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Ben Jonson's Rhetoric of Love

Mary L. Livingston

Classical beauty resists analysis. The polished surfaces of some of our most admired lyrics escape the scrutinous scholar's eye, as if their perfections are simply to be, not to be studied. Prominent among such literary jewels is a familiar lyric by Ben Jonson, the "Song to Celia" ("Drinke to me, onely, with thine eyes"). Though much anthologized and often sung, it has escaped critical attention, as if its perfection is, somehow, uneventful. In its beauty and neglect it raises some interesting critical problems. Do such classically smooth poems lack qualities that make poetry worth talking about? Or is it possible that their aesthetic perfection is itself part of the poetry's rhetoric?

Twentieth-century literary theory, which generally posits tension or ambiguity at the center of poetic activity, seems to leave such lyrics inaccessible to analysis. In light of contemporary critical expectations, Jonson's famous song appears deficient in qualities essential to serious poetry. In fact, one of the major statements of critical theory isolates the "Song to Celia" as an example of poetry that involves no significant ambiguity.¹ Since ambiguity has been regarded by many as a *sine qua non* of poetry, we may conclude that Jonson's lines lack the complexity of thought we expect in poetry. As William Empson has observed, one decides early "that a simple lyricism is intended" and therefore accepts the song at face value. And indeed, the absence of commentary on the song seems to indicate that none is needed.

Though the song shows a polished surface and is as graceful a compliment as any in English, its themes and techniques characterize Renaissance poetry that has provoked far more commentary. The themes are common to Renaissance love poetry: the deification of the lady, the metaphor of Platonic beauty, the comparison of the lady to a rose, the use of the rose as a messenger of mortality. In fact, the message to Celia is the standard advice of the Renaissance persuasion to love: seize the day. The fact that these themes are conventional to poetry of the period demands that we evaluate Jonson's song in its literary context. To assess the

poetic merits of the "Song to Celia" we must consider how Jonson uses traditional themes and motifs, just as we would read any other Renaissance poetry in terms of the poet's use of traditional elements. When we look at Jonson's song in its literary context, we can see that it is not simply a familiar lyric, but rather an extraordinarily subtle and well-crafted example of its genre. In spite of his protest, "Why I Write Not of Love," Jonson demonstrates with typical skill his mastery of the mode.

Especially because it is familiar, the first part of the poem needs attention:

Drinke to me, onely, with thine eyes,
And I will pledge with mine;
Or leave a kisse but in the cup,
And Ile not looke for wine.
The thirst, that from the soule doth rise,
Doth aske a drinke divine:
But might I of Jove's Nectar sup,
I would not change for thine.²

The first six lines are translated from the letters of Philostratus. In fact, most of the poem consists of a rearrangement of lines from Philostratus's letters. No source has been noted for lines seven and eight, however, and it may well be that they are original with Jonson. Empson focuses on these two lines as an example of the type of ambiguity that must be ignored, because reading the lines as ambiguous "would be irrelevant to the total effect intended," which is "simple lyricism."

The last two lines say the opposite of what is meant; I must take some credit for not putting this well-known case into the seventh type of ambiguity. But one has already decided from the rest of the verse that a simple lyricism is intended; there are no other two-faced implications of any plausibility, and the word *but*, after all, admits only one form for the antithesis. This is not to say that the last two lines are an accident, and should be altered; you may feel it gives a touching completeness to his fervour that he feels so sure no one will misunderstand him.³

Actually Jonson's use of the word "but," contrasting what is about

to be said with what has gone before, is no more obscure than Empson's. It is unlikely that Jonson used "but" to mean "even if" because that would imply possession of the lady's kiss (to make trading possible), whereas the point of the lines is to beg a kiss; and normally Jonson attends rigorously to the logic of his fictions. The subjunctive "would not change" rules out the possibility that the kiss can be assumed. Although the lady's kiss might be heaven on earth, only a drink of Jove's nectar can bring absolute satisfaction: "But might I of Jove's Nectar sup, / I would not change for thine." Thus the logic of the language steers us away from the usual reading of the poem as only an extravagant compliment.

An extravagant compliment it is, but, in the mode of love poetry, a compliment qualified by a glance at mutability and the devastations of time. When the lines in question are read as meaning simply what they say, they support the reading of the song as a *carpe diem* poem. The preference for Jove's cup qualifies—simultaneously lays the conditions for and delimits—the poet's commitments to love. The lady's kisses may be a "drinke divine," but their divinity is derived from a higher source; and it is because he lacks access to the original cup that the poet needs the kiss left in the present one. In terms of the religion of love expressed in Renaissance lyrics, Jonson's distinction is orthodox. The typical neo-platonic formula is operative: the lady's kisses are valued as "divine" because they are the most nearly pure embodiments of Jove's nectar, but the "thirst, that from the soule doth rise" seeks a draught ultimately from the source. Jonson outdoes the sonneteers by extending the neo-platonic hierarchy to a third level: the divinity of Jove's nectar is transferred to the lady's kiss and even to the shadow of her kiss left on a wine cup. Other Renaissance poets beg a kiss (and then another); in the religion of love, this poet excels them all by begging only the neo-platonic image of a kiss. Not only is the lover exquisitely courteous, but Celia, as her name shows, is truly heavenly.

The song's serious tone is warranted in part by some of the submerged imagery, such as the Biblical allusion to the "thirst, that from the soule doth rise."⁴ The word "cup" is also laden with religious significance, and "sup" suggests a broader frame of reference than mere drinking. The poet's argument, supported by the mixture of classical and Christian imagery, is that he loves the lady absolutely on this earth; but if he were able to sup at the final communion in heaven, he would no longer value her kisses so

dearly. The allusions to the soul's thirst and to its final satisfaction create a resonance extending beyond simple lyricism. Jonson's mixture of classical theme and Christian imagery creates the type of tension described in Archibald MacLeish's well-known essay on metaphoric action in poetry; like Marvell's "deserts of vast eternity," Jonson's imagery constitutes a "vivid figure which will not let the poem lie inert in the inanity of its apparent theme."⁵

Reading the first part of the poem in terms of Renaissance love lore prepares for the more explicit treatment of the theme of mutability and for further qualification of the lady's divinity in the second part. The song should be read as one piece; although the musical setting involves repetition, the poem is not divided into stanzas.

The second half of the poem is less familiar but more accessible in that its themes are clearly conventional to Renaissance poetry. Moving up close, this part consists of the response of the lover whose gift of roses has been rejected by his lady. His comment to her is elegant; but, like other *carpe diem* poetry, it also carries a sting:

I sent thee, late, a rosie wreath,
Not so much honoring thee,
As giving it a hope, that there
It could not withered bee.
But thou thereon did'st onely breath,
And sent'st it back to mee:
Since when it growes, and smells, I sweare,
Not of itselfe but thee.

As the interruptive word "late" suggests, time is the theme. The motifs are traditional to *carpe diem* poetry: the rose, its inevitable withering, its prized scent, the analogy with the lady. Like many of the poems in its mode, it is not simply a compliment, but also a warning to the lady. The rose is a symbol of beauty and of the transience of beauty. Shakespeare assumes both senses, for example, when the poet of Sonnet I wishes that "beauty's rose might never die."⁶

In the "Song to Celia," the lover's address to the woman who has rejected his flowers is shaped by the reversal of the terms of comparison in the traditional theme that as the rose withers, so will the lady's beauty fade. A good example of a simple statement of the

theme is Waller's "Go, Lovely Rose!" in which the rose is, as in Jonson's poem, a messenger.

Go, lovely Rose!
Tell her that wastes her time and me
That now she knows,
When I resemble her to thee,
How sweet and fair she seems to be.

The final stanza delivers the real message:

Then die! that she
The common fate of all things rare
May read in thee;
How small a part of time they share
That are so wondrous sweet and fair!⁷

Jonson's song pushes the analogy between the rose and the lady a step further. He reverses the terms of comparison, so that, extravagantly and at the same time realistically, it is the woman, not the rose, who sets the standards of beauty.

Jonson's claim that the roses "grow" is far more subtle than Waller's phrase, "Then die!" To say that the rosy wreath "grows" as a result of the lady's breathing upon it is by no means to suggest that the roses will not wither. Rather, as the mention of breathing intimates, the natural process leading to death is continuing. Among Jonson's contemporaries, one's breath was thought to express one's life; but to attribute to the lady's breath the power of giving life is to challenge the myth of her divinity. The image of the growing roses may be illuminated by comparison with an exchange between the Duke and Viola in *Twelfth Night*:

Duke: . . . For women are as roses, whose fair flow'r
Being once display'd, doth fall that very hour.
Viola: And so they are: alas that they are so!
To die, even when they to perfection grow!
(II.4.37-42)

As Celia continues to grow in beauty, so the roses flower in splendor. But all beauty will not last until autumn.

The interjected oath, "I swear," paradoxically causes the reader

to question the poet's sincerity or "simple lyricism." It suggests false naivete—a guise Jonson uses in a number of poems, such as those in "A Celebration of Charis," which form a similarly wry comment on the theme of love. The objection "Not so much honoring thee" likewise reminds us that the speaker is indeed a lover who sent roses as a persuasion to love, not a gardener interested in preserving flowers. We should imagine the speaker not as a sentimental poet holding a wreath of immortal roses, but as a clever lover whose graceful compliment also seeks its revenge. Though a master of hyperbole, Jonson usually grounds his hyperboles in reality; and his lines on love are always disciplined by the bite of his critical wit.

The claim that the rose's scent is not its own but the lady's is an exalted compliment, but it also indirectly identifies the lady's fate with the rose's (or rather, the rose's fate with the lady's). Since the terms of comparison have been reversed, so that the lady's beauty is logically prior, it is true that she honors the roses. Their beauty derives from the human perception of beauty, of which she is the model. The theme is handled so delicately that the lady's beauty is untouched—indeed, unmentioned. In the natural world, Celia is incomparable: even the rose must be compared to her, not she to it. The rose's prized scent derives from her breath. But if she, like the young friend in Shakespeare's sonnets, gives sweetness to the rose, she, as the human model, will also teach natural beauty how to die. In this humanistic framework, Jonson's lovely compliment is not at all farfetched, but tragically realistic.

The song's thematic tension is reinforced by its rhythmical patterns of statement and qualification. Throughout the song, eight-syllable lines alternate with six-syllable lines, creating a pattern of statement and dovetailing refrain that is reinforced by a parallel alternation in accentual patterns: the long lines open with stressed syllables, the short ones with unstressed syllables. This modified ballad form, with its rhythm sometimes counterpointing meaning, helps to convey the poem's complex message.

The "Song to Celia" is not ambiguous in the sense that the poet expresses uncertainties in his own mind or raises insolvable problems, but it exhibits to a high degree the obliquity or complexity of vision that modern theories of poetry emphasize. It can be called unparadoxical only if paradox is defined as open-ended ambiguity, and such a definition would exclude most medieval and Renaissance poetry. Amply it shows the "tough

reasonableness beneath a slight lyric grace" that T.S. Eliot appreciated as seventeenth-century wit. Perhaps its final complexity is its finely polished surface, which offers a lyric grace teasing the ear and tempting us to believe that beauty is truth.

NOTES

¹William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (New York: New Directions, 1947), pp. 241-42.

²All quotations of Jonson are from the edition by C. H. Herford, Percy Simpson, and Evelyn Simpson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1925-52), VIII, 106.

³Empson, p. 242.

⁴*Psalms* 63:1, 143:6; *Matthew* 5:6.

⁵Archibald MacLeish, "Metaphor," in *Aspects of Poetry*, ed. Mark Linenthal (Boston: Little, Brown, 1963), p. 353.

⁶Quotations of Shakespeare are from George Lyman Kittredge's edition of *The Complete Works of Shakespeare* (New York: Ginn, 1936).

⁷G. Thorn Drury, ed., *The Poems of Edmund Waller* (New York: Greenwood, 1968), p. 128.