

## The Catullan Kiss: The Semantics of *Basium* and the Nature of Desire

### A Servius Danielis on *Aeneid* 1.256

et sciendum osculum religionis esse, sauium uoluptatis, *quamuis quidam osculum filiis dari, uxori basium, scorto sauium dicant.*

And an *osculum* must be understood to be a matter of piety, a *saiuum* of pleasure, although some say that an *osculum* is given to one's children, a *basium* to one's wife, and a *saiuum* to a whore.

### B Catullus 48

Mellitos oculos tuos, Iuuenti,  
si quis me sinat usque basiare,  
usque ad milia basiem trecenta  
nec numquam uidear satur futurus,  
non si densior aridis aristis  
sit nostrae seges osculationis.

Your sweet eyes, Juuentius, if anyone were to allow me to kiss ceaselessly, I would ceaselessly kiss three hundred thousand times, and I would never seem on the verge of satisfaction, not if the crop of our kissing were thicker than the dry ears of grain.

### C Catullus 99.1-14

Surripui tibi, dum ludis, mellite Iuuenti,  
suauiolum dulci dulcius ambrosia.  
uerum id non impune tuli: namque amplius horam  
suffixum in summa me memini esse cruce,  
dum tibi me purgo nec possum fletibus ullis  
tantillum uestrae demere saeuitiae.  
nam simul id factum est, multis diluta labella  
guttis abstersti omnibus articulis,  
ne quicquam nostro contractum ex ore maneret,  
tamquam commictae spurca saliuua lupae.  
praeterea infesto miserum me tradere amori  
non cessasti omnique excruciare modo,  
ut mi ex ambrosia mutatum iam foret illud  
suauiolum tristi tristius elleboro.

While you were flirting, sweet Juuentius, I stole from you a little kiss, sweeter than sweet ambrosia. But I didn't take it without punishment: for I remember that for more than an hour I was attached to the top of the cross while I tried to justify myself to you, nor could I remove with any tears a tiny little bit of your savagery. For as soon as the deed was done, you wiped your lips, moistened with many drops, with every finger, so nothing picked up from my mouth would remain, as if it were the dirty spit of a filthy whore. What's more, you haven't stopped subjecting me to hostile love in my misery and torturing me in every way, so that that little kiss was transformed for me from ambrosia into something more bitter than bitter hellebore.

### D Catullus 99.15-16

quam quoniam poenam misero proponis amori,  
numquam iam posthac basia surripiam.

Since you impose this punishment on my wretched love, now I will never steal kisses again.

<b>poem/line</b>	<b>words used</b>	<b>addressee</b>	<b>context</b>
5.7 5.13	<i>basia</i> <i>basiorum</i>	Lesbia	Catullus requests <i>milia multa basiorum</i> , which will be so numerous that they cannot be counted by the jealous.
7.1 7.9 (twice)	<i>basiationes</i> <i>basia</i> <i>basiare</i>	Lesbia	In response to a question about how many kisses he wants, Catullus replies that he wants too many for the jealous to count.
8.18	<i>basibis</i>	Catullus Lesbia	Catullus breaks off his self address to ask Lesbia (absent) what she will do without him? (Literally, whom will she kiss in the future?)
9.9	<i>suaviabor</i>	Veranius	Catullus will kiss Veranius, who has just returned from Spain, in greeting.
16.12	<i>basiorum</i>	Furius Aurelius	The <i>milia multa basiorum</i> here are presumably those desiderated at 5.13.
48.2 48.3 48.6	<i>basiare</i> <i>basiam</i> <i>osculationis</i>	Juventius	As in poem 7, Catullus expresses his desire for Juventius in terms of an uncountable number of kisses.
68.126	<i>oscula</i>	Allius	A promiscuous Lesbia is compared to a dove, which bird is said to kiss its mate constantly.
79.4	<i>suavia</i>	Catullus	Lesbius is attacked for being unable to find three respectable Romans who will consent to greet him, and for being willing to sell out Catullus in order to do so.
99.2 99.14 99.16	<i>suaviolum</i> <i>suaviolum</i> <i>basia</i>	Juventius	Catullus has stolen a kiss and been sharply rebuffed.