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Sonnet Kisses: Sidney to Barrett Browning

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According to all accounts, especially his own, Lord Byron had a great deal of experience in matters of the heart, so it is worth paying attention when he offers an opinion about kissing.

A long, long kiss, a kiss of youth and love  
And beauty, all concentrating like rays  
Into one focus, kindled from above;  
Such kisses as belong to early days,  
When heart and soul and sense in concert move,  
And the blood's lava, and the pulse a blaze,  
Each kiss a heart-quake, for a kiss's strength,  
I think, it must be reckoned by its length.

By length I mean duration....

*(Don Juan 2.186-7)*<sup>1</sup>

Juan and Haidée's kiss turns to lovemaking before the end of the canto; it leads, we might say, to something more serious. Or does it? One of the reasons we should take Byron seriously on the subject of kissing is because his subjects take it seriously. Byron's straight-faced qualification – “By length I mean duration” – is effective partly because the experience that it suggests is so disturbingly intimate. There are only two ways in which a kiss can be extended: it can be extended in time, or it can be extended in space. But in order for the latter to occur, for a kiss to be “long” in breadth rather than duration, the kissers would have to be smiling and kissing simultaneously. And everybody knows that it is impossible to smile and pucker at the same time.<sup>2</sup> We are not told whether Juan

and Haidée smile while making love, but the fact remains that they could, whereas during their kiss they must look, as all kissing couples do, deadly serious.

The irony is that it was smiling that brought the couple together in the first place. Haidée has tried to teach Juan Greek – a practice, Byron says, as amusing as it is romantic; the teachers in such cases “smile so when one’s right, and when one’s wrong / They smile still more, and then there intervene / Pressure of hands, perhaps even a chaste kiss” (2.164). A lover like Juan or Byron may be attracted to someone for her smile, and then kisses intervene – “intervene” because the kiss paradoxically extinguishes the very feature that gave rise to the desire to kiss. This is a simple paradox, but it has further manifestations, and it explains why kissing plays such a large role in the poetic genre that above all defines itself by paradox and oxymoron, the love sonnet.

The first major sonnet-kiss in English takes place in the Second Song of Sidney’s *Astrophil and Stella*. The speaker comes across his beloved sleeping, and ventures to steal a kiss:

Oh sweet kisse, but ah she is waking,  
 Lowring beautie chastens me:  
 Now will I away hence flee:  
 Foole, more foole, for no more taking.  
 (25-28)<sup>3</sup>

The kiss causes a momentary ruffling of the verse, in the form of an extra syllable in the first line above, which must be smoothed over by a slurring of “she is”. The aftershocks then continue to be felt through the next thirteen sonnets, all of which directly or indirectly allude to the kiss.<sup>4</sup> The second sonnet after the kiss, number 74, is typical of the group; more than that, it can be seen as typical of the Sidneyan sonnet and its ironies.

I never dranke of *Aganippe* well,  
 Nor ever did in shade of *Tempe* sit:

And Muses scorne with vulgar braines to dwell,  
 Poore Layman I, for sacred rites unfit.  
 Some do I heare of Poets' furie tell,  
 But (God wot) wot not what they meane by it:  
 And this I sweare by blackest brooke of hell,  
 I am no pick-purse of another's wit.  
 How falles it then, that with so smooth an ease  
 My thoughts I speake, and what I speake doth flow  
 In verse, and that my verse best wits doth please?  
 Guesse we the cause: 'What, is it thus?' Fie no:  
 'Or so?' Much lesse: 'How then?' Sure thus it is:  
 My lips are sweet, inspired with *Stella's* kisse.

The wit and irony of this sonnet lies in the fact that the octave is an imitation and at moments a direct translation of the "Prologue" to the *Satires* of the Roman poet Persius. Persius's little poem very likely appealed to Sidney because it looks uncannily like a Petrarchan sonnet: fourteen lines of iambics, with a sharp turn halfway through. It is not, however, the best-known of classical lyrics, so Sidney makes sure of reminding the reader of his source through his pun on "pick-purse". Persius's is an unconventional purse to have picked, but Sidney's sonnet nevertheless typifies the ironies and paradoxes of *Astrophil and Stella*, and indeed all post-Petrarchan sonnet-sequences. It declares, indeed insists upon, its originality as an expression of heartfelt and spontaneous emotion, while simultaneously deploying the most codified and imitative of all lyric conventions. This inherent contradiction appears already in the final line of sonnet 1 of *Astrophil and Stella*, in which it is none other than the classical "Muse" who urges the poet to ignore all precedents for his verse; here the same irony is extended over fourteen lines of protestations of sincerity.

What I am suggesting is not only that sonnets are paradoxical (the oxymoronic nature of Petrarchan language has always been recognized) but that kisses are therefore inalienable features of sonnet love – more to be desired, indeed, than sexual intercourse.

The “kisse” which ends sonnet 74 as the explanation of Astrophil’s poetizing is not merely an elegant compliment, and still less a change of subject, but rather the logical conclusion of the poem’s paradoxes. I have said that kisses paradoxically extinguish the smile that gave rise to the desire to kiss. Besides her smile, other things about Stella that stir Astrophil’s desire include her beautiful eyes, her rosy cheeks, and the sound of her voice when she speaks or sings – “the voyce, which soule from sences sunders” (First Song, 29). Each of these features can, like a smile, continue to be admired while making love, but not while kissing. Above all, what excites the sonneteer is the sound of his *own* voice, but the act of kissing obliterates that as well. The kiss is said to be the source of sonnet 74, but the word “kisse” ends it, just as a real kiss must necessarily “intervene” in poetic self-expression. A sonnet-kiss, like a sonnet, is almost always self-contradictory.

The kiss is appropriate to sonnet 74, moreover, because both are stolen. When Sidney claims to be “no pick-purse”, he is lying doubly, because he has not only filched from Persius but from Stella’s pursed lips: “Yet those lips so sweetly swelling, / Do invite a stealing kisse” (Second Song, 23-4). Theft is a condition, not only of this surreptitious encounter and this particularly allusive sonnet, but of all sonnets and all kisses. More than in any other form of lyric, the language, form, tropes of a Petrarchan sonnet like Sidney’s are borrowed (from Petrarch, who himself borrows the language of religious poetry). Similarly, a kiss is also always borrowed, however fresh and new it may feel, in two ways. In the first place, every lip already has its complement, because lips come in twos; the natural, default state of a person’s lips is to be kissing each other. When one kisses someone else, one is intervening in this “kiss”, deflecting the lips away from their

original context – just as the sonneteer borrows or deflects another’s language from its original context.<sup>5</sup>

A kiss is always “borrowed” in the second place because kissing is not the primary function of lips. This is unlike the sexual organs, which may have multiple purposes, but the principal function of which, in terms of the preservation of life, is sex. But the mouth one kisses always has more necessary duties to attend to, such as eating and breathing. Hence Freud, who has relatively little to say about kisses, points out with some bewilderment that a kiss, or “contact . . . between the mucous membranes of the lips of the two people concerned, 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”.<sup>6</sup> A reader familiar with Sidney’s source in Persius would be particularly conscious of this “natural” function of lips, from which they are borrowed or diverted in the sonnet. Persius’s Prologue turns abruptly from the lines about not being a poet, which Sidney imitates, to a satirical tracing of all poetic inspiration to the “*venter*” – the belly. Sidney’s inspiration, the kiss, is more elevated but, as Freud reminds us, not entirely dissociated. Sidney too reminds us of the similarity between kissing and eating when he refers to the kiss as “a hungrie bit” (sonnet 82); indeed, Astrophil’s stolen kiss is apparently a direct result of Desire’s cry for “food” in sonnet 71.

A kiss is thus the objective correlative of the Petrarchan love-sonnet, first in being paradoxical (sonnet 79 of *Astrophil and Stella* describes a kiss in a string of oxymorons: “friendly fray”, “prettie death”), and secondly in being borrowed. The third point of resemblance is that a kiss, like a sonnet, is both the result and the initiator of desire. The

aim of a Petrarchan sonnet-sequence is not closure but perpetuation; hence the choice, from Laura onward, of an unattainable love-object.<sup>7</sup> Each sonnet does reach a conclusion and is complete in itself: there is pleasure in the coupling of octave with sestet, or in the apparent culmination of a rhyming couplet. But no single sonnet can ever be conclusive, because the beloved is never attained, and because words can never satisfactorily convey the beloved's perfections or the poet's love; hence the consummate pleasure of each sonnet itself necessitates a new protestation of the sonnet's insufficiency.

Kissing too is both pleasurable and insufficient, always a prologue to something more – “as is well known, we kiss not only because we love but so that we may love”.<sup>8</sup> James Finn Cotter asks, “Is the kiss the climax of the wooing process or [is] it a prelude to sexual relations? Both opinions frequently exist side by side in the same literary work without any apparent contradiction”. He acutely points out that Sidney's epithet for the kiss in sonnet 79, “Breakefast of *Love*”, is “apt, since the sweet kiss is both food after long abstinence and the first (but not last) meal of the day”.<sup>9</sup> The same might be said of the phrase “fastner of desire” in the following sonnet, which indicates primarily that a kiss seals a mutual desire, but also suggests a nonce usage of “fastner” in the sense of “quickener”. In the sonnet-kiss's end is its beginning: Romeo and Juliet's first kiss famously comes at the end of a sonnet (1.5.92-105), but it is less often remarked that their kiss then launches them immediately into the first quatrain of another sonnet (and into another kiss).

Sidney is clearly conscious of the parallel between the kiss as both end and initiator of desire and as source and interrupter of discourse. The sweet kiss begins sonnet 79 (“Sweet kisse, thy sweets I faine would sweetly endite”) and ends sonnet 80

(“teach my mouth with one sweet kisse”). It is, as we have seen, the inspiration of “smooth ... verse” in sonnet 74, and it is also the silencer: “Stop you my mouth with still still kissing me” (81, line 14). After reading the sonnets that follow the kiss in the Second Song, we are in a position to reinterpret the song’s final line, “Foole, more foole, for no more taking”. At first it might seem that Sidney is berating himself for taking “no more” in the sense of “no greater liberties”, and of course this meaning is included. But it is subsidiary to the primary implication, “no more [kisses]”. The aim of a sonnet in a sequence is to propagate more sonnets, and the aim of a kiss in a sequence is to propagate more kisses, as this one does – not to culminate in attainment.<sup>10</sup>

This explains why a kiss is so often figured as a lesson – because it is meant to be repeated, and because it is simultaneously good in itself and a preparation for greater things. In Byron’s description, kisses spring out of language lessons (“I learned the little that I know by this”). The kiss of the Second Song is similarly pedagogical – “Now will I but venture this, / Who will read must first learne spelling” (23-4) – imagery which is continued in sonnet 79, where the kiss is described as “schoolmaster of delight”. “Who will read must first learn spelling”: the kiss is not only made prelude to other things (or to more of the same thing), but is explicitly textualized, blurring the distinction between the fictional kiss and the literary form that contains it. Different explanations have been forwarded of the role of a kiss in a sonnet sequence: sometimes a kiss is just a kiss; sometimes it is a euphemism; sometimes it is a metaphor (apparently this is true in particular of the French sonnet-kiss).<sup>11</sup> I am suggesting that the kiss is above all the embodiment of the Petrarchan love-sonnet, summing up in itself the sonnet’s paradoxical or self-contradictory impulses, its borrowed nature, its self-perpetuation.

The importance of recognizing this correlation is that it allows us to understand the particular appeal of a sonnet sequence such as *Astrophil and Stella*; the appeal is osculatory. People kissing continue kissing with an earnest purposefulness that is, strictly speaking, devoid of biological purpose. Hence Freud classifies kissing as being “a point of contact between the perversions and normal sexual life”; Freud cannot call it perverted, yet cannot find a “normal” explanation.<sup>12</sup> In reading *Astrophil and Stella*, one cannot read for plot, though many have tried, since Astrophil does not end up very far from where he began 108 sonnets earlier. But the same could be said of the same number of kisses. Each kiss may interfere with the very attraction which gave rise to it, and each may do nothing more than perpetuate a desire for more of the same; but the satisfaction is both recognizable and undeniable.

Nearly two and a half centuries separated the Victorian revival of the amatory sonnet sequence from its Elizabethan precursors, and in that time the sonnet-kiss, like the sonnet, necessarily changed. The Renaissance sonnet sequence was already an unusually self-conscious genre since it participated in such an overdetermined tradition, but by the nineteenth century, the conventions of the Petrarchan sequence were not only overdetermined but defunct. Kisses in these latter-day sequences continued to embody the tradition, but the tradition was now a dead body that needed to be revived; consequently the kisses, like the sonnets, became all the more self-aware, even awkward. A kiss was no longer a simple, pretty paradox, but like the choice to write Petrarchan verse, a very deliberate thing. Both the awkwardness and also the morbidity that characterize Victorian Petrarchanism are evident in the kisses of the first two nineteenth



century amatory sequences, *In Memoriam* and *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, both published in 1850.

Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, of course, is not technically a sonnet sequence. Moreover, critics have (rightly) warned against reading Renaissance sonnet sequences as if they resembled *In Memoriam*. "The psychological theory that suits so well the structure of *In Memoriam* ... will not serve as a guide to reading Renaissance poems".<sup>13</sup> But the inverse does not hold equally true: on the contrary, it is crucial to remember the sonnet precedent when reading Tennyson's elegy, not least because Tennyson clearly recalls it himself. *In Memoriam* begins where *Astrophil and Stella* left off. The penultimate sonnet (107) of Sidney's sequence concludes, "O let not fooles in me thy workes reprove, / And scorning say, 'See what it is to love'". This is echoed by the opening section of *In Memoriam*, which concludes with a fear lest "the victor Hours should scorn / The long result of love, and boast, / 'Behold the man that loved and lost...'"<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the phrase "higher things", which concludes Tennyson's opening stanza ("That men may rise on stepping-stones / Of their dead selves to higher things") comes directly from the two final poems of Sidney's "Certain Sonnets". It is the one phrase they share: "Who should my mind to higher things prepare" (31, line 8); "And thou my mind aspire to higher things" (32, line 2). Since these two sonnets were routinely placed by nineteenth century editors at the end of *Astrophil and Stella*, the echo places Sidney's sequence prominently among the various traditions from which Tennyson's poem begins.

Sometimes the parallels are so close that it is difficult to follow the admonishment that we must forget *In Memoriam* when reading Sidney. The last of Sidney's kiss sonnets

(85) could fit almost seamlessly at the start of Tennyson's poem: "I see the house, my heart thy selfe containe, / Beware full sailes drowne not thy tottring barge" – lines recalling both Tennyson's address to Hallam's house in section VII ("Dark house, ... where my heart was used to beat") and his address to the ship in sections IX to XIX. Shakespeare's *Sonnets* are more often adduced as an analogue to *In Memoriam*; but if the male addressee of Tennyson's poem is closer to Shakespeare, the form of the *In Memoriam* stanza is closer to a Petrarchan octave. And the elegy's greatest point of contact with the amatory sonnet sequence – its tendency (especially in the first half) to seem to reach a conclusion, only to start again from the beginning in the following section – allies it to no single sequence, but to the whole Petrarchan tradition.

Given this genealogy, it is unsurprising that *In Memoriam* boasts a number of kisses. One is brief and fraternal, when Tennyson kisses his newly-married sister goodbye: "Farewell, we kiss, and they are gone" (Epilogue, 92). One is imaginary and paternal, when Hallam is pictured as he would have been had he lived to marry, have children, and sit "diffusing bliss / In glance and smile, and clasp and kiss" (LXXXIV, 6-7). One, to which I shall return, is metaphorical; but the most important "kiss" (though the word is not used) is surprisingly graphic:

'Tis well; 'tis something; we may stand  
 Where he in English earth is laid,  
 And from his ashes may be made  
 The violet of his native land.

'Tis little; but it looks in truth  
 As if the quiet bones were blest  
 Among familiar names to rest  
 And in the places of his youth.

Come then, pure hands, and bear the head  
 That sleeps or wears the mask of sleep,

And come, whatever loves to weep,  
And hear the ritual of the dead.

Ah yet, even yet, if this might be,  
I, falling on his faithful heart,  
Would breathing through his lips impart  
The life that almost dies in me;

That dies not, but endures with pain,  
And slowly forms the firmer mind,  
Treasuring the look it cannot find,  
The words that are not heard again.

(XVIII)

The kiss here quite consciously participates in an act of revival, both physical and literary. The first stanza refers to Persius, just as Sidney's kiss had, as well as to other literary sources.<sup>15</sup> But the section's most striking aspect is its physical particularity: the violets from ashes may be traditional, but the anatomy of a kiss in the penultimate stanza is not. The verse, moreover, makes the reader conscious of his or her own body, as Eric Griffiths explains: "The moral drama of wishing to die and wishing to survive death takes body in the regulated breath we have to take between [the final two] stanzas.... 'The life that almost dies in me;' | [the reader breathes in] 'That dies not...'"<sup>16</sup> Griffiths provides numerous other examples of the self-conscious breathings of Tennyson's verse; the kiss in these stanzas is not unique in that respect, but it is clearly distinguished from Sidney's kiss. Both picture a contact that seems conclusive but in fact leads to a continuation; Tennyson's awkward corporality however ("falling on his faithful heart") differs markedly from the "sugred kisse" Sidney sportively "suckt" (73, 5-6).

Tennyson's "kiss" is thus more morbid and more self-conscious than its sonnet precursors. The morbidity could be attributed to the fact that *In Memoriam* is, after all, an elegy, but a preoccupation with death is in fact typical of Victorian amatory sequences

and distinguishes them from their Renaissance counterparts. Petrarch had pictured the death of Laura, but his first English imitators did not follow him in this: Petrarch 248 concludes with imminent death, whereas Sidney's translation/adaptation in *Astrophil and Stella* 71 ends with desire. Death appears in Shakespeare's sonnets as a threat, a possibility, a cause for action in the form of reproduction, physical or artistic; in Victorian sequences, on the other hand, death is once again a physical reality. *Sonnets from the Portuguese* begins with death and moves almost unwillingly towards love; *Modern Love* and *The House of Life* both feature the death of the lover. Barrett Browning and her followers revived the Petrarchan sequence in English, but revival implies death as well as life. Hence the appropriateness of the kiss, which figures prominently in all the sequences I have mentioned.<sup>17</sup> A kiss can be a sign either of greeting or of farewell; in fairy tales it can serve as both a giver of life and as the Kiss of Death.<sup>18</sup> In the passage from Tennyson it is all of the above: the imagined kiss of section XVIII sums up the interplay of death and restoration that distinguishes latter-day Petrarchan sequences.

These sequences are also distinguished by their increased self-consciousness, even awkwardness, for which Tennyson's kisses likewise serve as representative. The third, metaphoric use of the word "kiss" in *In Memoriam* comes near the end of the poem, where the speaker suggests that the pleasure of eventual reunion with Hallam will be the greater for every minute of time that has intervened – or as Tennyson phrases it, "For ... every kiss of toothèd wheels" (CXVII, 9-11). Tennyson's evocative formulation cuts two ways: it invests the working of a clock – traditionally the most calculated, unemotional process imaginable – with physical desire; but conversely, it attributes some discomfort

to the kiss of reunion. The idea of a toothy kiss has the same minute physical accuracy as the earlier picture of “breathing through his lips”. Teeth are a part of kissing, but they tend not to display themselves in most poetic kisses: Sidney too mentions a love-bite (sonnet 82), but only in passing and with a glancing allusion to Catullus. In Sidney, the teeth are incidental; in Tennyson, they are more insistently dental.

These two aspects of Victorian sequences are most completely embodied in Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Sonnets from the Portuguese*. As Sidney is to Renaissance Petrarchanism, Barrett Browning is to the Victorians, and her poems mingle kisses, death, and self-conscious awkwardness. When the forty year old Barrett, who for fifteen years had been an invalid waiting for death, found herself suddenly in love, she turned with perfect aptness to the amatory sonnet sequence, a tradition that for so long had seemed defunct in English. Her opening sonnet encompasses themes both of revival and of the physical awkwardness, even violence, of revival:

Straightway I was ‘ware,  
So weeping, how a mystic Shape did move  
Behind me, and drew me backward by the hair,  
And a voice said in mastery while I strove, . . .  
‘Guess now who holds thee?’—‘Death,’ I said. But there,  
The silver answer rang . . . ‘Not Death, but Love.’<sup>19</sup>

The sequence is filled with such images, in which the poet struggles both with love and with long-disused poetic devices. The angels from Petrarch and from Shakespeare 144, for instance, have grown maladroit in the intervening centuries: “Our ministering two angels look surprise / On one another, as they strike athwart / Their wings in passing” (Sonnet 3, 3-5). Even the simple sonnet activity of gazing into the lover’s eyes meets with obstacles: “Since first thine earnest eyes with mine were crossed” (Sonnet 12, 8). The image of “cross-eyed lovers” may be infelicitous, but in this case it is felicitously

infelicitous, since it chimes with the other images of awkwardness that mark the sequence and that have often made readers uncomfortable.<sup>20</sup>

In both its morbidity and its conscious clumsiness, *Sonnets from the Portuguese* resembles section XVIII of *In Memoriam*, and it likewise features kisses which embody these characteristics. Once again, we see the kiss of death, as when the speaker gives her lover a lock of her hair on which he can find “The kiss my mother left there when she died” (Sonnet 18, line 4). On the other hand there are kisses that breathe life:

My own belovèd, who hast lifted me  
 From this drear flat of earth where I was thrown,  
 And, in betwixt the languid ringlets, blown  
 A life-breath, till the forehead hopefully  
 Shines out again, as all the angels see,  
 Before thy saving kiss!

(Sonnet 27, 1-6)

And as in Tennyson, the physical act of kissing is anatomized, so that it becomes a far more difficult and fumbling affair than it had been in Renaissance sequences.

First time he kissed me, he but only kissed  
 The fingers of this hand wherewith I write;  
 And, ever since, it grew more clean and white, . . .  
 Slow to world-greetings . . . quick with its ‘Oh, list,’  
 When the angels speak. A ring of amethyst  
 I could not wear here, plainer to my sight,  
 Than that first kiss. The second passed in height  
 The first, and sought the forehead, and half missed,  
 Half falling on the hair. O beyond meed!  
 That was the chrism of love, which love’s own crown,  
 With sanctifying sweetness, did precede.  
 The third upon my lips was folded down  
 In perfect, purple state; since when, indeed,  
 I have been proud and said, ‘My love, my own.’

(Sonnet 38)

Again, a simple courtly gesture – kissing the lady’s hand – is made uncomfortably real, as Browning’s kiss has apparently removed ink-stains from Barrett’s writing-hand, rendering it “more clean and white”.

The word in this sonnet with the greatest physical repercussions, however, is not “white” but “purple”. What are we to make of the odd alliterative phrase “perfect, purple”? It is not illogical, since lips could be considered to be a shade of purple – hence the “amethyst” of line 5 – but the word “purple” in one form or another occurs in the sequence with puzzling frequency. Barrett Browning finds contexts in which it will be appropriate: in Sonnet 8 the lover is “purple” because he is royal; in Sonnet 9 the lover’s “purple” suggests an allusion to Clytemnestra’s purple cloth in the *Agamemnon*. But in Sonnet 19, as in Sonnet 38, “purple” appears in proximity to a kiss; the lover gives the speaker a lock of his hair, a lock

As purply black, as erst, to Pindar’s eyes,  
The dim purpureal tresses gloomed athwart  
The nine white Muse-brows....  
Thus, with a fillet of smooth-kissing breath,  
I tie the shadow safe from gliding back.  
(5-7, 10-11)

Barrett Browning apparently loves the word “purple” not for its mind but for its body. The semantic value of “purply” and “purpureal” in these lines is minimal. Their worth lies in their sound, and more specifically in the physical motion it takes to pronounce the nonsense-word “purply”. If Sidney’s kisses embodied the sonnets in which they appear, Barrett Browning’s sonnets literally embody their kisses; they not only describe the physical minutiae of kissing, but compel the reader to perform them.

Scientific research suggests that alliteration on the letter “p” is more popular (and perhaps more pleasurable) than any other.<sup>21</sup> Barrett Browning certainly delights in it: the

reader's lips are constantly pursed in preparation for a sonnet kiss. Not only "purple" but "Pindar" and "Portuguese" are imported for this purpose. Before the climactic triple-kiss in sonnet 38, Barrett Browning provides a plethora of plosives to prepare us. "Pardon, oh, pardon", she asks in Sonnet 37, that in these poems she should distort "Thy purity of likeness" –

As if a shipwrecked Pagan, safe in port, ...  
Should set a sculptured porpoise, gills a-snort,  
And vibrant tail, within the temple-gate.

(1, 9, 11, 13-14)

"Purple" is present here in body if not in spirit, in "sculptured porpoise" and "temple". The anxious self-consciousness Barrett Browning experienced in reviving Petrarch is communicated in this physical run-up to the "First time he kissed me" at the beginning of the following sonnet, as if she were practising kissing herself in a mirror.

Barrett Browning might not be the first Victorian poet one would think of in connection with physically explicit kisses; that honour would more likely go to Dante Gabriel Rossetti, whose depiction of a post-coital kiss in his sonnet "Nuptial Sleep" caused a literary scandal. But Rossetti's graphic descriptions follow from Barrett Browning's. The speaker of *Sonnets from the Portuguese* differs from almost all her English predecessors not only in being a woman, but equally importantly in being, by her own account, old. Shakespeare also described himself as old, but in his sonnets he does not claim to be falling in love for the first time, as Barrett Browning does. She thus finds herself in a situation (loving, kissing) at once very familiar and strangely new; hence the self-conscious physicality of her sonnet-kisses, which is then echoed by those who followed her in the familiar yet newly self-conscious genre of the amatory sonnet sequence.



Barrett Browning's speaker differs from her Renaissance predecessors not only in her extreme self-consciousness, but also, as I have said, in her acute consciousness of death, likewise an effect of her age. She is constantly aware of the potential death both of the lover and also of love itself. The death of love, scarcely mentioned in Elizabethan sequences, presents a major concern for Tennyson as well, and appears in most of the sonnet sequences that follow – the fear, as Barrett Browning puts it, lest “This mutual kiss drop down between us both / As an unowned thing, once the lips being cold” (Sonnet 36, 11-12). But the sonnet-kiss remains prominent in this new context, because kisses have as much to do with greetings and farewells, life and death, as they have to do with desire and stolen pleasures. Kissing does not stop with the advent of adult consciousness, when one feels “chilly and grown old”. The kiss – always a serious affair – continued to suit the sober concerns of Victorian sequences, just as it had suited an earlier age.

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#### NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> All quotations from Byron refer to *Don Juan*, eds. T. G. Steffan, E. Steffan, and W. W. Pratt (Harmondsworth, 1986).

<sup>2</sup> There are two exceptions to this axiom. The first is people in breath-freshener ads, who do somehow manage to kiss while smiling. The other, more important exception is Adam and Eve. William Kerrigan points out how Adam's smile metamorphoses into the couple's first kiss in *Paradise Lost* 4.497-502; see “Milton's Kisses”, in *Milton and Heresy*, eds. Stephen B. Dobranski and John P. Rumrich (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 117-

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135. Kerrigan's article is a wonderful study of the poetics of kissing, with which my reading of sonnet-kisses frequently intersects.

<sup>3</sup> All quotations from Sidney refer to *The Poems of Sir Philip Sidney*, ed. William A. Ringler, Jr. (Oxford, 1962).

<sup>4</sup> James Finn Cotter, "The 'Baiser' Group in Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*", *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 12 (1970), pp. 381-403, shows how even those sonnets of the group that do not directly allude to the kiss nevertheless participate in the tradition.

<sup>5</sup> See Stephen Booth, *An Essay on Shakespeare's Sonnets* (New Haven, 1969): the "essential device" of the sonnet convention "is the use of the vocabulary appropriate to one kind of experience to talk about another. The writer talked about his lady and his relation to her as if she were a feudal lord and he a vassal, or as if she were the Virgin Mary and he a supplicant to her" (177). On the redundancy of kissing someone else's lips, see Christopher Ricks, *Keats and Embarrassment* (Oxford, 1974): a "kiss is a rhyme because it rhymes (pairs) [the lovers'] lips ... and doubly so because the upper and lower lips already rhyme with each other" (98).

<sup>6</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Complete Psychological Works*, tr. James Strachey et al. (1953-64), 7:150.

<sup>7</sup> Exceptions that prove this rule include Spenser's Elizabeth and Shakespeare's Dark Lady.

<sup>8</sup> Ricks, *Keats and Embarrassment*, p. 99.

<sup>9</sup> Cotter, "The 'Baiser' Group", pp. 386, 397.

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<sup>10</sup> Here I differ from Kerrigan, who asserts that “kisses are implored in Petrarchan verse because they are what the poet feels he might get, and not what he finally wants”; according to Kerrigan, it was Ben Jonson and his seventeenth-century heirs who “extricat[ed] kisses from the narrative of fulfillment inherent in Petrarchan desire” (“Milton’s Kisses”, p. 122).

<sup>11</sup> See Ruth A. Gooley, *The Metaphor of the Kiss in Renaissance Poetry* (New York, 1993), which traces the influence of Johannes Secundus on the Pléiade poets. For an even more extensive history, see Nicolas James Perella, *The Kiss Sacred and Profane* (Berkeley, 1969).

<sup>12</sup> Freud, *Complete Works*, 7:150. Compare Joyce: “Her lips were soft and they wetted his cheek; and they made a tiny little noise: kiss. Why did people do that with their two faces?”; see *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*,

<sup>13</sup> Thomas P. Roche, Jr., *Petrarch and the English Sonnet Sequences* (New York, 1989), p. xii.

<sup>14</sup> Lines 13-16. All quotations from Tennyson refer to *The Poems of Tennyson*, ed. Christopher Ricks, 2nd edn. (Berkeley, 1987).

<sup>15</sup> Hallam’s 1831 essay on Tennyson had cited Persius’s first satire, 39-40 (“will not violets be born from his blest ashes?”), and Tennyson here echoes the echo. Tennyson himself pointed out a simultaneous allusion to *Hamlet*; see Ricks, *The Poems of Tennyson*, 2:336-7.

<sup>16</sup> Eric Griffiths, *The Printed Voice of Victorian Poetry* (Oxford, 1989), p. 128.

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<sup>17</sup> The wife in Meredith's sequence dies with a kiss in sonnet 49. For a detailed account of the kiss in D. G. Rossetti's sequence, see Ernest Fontana, "Rossetti's Representations of the Kiss", *Journal of Pre-Raphaelite and Aesthetic Studies* 1 (1988), pp. 80-88.

<sup>18</sup> See Elisabeth G. Gitter, "The Victorian Literary Kiss", *Browning Institute Studies* 13 (1985), pp. 165-180, especially pp. 167-9.

<sup>19</sup> Sonnet 1, lines 9-14. All quotations from Barrett Browning refer to *A Variorum Edition of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Sonnets from the Portuguese*, ed. Miroslava Wein Dow (Troy, NY, 1980).

<sup>20</sup> See Dorothy Mermin, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: The Origins of a New Poetry* (Chicago, 1989), pp. 131-2 and 140-2, on Barrett Browning's "detailed and unflattering" self-portrait and the reactions it has elicited.

<sup>21</sup> See Gregory F. Hayden, "Alliteration in medicine: a puzzling profusion of p's," *British Medical Journal* 319 (1999), pp. 1605-1608. Compare also Dickens: "The word Papa, besides, gives a pretty form to the lips. Papa, potatoes, poultry, prunes, and prism, are all very good words for the lips"; see *Little Dorrit*,