Kissing

Erik Gray

DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780198752974.003.0004

Abstract and Keywords

This chapter concerns kissing, which has figured prominently in the love poetry tradition. A poem is the natural correlative to a kiss. Both are oral pleasures; both are simultaneously sensual and spiritual, providing satisfaction in themselves while also sublimating or substituting for more intimate forms of erotic contact. Above all, both reflect the many contradictions that cluster around love. Like a poem, a kiss both communicates and interferes with communication; it is both discrete and unbounded; it represents both union and separation. Beginning with Catullus and taking as its central figure the Renaissance poet Joannes Secundus, whose neoclassical Basia (Kisses) exerted a lasting influence, the chapter considers the structures that poets have consistently deployed to communicate the experience of a kiss, including not only rhyme but such tropes as chiasmus, parataxis, and polyptoton, all of which help figure forth the erotic tensions inherent in the act of kissing.

Keywords: kissing, kiss, sensuality, spirituality, sublimation, Catullus, Joannes Secundus, Basia, poetic tropes
Kissing and poetry form a natural pair. The first verse of the Song of Songs, for example, concerns poetry, announcing itself as “The Song of Songs, which is Solomon’s,” and the second concerns kissing: “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!” The connections between the two are both manifold and manifest. Perhaps the most fundamental link is that both are oral pleasures. The speaker in the Song specifies a desire not just for kisses but for the kisses “of his mouth” (piyhu): the very redundancy of the specification suggests the pleasure of lingering, even in imagination, on the lips of the beloved. And poetry too lingers on the lips. Most poetry is intended to be pronounced aloud, since the pleasure of physically articulating the words is integral to the experience of a poem—so much so that readers of poetry may move their lips even when reading silently, without feeling any of the stigma that usually now attaches to that practice. In return, readers tend to imagine poets likewise forming their words by mouth, rather than by hand. The poet is traditionally figured as a singer—hence the “Song of Songs”—and, however little this may correspond to actual practice at any given time, the idea of oral composition still adheres much more strongly to poetry than to prose. Thus poet and reader both imagine each other pronouncing the same words; like kissing, poetry is not just an oral pleasure, but a shared one.
Both activities, moreover, bear the same paradoxical relation to the usual, everyday language of love: they are at once more sensual and more spiritual. When conversation between lovers culminates in a kiss, the communication has, quite obviously, shifted from a conceptual register to a physical one. Yet a long tradition, which includes classical, Christian, and Neoplatonic strains of thought, views kissing not as a debasement but (p. 83) as the etherealization of love dialogue—a shift from a temporally bounded, mediated form of discourse to a form of almost divine immediacy, in which soul communicates directly with soul. As Ernest Fontana writes: “The kiss is a form of metalanguage...by which lovers abandon speech in order to communicate feelings of extraordinary intensity and value.”

The same dualities apply to poetry. Poetry is at once more sensual than common speech and more refined. A love lyric aims at emotional immediacy, yet it also necessarily implies mediation—distance, artifice, forethought. Finally, kissing and poetry can both be viewed as either an end or a means. A kiss may be the ultimate expression of love, or else decidedly penultimate—a preparation, even a stand-in, for closer forms of physical intimacy. And, by the same token, a love poem serves as a pleasurable end in itself but also as a substitute satisfaction, filling in for direct contact with the absent beloved.
The aim of this chapter is to explore the tropes, structures, and motifs that allow poetry not only to represent but to embody the experience of kissing. To focus on kissing, as so many poems do, is to offer a very specific vision of erotic love, as a relationship ideally free from hierarchies and distinctions. As many writers have noted, the mouth-to-mouth kiss is an almost perfectly gender-neutral act. Whatever the gender of the partners involved, “both have lips, and both have tongues, and both are, if you will, both. Mouths joined in kissing fit like the halves of an equation.” This symmetry blurs the distinction between hetero- and homoerotic love; (p.84) thus Catullus, one of the most influential of kiss poets, equitably devotes two poems (poems 5, 7) to kissing a woman and two (poems 48, 99) to kissing a man. More fundamentally still, the kiss effaces differences between the two lovers themselves. Even when one person initiates a kiss, this need not undermine the radical mutuality of the act. Just as one person must initiate even the most balanced dialogue, so one person may without imposition initiate a kiss. (Such balance is illustrated at the beginning of the Song of Songs: although the kiss described goes in one direction, from the man to the woman—“Let him kiss me”—it is the woman who voices the desire, so that both seem to take the initiative.) In any case, priority quickly dissipates: after the initial contact, there is very little distinction between kissing and being kissed. Or at least, that is the ideal. Not every case displays such perfect reciprocity: the last kiss poem in Catullus’ sequence (poem 99) concerns a stolen kiss, a motif that runs throughout the tradition; and this chapter concludes with other poems of troubled kisses. Yet the dominant poetic trope involves reciprocal kissing, which significantly suggests the persistence of a symmetrical ideal, even in times and cultures in which equality in erotic love would not seem to have been highly valued.
The first section of this chapter considers the parallel between kissing and poetry as activities that provide both physical and spiritual gratification. Both are sensually self-indulgent, yet both are also marked by inconclusiveness and deferral, thus offering a sublimated form of sexual pleasure. The next two sections then examine the shared element of paradox. Like poetic language, a kiss is often self-defeating or self-contradictory: it interferes with other erotic pleasures, and it is defined equally by approach and withdrawal. The central figure of these sections, and of the chapter as a whole, is the Dutch neo-Latin poet Jan Everaerts (1511–36), better known by his pen name, Joannes Secundus. Secundus’ posthumously published kiss poems, the *Basia*, which were widely read throughout the Renaissance and which significantly influenced the development of European love poetry, explore the frustrations as well as the delights of kissing. The discussion turns next to the trope of stolen kisses (that is, kisses taken from lips that are otherwise occupied) and their relation to the “stolen” language of poetry—language that borrows its terms and imagery from other contexts and applies them to love. The chapter then concludes with poems in which the kiss, represented in terms of vulnerability and restriction, suggests the anxieties of romantic love. In all of these instances, the various resources of poetry—its ambiguities, structures, and tropes—are deployed to figure forth the kiss and the paradoxical erotic feelings that it embodies.

(p.85) The special value of the kiss as an oral pleasure is highlighted by Ovid’s *Amores* 1.4, in John Dryden’s imaginative translation (pub. 1704). The speaker of the poem addresses his mistress, whom he will see that night at a banquet seated—or rather lying, as the Roman custom was—beside her husband; he therefore instructs her on how to behave toward her spouse:

When he fills for you, never touch the cup,
But bid th’ officious cuckold drink it up.
The waiter on those services employ;
Drink you, and I will snatch it from the boy,
Watching the part where your sweet mouth has been,
And thence with eager lips will suck it in.
If he with clownish manners thinks it fit
To taste, and offers you the nasty bit,
Reject his greasy kindness, and restore
Th’ unsavoury morsel he had chewed before.
Nor let his arms embrace your neck, nor rest
Your tender cheek upon his hairy breast.
Let not his hand within your bosom stray,
And rudely with your pretty bubbies play.
But, above all, let him no kiss receive:
That’s an offence I never can forgive.
Do not, O do not that sweet mouth resign,
Lest I rise up in arms, and cry ‘’Tis mine!’

The speaker’s attention seems oddly focused on his mistress’s mouth. We would usually expect his jealousy to intensify as her activities grew more explicitly sexual; instead, it is aroused “above all” by the possibility of a kiss, which he considers a worse “offence” than what would usually be perceived as more intimate forms of erotic contact.

Yet the speaker’s reaction makes sense when we consider how much more delicate the kiss is than the other activities described, and hence more “intimate” in the sense of “personal.” The husband’s other overtures are distinctly animalistic: pawing at his wife; offering her what is described as premasticated food—his “nasty bit,” which Dryden expands from Ovid’s original to emphasize the sexual implications of the husband’s proffering this “greasy” meat. The kiss, in other words, appears all the more worthy of the speaker’s jealousy specifically because it is not directly sexual. Instead, the mouth-to-mouth kiss is merely suggestive of sexual intercourse. Similarly, a kiss calls to mind the pleasures of eating and drinking, while transcendentally avoiding their debasing association with biological functions. This aspect of kissing puzzled Sigmund Freud: although clearly related to various survival instincts, kissing actually satisfies none of them. A kiss, Freud writes, “is held in high sexual esteem among many nations (including the most highly civilized ones), in spite of the fact that the parts of the body involved do not form part of the sexual apparatus but constitute the entrance to the digestive tract.” Displaced from the “sexual apparatus” to the mouth, appearing to address our need for food and digestion but stopping short at the entrance, kisses seem an unaccountably frustrating form of erotic activity, leading Freud to classify them as “a point of contact between the perversions and normal sexual life.”
Yet all these aspects—displacement, obliqueness, inconclusiveness—lie at the very heart of kissing’s tantalizing appeal. Like a poem, a kiss is essentially ambiguous: it is both a stirring means of communication between lovers and a sign of the distance that remains between them—of their yet-imperfect union. As Anne Carson writes, erotic desire presupposes some degree of separation; it therefore necessitates the presence of an intermediary:

[Since] eros is lack, its activation calls for three structural components—lover, beloved and that which comes between them. They are three points of transformation on a circuit of possible relationship, electrified by desire so that they touch not touching. Conjoined they are held apart. The third component plays a paradoxical role for it both connects and separates, marking that two are not one, irradiating the absence whose presence is demanded by eros.  

In Ovid the role of third party—the element the lovers share, even as it marks their separation—is played partly by the husband, whose presence clearly heightens the speaker’s sense of excitement. But the role belongs even more to all the furtive signs that the speaker prescribes to his mistress at the start of the poem. The speaker actually seems to welcome their separation for the opportunity that it gives them to communicate their desire through coded messages:

Sit next him (that belongs to decency),
But tread upon my foot in passing by;
Read in my looks what silently they speak,
And slily with your eyes your answer make.
My lifted eyebrow shall declare my pain;
(p.87) My right hand to his fellow shall complain,
And on the back a letter shall design,
Besides a note that shall be writ in wine.

(ll. 17–24)

These highly textualized signals, including the metapoetic “tread upon my foot,” are all deliberately oblique, delivered “slily,” “silently,” “in passing.” Like the poem of which they are a part, the signs are imperfect semi-conductors of desire, and valued as such.
But the culminating sign is the one at the start of the first passage quoted: the time-delayed “kiss,” transmitted by cup. If kissing is pleasurable in part because it involves erotic displacement and delay, then kissing via cup doubles the pleasure. “The waiter on those services employ; | Drink you, and I will snatch it from the boy, | Watching the part where your sweet mouth has been”: “watching”—and indeed “wait[ing]”—is all the fun. By the same token, since kissing is also pleasurable in part because it stands as a sign of other pleasures (sex; eating and drinking), the cup-kiss, as the sign of a sign, appropriately crowns the speaker’s list of love signals. Hence his cry of pain when he fears that his beloved will kiss her husband, which Dryden punningly renders as “Do not, O do not that sweet mouth resign.” The speaker fears losing sole possession not only of his beloved’s body but also, perhaps more importantly, of its signification—the messages of desire that it transmits.

Ben Jonson picks up from Ovid the motif of kissing-via-cup and foregrounds it in his brief lyric “To Celia” (1616), the first half of which reads as follows:

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.11
Once again, the kiss is valued specifically for being indirect. The first four lines of the poem propose two acts of mediation: first the speaker asks that the lovers drink to each other, but with glances substituting for wine; then (p.88) he suggests substituting a kiss instead. The “Or” at the beginning of line 3 could indicate the equivalence of these two suggestions. Glances and kisses are both things that lovers exchange; both are more intimate than a mere exchange of toasts; so the speaker could be saying that a glance or a kiss is equally welcome. But “Or” could also suggest a change of mind: “Glance at me—or, even better, leave a kiss in the cup.” The latter possibility seems more likely, given that the speaker devotes only two lines to the glance and six to the affair of the kiss. Those six lines end, moreover, with a claim that such kisses are not fungible—the substitution of a comparable commodity (“Jove’s nectar”) is not acceptable.

Yet, if the speaker prefers a kiss to a glance, it is not because the kiss is more perfect, but the opposite. The glance is immediate: it moves at the speed of light and is perfectly reciprocal (“with thine...with mine”). The cup-kiss, by contrast, is drawn out and oblique, even awkward. But, whereas Ovid’s speaker is compelled to take such indirect measures by the presence of the beloved’s husband, no such impediment is implied in Jonson’s poem.12 Instead, the speaker desires a kiss-in-a-cup for its own sake; the imperfection and delay are the very source of the pleasure. This explains why the speaker refuses to exchange for a “sup” of nectar. Jove’s nectar is presumably more like a glance—immediate, immaculate, ethereal. The process of kissing by cup, on the other hand, is tantalizingly slow and indirect.
Hence the focus shifts decidedly after the second line from the eyes to the mouth. “Love comes in at the eye,” as W. B. Yeats writes, but it lives upon the lips. And the same can be said of poetry. In “To Celia” the speaker’s turn from the pleasures of visual to those of oral communication coincides, significantly, with the first occurrence of alliteration, in line 3: “Or leave a kiss but in the cup.” The pleasurable pairing of “kiss” and “cup” reminds the reader that poetry, as much as kissing and drinking, is meant to delight the mouth. This sensual dimension is then reinforced in the following line with the appearance of the poem’s first, long-delayed rhyme. Rhyme is the formal aspect of poetry most obviously akin to a kiss: the outer edges of two separate lines of verse momentarily come together, in a gratifying touch of complementarity and fulfilment. In Jonson’s poem, that gratification is delayed until the fourth line—the longest that a rhyming poem in English tends to go before providing its first rhyme. Once the kiss of “mine” with “wine” has been achieved, however, others arrive in a sudden crowd: each of the next four lines rhymes, unexpectedly and rather unusually, with one of the first four; what had seemed to be a poem poor in rhyme turns out instead to be a poem of rhyme artfully delayed. Jonson thus foregrounds the sense of welcome deferral (of closure, of full comprehension) that, quite as much as any physical or sensual aspect, distinguishes poetry.

Jonson addresses the pleasures of deferral even more explicitly in his translation of a Latin lyric attributed to Petronius. Just as a kiss is superior to a glance, so it is superior to sex, and for much the same reason:

Doing a filthy pleasure is, and short;  
And done, we straight repent us of the sport;  
Let us not then rush blindly on unto it,  
Like lustful beasts that only know to do it:  
For lust will languish, and that heat decay.  
But thus, thus, keeping endless holiday,  
Let us together closely lie, and kiss,  
There is no labour, nor no shame in this;  
This hath pleased, doth please, and long will please; never  
Can this decay, but is beginning ever.
The lyric is split sharply down the middle, to the extent even of cleaving in half the central couplet. The subject of the first half is never explicitly named; instead, sexual intercourse is referred to simply as “doing.” But the bland euphemism itself suggests the purported problem with sex: its lamentably efficient teleology. “Doing” comes right away, at the start of the line and of the poem; sex does not wait but rushes blindly on. The word “kiss,” by contrast, appears only at the end of a line—only at the end, in fact, of the second line of the kissing half of the poem. For kissing is characterized by amorous delay; “keeping endless holiday,” it stretches over time, encompassing past, present, and above all future pleasure. Hence the poem ends, appropriately, with an ever-renewed “beginning.”

Yet the most erotic part of the lines about kissing comes at their start: in the phrase “thus, thus,” where deed and description converge. Each “thus” represents a kiss, not only in its meaning but in its form—the tongue slipping from between the teeth (thus, thus) in a self-consciously repeated motion, which is then reiterated in the “this…This…this” of the final three lines. Even as the poem thus introduces a sense of physical immediacy, however, it also grows decidedly more abstract, switching from an active, if unspecific, verb (“do”) to a pair of even less specific deictics. Thus, this: even as they strive to reproduce the action that they indicate, the two words notably fall short of conveying, or even naming it; they can only gesture toward an erotic satisfaction that the reader does not witness or share. No words in a poem, no matter how pleasant to pronounce, how often repeated or how slowly drawn out, can fully realize the experience of kissing another person—just as no kiss can achieve a full sense of union, however “closely” it approaches. Yet in both cases that limitation becomes an advantage, the source of continuing pleasure.
Petronius slyly and effectively reorients the point of view from which kisses are considered. In comparison to language, a kiss is extremely direct, almost primal; but, compared to sex, kissing is an act of deferral and self-restraint. Petronius’ poem consists of language that explicitly pleads for something more intimate: “Let us together closely lie and kiss.” But, because it begins with a renunciation of mere sexual “doing,” the poem manages to present its physical desire as a form of spirituality. Percy Shelley uses the kiss to perform a similar act of sublimation in his richly erotic lyric “Love’s Philosophy” (1819). The first of Shelley’s two stanzas introduces both physical and spiritual elements:

The fountains mingle with the river
And the rivers with the Ocean,
The winds of Heaven mix for ever
With a sweet emotion;
Nothing in the world is single;
All things by a law divine
In one spirit meet and mingle.
Why not I with thine?—

(p.91) The shift from physical to abstract in this stanza can be precisely located. It takes place midway, at the letter e in “emotion,” where the language of geophysical motion gives way unexpectedly to the language of spiritual feeling, which then continues through the next four lines. Yet the stanza concludes with a hiccup, a slight disruption of the perfect harmony it purports to describe. If “All things...In one spirit meet and mingle,” the speaker asks, then “Why not I with thine?” On the one hand, the words provide a satisfying conclusion: “I” does mingle, phonetically, with “thine”; and “thine” provides the completing rhyme with “divine”—just as it does at the same point in Jonson’s “To Celia.” On the other hand, there is an uncomfortable mismatch between the pronouns “I” and “thine” (meaning “thy spirit”). If the final line read “Why not mine with thine?,“ nothing would be wanting. But it is not merely the speaker’s spirit that addresses the beloved, it is “I”—the integral self, body as well as spirit. The conclusion feels unsatisfactory, since a whole (I) cannot mingle with a mere part (thy spirit).

The second stanza resolves this difficulty by invoking the kiss, with its mixture of physical and spiritual associations:

See the mountains kiss high Heaven
And the waves clasp one another;
No sister-flower would be forgiven
  If it disdained its brother;
And the sunlight clasps the earth
  And the moonbeams kiss the sea:
What is all this sweet work worth
  If thou kiss not me?

(ll. 9–16)

The opening six lines of this stanza accentuate the physical in multiple ways. They recall the imagery of physical nature (mountains, ocean, flowers) with which the poem began; they also replace the notion of spiritual “mingling” with the more concrete actions of clasping and kissing. Above all, they introduce a highly visible chiasmus. Chiasmus, or a mirroring a-b-b-a rhetorical structure, is a trope naturally associated with the act of embracing. Here it appears, appropriately, in the verb sequence kiss-clasp-clasps-kiss that runs down the middle of lines 9–14. But it also appears in the pair of phrases that frames those lines—“See the mountains kiss…the moonbeams kiss the sea”—and this second instance is just as important. Chiasmus is an unusual trope in that it applies just as readily to the outward, physical form of words as to their meaning—as in this case, which depends primarily on the incidental homophony (See, sea) and consonance (mountains, moonbeams) of the (p.92) two bracketing phrases. This duality, as much as its clasping structure, makes chiasmus an apt trope to represent kissing. Here, the double chiasmus manages to reintegrate spiritual and physical, rendering possible the full parallelism of the final line: instead of the faulty pairing of “I” with “thine,” the second stanza concludes with the full embrace of “thou” and “me.”
Yet the final two lines of this stanza are also, in their own way, imperfect. They break the circular symmetry of the previous six lines, disrupting the balance of clasps and kisses by adding an extra “kiss.” They end the poem, moreover, on a note of uncertainty and incompleteness. Like Petronius’ poem, Shelley’s turns out to be a request, a plea for a kiss from the beloved. Without that response, as Shelley writes in a metapoetic turn, “all this sweet work” (of poetry as well as of nature) is worthless. Hence Shelley adopts the stratagem, so common in love lyrics, of concluding with a question—a maneuver that invites, almost compels, the reader to participate in a shared imaginative enterprise. In this case, however, the move is self-defeating, since the invited response is not merely emotional or even verbal, but physical, and hence impossible; how can the reader kiss the speaker of this poem? Yet the poem feels all the more appealing for the impossibility of its final request. As Petronius suggests, a kiss is erotically pleasing specifically because it remains incomplete, a perpetual “beginning” to an implied but unrealized conclusion.

Like the opening of the Song of Songs, moreover, the end of Shelley’s poem is attractively egalitarian: the speaker initiates the request, but asks the addressee to initiate the kiss. This sense of mutuality is difficult to convey and maintain in lyric poetry, which, as we have seen, tends to veer inescapably toward the imbalance of monologue. Shelley therefore introduces the notion of sibling love (the “sister-flower” and her “brother”), an image, borrowed from the Song, of perfect amorous reciprocity. And he reinforces this sense of equality through his use of parataxis—the stringing-together of grammatically equivalent phrases: “the mountains kiss...And the waves clasp...And the sunlight clasps...And the moonbeams kiss.” Parataxis, by definition, eschews subordination; each clause is the equal of the last. Here the subjects of those clauses, the mountains and heavens and oceans, are similarly leveled with each other to allow them all to touch and kiss. The combination of all these osculatory tropes—the clasping chiasmus, with its focus on physical form as well as meaning; the invitingly open-ended rhetorical question; parataxis, with its insistent symmetries—operates together with the imagery of intimacy to turn Shelley’s “sweet work” into the very embodiment of a kiss.
The poet who most fully exploits the equation of kissing and poetry is Joannes Secundus. Secundus’ Basia or “Kisses” (pub. 1539), a sequence of nineteen poems in different meters, is credited with introducing a new genre of love lyric to the Western tradition: the basium, or kiss poem. A basium is not just a poem about a kiss but is itself a kiss; it aims not only to describe but to re-create the experience of kissing. The simple titles of Secundus’ poems—Basium I, Basium II—do double duty, numbering the poems like so many sonnets or elegies while also providing an inventory of different types of kiss. The Basia thus forms a kind of osculatory Kama Sutra, in which the variety of kisses is represented by the different forms and poetic devices deployed.¹⁸

Secundus was not, of course, the first poet to write about kissing; as we have seen, kisses figure prominently in many ancient love lyrics. His most immediate model was Catullus, whose book of poems, rediscovered in the early fourteenth century, had already exerted a transformative influence on European poetry. Notably, Secundus derives the notion of enumerating kisses—which serves, in the Basia, as both a structural principle and a recurrent subject—from a pair of poems near the beginning of Catullus’ collection (poems 5 and 7).¹⁹ These two lyrics both count kisses, only to (p.94) end by declaring their innumerability. The final lines of Catullus 5, for instance, read as follows:

da mi basia mille, deinde centum,
dein mille altera, dein secunda centum,
deinde usque altera mille, deinde centum
dein, cum milia multa fecerimus,
conturbabimus illa, ne sciamus,
aut nequis malus invidere possit,
cum tantum sciat esse basiorum.²⁰

Give me a thousand kisses, then a hundred,
Then another thousand, then a second hundred,
Then yet another thousand, then a hundred,
Then, when we have produced many thousands,
We shall throw them into confusion, that we may not know,
Nor any evil person be able to look upon them
with ill will
When he should know the number of our kisses.
The defiance of enumeration with which this poem concludes seems intuitive. Not only does it serve the superstitious purpose that Catullus names (avoiding the evil eye), but it fits the common notion that passion is, and should be, immeasurable. “There’s beggary in the love that can be reckon’d,” as Shakespeare’s Marc Antony declares. Yet the question arises, in that case, why Catullus nevertheless counts his kisses, and why such counting became one of his most imitated tropes.

The answer seems to be that numerability—together, paradoxically, with innumerability—forms one of the closest points of contact between kisses and poems. Both kissing and poetry invite enumeration, because both are naturally repetitious. As Petronius says, repeatability is what distinguishes kissing from sex. Unlike most sexual acts, kisses usually come in multiples. (Don Giovanni may keep a tally of sexual conquests, but it takes him a lifetime to accrue the numbers that Catullus demands, in kisses, all at once.) Unlike most non-sexual forms of embrace, on the other hand, kisses tend to be discrete, and therefore quantifiable, acts. It would be unusual to hug someone three or four times in quick succession, but perfectly natural to imprint the beloved with a series of individual kisses. Kisses are thus both numerous and numerable. And yet there also arrives a point at which these qualities cease to obtain. Kisses grow less distinct in proportion as they grow more intense. As a kiss moves from the cheek to the lips, it loses its discrete form; the series of kisses blends into one. (This effect is perhaps reproduced in line 9 of the Catullus poem, where the words describing the third thousand of kisses become slurred all together through a double elision: deind’ usqu’altera.) When kissing grows truly passionate, the “kiss’s strength,” in the words of Lord Byron, is measured no longer by quantity but “by…length.” It is as if kisses were born in a state of numerability, which they then strive to transcend.
The same can be said of poetry. Most poetry depends on the repetition of discrete, numerable units—syllables, feet, lines, stanzas. The traditional terms for poetry stress this aspect: writing “in numbers,” “in quantity,” “in measure.” Even in its freest forms, poetry is an art of proportion. Yet poetry has also traditionally striven for beauty that transcends measure or the reach of art. It establishes quantifiable rules only to escape them. Even the most strictly regular poem seeks to exceed the sum of its parts. In exhibiting this rivalry between delimitation and overflow, clear distinction and sublime confusion, poetry resembles kissing. Hence Catullus 5 with its dual emphasis—counting, innumerability—serves as a natural archetype for several of Secundus’ self-conscious kiss poems. Basium VII, for instance, picks up on Catullan themes while also adding an important new element. In Thomas Stanley’s fine translation (1651):

Kisses a hundred, hundred fold,
A hundred by a thousand told,
Thousands by thousands numbred o’re,
As many thousand thousand more
As are the Drops the Seas comprize,
As are the Stars that paint the Skies,
To this soft Cheek, this speaking Ey,
This swelling Lip will I apply.

But whilst on these my Kisses dwell
Close as the Cockle clasps her shell,
This swelling Lip I cannot spy,
This softer Cheek, this speaking Eye:
Nor those sweet Smiles, which (like the Ray
Of Cynthius driving Clouds away)
From my swoln Eyes dispel all Tears,
(p.96) From my sad Heart all jealous Fears.
Alass! what Discontents arise
Betwixt my æmulous Lips and Eyes!
Can I with patience brook that Jove
Should be a Partner in my Love,
When my strict Eye the Rivalship
Disdains to suffer of my Lip?23
The language of numbers, of jealousy, and of ultimate frustration is all familiar from Catullus. What Secundus adds is the observation of a paradox that deepens the connection between kissing and poetry. A kiss, he writes, is inherently self-defeating. Beauty—the beauty of “this soft Cheek, this speaking Ey, | This swelling Lip”—gives rise to the desire to kiss. Yet the kiss interrupts the perception of that beauty: you cannot gaze upon the lip that you are kissing. Its attractive qualities of “swelling,” “Smil[ing],” “speaking” (though the last is here transferred to the eye) are all eclipsed by the very act of tribute that they elicit. A kiss thus represents not so much the culmination of the desire for beauty as its vanishing point, the source of inevitable “Discontents.”

Love poetry, of course, faces much the same predicament. Paradox and oxymoron form the basic language of love poetry, not just in Petrarch but throughout the amatory tradition, because a love poem is naturally self-defeating. The same text that seeks to unite writer and reader, lover and beloved, through an act of passionate utterance also necessarily records their separation, and sometimes deepens it. In the very process of expression, as Ruth Gooley writes, a well-wrought love lyric threatens to become “a fetish with a self-generating and self-completing momentum that displaces the original object of desire.”

Even when such displacement does not occur, the language of love poetry continually thwarts itself in all the ways we have seen in the opening chapters. The poem is a public, artful expression of intimate, ineffable impulse. And, since there’s beggary in the love that can be reckoned or told, love poetry can succeed only by insisting on its own insufficiency.

Both these contradictions—the kiss that frustrates the desire it fulfills, the poem that necessarily belies the feeling it expresses—derive from the same fundamental paradox of erotic desire. As Carson explains: (p.97)
The Greek word *eros* denotes “want,” “lack,” “desire for that which is missing.” The lover wants what he does not have. It is by definition impossible for him to have what he wants if, as soon as it is had, it is no longer wanting. This is more than wordplay. There is a dilemma within eros that has been thought crucial by thinkers from Sappho to the present day. Plato turns and returns to it. Four of his dialogues explore what it means to say that desire can only be for what is lacking, not at hand, not present, not in one’s possession nor in one’s being.25

The achievement of the basium as a genre is to emphasize the erotic paradox, the inseparably mingled pleasure and frustration, of both kissing and poetry. Each activity is self-thwarting, and each also thwarts the other; the lips that pronounce a poem about a kiss are necessarily not kissing, and vice versa. There are thus two “Rivalships” in Basium VII: the explicit one between lips and eyes, and an implicit one between lip and lip—between the pleasure of kissing, and the pleasure of describing a kiss poetically. (The latter becomes explicit in the next poem of Secundus’ sequence, in which the poet’s beloved curtails his singing with a kiss that manages to injure the tongue that had been praising her.) There are many pleasurable ways to interact with one’s beloved, but a scarcity of body parts ensures that they can never all be enjoyed at once. The basium evokes these multiple pleasures and, simultaneously, their incompatibility.

For this reason, Yeats’s “A Drinking Song” (1910), even though it never mentions kissing, can be considered a basium:

Wine comes in at the mouth
And love comes in at the eye;
That’s all we shall know for truth
Before we grow old and die.
I lift the glass to my mouth,
I look at you, and I sigh.
This apparently simple poem contains multiple self-contradictions. The generic designation of the title, for instance, conceals a significant oxymoron: drinking and singing, like kissing and poetry, are strictly speaking incompatible. They complement one another, and one may very well lead to the other; but it is not actually possible to sing and drink at the same time. The title thus hints at a variety of delights but also implies, as in Basium VII, their mutual frustration, which the poem reconfirms. The opening lines suggest that, since wine and love enter at different points, it should be possible to drink and to gaze at the same time. But the conclusion contradicts the opening: “I lift the glass to my mouth, | I look at you, and I sigh.” (p.98) The drink remains unachieved at the end of the poem; wine reaches the lips but cannot enter in, because love has given the mouth other employment.

The poem thus ends with a whimper, but one that provides the greater part of its tension and interest. “Sigh,” like “thine” in the first stanza of Shelley’s poem, seems on the one hand satisfyingly conclusive. Unlike the disappointing rhyme in the previous line of “mouth” with “mouth” (not mine with yours, in this case, but more abstractly “my mouth” with “the mouth”), “sigh” provides a true rhyme at the end. It also contains, and so seems aptly to express, the “I” that expresses it. And yet the act of sighing—the whine that comes out at the mouth—prevents the speaker of this drinking song from either drinking or singing, or even from speaking any further. The sigh, by postponing closure, supplies what might otherwise have been a nugatory poem with a gust of erotic energy.

Secundus’ Basium III, the briefest of the Basia, resembles Yeats’s poem. Instead of the rivalry between kissing and other oral pleasures, however, it highlights the frustrations and limitations inherent in the act of kissing itself:

“Da mihi suaviolum,” dicebam “blanda puella!”
Libasti labris mox mea labra tuis.
Inde velut presso qui territus angue resultat,
Ora repente meo vellis ab ore procul.
Non hoc suaviolum dare, lux mea, sed dare tantum
Est desiderium flebile suavioli.

“Give me a sweet kiss,” I said, “charming girl!”
You promptly touched my lips with your lips.
Then like one who springs back in terror after
treading on a snake,
You immediately plucked your mouth away
from my mouth.
This is not giving a sweet kiss, my dear, but
merely giving
The painful desire for a sweet kiss.

The kiss Neaera bestows in line 2 is gratifyingly dialogic. It responds to a speech act and is itself interactive, enclosing my lips (mea labra) within yours (labris...tuis). The partners engage in a shared pleasure, a give-and-take. Yet the kiss is also a give-and-take in a more frustrating sense: what Neaera giveth she also taketh away, and that is true not only of this particular butterfly kiss but of all kisses. A kiss, unlike most forms of sex, has no natural endpoint; it concludes not with climax but withdrawal—lip from lip, or lip from cheek. (This aspect of kissing haunts the young narrator at the beginning of Marcel Proust’s Swann’s Way, who longs for his mother’s goodnight kiss but begins to feel a pang of “utmost pain” even before it arrives, because her coming to kiss him already signals her inevitable departure. A kiss both satisfies desire and begets it, leaving behind a renewed sense of longing, of lack.

Appropriately, then, Secundus’ next basium begins with a not-kiss. “Non dat basia, dat Neaera nectar”: Neaera does not give kisses, she gives nectar (IV.1). The declaration of transcendence (nectar) is inextricable from the stark negation; every kiss entails its own cancelation. The process of separation begins already in the middle couplet of Basium III. Whereas line 2 had intertwined lips with lips, line 4 sets your mouth (Ora) at a remove from mine (ore). This dissociation is reinforced by the mention of the snake: the Edenic imagery serves as an ominous reminder of division and loss. The final couplet completes the withdrawal: the phrase “to give a sweet kiss” (suaviolum dare) is divided, and its component parts (dare...suavioli) dispersed over two separate lines.
By the end of the poem, reciprocity has given way to mere repetition. Instead of matching lips with lips and mouth with mouth, the closing lines simply repeat the speaker’s opening plea, “Give me a kiss” (*Da mihi suaviolum*), and each new iteration—a negated infinitive (l. 5), then a widely split infinitive (ll. 5–6)—is weaker than the last. Repetition is an inherent quality of both kissing and poetry. But Secundus’ basia frequently show repetition tipping into the more frustrated, short-circuited form of tautology. This is clearest in Basium V, the conclusion to which can be read alternatively as either ecstatic or desperate:

Tunc dico: “Deus est Amor deorum,
Et nullus deus est Amore maior.
Si quisquam tamen est Amore maior,
Tu, tu sola mihi es, Neaera, maior!”

(V.18–21)

Then I cry: “The god of gods is Love,
And no god than Love is greater.
But if anyone than Love is greater,
You, you alone, Neaera, are greater!”

Like all tautology, the lines feel both full and empty at once. They draw a maximum of effect from a minimum of phonemes (*Amore* and *maior* are nearly anagrams of each other). The effect is simultaneously satisfying and disappointing.

(p.100) The close relation between tautology and kissing is established at the outset of Secundus’ sequence. Basium I offers a fable to explain the origin of kisses. Venus, the poem explains, once brought her sleeping grandson Ascanius to her home on Mount Cythera and laid him on a bed of flowers. Gazing on him as he slept, however, she recalled her old passion for Adonis and, consumed with desire, solaced herself by kissing the nearby roses; from this action kisses were born:

O quotiens voluit circumdare colla nepotis!
O quotiens dixit: “Talis Adonis erat!”
Sed placidam pueri metuens turbare quietem,
Fixit vicinis basia mille rosis.

Quotque rosas tetigit, tot basia nata repente
Gaudia reddebant multiplicata deae.

(I.7–10, 13–14)
Oh how often she longed to embrace her grandson’s neck!
   Oh how often she said, “Adonis was just like this!”
But fearing to disturb the boy’s peaceful repose,
   She fixed a thousand kisses on the neighboring roses.
. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
As many roses as she touched, so many kisses were suddenly born
   And returned manifold pleasures to the goddess.

This etiology, original to Secundus, is frustrating at almost every level. In the first place, kisses are said to originate, tautologically, from kisses. They are born, moreover, out of disappointed desire: Venus pleasures herself autoerotically with roses, as a substitute for her (incestuous) desire for Ascanius—itself a mere substitute, or repetition, of her earlier longing for Adonis.

This may seem a strange way to begin a sequence of poems in praise of kisses; but Secundus is cannily highlighting the (sometimes pleasurable) frustrations of kissing, as well as its sheer pleasures. As the fable recognizes, a kiss may be desired for itself, but it often substitutes for some other, unattainable, form of contact. And, although it can be an act of mutual, reciprocated pleasure, a kiss is also fundamentally self-gratifying. As Venus demonstrates, it is not uncommon to solace one’s loneliness by kissing inanimate objects associated with the beloved. Kissing is closely related, moreover, to oral satisfactions (eating, drinking, and especially suckling) wholly centered on the self. At the most basic level, a kiss can be considered tautological, narcissistic—perhaps even, in a sense, incestuous—because lips come in twos: the default state of a pair of lips is to be kissing each other. There is thus an inherent redundancy in kissing another pair of lips, since you are merely reproducing the way your body already touches (p. 101) itself. Even when shared, therefore, kisses retain a self-directed quality; they point outward and inward at once.
All of these characteristics, significantly, appertain just as much to poetry as to kissing. Like Neaera’s brief kiss in Basium III, a love poem answers a lover’s desire for communion, but only ever partially; its very inconclusiveness begets more desire (and more poetry). Like Venus’ kisses in Basium I, meanwhile, a poem provides a substitute satisfaction for displaced erotic energy. And, while it may result in shared pleasure, it often originates in a more self-serving need for expression. Many of the greatest love poems have been composed in the absence of any actual beloved, or any prospect of readership; poetry is avowedly self-stimulating and self-satisfying. Hence Basium I naturally concludes with a self-conscious turn to poetry. Having offered his account of Venus’ autoerotic displacement of her desire, Secundus turns the focus to himself:

En ego sum, vestri quo vate canentur honores,
Nota Medusaei dum iuga montis erunt.
Et memor Aeneadum stirpisque disertus amatae
Mollia Romulidum verba loquetur Amor.

(I.23–6)

Behold, here am I, the poet by whom your praises will be sung,
As long as the peaks of Parnassus shall be known,
And Love, remembering the beloved race and descendants of Aeneas,
Shall speak with eloquence the sweet language of the Romans.

These lines cast the poet himself in the role played by Venus in the fable (an association underlined by the reference to the “descendants of Aeneas”), with all the same limitations. Notably, the satisfaction he derives from his “Kisses” seems, like hers, to be solitary rather than shared. “Behold, here am I”—but the audience is left unspecified; Neaera is not mentioned in this opening poem. The pleasure of these lyrics lies in their production rather than their circulation.
This sense is reinforced by the concluding couplet, which draws attention to the fact that the poems are written in Latin. Secundus’ decision to write in the scholarly lingua franca, rather than in his native Dutch, may make his poems more accessible to a European audience and to posterity, but it also sets them at a remove from the woman to whom almost all of them are addressed. Latin had not been a language spoken between men and women for a thousand years, at least not in the bedroom. In (p.102) La Vita Nuova (1295), Dante explains that male poets began writing in the vernacular specifically in order to be understood by the women they loved: “the first to begin speaking as a vernacular poet was moved to do so because he wished to be understood by a lady who had difficulty understanding verses in Latin.” Yet Secundus explicitly eschews this advantage; ironically, a sequence that celebrates intimate forms of lingual communication begins by foregrounding its linguistic displacement. The reference to the use of the “language of the Romans” (Romulidum verba), moreover, highlights the secondary, imitative nature of the Basia. Secundus is writing not in his mother tongue but, as it were, in his grandmother’s tongue; his words, meter, tropes, and even the very figures of Venus and Ascanius are all derived from ancient poetry—Catullus, Virgil, Ovid. Nor is this a situation peculiar to neo-Latin love poetry. All poetic language, like all language, is “borrowed”; it is simply the condition of love poetry to express a private, involuntary emotion in a medium that is necessarily shared, conventional, imitative. But, by emphasizing these limitations together with those appertaining to kissing—secondariness, displacement, tautology—Secundus suggests that poetry, far from being disqualified from expressing passionate love, is its aptest medium.

All of these conditions reappear in Robert Herrick’s “The Kisse: A Dialogue” (1648), which also brings to the fore another paradox that kissing shares with love poetry: its mingled public–private nature. “The Kisse” continues the tradition of the basium inaugurated by Secundus; like much of Herrick’s verse, it emphasizes “nongenital, especially oral, gratifications,” which it seeks to embody or re-create poetically. The poem therefore takes the form of a dialogue, as its subtitle indicates and as the opening stanzas show:

1. Among thy Fancies, tell me this,
   What is the thing we call a kisse?
2. I shall resolve ye, what it is.
   It is a creature born and bred
   Between the lips, (all cherrie-red,)
   By love and warme desires fed,
   Chor. And makes more soft the Bridall Bed.

(p.103) 2. It is an active flame, that flies,
   First, to the Babies of the eyes;
   And charmes them there with lullabies;
   Chor. And stils the Bride too, when she cries.31

This seems in some ways a Platonic ideal of balanced dialogue. Speaker 1 initiates the conversation with a question, which Speaker 2 then helpfully seeks to “resolve”; the use of numbers rather than names for the speakers leaves them ungendered and scarcely differentiated. Yet, as in other kiss poems, the numbers eventually become confused: how many speakers are actually involved in this “Dialogue”? Speaker 1 refers to “we,” and, although this seems at first to be a general rather than self-referential use of the pronoun, the case becomes clouded when Speaker 2 responds with the plural form “ye.” This is followed by the surprising entrance, in the next stanza, of the Chorus as third participant: what had seemed an intimate interchange is suddenly revealed as a public performance.
The revelation is appropriate, however, not only to love poetry, as the paradoxically public record of intimate feelings, but to kissing. A kiss “is both public and private—a permissibly public gesture that signifies private intimacy.” The duality derives in the first place from kissing’s association with the mouth, the “point of convergence between the internal and external worlds.” Herrick brilliantly describes the kiss as being born “Between the lips,” a phrase that suggests both a very intimate space (the entrance to someone’s mouth) and a semi-public one (the space that separates one person’s lips from another’s). A kiss also straddles private and public in that, unlike most other forms of sexual contact, it may be performed with equal propriety in the bedroom or in society. A kiss was as common a manner of salutation in Herrick’s England as it is today; and as Herrick’s multiple references to “the Bride” remind us, kissing in front of witnesses forms a crucial and climactic part of the wedding ceremony. Hence the swift progression, in Herrick’s basium, not only from two speakers to many but, correspondingly, from the private imagination of a kiss in line 1 (“thy Fancies”), to the shared discourse of kissing in line 2 (“we call”), to a full-blown physical act (“a creature”) perceptible to the eyes.

Herrick’s use of bridal imagery associates kissing with the duality not only of public and private but of innocence and experience. The move over the first two stanzas from thought, to speech, to fully incarnated kiss, and eventually to “Bed” can be read as a continuous progression towards greater sexual knowledge. Puzzlingly, however, the stanza culminates not in a marriage bed but a “Bridall Bed,” a term that teeters on the edge between the virginal and the sexual. The third stanza seems to retreat from any sexual implications, with its language of babies and lullabies and charming eye kisses. But the disturbing chorus to stanza 3—“And stils the Bride too, when she cries”—throws all back into confusion. Does the bride cry because, like Proust’s narrator, she is childish and lonely and wishes to be comforted? Or do the tears result from her loss of virginity on her wedding night? If we read the line as suggesting the latter, then kisses have wholly changed their valence over the course of these stanzas. At the beginning kisses suggest equal, gender-neutral dialogue; by the end they are associated with one-sided sexual dominance and the “stil[ling]” or silencing of the woman’s voice.
The question of speech and silence returns in the poem’s last two stanzas:

1. Ha’s it a speaking virtue? 2. Yes;
1. How speaks it, say? 2. Do you but this, Part your joyn’d lips, then speaks your kisse; Chor. And this loves sweetest language is.

1. Has it a body? 2. I, and wings With thousand rare encolourings: And as it flyes, it gently sings, Chor. Love, honie yeelds; but never stings.

(ll. 16–23)

The penultimate stanza leaves it unclear whether kissing is the highest form of speech or its utter antithesis. “Part your joyn’d lips, then speaks your kisse”: this could refer to opening your own mouth, as people do when they prepare to kiss someone. In that case, the kiss operates in the usual manner of speech, only more directly and delightfully: it “speaks” when you part your lips and address them to someone else. But the line may indicate, contrarily, that a kiss “speaks” when two mouths that had been kissing “part” or separate, and this seems just as plausible a reading. Speech—including the discourse of love and such celebrations of kissing as this one—begins only when the kissing concludes. At a physical level, moreover, it is at the moment of completion or withdrawal that kissing lips make their distinctive sound. According to “The Kisse,” then, “loves sweetest language” comprises either (p.105) kissing or else the speech (and poetry) made possible specifically by not-kissing; but the poem refuses to determine which it is.

Instead “The Kisse” concludes by speaking about the birds and the bees. Once again the chorus confuses everything: its language of “honie” and “stings” clashes with the avian metaphor of the previous lines to produce a grotesque image, half-bird, half-bee. But this is appropriate to the hybrid, inscrutable nature of the kiss. The basium, which exploits the mutually reinforcing paradoxes of kissing and poetry, presents a particularly complex image of erotic love. Love in these poems is rooted in equality and mutual delight, yet it can thrive and multiply even in solitude. It is direct and indirect, internal and performative at once; it is defined as much by separation as by union. The contradictory fluctuations of erotic feeling find in the basium their physical and poetic expression.
The mingled private–public nature of the kiss, which Herrick treats so whimsically, takes on somewhat darker overtones in the motif of the stolen kiss. In Catullus 99, for instance, the speaker snatches a kiss from an unsuspecting youth (Juventius) in the opening couplet, only to spend the remaining fourteen lines apologizing for the rash act and promising never to repeat it. Yet it would be wrong to read the trope, either in Catullus or in his followers, as something more somber or serious than it really is. Catullus’ poem is still playful: the first line sets the action “while you were playing” (*dum ludis*), and the speaker’s impulsive embrace participates in the ludic mood. The poem does not present a fantasy of sexual aggression so much as a recognition of the inevitably public element that exists in both love and poetry. Juventius reacts to the kiss by indignantly washing his lips with water, as though they had been sullied by “a polluted prostitute” (*commictae lupae* (l. 10)); he seems to object to the kiss less as an act of violation than as one of vulgarization—an unlicensed arrogation of his body for common use. The irony is that the whole poem, despite its concluding pledge never to do it again, repeats the original offence through its very publication; like all such poems, it kisses and tells.

The fifteenth-century nobleman–poet Charles d’Orleans plays on the same irony in his rondel about a stolen kiss.

```
My ghostly father, I me confess,
   First to God and then to you,
That at a window—wot ye how?—
I stole a kiss of great sweetness,
Which done was out avisedness;
   But it is done not undone now.
```

My ghostly father, I me confess,
   First to God and then to you.
But I restore it shall doubtless
   Again, if so be that I mow;
And that to God I make a vow
And else I ask forgiveness.
My ghostly father, I me confess,
   First to God and then to you.35

(p.106)
The second half of the poem makes a classic joke, nearly identical to the one Romeo makes in his first conversation with Juliet: since I repent of having taken this kiss without your permission, let me make amends by giving the kiss back to you. But in this case the joke carries a metapoetic irony, like that at the end of Catullus’ poem, since the very speech that promises redress repeats the original grievance; just like the stolen kiss itself, the poem puts into public circulation what should have remained private. Behind the joke, moreover, lies an important observation—namely, that, where kissing is concerned, giving and taking are almost impossible to distinguish. The speaker’s action, were he to “restore” the kiss, would look identical to his original theft. Paradoxically, the same gesture that is so liable to being imposed or misappropriated can also serve as a symbol of mutuality, an act in which agency and propriety lose their sense.

Hence the poem’s persistent blurring of the line between public and private. We would typically think of the confessional as the site of the most private possible discourse. But by repeatedly distinguishing between God and his earthly representative, the father confessor (confessing “First to God and then to you”), the speaker instead casts the confessional as a comparatively public space. In contrast to the silent inwardness of prayer, the sacrament of confession is outward, interpersonal, discursive. The opening refrain therefore alters our reading of the kiss that follows. There is a clear parallel between the confessional, where private sin is absolved precisely through being expressed and shared, and the “window” at which the speaker steals his kiss. The analogy manages to sacramentalize the kiss—as if the speaker were purging rather than committing a sin. His theft comes to seem almost an act of charity: only when a kiss, or a confession, passes the threshold of the lips can restoration occur.
The poem thus introduces the notion of stealing a kiss only to call it into question. In what way is the kiss in this poem “stolen”? In Catullus the kiss is forcibly “snatched” (surrripui (l. 1)); in many other poems, kisses (p.107) are stealthily taken from one who is sleeping. But neither scenario seems plausible here, where “at a window—wot ye how?— | I stole a kiss.” In fact it is very difficult to “wot” how one might steal a kiss either by force or by fraud in such a situation. People do not tend to sleep while leaning out of windows, and the wall would seem to provide protection from any unwanted embrace. The poem thus implies that the kiss was not unwelcome or unilateral. Perhaps it is stolen, then, merely in the sense of being furtive or illicit, like a stolen glance. Or perhaps it is stolen in the sense that even open and acknowledged lovers may be said to “steal a few minutes together” in the course of a busy day—diverting those minutes, in other words, away from more public or more practical matters.

Yet any kiss can be said to be stolen in the latter sense, because a kiss always diverts the lips from other, more necessary, matters: eating, breathing (and perhaps praying). To kiss someone is necessarily both to intervene in the communion of their lips with one another and to steal those lips away from their important biological functions, all for a temporary indulgence in a purely non-purposive pleasure. And this suggests another way in which kissing once again resembles poetry. Poetic language is, by almost any definition, figurative language, language that displaces terms and images from their usual functions—employing the terminology of religious confession, for instance, for non-sacramental purposes. Poetry diverts words from their normal employment, with the result that every poem, like every kiss, carries a hint of transgression, the sense of something stolen for pleasure’s sake from the everyday business and discourse of life.
Hence the prominence of kissing in that most figurative of genres, the Renaissance love sonnet. As Stephen Booth writes, “the sonnet convention is one of indecorum. Its essential device is the use of the vocabulary appropriate to one kind of experience to talk about another.”

It is no surprise, therefore, that Philip Sidney’s *Astrophil and Stella* (1591)—the first full Petrarchan sonnet sequence in English, which commandeers for the service of love terms drawn from almost every imaginable realm of experience—features, not just a kiss, but specifically a stolen kiss. In the song that follows sonnet 72, the speaker finds his love asleep and, after some hesitation, decides to “venture” a kiss upon her lips: “those lips so sweetly swelling | Do invite a stealing kisse.”

The action is performed in a spirit of “play” (l. 8). As in Catullus, however—and, more facetiously, in Charles’s rondel—this then turns to guilt, as Stella awakes and scoldingly “chastens” Astrophil (l. 26), who runs away in a state of confused self-reproach.

But the sense of play quickly returns: six of the ten sonnets that follow the song refer back to the kiss, and they are among the most exuberant in the whole sequence. All of Sidney’s sonnets are witty and imaginative, but the kiss poems seem to enjoy an extreme degree of license and vitality—so much so that the speaker himself remarks upon it. “How falles it then, that with so smooth an ease | My thoughts I speake, and what I speake doth flow | In verse?” he asks in sonnet 74, and then answers his own question: “Sure, thus it is: | My lips are sweet, inspired with Stella’s kisse” (ll. 9–14). Yet the kiss seems to be only half the answer. The first part of sonnet 74 deals, not with kissing, but with stealing. The poem’s first four lines are borrowed—not merely imitated, in this case, but stolen outright—from the Roman satirist Persius, whose Prologue to his poems Sidney has translated nearly verbatim. Far from trying to hide the theft, the speaker exultingly draws attention to it, with his punningly self-betraying protest, “I am no pick-purse of another’s wit” (l. 8). Having stolen a kiss from Stella’s (pursed) lips, he has now been emboldened to pick the purse of Persius, appropriating the language of the earlier poet’s satire and putting it to use in his love poetry; and the result of the thefts is a sense of liberation. Once he has begun to divert language from its original ends, the poet starts to indulge in pure linguistic play.
Sonnet 79, for instance, takes the kiss as the starting point for a rhetorical flight of fancy, free from any sense of logical progression:

Sweet kisse, thy sweets I faine would sweetly endite,
    Which even of sweetnesse sweetest sweetner art:
    Pleasingst consort, where each sence holds a part,
    Which, coupling Doves, guides Venus’ chariot right.
    Best charge, and bravest retrait in Cupid’s fight,
    A double key, which opens to the heart...

(ll. 1–6)

The first two lines offer a bravura example of polyptoton, a rhetorical device beloved of the Renaissance that makes use of multiple inflections of the same root word—here, six different forms of “sweet” in two lines. Polyptoton may well be the trope of kissing par excellence. Like a kiss (and, for that matter, like a sonnet sequence), it takes unabashed pleasure in sheer repetition. Or, rather, the pleasure in each case lies in both the repetition and the variation—the slight movement of the tongue and lips that differentiates “sweet” from “sweets” from “sweetly.” Hence Catullus too (p.109) uses polyptoton to describe a kiss, “sweeter than sweet ambrosia” (*dulci dulcius ambrosia* (99.2)). But Sidney extends the trope nearly to the point of linguistic nonsense.
The device’s effect is reinforced by the veritable tropical storm that accompanies it. After the polyptoton follow ten lines of elaborately figurative language, presenting a string of metaphors borrowed from all different areas of life: the kiss is a concert (“consort”), a pair of yoked doves, a battle, a double key, and so on—all the way up to “[h]ostage of promist weale, | Breakefast of Love” (ll. 12–13). The heterogeneous images (hostages, breakfast) are piled on top of each other, without grammatical structure; the pleasure lies not in their mutual relation but in the far-fetchedness of each momentary metaphor and in their cumulative confusion. (“Conturbabimus illa,” as Catullus writes of his kisses: we shall throw them into confusion (5.11)). Many of the words used, moreover, carry a double meaning. Already in the first line, as James Cotter notes, there is a “play on the words fain (‘to be glad, rejoice’) and feign”; and this punning continues at the end of line 2: “‘art’ (third person singular of the verb to be) echoes the noun; the art is literally hidden under the simple verb to be.”38 “Art” likewise prepares the reader for the shift in meaning that immediately follows, when “consort” turns out to refer, not to a companion, but to a musical harmony. It also alerts us to the sense of “retrait” (l. 5) as “a portrait” as well as a retreat, and to the musical overtones of the word “key” (l. 6). Almost every word has become “a double key.” Such wordplay is not new in the sequence, but it reaches a new pitch of intensity in the poems that follow the stolen kiss, which seem to treat language more as a toy, a pleasurable end in itself, than as a communicative tool.
The torrent of kiss metaphors is finally interrupted in the concluding couplet. But, instead of snapping out of his ecstatic imaginings into a state of self-conscious reflection, as he often does at the end of a sonnet, Astrophil here just indulges in even more basic forms of linguistic self-gratification. “Breakefast of Love,” he intones, before breaking off: “but lo, lo, where she is, | Cease we to praise, now pray we for a kisse” (ll. 13–14). The key word “Love” is reduced, in Stella’s presence, to the mere lingual repetition “lo, lo.” The words provide the same nearly mimetic sense of physical pleasure as “thus, thus” in Jonson’s translation of Petronius, but in an almost infantile register. Before they can speak actual words, babies begin to repeat single syllables, in a practice known, onomatopoetically, as “lalling”;39 “lo, lo” (p.110) seems to fall into this category of syllables pronounced purely for their own sake. By the end of the poem language has thus been largely deflected from its usual aim; it is valued for its form as much as its meaning, as reflected in the play on “praise” and “pray” in the final line—words that, unlike “sweets” and “sweet” at the start, are not actually related except in sound. The poem then concludes, as it began, with a “kisse,” reminding us of the source of the verbal experimentation. The stolen kiss has “inspired” Astrophil’s lips, diverting them equally from praise and prayer and loosing them into pure play.
Not all kisses are light-hearted. Kisses are used for greeting but also for farewells, including the final farewell: the “kiss of death” figures in the art and poetry of many different cultures.\(^4^0\) In *Romeo and Juliet*, for instance, the kiss changes its valence as the play darkens from a comedy into a tragedy. The young lovers kiss when they first meet, but also when they part (Romeo: “Farewell, farewell! One kiss, and I’ll descend”); and each kisses the other as, in turn, they kill themselves (“Thus with a kiss I die”).\(^4^1\) Earlier, even as he is about to marry them, Friar Lawrence invokes the kiss as a monitory image: “These violent delights have violent ends, | And in their triumph die, like fire and powder; | Which as they kiss consume” (2.4.9–11). Kissing here becomes a symbol not so much of consummation as of consumption—a disturbing connotation that it still inevitably carries. As Nicolas James Perella writes, “the kiss may very well be a vestigial remainder or a carry-over of a primitive habit of eating” whatever seems attractive; hence cultures unfamiliar with oral kissing have been known to respond with “horror” when they witness it, “as at some cannibalistic act.”\(^4^2\) The association persists even in sophisticated representations of the kiss. Astrophil, for instance, catches one of Stella’s lips in “(p.111) a hungrie bit,” and must promise to distinguish better in the future: “I will but kisse, I never more will bite” (82.11, 14). Kisses reflect the sense of threat, frailty, loss that accompanies erotic love, as well as its pleasure.

Secundus, too, writes of kisses that turn unexpectedly violent, accusing Neaera of having caught his tongue in a “vicious bite” (*Ferociente morsu* (8.5)). More significantly, his exuberant collection concludes on an elegiac note, with a poem full of plangency. All the aspects that make kissing erotic—the sense of postponement, paradox, self-cancelation—also make it a source, and an emblem, of painful yearning. Hence the final poem of Secundus’ sequence, Basium XIX, a bittersweet invocation that ends with a candid avowal of anxious distress. The poem begins expansively, as an invitation. The speaker addresses the honeybees, telling them no longer to go from flower to flower in search of nectar; instead, “come you all to my mistress’s lips!” (*Omnes ad dominae labra venite meae* (19.4)). But invitations, of course, can be threatening as well as welcoming, and this one is no exception. The speaker says of Neaera’s lips:

Narcissi veris illa madent lacrimis
Oebalique madent iuvenis fragrante cruore,
Qualis uterque liquor; cum cecidisset, erat

Impleret fetu versicolore solum.

(19.8–12)

They are wet with the true tears of
Narcissus,
And they are wet with the fragrant blood of
Hyacinth,
As each liquid was when it fell
And filled the earth with many-colored offspring.

The imagery recalls the etiological fable of Basium I, when Venus “sprinkled kisses upon the fertile earth,” which flowered in a “happy crop” (fecundis oscula glebis/Sparsit...seges felix (1.17–19)). Here, however, the etiology is much more disturbing, since, in the Ovidian myths to which the poem refers, beauty, in the form of flowers, is born only out of death and despair. The second half of the poem then follows with a series of almost desperate injunctions. Having invited the bees to partake of the nectar on Neaera’s lips, the speaker now begins to plead querulously: do not keep me too from her lips; do not drain them dry and leave them barren; do not sting them. With this string of negative commands, capped off by a threat of retribution if they disobey—“she will suffer no injury to go unavenged” (non ullam patietur vulnus inultum (19.21)) —the collection ends.
This concluding lyric, which seems so strangely out of keeping with the rest, becomes more understandable when we recognize its metapoetic nature. Secundus uses the kiss to channel his own authorial anxiety, addressing his readers through a double figurative displacement (reading the poet’s words becomes kissing Neaera’s lips, which is then compared to sipping nectar from a flower). The association is natural, because both invitations—“read me”; “kiss me”—leave the speaker similarly exposed and vulnerable. A poet longs for the intimate approach of a reader, as the lover longs for the beloved, yet also fears it, not least because both situations carry repercussions that stretch beyond the momentary act itself. The lingering effects of reading and kissing are suggested by Secundus’ bee metaphor. Bees do not merely drink from flowers; they bring the pollen away with them to be transformed into something very different (hence the references to Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*), which will then be stored, perhaps beyond the life of the flower itself. In the same way, the reader’s experience of a poem extends far beyond the brief span of the original encounter. And a kiss, too, can have transformative and lasting effects. In folklore, a kiss can effect a metamorphosis: a beast becomes a prince; a princess awakes into a new life. In practice as well, a kiss can perform wonders, revealing (and sometimes creating) a mutual attraction, or sealing a marriage bond. Hence Secundus’ understandable hesitation, his desire to hedge his basia with conditions before offering them up to the world.

The solemnity and apprehensiveness that surround the beginning of a new erotic relationship find even fuller expression in “The Kiss” (1915), by the American poet Sara Teasdale:

Before you kissed me only winds of heaven Had kissed me, and the tenderness of rain— Now you have come, how can I care for kisses Like theirs again?

I sought the sea, she sent her winds to meet me, They surged about me singing of the south

I turned my head away to keep still holy Your kiss upon my mouth.

And swift sweet rains of shining April weather Found not my lips where living kisses are;
I bowed my head lest they put out my glory
As rain puts out a star.

I am my love’s and he is mine forever;
Sealed with a seal and safe forevermore—
Think you that I could let a beggar enter
Where a king stood before? 43

(p.113) The final stanza harks back to the Song of Songs: its first line is a direct quotation (Song 6:3), the second recalls the figure of “a fountain sealed” (4:12), and the reference to the beloved as “king” recalls the Song’s opening (“The king has brought me into his chambers” (1:4)). Yet the contrast between the two works’ depictions of kissing could scarcely be greater. The speaker here presents the kiss, not as part of a repetitive, ongoing process (“Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!”), but as a single, conclusive gesture. The same osculatory tropes of chiasmus and polyptoton are present here as in other kiss poems—forever... sealed... Seal...forevermore—but their effect is very different, suggesting not all-embracing flexibility but insistent enclosure.

The speaker's focus, in other words, is on the exclusivity of erotic relations. 44 The poem begins by noting the loss of earlier emotional experience: in the first stanza, the lover’s kiss signals to the speaker the end of all other kisses and of a type of “care” that she had valued. (The sense of constriction is reinforced formally by the stanza’s abbreviated fourth line—a foot shorter even than those in other quatrains.) For all that the “seal” of love in the final stanza claims to be everlasting, it also seems surprisingly fragile, threatened by the speaker’s every experience. Hence in the middle stanzas the speaker isolates herself, “turn[ing]...away” from the overtures of the sea, figured here as a female companion. She likewise shuts her senses to the aesthetic appeals of nature, the “singing” of the wind and “shining” of rain. What in Secundus had been a pleasing erotic paradox—the fact that a kiss interferes with seeing and hearing, to the extent of extinguishing the very sights and sounds that gave rise to love in the first place—becomes in Teasdale’s poem an emblem of something more serious: the way that a love relationship can narrow perception and constrain the affections.
Yet “The Kiss” is not cynical or hopeless. It does challenge some of the fantasies we have been examining: Petronius’ notion of the kiss, for instance, as an endlessly renewable erotic resource that never cloys or decays; Shelley’s free-love ideal of a world in which everyone kisses everyone else without jealousy. But the poem proposes, in exchange, a balanced notion of erotic love, much like that forwarded by the invitation poem: the kiss is depicted as both an ending and a new beginning, offering recompense for the loss it necessarily entails. Thus, like Shelley’s, Teasdale’s poem ends with a question. Although the first two lines of the last stanza emphasize the hermeticism of the kiss—it is a closed circuit, self-fulfilling and exclusive—the final lines break the seal and turn outward. A kiss after all is a form of conversation, of give and take, of self-exposure; like a poem, it must make its appeal to another to be complete. “Think you...?": the concluding question, addressed equally to lover and to reader, opens the door, however hesitantly, to further interaction.

Notes:


(3) Daniel Karlin, *The Figure of the Singer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013),
(4) The spiritual nature of the kiss is discussed by most writers on the subject but is most fully explored by Nicolas James Perella, *The Kiss Sacred and Profane: An Interpretative History of Kiss Symbolism and Related Religio-Erotic Themes* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969), which traces “the idea that souls can migrate or mingle in a kiss” from Plato through the Christian Middle Ages to the humanist writings of the early Renaissance (p. 7). See, e.g., the disquisition on kissing spoken by Pietro Bembo near the end of Baldesar Castiglione’s *The Book of the Courtier* (1528), which asserts that “a kiss may be said to be a joining of souls rather than of bodies, because it has such power over the soul that it withdraws it to itself and separates it from the body” (Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, trans. Charles S. Singleton (New York: Anchor, 1959), 350).


When the poem appears in Jonson’s collection *The Forest* there may be a husband implied, since both of the earlier lyrics in the same collection addressed to Celia (poems 5 and 6) concern furtive, adulterous love; but nothing within the poem itself suggests a need for subterfuge.


First published as poem 88 of *The Underwood*, the sequence of poems that appeared in the second (posthumous) folio edition of Jonson’s works in 1640. The translation keeps very close to the Latin original, which is no longer attributed to Petronius; nevertheless, to avoid confusion I refer to it throughout as Petronius’ work.


Chiasmus is also one of the rare tropes that call attention to the spatial aspect of poetry: its name derives from the crisscross formation (resembling a Greek chi) produced by its elements on the page. In Shelley’s poem, the chiasmus makes the six lines visibly recognizable as a single unit, with the sequence of clasps and kisses forming a bridge from “See” to shining “sea.”

(19) Secundus directly acknowledges the influence in Basium XVI: “Da mi basia centum! | Da tot basia, quot dedit | Vati multivolo Lesbia, quot tulit” (Give me a hundred kisses! Give me as many kisses as Lesbia [the addressee of Catullus’ poems] gave and received from her desirous poet) (ll. 3–5). All quotations from Secundus refer to The Love Poems of Joannes Secundus, ed. and trans. F. A. Wright (New York: Dutton, 1930); translations are my own unless otherwise noted. On the influence of Catullus 5, including its trope of enumeration, in the Renaissance, see Gordon Braden, “Vivamus, mea Lesbia in the English Renaissance,” English Literary Renaissance, 9 (1979), 199–224.


(23) Thomas Stanley (trans.), Anacreon; Bion; Moschus; Kisses, by Secundus; Cupid Crucified, by Ausonius; Venus Vigils, Incerto Authore (London, 1651), 60–1.

(24) Gooley, The Metaphor of the Kiss, 1.

(25) Carson, Eros the Bittersweet, 10.

(27) The chief source for Secundus’ simile of the snake is epic; see *Iliad* 3.33–7, *Aeneid* 2.379–82. But accompanied by the images of tasting (*libasti*, you sipped or tasted), the snake also clearly recalls the opening of Genesis.


(35) I quote the modern spelling version printed in Stallworthy (ed.), *A Book of Love Poetry*, 105. Charles’s English poems are difficult to date but were most likely written during his captivity in England, 1415–40. On the widespread motif of the stolen kiss, see Nyrop, *The Kiss and its History*, 24–5, 60–71.

Kissing


(39) The word is no longer generally used by developmental psychologists, but it has a long history. Persius uses it (*lallare recusas*) to refer to a mother’s shushing sounds (3.17). See also Abrams, *The Fourth Dimension of a Poem*, 5.


(41) *Romeo and Juliet*, 3.5.42; 5.3.120 (Romeo again).

(42) Perella, *The Kiss Sacred and Profane*, 1. Kissing thus resembles poetry in straddling the division between instinct and cultivation. As Nyrop phrases the question, does the kiss bring us “face to face with something primitive, or something conventional and derivative? Is it as natural to kiss when we are transported with love as to smile when we are mirthful, or weep when we are sad?” (Nyrop, *The Kiss and its History*, 177). The answer appears to be both yes and no: kissing is “une activité corporelle à la fois archaïque (le ‘porter à la bouche’) et fortement culturelle” (a physical activity that is simultaneously primal (bringing something to your mouth) and highly cultivated); see Alain Montandon, “Préface,” in *Les Baisers des lumières*, ed. Montandon, 7–10, p. 7.


(44) This may be partly a gendered, and historical, response: to a female speaker, in 1915, the first kiss may carry a commitment akin to a marriage bond. Yet if monogamy and certain forms of chastity are historically particular, exclusivity is far less so. As noted in the Introduction, the desire for exclusivity is often taken as a definitive feature of erotic love.
Kissing

Access brought to you by: