and Cavalier: Celebrating Jonson and the Sons of Ben*, addresses current opinion when he writes that the "recent quickening of critical interest in Jonson's nondramatic poetry has led to a new appreciation of his 'subtle sport' and to a new willingness to read him on his own terms." This appreciation is echoed by Marchette Chute in *Ben Jonson of Westminster*, who writes, "Song: To Celia" "is an almost perfect example of a classical poem,

achieving the balanced Greek harmony and the lucid singing line in which each word fulfills its purpose and there is not one too many."

Themes

Courtly Love

Jonson borrowed the conventions of courtly love for the poem but manipulated them to create his unique voice. Traditionally, the lover in these poems is stricken by his lady's beauty, which causes him to idealize her. Ever obedient to her wishes, the humble lover strives to be worthy of her. His feelings of love ennoble him and lead him on the path to moral excellence.

Jonson expresses the cult of the beloved in his poem through his vision of the lady whose kisses are sweeter than the nectar of the gods and whose breath can grant immortality. Yet this speaker does not humble himself to his mistress. He has a calm assurance not found in conventional courtly love poems. In the first stanza, he subtly acknowledges that his lady might be reluctant to express her love for him when he suggests that she leave a kiss in the cup. Traditional lovers would prostrate themselves at their lady's feet, but Jonson's speaker calmly provides an alternative to drinking to him with her eyes.

In the second stanza the speaker alludes to the lady's rejection of his tokens of love when he notes that she sent the rosy wreath back to him. Traditionally, the ladies in courtly love lyrics appear immune to their lovers' terms of endearment. Jonson uses the traditional hyperbolic Petrarchan conceit—an elaborate, especially clever metaphor used to idolize a lady while lamenting her cruelty or indifference—in an innovative way. (Petrarch was a prominent Italian poet of the fourteenth century whose sonnet, with its distinctive construction and themes, became an important poetic model.) Jonson's speaker refuses to recognize the lady's indifference as he offers her signs of his love.

Power

This refusal alters the balance of power in the poem. In courtly love poems, the lady retains power over the speaker, who succumbs to her great beauty. He continually pays tribute to this beauty through the use of hyperbole. Jonson's speaker also uses this device as he praises his lady, but he does not flatter her physical attributes. He finds instead a potent essence within her that transfers kisses into wine and transfers immortality to a rosy wreath. The last four lines of the poem focus on this power and the lady's active connection with nature.

While the speaker acknowledges this force within his lady, he refuses to grant her complete control over him. He admits that his thirst for her would be quenched by drinking her kisses, but he will not openly acknowledge her seeming indifference to him. He maintains his calm composure when she returns the wreath to him and cleverly turns her action into a compliment, noting that the wreath continues to grow and that he can smell her essence on it. Jonson's speaker shows no signs that he considers himself to be her inferior as he tries to find alternate ways for her to express her love for him.

Style

Sound

Repetition of sounds in a poem can emphasize key words and images and so create poetic structure. In addition, sounds can provide pleasure. Jonson uses alliteration, the repetition of initial consonant sounds, in line 6 in the words "drink" and "divine" to emphasize the value the speaker places on his mistress's kiss. He repeats this technique in line 9 with the words "rosy" and "wreath," which highlights her connection with nature. Jonson makes a clever connection between the speaker and his mistress through examples of consonance, the repetition of final consonant sounds, as well as word placement. He ends lines 2, 4, 6, and 8 with the words "mine," "wine," "divine," and "thine," respectively, suggesting that the union of the two would be more divine than wine. The placement of these rhyming words at the ends of the lines reinforces his point.

Language

The poem's popularity is most likely due to its use of simple, direct language that is not difficult for the reader to understand. Robert C. Evans, in his article on Jonson for the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, concludes that Jonson's "'plain style' was neither artless nor utterly clear" and that it avoids the extremes of "sublimity and vulgarity." Evans argues that Jonson's style was "meant to communicate, to have an effect, and it gives his poetry a directness, practicality, seriousness, and force that loftier, lower, or more complicated phrasing would obscure."

These qualities are clearly displayed in "Song: To Celia" in that the lyrics appear more like rhymed prose than poetry. The speaker focuses on actions rather than elaborate metaphors as he describes his love for his lady. He does not effusively describe any distinguishing characteristics about his lady's eyes, for example, or her kisses or her breath. He concentrates instead on what his response would be to her pledges to him. This plain language of love contrasts to the elaborate

conceits of John Donne's poetry as in his poem "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning." Here, the speaker describes himself and his love's souls as "stiff twin compasses": "Thy soul, the fixed foot, makes no show / To move, but doth, if th' other do."

Historical Context

The Seventeenth-Century Court

The dominant forms of literature during the Elizabethan age and under James I and Charles I, the first two Stuart kings, were courtly. The literature read by the courtiers—members of the court and those who frequented it—were the sonnet sequence (a lyric poem of fourteen rhyming lines of equal length), as illustrated in Shakespeare's sonnets; the pastoral romance (which celebrates an idolized vision of love), as in Sir Philip Sidney's *Arcadia*; the chivalric epic (a long poem presenting an idealized code of behavior), as in Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene*; the sermon; and the masque (a spectacular performance that combines drama, music, and dance), as in Jonson's "Pleasure Reconciled to Vertue." Authors like Jonson wrote almost exclusively for the court, since that is where they received their patronage and acclaim.

The literature of the age reflected the distinctive values of court society. Literary works centered on the promotion of a hierarchical order, which necessitated allegiance to the Church of England and the monarch. Robert M. Adams, in his overview of the age, notes that the Elizabethan monarchy and the Church gained such elevated and powerful status owing to the firm belief in "the inevitable structure of things, the natural pattern of the world." This hierarchical form focused on the great chain of being, Adams concludes, where "every creature had his place in the great order of divine appointments; and the different families of being were bound together by a chain of universal analogy."

These values, which were carried over into the reign of James I, promoted literature that was intricate, ornate, and allusive (making reference to important events, literature, or people). Favored subjects included the heroic passions: love, which may or may not be accompanied by marriage; aggression, which often led to a war that lacked a specific political context; and a yearning for a closer relationship with God, expressed as devotional piety. Honor became the paramount principle that governed the works.

Seventeenth-Century Poetry

One of the most significant events of the seventeenth century was the Puritan Revolution of 1640–1660. The Puritans criticized literary works that did not address religious themes and that expressed too much emotion. None of the literature of the age, with the exception of works by John Milton, expressed evident sympathy with Puritan doctrine, which began to emerge in the decades before the revolution. Yet a challenge to tradition and a desire for social and political change began to appear, reflecting the revolutionary spirit of the age. Two distinct poetic groups formed during this period: the metaphysical poets led by Donne, including George Herbert, Richard Crashaw, Henry Vaughan, Abraham Cowley, and John Cleveland, and Jonson and "Ben's Sons," the Cavalier poets Thomas Carew, Robert Herrick, Sir John Suckling, Edmund Waller, and Sir William Davenant. Although some crossover occurred, these two school were defined by distinct characteristics.