

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

Among the best-known poems of Catullus are several that involve kissing, and more specifically, that use forms of the word *basium* and its near relatives *basiare* and *basiatio*. Investigations into this word group have typically looked no further than questions of etymology and provenance, and scholarship on the poems in which kisses occur focuses almost entirely on literary-critical issues (e. g., Ramminger 1937; Akbar Khan 1967; Cairns 1973; Selden 1992; Janan 1994; Fitzgerald 1995; Nappa 2001). Words of this derivation occur in few authors outside of Catullus, and all are authors significantly influenced by him (*TLL* s.v.). It can be shown, however, that Catullus uses *basium* words for kissing only in highly specific circumstances. By analyzing these circumstances, I will show that kissing is deployed by Catullus as a means of exploring the nature of desire and the impossibility of satisfaction.

In reference to Vergil, *Aeneid* 1.256, Servius Danielis provides a definition of three separate words for “kiss”: *oscula* are general, affectionate kisses of the kind parents might give children; *suavia* are reserved for *scorta*; *basia* are the kind of kisses given by husbands to wives. This distinction only partly holds for the Catullan corpus, and, more importantly, it leaves out the extraordinary specificity of Catullan usage. Three important considerations govern the use of *basia* words in the Catullan corpus. (1) With one telling exception, *basia* are only given by Catullus himself; the exception is Lesbia, but the man whom she will kiss is only hypothetical, a negative stand-in for Catullus himself. (2) *Basia* are only given to Lesbia and Juventius; erotically-involved characters aside from Catullus, Lesbia, and Juventius do kiss in Catullan poetry, but their kisses are not *basia*. (3) Finally, and most importantly, *basia* are only hypothetical; they are envisioned, requested, debated, but never—in any way that can be confirmed—actually delivered.

It can easily be shown that the *basia* in poems 5, 7, 16, and 48 should be regarded only as kisses spoken about, not kisses that occurred. Poem 99 uses the word *basium* in a way that, while apparently exceptional, proves the rule. In it, Catullus describes a scene with Juventius. The poet has stolen a kiss (*suaviolum*) from the boy, who has indignantly wiped it off his lips. Catullus relates his emotional torment at this sign of rejection. The poem closes with Catullus vowing that he will never steal *basia* again. The actual kiss of poem 99 has been undone by Juventius. When Catullus described that kiss as an event that actually occurred, he chose the term *suaviolum*; it is only when he has realized that that his stolen kiss represents an unfulfillable wish, an unsatisfiable desire, that he uses the term.

Thus *basia* are not so much Catullan kisses as Catullan wishes, and wishes that, throughout Catullus' poetry, are never fulfilled, because in the world Catullus creates, desire is the state of being forever unsatisfied.

Works Cited

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