

‘Give me a thousand kisses’: the kiss, identity, and power in Greek and Roman antiquity¹

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ABSTRACT: While modern studies of gender have discussed at length the social meanings of the sex-act in Greek and Roman antiquity, less scholarly attention has focused upon the act of kissing. This article offers suggestions towards a re-evaluation of the kiss in Greek and Roman literature and society, as a taster of a larger ongoing project by the author. It discusses Greek and Latin terminology, and then key themes in the non-sexual, sexual, and social uses of the kiss, from Homeric times to the third century AD. The uses and meanings of the kiss are seen to develop across time, embracing questions of identity that include age, gender, social status, race, morality, and power.

Modern popular conceptions of love in ancient Greece or Rome are usually sexual. They are highly influenced by the tendency in the media to sensationalise this aspect of antiquity. Images of decadent, scantily clad men and women, at orgies, with plenty of wine and grapes, owe more to Hollywood movies and saucy comedy such as the television series *Up Pompeii!* than to ancient evidence. Hollywood’s distorted image in turn derives from its sensationalist counterpart in antiquity, Petronius’ *Satyricon*, or from erotic vases, viewed out of context.

In these imaginings the kiss plays the role of the precursor to, and a public symbol of, sexual intimacy. Modern studies of the kiss, however, have also been guilty of this sensationalist tendency. In perhaps the most famous and popular modern study, its author, Adrienne Blue, advertised as ‘the world’s expert on kissing’, attempts to map across time what she calls ‘a larger kiss continuum’ (1996:14). Her study covers an ambitiously broad time-period from antiquity to the present day, and embraces references to many different cultures across the globe. She is aware of the complexity of meaning of the kiss: ‘The power of the kiss as a symbol stems from the fact that not just the kiss of sexual intimacy, but virtually every kiss, partakes of the continuum of meaning’ (p.15).

Unfortunately Blue’s approach, although popular enough to be translated into seventeen languages, and inspiring in that it excites further discussion and investigation, is limited in its scholarly value for social historians of specific historical societies. She casts her net wide, and, inevitably for such a popular approach, pulls together a selection of classical examples that are random and only vaguely referenced, and which are never viewed in an appropriate historical context.² Blue draws in turn upon Phillips 1993, who neatly summarises Freud’s

¹ A very much shorter, oral version of this paper was commissioned for a conference on *The Kiss in History*, at the Institute of Historical Research in London, in July 2000, where all papers bar mine dealt with early modern history. This paper summarises some themes arising from my larger ongoing research project into this subject.

² E.g. 1996:36-7, 72, 76-7, 81.

obsessions with the psychoanalysis of the kiss, as simultaneously ‘a threat and a promise’ (1993:107). Phillips does note that ‘there are many kinds of kisses and... they have always punctuated our lives’ (1993:107), but does not develop these ideas as Blue attempts to do.

Classical scholarship on gender and sexuality has blossomed greatly recently, but despite the wealth of extremely interesting and helpful analyses offered, the emphasis has tended more to be placed on the sex-act, and its place in literature/art, rather than on the kiss-act and its wide range of meanings.³ I intend my own research, therefore, to complement these existing studies and to fill an otherwise neglected niche in the rich history of ancient sexuality.

The aim of my research into the kiss in Greek and Roman antiquity is to present a more culturally specific and culturally aware discussion of the wide range of uses and meanings of the kiss in classical culture. A closer, more nuanced examination of the kiss in ancient evidence shows that it plays important roles in the creation and perpetuation of identity. It acts as a symbol of non-sexual affection, for example within families, of sexual lust and desire, but with different emphases dependent on gender and status, and of power relations, both personal and institutional. In addition it can echo social attitudes towards race, respectability, and age.

This article serves to outline the key areas of my ongoing research. The topic is large, and so for reasons of space what follows is just a selection of material, which best illustrates key themes and ideas. I cannot, for example, discuss here the use of the kiss in the visual arts, which must wait for another time.

For the purpose of this article I divide my discussion into four sections: terminology, non-sexual, sexual, and social.

1. Terminology

In looking at Greek and Latin words for kiss we encounter a relatively small number of commonly used words. Here there is no definitive study in existing classical scholarship. Henderson (1991:181-2) catalogues several unusual Greek words for kissing, used on a small number of occasions (some only once), predominantly in Attic comedy, but does not develop the issue, as it would not suit his purpose. Perhaps surprisingly, kissing does not figure in Adams’ detailed discussion of Latin sexual vocabulary (1982).

The commonest verbs used in Greek are *philein* and *kunein*. Since *philein* more commonly means ‘to love’, the act of kissing is usually signalled by the use of the verb in the aorist, the tense of a single action, and is used in this sense across the classical period in both prose and verse, although not in Homeric epic.⁴ The cognate noun here is *philêma*. This noun is often used to describe a kiss that

³ Friedländer 1965:4.58-60 discusses the ceremonial role of kissing, but with his emphasis more on the history of the position of ‘friend’ of the emperor. The fullest classical discussion is still that by Sittl 1890:36-43. However Sittl does not, of course, discuss the nuances of identity that interest us today, nor is he interested, as I am, in the literary uses of the kiss.

⁴ See further *LSJ* I.4.

is not necessarily erotic.⁵ It is used to describe kisses won as a prize in the drinking game of *kottabos*, and thus one assumes chiefly among men.⁶ It is also the word used by Plato's Socrates to describe the kisses male lovers could give each other as rewards for and incentives towards military valour (*Republic* 5.468bc).⁷ Interestingly, Xenophon's Socrates doubts the value of the practice (*Symposium* 8.32-5).

Kunein is predominantly poetic and is the preferred verb for 'to kiss' in Homeric epic. In epic it is interesting that it usually refers to non-sexual kisses, for example those that accompany acts of respect or general affection.⁸ In prose we note similar connotations: it is used, for example, by Lucian to refer to the kiss of greeting expected by Alexander the false prophet on his hand (*Alexander* 55), or to describe pigeons kissing each other affectionately (Aristotle *History of Animals* 560b31).

Another verb sometimes similarly used in the aorist is *aspazesthai*, 'to embrace'. As we shall see further below, Aspasia was a common name for Greek female prostitutes, and thus could mean 'the kisser', 'Miss Kissy'.

In Latin we encounter three commonly used words for kiss: *osculum*, *basium*, and *suavium/savium*. Several sources offer similar distinctions: *osculum* as a more respectable, dutiful kiss, *basium* as that between family members, and *savium* as erotic. In his commentary on Vergil *Aeneid* 1.256 (I.95 Thilo-Hagen), Servius notes: *sciendum osculum religionis esse, savium voluptatis; quamvis quidam osculum filiis dari, uxori basium, scorto savium dicant*. A similar division is offered by Donatus in his commentary on Terence *Eunuchus* 456 (1.2.3 = I.369 Wessner): *tria sunt: osculum, basium, savium. Oscula officiorum sunt, basia pudicorum affectuum, savia libidinum vel amorum*. This distinction is confirmed by Festus' remarks on the use of *osculum*: *quod inter cognatos, propinquosque institutum ab antiquis est, maximeque feminas* (*On the Meaning of Words* 228.35-9).

S(u)avium seems to be an early Latin word, used more in verse, and is a word especially common in Plautus' comedy.⁹ This is, however, to be expected, if, as is suggested above, it was thought of as primarily a word used to suggest naughty or erotic kisses.¹⁰ *Basium* is also mostly poetic, and is Catullus' and Martial's word

⁵ E.g. Aesch. *Ag.* 1559 (kissing a father's hand); Soph. *OC* 1131 (of the head); Eur. *Supp.* 1154 (of the chin). A kiss of greeting: Hdt. 1.134 (on the lips and not the cheek), and thus later in Christian literature, e.g. *I Corinthians* 16.20.

⁶ See Plato *Comicus* fr. 46.5 K-A (= Athen. 15.666d); Soph. *Salmones* fr. 537 Radt (= Athen. 11.487d; see too Pearson's note *ad loc.* = 2.179); Eubulus fr. 3.4 Hunter.

⁷ Recalled by Gellius *NA* 18.2.8.

⁸ E.g. *Od.* 16.15, 19.417, 23.208 (head); 21.224 (head and shoulders); *Il.* 24.478 (hands).

⁹ E.g. Plaut. *As.* 891 (5.2.41), 940 (5.2.90); *Bacch.* 429 (3.3.25); *Cas.* 887 (5.2.14); *Truc.* 356 (2.4.5). In *Poen.* the word is used as part of a formula for characterisation and is repeated at 366 (1.2.159), 375 (1.2.168), 383 (1.2.176), 388 (1.2.181). A similar expression of affection is found in Ter. *Eunuch* 456 (3.2.3). Cf. *suavisaviatio* in Plaut. *Bacch.* 116 (1.2.8), 120 (1.2.12), and *Pseud.* 65 (1.1.63).

¹⁰ Yet it is also the word used in Gellius *Attic Nights* 3.15.3 of boys kissing their father after their victory at the Olympic games, and the word used by Cicero to refer to kissing the child Attica

of choice. It is therefore not unexpected, given its connotations, that the prose author who uses it most is Petronius.¹¹ Martial usually uses it to refer to kisses of greeting, which he generally depicts as unwanted.¹² *Basium* is also the word used for kisses given or thrown by someone to a crowd of supporters or an audience.¹³ *Osculum* words seem sometimes to be used for kisses between lovers,¹⁴ and more often for kisses of greeting and farewell.¹⁵

2. Non-sexual

The commonest classical use for the kiss in a non-sexual context is within the family. Here parents, regardless of gender, show affection by kissing their children. Perhaps more predictably it is the mothers who are more often described in literature as kissing their children. However, instances in early Greek literature are not as common as one might first imagine. The motif of familial love is important as a theme in the *Iliad*, where, for example, Thetis' tenderness towards her son Achilles accentuates and contrasts with the gruesome horrors of the battlefield. However, when one examines the episodes between the mother and son, the tenderness is chiefly expressed through tears and tender words between them, not kisses. An exception is the tender kiss that the warrior Hector gives his little son Astyanax at 6.474, which poignantly encapsulates and confirms with a single action the hero's sense of familial affection and duty. Where kisses are more generally used is in supplication, for instance when Thetis supplicates Zeus (8.371), and, most vividly, when Priam visits Achilles to ask for his son's corpse to be returned and, before he speaks to Achilles, silently touches his knees in supplication and 'kisses his terrible, man-slaying hands' (24.478-79). The poet's choice to make Priam kiss in this way, so unexpected and dramatic an action in this context, underlines the pathos of the scene, and indeed encapsulates Priam's depth of grief. We shall see below that the kiss is also used as a dramatic climax in other types of literature. It is indeed clear that ancient authors knew that there are times when a kiss (whether pathetic or erotic) is far more emotional and effective than any words, and that they could accordingly delay and deploy it when most powerful.

(*Letters to Att.* 16.3.6, 16.11.8) and of Brutus' ancestor kissing his mother Earth (*Brutus* 14.53). For the latter story, see Livy *History of Rome* 1.56.

¹¹ E.g. 18.4 (of a grateful woman to a man), 135.2 (woman kisses man); cf. 85 (Eumolpus' oath to give doves to Venus if she allows him to kiss a sleeping boy he fancies: the word used here is the diminutive *basiolum*).

¹² Martial 2.21.1; 7.95.7 (Livius kisses everyone on a cold day); 11.98 (the hated excessive attentions of the male *basiator*); 12.55.9; 12.59.1 (excessive greeting after absence by undesirable men). Contrast 1.94.2: used of male sexual intercourse with a woman.

¹³ A flute-player kisses his hand and throws kisses: Phaedrus 5.2.8; throwing kisses from a carriage: Juvenal *Sat.* 4.117; a reciter thanks his audience for their applause by throwing kisses: Martial 1.3.7; Otho throwing kisses at the crowd: Tac. *Hist.* 1.36.

¹⁴ E.g. Plaut. *As.* 222 (1.3.69), yet 225 (1.3.72) is of kissing a prostitute; *Mil. Glor.* 243-5 (2.2.90-2), 1433 (5.1.40).

¹⁵ E.g. Cic. *Letters to Att.* 16.5.2 (farewell between men); *Letters to Att.* 12.1.1 (man greeting a child); Cic. *Rep.* 6.14.14 (man kissing another man in grief); Plaut. *Ep.* 571-3 (4.2.2-4, girl greeting her mother); Verg. *Aen.* 1.687 (Dido to the disguised Cupid); Ap. *Met.* 2.117.23 (kissing the hand).

Greek tragedy picks up this connection of the kiss and pathos. When Euripides wishes to emphasise the conflict of emotions in Medea as she ponders whether or not to kill her own children, he chooses to have her kiss her children, in a scene overshadowed by tragic irony (*Medea* 1069-71).¹⁶ In an ironic twist that suits her perverted mythological character, Ovid's Phaedra hopes that onlookers will excuse her kissing her stepson Hippolytus because of their family relationship: 'whoever sees our kisses will commend us, will call us kind stepmother, true stepson' (*Heroides* 4.137-40). Here Phaedra is unquestionably depicted as immoral partly through her desperate desire as a woman actively to kiss Hippolytus. I shall return to this topic later. A similar attempt to disguise lustful kisses is found in Petronius (*Satyricon* 74), whose Trimalchio kisses a handsome boy at a party, which angers his wife, Fortunata. He apologises to her and explains that he was only kissing the boy because he was a good and honest servant, not because of his beauty!

The tender kiss between parent and child also sometimes involves the father as kisser. In Valerius Flaccus' *Voyage of the Argo* Peleus, before leaving on the Argo, kisses his little son Achilles (1.264), in an act that poignantly confirms the otherwise generally virtuous mythological characterisation of Peleus. A similar kind of kiss is that which Jupiter places on Cupid's hand as a sign that he finally yields to Cupid his beloved nymph Psyche (Apuleius *Metamorphoses* 6.22). Here again the kiss acts as an encapsulating symbol, this time of Jupiter's change of feelings.

The affectionate kissing of children, indeed, spawns a unique type of special kiss, the *chutra*, or 'jug-kiss'.¹⁷ The Greek lexicographer Pollux records (*Onomasticon* 10.100) that the *chutra* is a type of kiss when one kisses one's children, holding them up by the ears, as if they were two handles of a jug. By way of illustration Pollux cites a fragment (fr. 1) of the comedy *Anteia* by Eunucus: 'lift him up by the ears and give him the *chutra* kiss.' Bizarrely perhaps, this classical custom is still alive and kicking by the time of Tibullus in the late first century BC, who refers to a child kissing his father while holding his father's ears (2.5.92), and Plutarch, who writes in the first-second century AD that 'many people kiss little children by holding their ears and asking the children to do the same' (*Moral Essays* 38c).

It is significant that in these instances, it is the parent who is generally described as the active agent, the kisser, and the child as the passive recipient of the kiss. Although sometimes the child kisses back, the narrative focus is upon the kiss as a symbol of the love the parent bears the child, and thus acts to characterise the parent's virtue of familial affection.

3. Sexual

The most pervasive examples of the kiss in Greco-Roman evidence are in relationships that illustrate affection between adults (or near-adults) in an often

¹⁶ Despite the doubt over the authenticity of this passage as a whole, the author still makes a deliberate effort to show the pathos in such a context of the final kiss between mother and child.

¹⁷ See *LSJ* II.

sexual context. However, the meaning of the kiss modulates over time and is affected by issues of gender and status.

In classical Athenian culture the kiss is more often a sign of affection between men than between men and women. The kiss, rather than the sexual act, between men has overtones of elite self-control, and is often centred on the *symposion*. The *symposion* was essentially a male-only environment, where the only women that might be present would be slaves or prostitutes/escorts. Here the erotic arena is one of temptation and threat. The kiss is a sign of an adult male's yielding to affection or desire of a younger male. Kisses were sometimes a prize in the male drinking game of *kottabos* (see above). The harm that can befall older men from kissing young boys is famously referred to by Socrates, who, in a detailed discussion of the moral dangers of the kiss, warns Xenophon to flee beautiful boys, since their kisses will inspire him with fearful desire, more dangerous than poisonous spiders (Xen. *Memorabilia* 1.3.8-15).¹⁸ In this passage Socrates is dismayed at the handsome young Critobulus kissing a beautiful young boy, because Critobulus does not realise how dangerous it is to fall in love, and compares Critobulus' action to somersaulting into a ring of knives or jumping into fire.

Sexual kisses between men and women in classical literature seem, by contrast, to smack of immorality and boorishness. Women who play the active role as kisser are especially cast as of dubious morality. In Aristophanes' comedy *Clouds* the pathetic 'hero' of the play, Strepsiades, describes the wealthy, pampered, and idle woman he married and includes among the many signs of her depravity 'scent, saffron, and deep kisses' (51). The Greek word used here is *kataglôttisma*, which differentiates this deep oral penetration (*kata-* compounds often signify downward movement) from non-sexual, affectionate kisses.¹⁹ The verb *kataglôttizein* is used twice by the comedian Aristophanes to refer to Cleon's persuasive style of speech, 'out-tonguing' or 'out-talking' (*Acharnians* 380, *Knights* 352).²⁰ The choice of this word, given its connotations, helps to feminise and thus satirise Cleon. Similarly immoral is the oral activity of Philocleon's daughter in Aristophanes' *Wasps*, who kisses her father when he comes home from the courts and slips her tongue into his mouth in order to remove his jury pay from his mouth (608-9),²¹ as some Athenians apparently carried small coins in the mouths, as in a purse. In these (and other similar) instances, power relations and gender are important. The active kisser is thought of here as morally flawed. If the

¹⁸ Echoed by Burton in his *Anatomy of Melancholy* (Part 3 Sect. 2 Memb. 2 Subs. 4, 1932:3.110), as noted by Phillips 1993:107. See too Xen. *Symp.* 4.25-6 (avoid kissing beautiful boys), and 8.23 (the male lover always desperate for another kiss). Note too *Symp.* 4.8, where the banqueters jokingly discuss chewing onions to make people avoid kissing them.

¹⁹ Used by transference to refer to 'women's music' in *Thesm.* 131. Cf. also *kataglôttismos*: Comic. Adesp. fr. 761 K-A (= Pollux *On.* 2.109, I.118 Bethe).

²⁰ See Henderson 1991:182: "'tongue-kiss into silence" as well as tongue-lash.'

²¹ Sommerstein *ad loc.* does not believe that the girl can talk and kiss at the same time, so he suggests that the 'kiss' metaphorically symbolises her coaxing and flattering words. Nonetheless he does agree that there is 'an indecent suggestion' here. I would prefer to see here a literal 'fishing about' in Philocleon's mouth and a lewd perversion of an affectionate familial kiss, as does MacDowell *ad loc.*

active kisser is a woman, this is especially true, and seems to carry connotations of the active immorality of prostitutes. We may compare the girl featured in Crates' *Paidiai* fr. 27 K-A (= Pollux *Onomasticon* 9.114), who plays a kissing game (*kunêtinda*) with a chorus of (presumably young) men, and is probably presented as less than respectable for doing so.

Today in Western European society many think of kissing their partner, husband, wife, girlfriend or boyfriend in public as socially acceptable. However references to kisses between husband and wife in classical literature are rare. It is also interesting that while many modern marriage ceremonies are 'sealed with a kiss', given at the end of the ceremony, as a symbolic climax, before the assembled witnesses, such a public act of affection is not part of a traditional marriage ceremony in either ancient Greek or Roman society.²² Instead the emphasis there is on the public procession and spectacle.²³

When kissing between partners is recorded it is worthy of note as exceptional behaviour. One interesting example is the relationship between the classical Athenian statesman Pericles and his partner, Aspasia.²⁴ Aspasia bore a prostitute's name. It means 'the kisser' and was shared by other women of the profession.²⁵ It appears that she was once a prostitute and then shifted into a relationship with Pericles where she acted more as a relatively more socially acceptable concubine, and mother to his son, Pericles the younger. In his biography of Pericles, Plutarch records (24.5-6): 'Pericles loved her exceedingly. Twice a day, as they say, on going out and coming in from the market-place, he used to salute her with a loving kiss.' The source of the remark is not given by Plutarch, who instead uses his common cover-all 'they say'.²⁶ It may well be from a comedy, as much of the rest of this section about Aspasia derives from comic sources.²⁷ Aspasia was commonly used by comedian critics to satirise Pericles, perhaps echoing contemporary opposition. It is also possible, as Podlecki notes (1987:60), that this may derive from a remark by the philosopher Antisthenes, whom Athenaeus later records (13.589e) as saying that Pericles left home and returned twice a day just to be able to kiss her more often.²⁸ Plutarch's version also includes an artistic pun in the Greek, as 'he used to salute' is *êspazeto*, from *aspazesthai*, the verb that gives

²² For example, Lucan *Pharsalia* 2.326 records the details of the marriage Cato and Marcia did not have, which must reflect expected custom.

²³ On the debate whether a kiss was performed at engagement: Treggiari 1991: 149-52. The main evidence for a ritual kiss at the *sponsalia* is from Tertullian *On the Veiling of Virgins* 11.4-5, and *On speech* 22.10. Treggiari rightly notes that Tertullian can really only serve as evidence for practice in Christian North Africa at that date: 'no other classical author takes any interest in a betrothal kiss' (1991:151). Kissing does not seem a normal part of the marriage ceremony either, as Tacitus seems to use it, among other similarly scandalous features, as a sign of the unusually immoral wedding ceremony of Silius and Messalina (*Annals* 11.27.1).

²⁴ On Aspasia generally see the excellent survey by Henry 1995.

²⁵ E.g. Aspasia the concubine of Cyrus: Plut. *Per.* 24.11-12.

²⁶ On Plutarch's habit of avoiding explicit source references and of repeating various phrases like this, see Henry 1995:71-2.

²⁷ See Henry 1995:19-28.

²⁸ On Antisthenes' dialogue *Aspasia* and its probable negative representation of Pericles, see Henry 1995:30-2.

us Aspasia's name. The word for kiss used here is *to kataphilein*, whose *kata*-prefix may imply a less than respectable, sexual kiss (see my remarks on *kataglôttisma* above, although also see my remarks in n.32 below).

In the Hellenistic period the prominence and use of the kiss increase. The kiss between men in a homosexual context is still there, although it becomes more eroticised. Theocritus *Idyll* 12 focuses on a man who welcomes a younger male lover after some absence. At the end of the poem he refers to a religious festival at Megara called the Diocleia. This honoured the death of a local hero, Diocles. I give here Gow's appropriately poetic translation:²⁹

Megarians of Nisaea, champions of the oar, prosperous may ye live since ye honoured exceedingly the Attic stranger, Diocles the lover. Ever about his tomb in early spring the lads gather and contend for the prize in kissing. And whoso most sweetly presses lip on lip turns homeward to his mother with garlands laden. Happy he who judged those kisses for the boys, and surely long he prays to radiant Ganymede that his lips may be as the Lydian touchstone whereby the money-changers try true gold to see it be not false. (27-37)

The highly fictionalised and eroticised festival here may recall some element of reality, however, as Varro recalls another kissing contest, the Philesia, at Didyma.³⁰

Tibullus 1.4 shows the sex-god Priapus advising male worshippers on how to chase reluctant boys. Eventually, he says, they surrender: 'then you may capture kisses; he'll fight, but (the kisses) will still be sweet. At first you'll seize them, then he'll give them, at last he'll hang around your neck' (53-6). The idea of resistance on the part of the object of desire is all part of the 'fun'. The kiss marks victory and domination. We shall see this in a heterosexual context later below. Nevertheless it is striking that the kiss, as passionate moment between men, is not really developed as a motif in Greek erotic poetry.³¹ An exception is the touching epigram by Meleager (*Greek Anthology* 12.133 = *Ep.* 84 Gow-Page), where the poet describes a kiss as quenching the thirst of desire, and refers to Zeus 'drinking the nectar kisses of Ganymede' as the lover's kiss 'has drunk the sweet honey of the soul'.

However, the kiss between heterosexual lovers in this period takes on a new importance. The male lover-poet now uses kisses as symbols of his active desire for the female object of their interest. The power relationship, which we shall see further strengthened in later Roman love elegy, is constructed in this eroticised context: the active male lover, the passive female object. In the fewer cases where women are the active kissers, the context is often still, for the male reader/audience, eroticised. For example, when the young girl Phoenicium in Plautus' *Pseudolus* (1.1.63), which often recreates a very Greek ambience, writes a letter to her female friend, she lists among the pleasures that they shared 'sweet kissing' and 'soft kisses of tender lips'. Although the girls did not mean the kisses

²⁹ See also Gow *ad loc.*, and the scholia on 12.29.

³⁰ Varro in scholia on Statius *Thebaid* 7.198.

³¹ As noted by Buffière 1980:317. Yet see Strato *Greek Anthology* 12.177.

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to be erotic, male fantasy sees an active female kisser as an active erotic agent, and thus alluring and potentially open to other sexual activity.

The sexual openness of women who kiss their male lovers colours our reading of the descriptions of kisses in Roman literature's first real kiss 'fanatic', Catullus. The power relation of the dominant kisser over kissed is strong in his poems, but is not always presented predictably with male as active, female as passive. Perhaps the most famous example is poem 5:

Let us live, my Lesbia, and love, and value at one farthing all the talk of crabbed old men. Suns may set and rise again. For us, when the short light has once set, remains to be slept the sleep of one unbroken night. 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 made up many thousands, we will confuse our counting, that we may not know the reckoning, nor any malicious person blight them with evil eye, when he knows that our kisses are so many. (trans. Cornish)

Here the passionate kisses, almost literally innumerable, run riot. The dramatic, rhetorical accumulation (*exaggeratio*) of numbers overwhelms the kisses themselves with desperate activity that deliberately illustrates the poet's lack of self-control. The expected power relations are nicely reversed. Lesbia is to 'give' these kisses to Catullus; she is to be the active erotic agent. In this way she resembles the immoral active women kissers we have noted above. Only later in the poem is Catullus jointly involved with the use of the first person plural.

The kiss can be staged within narratives as a dramatic climax, a goal towards which the text's participants strive, and, ultimately, when won, a clear symbol of victory. Ovid is particularly good at this in his *Metamorphoses*. Ovid's elaborate description of Narcissus' obsessive self-love reaches its peak when the young boy kisses his own reflection (3.427). Similarly dramatic is the use of the kiss in Ovid's version of the Pygmalion story (10.244-97). Ovid emphasises Pygmalion's desire by telling us that Pygmalion kisses the lifeless statue (256). After his prayer to Venus, he goes to the couch and again kisses the statue. Ovid speaks of two kisses (281-2), each of which marks the statue's coming alive, warm and soft. We are told that the now-alive maiden feels his kiss, blushes, and trembles (292-3). The kiss here too is deliberately used, therefore, by means of its repetition, to symbolise the story's happy resolution and Pygmalion's realised goal.

We encounter a similar dramatic use of the kiss in the story of Hermaphroditus (*Metamorphoses* 4.285-388). However here there is a neat gender twist, in that the active desirer and kisser is the nymph Salmacis, and the boy Hermaphroditus the reluctant object. The tone of Ovid's narrative makes it clear that it is the nymph who is immoral and who seeks to take advantage of the beautiful and innocent boy. Ovid's tale of Salmacis' obsessive lust climaxes as the nymph jumps into the pool where the boy is bathing and steals a kiss from him against his will, wrapping herself around him like a snake, before praying that they become one, as then happens (4.358-76).

Ovid also plays with this idea of resistance in his handbook for lovers, again in a heterosexual context. A skilful male lover, we are told, blends his words with

kisses. The woman will resist, but the lover must persevere. Kissing is not the final fulfilment of desire, and Ovid tells the lover not to stop there: women love to be forced (*Art of Love* 1.663-680). This idea of the kiss as a stage on the way to final gratification is echoed by Donatus in his commentary on Terence *Eunuchus* 640 (4.2.12 = I.405-6 Wessner), who records five stages of love: sight, conversation, touch, kiss, and intercourse.

This domination theme is also presented elsewhere with a more predictable use of gender. The sixth-century AD epigrammatist Agathias presents a lengthy and elaborately detailed description of a male lover's 'siege' of a female beloved. The poem's narrative builds up gradually, with frequent use of military metaphors, to the climax of the lover's 'capture' of his beloved: 'I took delight in her face, gorging my mouth on the soft touch of her lips; the spoils were her beautiful mouth and a kiss was a pledge of the night's contest' (*Greek Anthology* 5.294). The kiss again symbolises victory and conquest.

Perhaps an even more aggressive use of the kiss, deliberately and cruelly designed to inspire jealousy, is that recounted by Lucian in one of his comic *Dialogues of the Courtesans* (3). Here the prostitute Philinna tells how her lover, the comic poet Diphilus, carefully watched the jealous Philinna while he kissed another prostitute, Thais, the lover of his friend, Lamprias. He took Thais' ear and bent back her neck, only to kiss her so vigorously that he almost tore her lips.³² The prostitutes here are clearly expected to remain passive, as Diphilus imposes his kisses on whomever he wishes, however he wishes. It is ironic that within the dialogue as a whole this kiss-act, perhaps more than anything else, elicits sympathy with the reader for Philinna, the otherwise immoral prostitute, and casts Diphilus as cruel and heartless.

Yet this is a deliberate extreme. The majority of texts from the Hellenistic into the Roman period present the kiss between men and women as essentially erotic and even romantic. Some texts, such as the Greek Romances, deliberately play with this conceit with a tone of *faux naïveté*.³³ In the pastoral romance *Daphnis and Chloe*, by Longus, Daphnis asks himself what Chloe's kiss may do to him, her 'lips are tenderer than roses, her mouth sweeter than honeycomb, but her kiss is more bitter than the sting of the bee... like poison'. There are numerous kisses in Longus' novel that are affectionate and loving. Sometimes lovers kiss objects, such as wreaths or pipes, that have been held by their beloved.³⁴ Kisses can be given in exchange for gifts, as Chloe does to the dying Dorcon in return for his pan-pipe (1.29.3). At 2.7.7 the aged Philetas describes a cure to Daphnis and Chloe for love, which comprises three things: kisses, embraces, and lying together. For the old Philetas, indeed, just one kiss from a young boy would be

³² The neck is part of a woman's body often connected with erotic kisses: cf. Hor. *Odes* 2.12.25 (with Porphyry's *scholium ad loc.*); Prop. 3.8.21; Ach. Tat. 2.4.4; Alciphron *Letters* 2.7.1.

³³ On the kiss in the Greek romances and in pastoral literature in general, see Bompaire 1973, Poggioli 1974:14, Rosenmeyer 1969:77-82, Konstan 1990.

³⁴ Compare the lovers who kiss their beloved's door: Callimachus *Greek Anthology* 12.118.5-6 (*Ep.* 42 Pfeiffer); [Theocr.] 23.18; Lucretius *On the Nature of the Universe* 4.1179.

worth bribing him with fruit (2.4).³⁵ The pathos of his situation is thus emphasised by the motif of a single kiss.

Kisses may also play other roles in the novels. In Xenophon of Ephesus' novel, the heroine Anthia kisses her husband Habrocomes on their wedding night, but she kisses his eyes and addresses them, thanking them for acting as the conduit of love between the two of them, but also persuading them not to allow Habrocomes to see any other beautiful women (1.9.7-8). Here we have a touching reworking of the use of the kiss in persuasion.³⁶

In his novel *Leucippe and Cleitophon*, Achilles Tatius plays with the motif of kisses in his famous comparison of hetero- and homosexual love (2.37-8).³⁷ The speaker advocating love of women says (2.37) that women's lips are 'tender and soft for kissing'. He describes in detail the kiss of a woman, and deprecates those of boys. 'Schoolboys', he says, 'are hardly so well-educated in kissing, their embraces are awkward, their love-making is lazy and devoid of pleasure.' Even the advocate of boy-love notes that their kisses are not as sophisticated as women's (2.38). As Halperin notes, the focus in the whole comparison is the effect the kiss has upon the male lover who is the recipient of the kiss: 'the description is utterly self-referential and narcissistic' (1990:274). As such, the description and its power balance echo themes we have seen above, for example in Xenophon or Catullus.

So far we have seen that the kiss defines various identities. With regard to age, it identifies parent and child. We have seen that kisses in a homosexual context can be seen as elitist and not crude, a tentative flirt with a tempting danger, unlike those in certain heterosexual contexts, where active kissing is boorish, dominating, and even crude or violent. The third area I wish to look at is where the kiss takes on another meaning, where the power relations are still important, and where the kiss-act helps to identify the kisser's relationship to the kissed in a more public context.

4. Social

Perhaps the most common form of social kiss seems to have been the kiss of greeting or farewell,³⁸ used by both men and women, usually within extended family groups.³⁹ Certain races had different customs that Greek authors thought worthy of note as defining their un-Greekness, and such welcome kisses were generally viewed as non-Greek.⁴⁰ Herodotus (*Histories* 1.134) notes that the Persians greet each other with kisses on the lips, not on the mouth. Xenophon (*Education of Cyrus* 1.4.27-8) bases an amusing anecdote on the practice: an adult male Mede falls in love with the young Cyrus and keeps returning for goodbye

³⁵ On Philetas and his garden: Zeitlin 1990.

³⁶ On love and the eyes, a common theme in classical literature, see e.g. Konstan 1990:195.

³⁷ See Halperin 1990:273-4.

³⁸ Farewell kisses: Prop. 2.13b.29; Tib. 1.1.62; Petr. *Sat.* 74.17.

³⁹ Polybius 6.11a.4 (= Athen. 10.440e) says in Rome to the level of sixth cousin.

⁴⁰ As noted, for example, by Dover 1978:64 n.6.

and hello kisses.⁴¹ Such greeting and farewell kisses, on the cheek, are frequently referred to by Greek and Roman authors, especially the latter.⁴² Sometimes the right hand is also grasped.⁴³ It does appear, however, that it was a recognisably urbanised Roman practice to Greek eyes, as we can see, for example, from Dio Chrysostom *Oration* 7.59, where Greek townspeople laugh at the sight of men greeting each other with a greeting kiss, since ‘they do not kiss each other in the towns’.

There also seems to be an historical development here. Friedländer (1908-1913:4.58-9) notes that while there was a long tradition among Romans that family members and very close friends might kiss one another greeting,⁴⁴ the practice of welcome-kissing those less close comes to Rome later, and he suggests that it starts under Augustus.⁴⁵ It is also worth noting that it appears as if the practice in addition had elite status connotations: Pliny (*Natural History* 26.3) notes that a facial skin disease tended to spread more among the elite because of the practice of kissing.⁴⁶ Indeed it appears that the closest friends of those in power had their status publicly recognised and confirmed by a kiss. Lucian satirises this practice in his *Alexander* (41). Here the sham prophet Alexander of Abonuteichos has a practice of not welcome-kissing on the lips anyone over eighteen years of age, but instead offering them his hand to be kissed. He reserved only young men for the status of ‘those within the kiss’ (*hoi entos tou philêmatos*), which Friedländer sees as a technical term, parodied by Lucian. This perversion of custom acts, Lucian tells us, as a cover for Alexander’s immoral desire for boys.

In the classical Greek period one of the most important defining characteristics was race: was one Greek or Barbarian? Even in the later Roman world there was still a persistent fear of ‘the Eastern’. One of the most common features in classical descriptions of Eastern or Persian society was the activity called by the Greeks *proskunêsis*. This literally means ‘kissing towards’,⁴⁷ and was the form of prostrate ritual obeisance, probably accompanied by a ritual blowing of a kiss with the hand, which was performed by Persians before their king. In Greek sources it is regarded with detached interest and a touch of disgust. When Alexander the Great started to adopt aspects of Eastern ruler-worship, this would have included *proskunêsis*. The until-then epitome of Greekness starts to excite criticism and distrust once he adopts a practice that involves the exaggerated kiss-act as a sign of obeisance and submission. Plutarch (*Alexander*

⁴¹ Cf. Xen. *Agesilaus* 5.4: Agesilaus’ self-restraint causes him not to kiss a young male Persian, for fear that it might exacerbate Agesilaus’ lust.

⁴² See above n.15 and add e.g. Eur. *IA* 679 (daughter to father), 1238 (father to daughter); *Androm.* 416 (son kisses father); *Alc.* 183 (kissing the marital bed); *Med.* 1141 (hand and head of a child); Aristoph. *Birds* 141 (man greeting a boy).

⁴³ E.g. Aristoph. *Clouds* 81 (father kisses son and takes hand); *Frogs* 788-9 (Sophocles kisses Aeschylus and gives his right hand); *Wealth* 754-5.

⁴⁴ See above nn.38 and 39.

⁴⁵ He says that the first instance he can find comes in 6 BC, citing Suet. *Tib.* 10.

⁴⁶ *Nec sensere id malum feminae aut servitia plebesque humilis aut media, sed procures veloci transitu osculi maxime.*

⁴⁷ See *LSJ* II.1. On *proskunêsis* in general, see Hall 1989:96-7, with her further bibliographical references in n.188.

54.3-6) offers a significant and vivid episode to illustrate Alexander's fondness for *proskunêsis*.⁴⁸ He records, following his source Chares of Mitylene, that at a banquet Alexander offered the goblet from which he had drunk to one of his friends, who stood up, drank the king's health, paid him reverence, kissed him, and then sat down again. Callisthenes was not allowed to kiss Alexander because he had not paid him due reverence. Here the kiss-act marks out clear material power relations. It defines the status of the ruler and that of the ruled, and is thought of as a reward for public recognition of superior status.

This Eastern-style obeisance was much later adopted as court protocol in the Roman Empire. The emperor Diocletian instituted elaborate ceremonial in his court that centred on the act of *adoratio*.⁴⁹ This practice, which means literally 'bringing to the mouth', was the act of kissing the imperial robe. This kiss symbolised and defined the power relationship between emperor and subject. This kiss defines and confers public, political power. It is from this court protocol that the Christian Church may have later borrowed the practice of, for example, kissing the ring of a powerful cleric as a sign of his power and the kisser's recognition of and submission to his will. So pervasive was this image of kissing what was politically your superior power that we even have a record of one proconsul in 313 AD 'adoring', literally kissing, the letters of the emperor, which symbolised his power and instruction.⁵⁰

The kiss could also, at least in popular mythology, become a test of virtue and socially acceptable gender-specific behaviour. The sources that tell us about the ancient Roman custom of wives kissing their husbands on their return (sometimes mistakenly called the *ius osculi*)⁵¹ hint that it was also seen as a way for men to check whether their wives had been drinking.⁵² In Roman custom the drinking of wine by women was discouraged.⁵³ According to Pliny (*Natural History* 14.89-90), it was the infamous moral conservative (and misogynist) censor Cato who advocated this practice. The alleged custom was indeed thought so odd by the Greek Plutarch that he devotes one of his *Roman Questions* to it (6 = *Mor.* 265bc). Additionally Cicero notes with approval (*Republic* 4.6) that kinsmen stop kissing women who have lost their reputation. The withdrawal of this common Roman kiss is thus a public sign of their immorality.

⁴⁸ See Hamilton 1969:150-3 for a full and detailed discussion of the practice of *proskunêsis* and of the debate concerning its adoption by Alexander.

⁴⁹ Ammianus 15.5.18; Eutropius 9.26; Aurelius Victor *Caes.* 39.4; cf. *Pan. Lat.* 11(3).11.1-2 and Stern 1954.

⁵⁰ See Corcoran 1996:155-6, with n.150; Aug. *Ep.* 88.2.

⁵¹ It was not a *law* at all. For the term *ius osculi* in this context: Val. Max. 3.8.6. The term *ius osculi* is used by Suetonius in *Claudius* 26.3, perhaps in an ironic reminiscence of the term, to refer to the power of Agrippina's kisses over her 'victim', Claudius.

⁵² For the story, see Polybius 6.11a.4 (= Athen. 10.440e); Plut. *Bravery of Women* 1 (= *Mor.* 244a). Interestingly the verb Plutarch uses in this last passage for the women's kissing is *kataphilein*, which appears to be a favourite of his for tender kissing, cf. its use of kissing a religious amulet at *Sulla* 29.6 (cf. Xen. *Mem.* 2.6.33).

⁵³ See Plut. *Rom. Quest.* 20 (= *Mor.* 268de); Gellius *Attic Nights* 10.13; Servius on Verg. *Aen.* 1.737, Tertullian *Apology* 6.3-5 (decadent present contrasted with the moral past).

Kissing could also be a sign of religious piety or superstition. There are several references to Romans kissing a statue or amulet of a god for luck.⁵⁴ Cicero also recalls the curious practice of kissing the dying to take their last breath (*Verrines* 2.5.118), which becomes a commonplace in Roman consolation literature.⁵⁵ Suetonius tells us (*Augustus* 99.1) that Augustus died as he and Livia were kissing, and that his last words were to remember her husband.

Following on appropriately from this, we may end our survey of the wide range of uses of the kiss with a tragic story. Lucian ends his dialogue *In Praise of Demosthenes* (49) with a dramatic use of the kiss. Seeking sanctuary at the altar of Poseidon, Demosthenes appears to his interlocutor Archias to be paying respect to the god when, at the end of their conversation, he puts his hand to his mouth and kisses it. However Demosthenes with this act was in fact taking poison that he had procured earlier, and so dies, with his last words denying his enemies the pleasure of taking him alive. This tragic and cunning kiss empowers Demosthenes within the narrative, and gives Lucian an appropriately pathetic and heroic conclusion to his exercise in *encomium*.

5. Conclusion

The range of different meanings and uses for the kiss during Greco-Roman antiquity is striking. It is indeed, as Blue suggests, a ‘continuum of meaning’, but it is a more diverse and complex continuum than Blue and other scholars imagine. The kiss embraces (if you will forgive the word-play) a range of meaning from traditional affection between parents and children, to the problematic symbol of the kiss as a signifier of erotic power, or even resistance. Outcry when a politician publicly kisses his lover, or expects Eastern-style obeisance, reveals interesting levels of social meaning and offers insight into important questions of identity, what is socially acceptable, and what is not.

A closer examination of the use of the kiss reveals a gradual development from a tender, primarily non-sexual act in archaic and classical Greek society, to eroticised same-sex kissing contests in Hellenistic literature, to fervid expressions of male-authored desire in Latin love poetry, through Roman elite greetings with a kiss, to the extreme example of dominance-submission that was the ritualised ‘adoration’ of the Roman emperor. Broader social issues of identity therefore surround the kiss, issues of age and gender expectations, as well as power relations in both personal, sexual contexts and public, political ones. Power relations and personal and public identities are crystallised in the moment of the kiss, be they erotic kisses by the male lover, which subdue and control the objectified female lover, or the suppliant’s kiss of the imperial cloak, which transferred power and status in the high empire.

⁵⁴ E.g. Sulla tenderly kissing a small likeness of Apollo that he carried around with him (Plut. *Sulla* 29.6); Minucius Felix *Octavius* 2.4.

⁵⁵ Cf. Cic. *Inv.* 1.108; Quint. *Educ. of the Orator* 6 pr.12; Seneca *Consol. to Marcia* 3.2; *Consol. to Polybius* 15.5; *Consol. to Helvia* 2.5; *Consol. to Livia* 95-6; Statius *Silvae* 5.1.195-6. On the ideal of dying in one’s wife’s arms: Treggiari 1991:484-5.

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