

## Have You Seen But a White Lily Grow

*Words: Ben Johnson  
Tune: Robert Johnson?*

Reliquary of English Song, p.28

From: <https://www.allmusic.com/composition/have-you-seen-but-a-white-lily-grow-for-voice-lute-mc0002377297>

Description by "Blue" Gene Tyranny

Written for the play *The Devil is an Ass* by Ben Jonson (first presented by the King's Men, the early 1600s theater group of which William Shakespeare was a member and for whom he wrote plays), this song for baritone and lute expresses a feeling of awe and adoration--but with the softest of touches. The listener is drawn in by the first two lines--"Have you seen the white lily grow,/Before rude hands have touched it?"--which make their way from a major key to the relative minor by means of gentle, ascending scale passages. With the lines "Have you felt the wool of beaver?/Or swans' down ever?" the text begins to lean toward the erotic; accordingly, the harmonies also change, colored by an evocative modal tuning. As though a provocation to puritanism, the song continues to offer rich imagery related to the senses of smell, taste and touch: "Have you smelt to the bud of the brier? Or the nards in the fire? Have you tasted the bag of the bee?" The concluding refrain is repeated with extreme delicacy: "Oh, so white, oh, so soft,/Oh, so sweet is she!"