Song: To Celia ("Drink to me only with thine

POEM TEXT

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.

SUMMARY

If you'd only "toast" me with a glance, I'd swear loyalty to you with my own eyes in return. And if you dropped a kiss into my empty cup, I'd never bother to fill it with wine. A thirst (like love) that comes from the soul can only be quenched with a truly sacred drink. But even if the king of the gods himself offered me some of his sweet wine, I'd still prefer your kiss.

Not long ago, I sent you a crown of roses, not so much as a gift for you, but as a gift for the roses: I imagined that, in your blissful company, they might never wilt and fade. All you did was breathe gently on this flower-crown and send it back to me. Since then, I swear, the crown is still fresh and growing, and doesn't smell of roses, but of you.

THEMES

THE POWER OF LOVE

The besotted speaker of "Song: To Celia" is drunk on love. A simple glance from his beloved Celia is more delicious than even the wine of the gods, and the scent of her breath makes him feel as if he might be able to cheat death itself. To this speaker, the intoxication of love is a pleasure beyond anything in heaven or earth, and it has the power to transform an ordinary mortal into a goddess.

Begging his beloved Celia to glance his way—or, if he's really lucky, give him a kiss—the speaker makes it clear that he prefers Celia's love to any other delight. If she'd "leave a kiss" in his empty cup, for instance, he'd never need to drink wine again: love alone could get him drunk. Even "nectar," the legendary drink of the classical gods themselves, is nothing next to his Celia's sweetness. There's absolutely no pleasure the speaker would choose over Celia; her love is the absolute best thing he can possibly imagine, in this world or in the heavens themselves.

Not only does Celia outclass every other pleasure in the world for this speaker, but she also has almost supernatural abilities to stave off death. These powers reflect the speaker's undying love for her. When the speaker sends Celia a wreath of roses, he's hoping that her mere presence will preserve them forever—and he's not disappointed. She only has to breathe on the roses, and not only do they not wilt, they "grow." They even smell of Celia herself—a smell that this speaker clearly prizes above any flowery perfume. This sensual image of immortality suggests that the speaker feels his love for Celia is as deathless as those symbolic roses. But it also suggests that love makes him see Celia as a kind of goddess. Love hasn't just made him drunk, it's made his beloved seem magical.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-16

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

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.

Ben Jonson's "Song: To Celia" starts with a famous metaphor: love as wine. To this speaker, love isn't just deliciously intoxicating: it's the most glorious beverage imaginable. No literal wine can live up to a mere glance from his beloved Celia.

The poem's first two lines present an image of lovers' eyes meeting as a kind of toast: a ceremonial beginning to something wonderful. The speaker begs his Celia to "drink to him" with her eyes and vows that he'll "pledge" her with an identical glance. This image suggests not just that the pair are about to enjoy the wine of love together, but that they're making a kind of

promise. A "pledge," after all, can be both a toast and a vow. The speaker isn't just saying that he longs for Celia to return his loving gaze. He's saying that, once she does, he'll swear himself to her forever.

He'll even go one further. If Celia will only "leave a kiss but in the cup," it'll satisfy him so completely that he'll have no need for literal wine anymore. This suggests that Celia's kiss has all the powers wine has, and more: it can quench the speaker's metaphorical thirst, it can satisfy his tastes, it can get him drunk. But the wine of Celia's kiss is better than any real wine could be.

Even in these first four lines, the reader gets the sense that this speaker is pretty drunk on his love for Celia already. But he's not sloppy or exuberant in his drunkenness: he's intensely, quietly committed. Listen to his assonance in these lines:

> 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.

That insistently repeated long /i/ sound—which will appear all through this first stanza—makes the speaker sound completely focused, suggesting that his life centers on his singleminded desire for Celia's love.

LINES 5-8

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 four lines of the poem establish that the speaker experiences his love for Celia as a delicious, intoxicating drink and that he prefers this metaphorical wine to any real wine on earth. The rest of this first stanza makes it clear that he won't stop there: he prefers Celia's love to anything in the heavens too.

His love for Celia, the speaker insists, comes not just from his body, but from his soul. Only a truly "divine" beverage can quench the kind of spiritual thirst he feels as he gazes at her. Yet even if he were offered "Jove's nectar"—that is, the traditional drink of the Olympian gods, the most "divine" drink there is—he'd turn it down in favor of Celia's affections.

That's a pretty big claim! The speaker is here alluding to a drink that the classical gods (including "Jove," or Jupiter) used to maintain their immortality and to turn mere mortals into gods themselves. For instance, the mortal princess Psyche was said to have drunk nectar at her marriage to the love-god Eros, and to have thus transformed into the goddess of the soul.

If the speaker is turning a sip of that magical beverage down in favor of Celia's love, he's either saying that he prefers a mortal life with Celia to an immortal life among the gods themselves—or, even more boldly, that Celia's love might have the power to make him immortal too. If her kiss can quench his "soul," perhaps it can also preserve it. That powerful idea will return in the second stanza.

For now, note the way this image unites the spiritual and the sexual. Take a closer look at the language here:

> But might I of Jove's nectar sup,
> I would not change for thine.

That "thine" suggests that Celia has a "nectar" of her own. That might suggest Celia's love, in a pure and abstract kind of way. But it might also suggest something a lot more literal: for instance, the sweetness of her lips!

In other words, this speaker's passion is deeply rooted in both his soul and his body: he loves Celia with every part of himself. And his love is so intense that even the gods can't compete. There's nothing in heaven or earth that he adores more deeply than Celia.

LINES 9-12

I sent thee late a rosy wreath,
Not so much honouring thee
As giving it a hope, that there
It could not withered be.

In the second stanza, the speaker begins to tell a story—rather a strange one, as it will turn out. He remembers sending Celia a crown of roses, claiming that this wasn't so much a gift for her as it was a way of preserving the roses. Hoping that in Celia's company, the roses "could not withered be," the speaker suggests that Celia has magical, revitalizing power.

In sending Celia this wreath and hoping she'll preserve it forever, the speaker hints that he feels Celia might just be the person to do the almost impossible and keep love eternally alive. Roses are one of the most ancient symbols of love there is. That's not just because of their delicious scent and their skin-soft petals, but also because of their painful thorns and their all-too-fast withering. (Like Ben Jonson's buddy Shakespeare wrote in *Twelfth Night*, roses' beautiful blossoms, "being once displayed, doth fall that very hour.")

But around Celia, the speaker suggests here, roses can never fade. His adoration for her seems almost to make her into a goddess, a figure who can keep love perpetually new and fresh.

He describes the gift he sent, not merely as a crown of roses, but as a "rosy wreath." This evocative adjective suggests these flowers are deep pink, a bit of imagery that hints at something bodily: perhaps these roses are the color of Celia's lips or her blushing cheeks. Once again, there's a sense that the speaker's love for Celia is both soulful and sensual. The /ee/ assonance in "I sent thee late a rosy wreath" makes that even clearer: that

sweet, drawn-out vowel suggests how much the speaker savors even the thought of his beloved.

LINES 13-16

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.

When Celia receives the speaker's crown of roses, she does something peculiar with it, something that shows she understands the speaker perfectly. Rather than doing any of the obvious things one might with a wreath of roses—wear it, for instance, or hang it on the wall—she "only breathe[s]" on it and sends it right back to the speaker.

That gesture might, to some, look like a rejection. But to this speaker, it's deeply satisfying, and only confirms what he suspected: his Celia is pure magic. Ever since he got those roses back, he says, not only have they not withered, they've started to "grow" afresh. And even better, they don't just smell like roses anymore: they smell of Celia herself.

This intimate moment of imagery suggests that the speaker knows *exactly* what Celia smells like, and prizes that smell above even the scent of roses. Perhaps it helps readers to imagine that perfume, too: it's as if the speaker is saying, "imagine the smell of roses—but *even better*."

At once holy and sexual, this final moment sums up the speaker's wholehearted, body-and-soul love for Celia. In his besotted eyes, Celia is a goddess, capable of making cut flowers sprout and grow, well worthy to be crowned with roses as the Queen of Love. But she's also a human being whose body he knows intimately. She fulfills and enchants him both spiritually and physically.

The proof of the speaker's intense devotion appears, not only in his passionate images, but also in a delicate pun:

> But thou thereon didst only breathe,
> And sent'st it back to me;

Celia "sent'st" the wreath back to the speaker—and "scents" it with her breath.

This isn't the kind of wordplay one is likely to notice on a first reading, since the speaker doesn't introduce the striking idea that the wreath smells of Celia until a couple of lines later. But that very subtlety suggests just how completely the speaker's love for Celia has possessed him. Her delectable perfume seems to waft out into the very fabric of his poem: it's so much a part of him that it infuses all his ardent language.

SYMBOLS

THE ROSY WREATH

The "rosy wreath" the speaker sends Celia in the second stanza is a symbol of undying passion.

Flowers are a common symbol of love, and none more so than roses. Their delicious scent and soft petals evoke love's delights (and lovers' bodies), and their thorns and speedy wilting reflect love's pains, disappointments, and unreliability.

But when this speaker sends Celia a "rosy wreath," it seems all the agonies of love go out the window. Celia's mere breath makes these roses immortal: they can't be "withered" so long as they're near her.

What's more, in this speaker's mind, Celia and the roses seem pretty intimately related. When Celia breathes on the wreath and sends it back to him, the speaker swears that the wreath smells, not of roses, but of Celia herself: an intensely sexual image that suggests his passion for her will never "wither," either.

And since these roses take the form of a "wreath," there's a sense that the speaker wants to crown Celia the queen of love—the way a poet laureate is crowned with laurels.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-16:** "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."

POETIC DEVICES

PARALLELISM

The parallelism (and anaphora) in the first lines of "Song: To Celia" introduces the speaker's earnest voice—and the poem's wine metaphors.

Take a look at the repeated grammatical structure in the first quatrain:

> 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.

These lines use a sing-song structure that harmonizes with the sing-song rhyme scheme. First, the speaker begs a favor from his beloved Celia. Then, he assures her of just how deeply he'll

appreciate any sign of love from her.

Those assurances start with the same words: "And I will," "And I'll." That anaphora makes the speaker sound even more serious and intense, as if he's saying, "No, listen, really, I want *nothing more* than the tiniest loving gesture from you."

The repetitions here also introduce the poem's wine metaphor. In this impassioned speaker's eyes, a mere glance from Celia—let alone a kiss!—is more intoxicating than even the headiest drink. Parallelism subtly underscores that comparison, repeatedly drawing the reader's attention to the speaker's love-drunk state.

Parallelism thus sets up the tone and mood of the rest of the poem, making it clear that this speaker is deeply in love, and deeply serious about it.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "Drink to me only with thine eyes, / And I will pledge with mine;"
- **Lines 3-4:** "Or leave a kiss but in the cup, / And I'll not look for wine."

METAPHOR

The poem's central metaphor, in which the speaker imagines Celia's love as an intoxicating beverage, presents love not just as overwhelming and delicious, but as heavenly—or better than heavenly.

At the end of the first stanza, the speaker assures Celia that even "Jove's nectar" isn't anywhere near as sweet as hers. Celia's "nectar" here is a richly ambiguous metaphor: it might mean anything from her love in general to the literal taste of her lips.

And in saying that he prefers that "nectar" even to "Jove's," the speaker is making a pretty dramatic claim! Nectar was the traditional drink of the Greek and Roman gods, and it had immense power: paired with the gods' food, ambrosia, it conferred immortality. In some stories, the gods even used nectar and ambrosia to turn mortals into Olympians; for instance, the mortal princess Psyche, bride of the love god Eros, became a goddess after a feast of those magical delicacies.

Turning aside a goblet of "Jove's nectar" in favor of Celia's nectar, the speaker thus makes his point very clear: Celia's love is a pleasure beyond even immortal godhood. In fact, maybe the speaker even feels as if a kiss from Celia makes him feel even more immortal and godly than nectar could! This metaphor suggests that, to this speaker, there's nothing in heaven or earth to compare to Celia.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-8:** "But might I of Jove's nectar sup, / I would not change for thine."

ASSONANCE

Pronounced, musical assonance helps to make this poem sound like what it is: a love song.

For instance, take a look at the sounds that weave through the first four lines:

> 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.

A lot of the assonance here is on a long /i/ sound—a sound that also appears in the rhyme words "mine" and "wine," and creates a slant rhyme between "eyes" and "mine." The constancy of that sound, which appears all through the first stanza, makes the poem feel both musical and intensely focused, reflecting the speaker's single-minded adoration. Meanwhile, the quiet /uh/ sound of "but" and "cup" adds a gentle counterpoint.

And listen to the similar effect in the first lines of the second stanza:

> I sent thee late a rosy wreath,
> Not so much honouring thee

All those long /ee/ sounds evoke the delicious sweetness of love: they invite the reader to draw the vowel out at luxurious length. They also create another slant rhyme between "wreath" and "thee," drawing even more attention to the poem's musical rhymes. (Take a look at the Rhyme Scheme section for an in-depth look at how rhyme and assonance work together to make this poem melodious.)

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "thine eyes"
- **Line 2:** "I," "mine"
- **Line 3:** "but," "cup"
- **Line 4:** "I'll," "wine"
- **Line 5:** "rise"
- **Line 6:** "divine"
- **Line 7:** "might I"
- **Line 8:** "I," "thine"
- **Line 9:** "thee," "rosy," "wreath"
- **Line 10:** "so," "thee"
- **Line 11:** "hope"
- **Line 12:** "be"
- **Line 13:** "breathe"
- **Line 14:** "me"

ALLITERATION

Alliteration adds touches of color to the poem's sounds, drawing attention to important moments.

For instance, the crisp /k/ sound of "leave a kiss but in the cup" both invites readers to imagine this romantic scene—what might it look like to drop a kiss into a cup?—and almost makes a kissing sound itself.

And when the speaker observes that the soul's deep thirst for love "Doth ask a drink divine," those powerful /d/ sounds help readers to feel just how serious the speaker is here. Celia's kiss, to him, outclasses the "nectar" of the gods; it's the divinest drink there is.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "kiss," "cup"
- **Line 5:** "doth"
- **Line 6:** "Doth," "drink divine"
- **Line 9:** "rosy wreath"
- **Line 11:** "that there"
- **Line 13:** "thou thereon"
- **Line 15:** "Since," "smells," "swear"
- **Line 16:** "itself"

ALLUSION

The poem's allusion to Jove and his nectar raises the speaker's love to heady, mythological heights—and places the poem in Ben Jonson's own 17th-century world.

Jove was another name for Jupiter, also known as Zeus, the king of the gods in the Greek and Roman pantheon. Classical mythology was so fashionable as to be ubiquitous in Renaissance Europe, and writers often invoked the gods to intensify (and class up) their poetry.

But in the 16th and 17th centuries, Jove was also a common euphemism for the Christian God. Some 17th-century English-speaking Christians felt that it was blasphemous to call God "God," and swore by Jove instead—both because Jove might just be a classical reference, and because it sounded like "Jehovah," one of God's traditional proper names in the Bible. ("Jehovah" is an Anglicization of the tetragrammaton, YHWH, often pronounced "Yahweh" in the Jewish tradition.)

Here, the speaker seems to have the Greco-Roman Jove in mind. He's imagining being offered "Jove's nectar," the traditional beverage of the Olympian gods, and rejecting it in favor of Celia's love. But perhaps both versions of Jove are at play here. To this speaker, Celia seems to transcend everything in heaven and earth, and even has godlike powers: her mere breath can keep transient flowers fresh and growing. Turning away from "Jove" in favor of Celia, the speaker seems to find all the powers of the heavens concentrated in his beloved.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-8:** "But might I of Jove's nectar sup, / I would not change for thine."

IMAGERY

At the end of the poem, the speaker uses intense (and rather racy) imagery to evoke, not just the *spiritual*, but the *physical* power of Celia's love.

This imagery arises in an odd little anecdote. The speaker first remembers sending Celia a "rosy wreath." On the one hand, this could just be a straightforward description: a rosy wreath is a crown of roses. But the speaker's choice to use the adjective "rosy" (rather than just saying he sent a rose crown) heightens this line's sensory power, inviting readers to imagine abundant blush-pink petals. There's some clear sexual symbolism in this image as well.

Celia did something peculiar with this flowery gift, the speaker recalls: she merely "breathe[d]" on it and sent it back to him. Since then, he says, it hasn't wilted: instead, it's still alive and growing. What's more, it "smells [...] Not of itself, but thee." This deeply intimate image manages to suggest not just that the roses smell of Celia now, but that Celia might also smell a bit like roses—though even better, of course. This moment also makes it clear that this is a smell the speaker *knows*: he's gotten close enough to give Celia a good sniff before!

This moment of imagery makes it clear that the speaker's passion for Celia isn't some chaste courtly romance, but deeply sexual.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "a rosy wreath,"
- **Lines 15-16:** "Since when it grows, and smells, I swear, / Not of itself, but thee."

PUN

The poem's single, subtle pun helps to make the poem's sensual last lines feel even more striking.

At the end of the poem, the speaker tells Celia about the mysterious transformation that has come over the "rosy wreath" he sent her. Ever since she "breathe[d]" on it and sent it back to him, he says, it has stayed eternally fresh, as if Celia's breath had an immortalizing power. But what's more, those roses don't smell like roses any more: they smell like Celia herself, a perfume the speaker clearly prefers to the original.

The speaker underlines this sensuous moment with an understated bit of wordplay:

> But thou thereon didst only breathe,
> And sent'st it back to me;

It seems that Celia hasn't just "sent'st" (or sent) the roses back to the speaker: she also "scents" them, out-perfuming their perfume.

Of course, readers aren't likely to notice this pun until a second reading, as it appears *before* the idea that the roses smell of Celia now. But that's all part of the subtle elegance that has made this poem as immortal as those roses. This is the least jokey of puns: it's not a gag, but a moment of almost subliminal wordplay that suggests just how deeply love for Celia has penetrated this speaker's soul.

Where Pun appears in the poem:

- **Line 14:** "sent'st it back to me"

VOCABULARY

Drink to me (Line 1) - Toast me, raise a glass to me.

Thine, Thee, Thou (Line 1, Line 8, Line 10, Line 13, Line 16) - "Thine" means "your"; "thee" and "thou" are the object and subject forms of "you." All of these words might sound formal now, but in Jonson's time they were intimate, like the French or Spanish "tu."

Pledge (Line 2) - To pledge can mean to toast, as with a glass of wine—but it can also mean to swear loyalty.

Leave a kiss but in the cup (Line 3) - In other words, "just drop a kiss in my cup."

Doth (Line 5, Line 6) - Does.

Jove (Line 7) - Another name for Jupiter or Zeus, the king of the gods in Greek and Roman mythology.

Nectar (Line 7) - The immortality-bestowing wine of the gods in Greek and Roman mythology.

Sup (Line 7) - Drink.

I would not change for thine (Line 8) - That is, "I wouldn't trade your kisses even for the nectar of the gods."

Thou thereon didst only breathe (Line 13) - That is, "You merely breathed on the wreath I just mentioned."

Sent'st (Line 14) - A contraction of "sentest"—which just means "sent"!

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Song: To Celia" is, as its title suggests, a song: a short, sweet, musical poem. It's built from two eight-line stanzas (or octaves), but those stanzas also break down neatly into two pairs of four-line stanzas (or quatrains). Each quatrain is more specifically a ballad stanza, a form that's often set to music. (For more on what makes this a ballad stanza, check out the Meter and Rhyme Scheme sections of this guide.)

This neat, elegant form makes the speaker sound not just passionate, but calm and sure-footed. He isn't wildly crying "I'm in love and I want the world to know it!" like a young Romeo. He's making a measured, focused, quietly intense "pledge" of undying love.

In the first stanza, the speaker swears that he wants nothing more than his Celia's love—a common enough sentiment in love poetry, though beautifully expressed. But something more unusual happens in the second stanza: the speaker tells Celia a little story about how the roses she breathed on smell, not of roses, but of her own sweetness now. This storytelling makes the poem feel more intimate as it goes on, until, by the end, it's as if the speaker is whispering in Celia's ear.

METER

"Song: To Celia" uses an old, musical meter: ballad meter, sometimes also known as common measure. That means its lines switch between iambic tetrameter—that is, lines of four iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm—and iambic trimeter, lines of *three* iambs.

Here's how that sounds in lines 5-6:

> The thirst | that from | the soul | doth rise
> Doth ask | a drink | divine;

This is one of the oldest and most common meters in English-language poetry, and its gentle, swaying rhythm makes it especially suitable for love poems like this one. The meter here seems to invite a besotted lover to burst into song. (And in fact, this famous song has been set to music many, many times—see the Resources section for some examples.)

But the speaker also plays with that meter. Take a look at the rhythm of the very first line:

> Drink to | me on- | ly with | thine eyes,

Spot the difference? The first foot there is a trochee, the opposite of an iamb: it goes DUM-da instead of da-DUM. That strong first stress makes the speaker sound urgent, as if he's swept up in his passion.

RHYME SCHEME

This poem's musical rhyme scheme runs like this:

> ABCBABCB

An ABCB rhyme scheme is pretty common and familiar, turning up everywhere from ballads to nursery rhymes. But there's something a little different going on here.

The ABCB scheme usually breaks down into quatrains, with a new set of rhymes in every four-line stanza. But here, the same

A, B, and C rhymes repeat across each full eight-line octave.

This drawn-out, alternating pattern, always returning to that same B rhyme, feels melodious and hypnotic. That musicality suits this poem's form—it's a song, after all. But it also suggests just how enraptured the speaker is by his Celia: just as the rhymes orbit around that B, his thoughts orbit around her.

And to make things even more intense, the poem is also riddled with assonant slant rhyme—for instance, the long /i/ sound shared between "eyes" and "mine" or "rise" and "divine" in the first stanza, or the long /ee/ sounds of "wreath"/"thee" and "breathe"/"me" in the second. These echoes fill the poem with rich harmony.

SPEAKER

The speaker of this poem is, first and foremost, a lover. He's so besotted with his Celia that he sees her as an almost angelic figure: a being whose kisses are more intoxicating than wine, who smells sweeter than roses, and who can keep flowers alive with her mere breath.

In fact, this speaker is so deeply in love that he can't imagine any pleasure above the pleasure his beloved gives him. Even the wine of the gods couldn't tempt the speaker away from a single kiss from Celia. In other words, he's got it bad—and that doesn't bother him one bit. He embraces his fate with fervor, vowing to "pledge" himself to his beloved like a priest in a goddess's temple.

While we've used masculine pronouns in this guide to reflect the fact that the speaker has been historically read as being male like the poet, Ben Johnson, do note that there's no actual indication in the text itself of the speaker's gender!

SETTING

There's no clear setting in this poem: it's just an intimate message of love. But its archaic vocabulary makes it clear that this love song belongs to Ben Jonson's own Jacobean England.

For instance, the allusion to "Jove" evokes not just ancient Greece, but a Renaissance habit of referring to (and swearing by) the classical gods. (See Malvolio in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* crying "Jove and my stars be praised!" for just one famous example.)

While the language here places this poem in a particular era, its sentiments are timeless. Set to music, this poem has become an old standard, alive to this day.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

The rowdy, witty, irascible Ben Jonson (1572-1637) was one of the biggest and most influential voices of 17th-century literary London. A contemporary, friend, and sometime rival of Shakespeare's, he was famous for his brilliant, cynical plays and his tender (and often heartbreaking) verse.

"Song: To Celia" is perhaps Jonson's most enduring work, though it's often not even attributed to him. Set to music, it became so famous that it's almost a folk song, an old standard that has stayed popular since it was first published in Jonson's 1616 collection *The Forest*. It's such a force in pop culture that everyone from Johnny Cash to Bing Crosby to Hyacinth Bucket has performed it.

Jonson was such a popular and influential figure that a whole younger generation of writers, including big names like Robert Herrick and Richard Lovelace, called themselves the "Tribe of Ben." These writers would gather in The Devil and St. Dunstan, a London tavern, to party and argue with Jonson, and considered themselves inheritors of both his lyrical language and his iconoclastic wit.

Jonson was often in trouble with the law during his lifetime—for his brawling, and for his stubborn Catholicism in a Protestant era. He nonetheless rose to favor and acclaim under the reigns of King James and King Charles I. While he was never officially given the title, many consider him England's first Poet Laureate.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Ben Jonson was one of the leading lights of the English Renaissance, and lived right at the heart of the action in 16th- and 17th-century London, a golden age for English poetry and theater. Poets and playwrights like Jonson held an unusual position in a changing English society: while many of them came from lower-class origins, their popular and influential art meant they walked among royalty. Jonson, for instance, worked as a bricklayer and soldier as a young man, but by the end of his life had served two monarchs, James I and Charles I. In this art-loving age, theater and poetry allowed for an unprecedented new kind of social mobility.

Jonson worked for a while as an actor and an undistinguished writer, but began his real rise to prominence when the Lord Chamberlain's Men—Shakespeare's theater company—performed his play *Every Man in His Humour*. Jonson quickly became famous for his cutting, cynical plays, many of which skewered human greed and folly.

He was also famous for his combative friendship with Shakespeare. Not long before he died, he wrote in one breath that Shakespeare was a windbag—and a man he loved "on this side idolatry." It's in part thanks to Jonson that much of

Shakespeare's work survived: after Shakespeare's death, Jonson helped to publish the First Folio, the world-changing book that collected many of Shakespeare's previously unprinted plays. (Cantankerous to the end, Jonson also took the opportunity to criticize the portrait of Shakespeare that appeared in that volume, urging readers to "look / Not on his picture, but his book.")

Ever an iconoclast, Jonson refused to do what others did even in death: a longstanding legend that he was buried standing up was confirmed in an excavation of his grave in Westminster Abbey.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Short Biography — Learn more about Ben Jonson's life and work at the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/ben-jonson)
- Jonson's Legacy — Learn more about Jonson's enduring literary reputation. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/oct/14/ben-jonson-a-life-review)
- The Poem Set to Music — Listen to Johnny Cash performing this song (and reminiscing about how important it was to him). (https://youtu.be/0LJeidEMdXA)
- The Poem in Pop Culture — Watch a performance of the song from the 2020 movie version of Jane Austen's Emma. (https://youtu.be/zaLqAGIxixM)
- Jonson's Works — Find links to more information about Jonson's career and writing at the British Library. (https://www.bl.uk/people/ben-jonson#)
- Another Performance — Listen to Paul Robeson singing another musical version of the song. (https://youtu.be/kUZSLWoCRsE)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER BEN JONSON POEMS

- On My First Daughter
- On My First Son

HOW TO CITE

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