A Kiss is Just a Kiss? Suetonius' *Lives*, Social Status, and the Performance of Intimacy

Public acts of kissing inherently carried social meaning at Rome. By the Antonine era, the act was almost always associated with a performative social display, as discussions of the greeting of the emperor, and whether or not kissing was included, at the *salutatio* suggests (e.g. Paterson 2007). Likewise the Latin vocabulary of kissing illustrates different forms of kisses suited to specific contexts, with terms such as *suavium* and *basium* suggesting greater eroticism and *osculum* generally signifying the act in public social setting (Moreau 1978, Flury 1988). For as common as these terms are, however, the verb *exosculari* is comparatively rare, and appears to suggest a distinct kind of kissing, particularly in the second century—far from simply a show of affection, it represents a performance of status and hierarchy. *Exosculari* signals kisses given to a superior, whether as a form of praise (e.g. Plin. *Ep*. 9.13.21, Gell. *NA* 2.26.20) or general affection (Fronto 67, 10-15 VdH); but when the social hierarchy is disturbed, the verb signals the corrupt character of the person in question. In this regard, Suetonius' *Lives*, in which scholars have recently explored the interactions of emperors and their subjects, as well as the management of spatial relations (e.g. Newbold 2000, Thorburn 2008, Mitchell 2015), and their descriptions of the emperors offer a useful test case.

In this paper, I argue that Suetonius manipulates the discourse of kissing in the *Lives* to undercut several of his imperial subjects, particularly through his pointed (and rare) uses of *exosculari*: he inverts a term, and gesture, of praise and affection into one of deceit and turpitude. This transformation is evident in the *Life of Caligula*: while early on Suetonius observes Augustus' kissing of a statue of a deceased child of Germanicus (*Calig*. 7.1), Caligula's own kisses to his mistress come marked with threats (*Calig*. 33.1), suggesting the degradation of

Augustus' displays of affection. Suetonius' *Nero* demonstrates a similar ambivalence. When the young emperor receives Tiridates, he kisses the Armenian as he crowns him (*Ner.* 13.1-2); this episode Suetonius sees fit to term one of the emperor's *spectacula*, as he publicly "kisses up" to his political and social inferior. Likewise Nero ostentatiously gives the same form of kiss during the perverse spectacle of his marriage to Sporus (*Ner.* 28.1-2). In each of these episodes, Suetonius pointedly uses *exosculari* to mark off the kissing as examples of these flawed emperors' characters; while connected with performances of their social roles, these episodes represent inversions of the proper hierarchies. If *exosculari* possesses a positive valence elsewhere, in Caligula and Nero it has vanished, as their behavior perverts the expected behavior of the *princeps*.

The choice of *exosculari*, then, is semantically marked in the imperial period, and especially in Suetonius; far from being a neutral kiss, the verb contains encoded within it a range of meaning tied to the societal expectations of who could kiss whom, and how such affection could be appropriately displayed in public. While by the late Antonine era "kissing up" suggests acknowledgment of one's better, with a close connection to rhetorical skill, it is clear through Suetonius that not all kisses are equal, and those who subvert the proper hierarchies with their public displays of affection make manifest the deception, corruption, and vice of their inner character.

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