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The Kiss in Medieval Literature Erotic Communication, with an Emphasis on *Roman de Silence*

Albrecht Classen

Department of German Studies, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ 85721, USA.

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***Corresponding author:** Albrecht Classen, Department of German Studies, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ 85721, USA.
Email: aclassen@arizona.edu

Abstract

In the pre-modern world, exchanging kisses carried many different reasons, not at all purely erotic. Instead, we commonly observe that the kiss was of great significance in religious, political, and legal terms. However, we have not yet fully recognized the fact that the kiss represents the ultimate medium of communication in an erotic or other type of relationship. After surveying briefly the history of kissing in medieval literature, this article examines some major situations in Heldris de Cornwall's *Roman de Silence* where this phenomenon is most dramatically illustrated. Once words have failed to express the full meaning of an exchange, the kiss constitutes the ultimate human expression joining two individuals.

Keywords

Meaning of kisses, human communication, language and love, Heldris de Cornwall

1. Introduction

Some of the most iconic images in world politics and in art focus on the kiss, mostly exchanged between two heterosexual people kissing each other out of erotic desire, whether we think of Jean-Leon Gerome's "Pygmalion and Galatea" (1890), Henri de Toulouse Lautrec's "Dans le lit" (1892), Auguste Rodin, "The Kiss" (1888-1898, sculpture), Egon Schiele's "The Kiss" (1908-1909), Constantin Brancusi's "The Kiss" (1916, sculpture), Marc Chagall's "L'anniversaire" (1915), René Magritte's "The Lovers" (1928), Pablo Picasso's "The Kiss" (1967), Roy Lichtenstein's "The Kiss" (1980), William Cobbing "The Kiss 2" (2004; video), or Malcolm T. Liepke, "The Kiss" (2016) [for illustrations and comments on all those images, see online,
https://www.widewalls.ch/magazine/kiss-art-paintings/banksy-the-kissing-copper;
https://www.ifitshipitshere.com/the-evolution-of-the-kiss-in-art/].

But there are also images of kisses between people of other sexual orientation. Moreover, in politics, socialist leaders tended to kiss each other, such as Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev and East German leader Erich Honecker, a moment painted by Dmitry Vrubel (1990, based on a photograph from 1979 depicting both men exchanging the Socialist fraternal kiss on the occasion of the thirtieth anniversary of the foundation of the German Democratic Republic; cf. Schimmel). Religious art is flooded with references to kisses, especially in the history of Christianity, obviously because the kiss demonstrates the closest connection between the ordinary individual and the Godhead [Axen]. We know of countless examples of the 'kiss of peace' in both political and religious terms (e.g., Romans 16:16; 1 Corinthians 16:20; 2 Corinthians 13:12; 1 Thessalonians 5:26; 1 Peter 5:14) [cf. the detailed information online at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kiss_of_peace; https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08663a.htm]. But kisses have been exchanged throughout the world and throughout time, and this in most cultures, a fact which allows us to comprehend it as a major cultural representation [Harris], certainly carrying a wide range of meanings and values.

In particular, kisses represent some of the most powerful human gestures of immediacy, communication, intimacy, and community. Particularly because of their iconic symbolism, kisses could thus also be exchanged with the explicit purpose of betraying the other, such as infamous Judas's kiss of Christ as depicted by the famous artist Giotto in the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua, Italy (ca. 1304-1305)
[https://www.thehistoryofart.org/giotto/arrest-of-christ/]. Globally, however, kissing has always represented the critical moment when two individuals form a profound physical, spiritual, erotic, and also sexual union. The kiss can represent love, erotic passion, friendship, family bonding, veneration, or political or religious respect, and it has regularly assumed a highly performative, ritual character [Carré].

Already since antiquity, hosts welcomed their guests with a kiss, and since the rise of Christianity, the kiss exchanged between two faithful ones, or between Christ and his disciples, became a standard gesture and ritual. Within the Christian liturgy, the kiss expressed peace, friendship, and comfort shared by equals. Communal praying was concluded with a kiss (Tertullian, *De oration*, 18). Baptism was concluded with a kiss, the welcome of a new bishop was carried out with a kiss, and the reintegration of a sinner or heretic was concluded with a kiss. Even kissing a valuable relic was of tantamount importance throughout the history of the medieval Church [Lengeling]. Within the world of law, contracts were sealed with a kiss between both co-signers, and feudal estates were regarded as illegitimate if the ceremony had not been accompanied with a kiss (Nyrop, Strätz, 1985; Strätz, 1991). In the political arena, when a king kissed another king, or one of his vassals, or even only a messenger, then both people were deeply bonded with each other. A remarkable example of this aspect will be addressed further below.

2. Kisses in Medieval Literature

One of the most famous kisses was certainly the one between Paolo and Francesca in the fifth canto in Dante Alighieri's *Divina Commedia*. While these two people were reading "of Lancelot, of how he fell in love; / we were alone, innocent of suspicion" (V, 128–29). The narrative, however, infused the two with such passion that they submitted to the same feeling: "it was when we read about hose longed-for lips / now being kissed by such a famous lover, / that this one (who shall never leave my side) / then kissed my mouth, and trembled as he did" (Canto V, 133–36). Of course, these two souls were then lost, and spend the rest of their time in the afterworld in Inferno, where Dante the pilgrim encounters them, deeply compassionate, listening to their story, and then collapses on the floor: "I swooned as though to die" (141). Francesca's account represents one of the most astounding poetic narratives of kissing, closely associated with the reading process, especially because the story of love proves to be the catalyst of new love, so we face here the intricate case of the narrative within the narrative, with love being transported from one level to the other, concluding with the kiss. We do not learn anything else about that couple and must be content with the realization that their relationship, illicit or not, went through a lengthy communication process and then became realized through the kiss. Kissing thus proves to be the ultimate communicative gesture beyond which no words are needed any longer [Dante].

Isolde in Gottfried von Strassburg's *Tristan* (ca. 1210) [Gottfried] illustrates such a situation most dramatically when the two young people have accidentally drunk the love potion and demonstrate the first signs of its effect, their strong feelings of love for each other. He clearly notices her changed appearance and wonders aloud what might be wrong with her, upon which she answers only "'*Lameir* is my anguish, *lameir* is what oppresses me, *lameir* is what causes me pain'" (149). Tristan desperately tries to figure out a different meaning of that term, *lameir*, suggesting the bitterness of the sea (sea sickness) or bitterness of her mind, i.e., her continued hatred against him because he had killed her uncle Morold in a joust. But Isolde rejects all of his efforts to interpret her own feelings with the help of courtly concepts or medical notions and insists unwaveringly: "'*l'ameir* is the only thing that pains me'" (149).

Of course, Tristan finds himself in a most difficult situation since he is obliged to transport Isolde back to Cornwall as his uncle King Mark's future wife, but she knows exactly what she wants and needs, love. Finally, overcome by his own feelings for her, and convinced of the true meaning of her words, he admits his own love for her: "*L'ameir* and you, you both are my anguish. Dear Isolde, you are the lady of my heart . . .'" (149). His entire world has been eliminated and has been replaced with his passion for Isolde: "'. . . there is nothing in all the world more dear to me than you'" (150). Once this conversation has led to their realization that they are really one heart and one soul, their pain eases, and they embrace each other, concluding with the ultimate expression of love and the finite form of human communication, the kiss: "He kissed her and she kissed him, lovingly and gently. This was the blessed beginning of Love's recompense. Each of them poured out and drank in the sweetness that flowed from

their hearts" (150). As much as it is true that these two lovers then develop their own language which no one else at court can understand despite the use of the same words, for instance [Schnell], it is the kiss itself which constitutes the ultimate expression of their love, their merging of body and mind.

There would be many other opportunities to examine poetic or artistic scenes of the kiss as the supreme expression of love, as the final bodily action bonding two people in love, apart from the sexual union, both in medieval literature and the arts. However, courtly love poetry is more determined by the notion of longing and unrequited love than by the opposite, as both *troubadour* and *Minnesang* poetry indicates clearly. In the famous beautifully illustrated *Manesse* codex from ca. 1310-1340, for instance, we normally do not find cases of lovers who actually have found each other, either in an embrace or even kissing each other. The only exceptions seem to be the cases of the poets Albrecht von Johansdorf (fig. 56), Hugo von Werbenwag (fig. 82), and Von Wengen (fig. 98), but the artists present the respective couple only in an amatory embrace and not kissing each other [Walther]. Of course, medieval culture was deeply occupied with social and emotional issues, so any closer analysis of romances in whatever language would yield plenty of examples confirming the social, public role of kisses [Jones].

3. Communication and the Kiss in *Le Roman de Silence*

Words prove to be complex, ambiguous, and deceptive, and yet they are the fundamental building blocks in all of human communication. In all situations of love as presented by medieval poets, the verbal exchange precedes the erotic fulfillment, which is then achieved when the two lovers kiss each other. As we can observe brilliantly in Heldris of Cornwall's (or Heldris de Cornuälle's) *Le Roman de Silence* (middle of the thirteenth century, only one manuscript, University of Nottingham, MS. MiLM.6, fols. 188r to 223r), two young people who have fallen in love with each other are first tortured by the ambivalence of their own language, and only when they have finally experienced a breakthrough in their exchange, leading to the revelation of their true feelings, they then proceed to kiss each other. This kiss thus makes all further words unnecessary and represents the most glorious medium of human communication.

Since its rediscovery and new interpretation first in the early twentieth century, but really only since the 1970s or 1980s, many scholars have paid new attention to this highly unusual and completely uncanonical romance [see the introductions to this romance by Psaki and then Roche-Mahdi]. Here the female protagonist, despite her natural gender, is raised as a boy and then grows up as a knight because according to the king's order only male heirs would be entitled to take over their father's inheritance. Silence's parents try to avoid the tragic destiny of their child and hope to deceive the entire world by having their daughter pretend the whole time that she is male. In fact, this strategy works so well that later, when the young 'man' lives at the king's court, the queen is so enamored with him that she tries to seduce him – a direct borrowing of the biblical motif of Joseph and Potiphar's wife (Genesis 39), and we find a significant literary variation in the *lai* "Guigemar" by Marie de France, ca. 1190 [Marie de France]—and subsequently, since he had adamantly rejected her, to claim that he had tried to rape her (4075-96).

Ultimately, Silence manages to survive all these challenges, can catch Merlin as a precondition for 'his' pardon, but the latter then reveals all the secrets, including Silence's true gender identity and the evil deceptiveness of King Ebain's wife and her many acts of adultery together with the abbess of a monastery, who suddenly turns out to be a man. Recent research has engaged intensively with this truly unique and highly meaningful text because here, more than anywhere else, the poet reflected deeply on the relationship between nature and nurture, on the social constructiveness of gender, and the painful misogyny by the ruler [Krueger; Rüthemann, 293-339]. Ebain had banned all women from inheriting their father's lands (313-15) out of grief over the death of two of his vassals who had fought against each other in a single combat over their wives' lands—both women being twin sisters, which had complicated the situation and so led to that deadly impasse (283-304).

All that matters here, however, is a much earlier scene in which the knight Cador is presented being deeply in love with the maid Euphemie, daughter of Renaut of Cornwall. In order to improve his chances, he takes on the huge challenge of killing a man-eating serpent and succeeds in that feat, but he is then falling into a severe love-sickness which only Euphemie can save him from. The two persons, however, do not dare to talk to each other or to confess their feelings openly, which makes the condition even worse for both of them. Cador reflects intensively on his suffering and fear which is the result of overpowering longing for her, but he does not dare to reveal the truth to Euphemie. The latter undergoes the same painful experience, talks to herself about her love-sickness, but cannot cure it herself, of course.

The poet projects a truly impressive psychological portrait of both characters, demonstrating how much their emotions disturb them to no end, until they finally begin to exchange words, which progressively convey what they

actually experience in their hearts. Her statement: "'Ami, speak, alas!'" (882; "Amis, patlés, haymmi!") unleashes a torrent of new exchanges between both because both "amis" and "alas" give him hope (893-903), and yet still deter them since their meaning is not completely unmistakable. Tentatively, Cador probes the words, pushes further, invites her indirectly to meet him in the middle of the road of his interpretation, and she responds in kind, admitting carefully that she shares his spiritual and bodily suffering even though she had already healed him from the serpent's venom (939-44). Their exchange also addresses the nobility of Cador's character, his honor and worth as a knight, hence as a lover [Terrell].

Both people have received the king's promise that they could choose as a marriage partner whomever they would desire in the kingdom of England as a reward for their accomplishments—Cardor having killed the serpent; Euphemie having cured Cardor from his sickness—and yet both are afraid that the respective other would have another person in mind. Love and fear are deeply intertwined, and yet their dialogue constantly moves them closer to each other. Cador describes in moving terms his body's response to his feelings of love, and she admits that she suffers from the same sickness, which turns out to be love, as he hesitatingly admits (1045-52). Every time they speak, they inch closer to each other in linguistic and emotional terms, as she reveals: "'... I know now that Love has me in his power… '" (1058). However, uncertainty continues to dominate, until they finally agree to speak openly and honestly to each other about their hearts' deepest desires (1089). But then something magical happens because instead of exchanging further words, they touch their hands, and this inflames them so much "that they could not refrain/from placing their mouths together" (1092-93).

Intriguingly, as the poet indicates, the very body part which makes speech possible is cutting of their words because the kiss has finally been exchanged, and thus the ultimate truth has been spoken, physically: "a very clear sign of noble love" (1095). Their lips speak a true language, revealing their love for each other. Words could not quite render this fact since love is too elusive. The kiss thus proves to be the ultimate communicative means for the lovers; it is the carrier of their emotions for each other, but it is a unique, erotic kiss, not the kiss exchanged between neighbors, family members (1099-1100), and also not the kiss between a liege lord and his vassal, an abbot and his monks, or a queen and her servants, which Heldris later addresses as well [Tanner; Schreiner].

Then, however, the queen is trying to seduce him by means of her kisses, which transmogrifies the basic function of a kiss (3757-84), signaling that her conversation with the boy-maiden is determined by personal greed and viciousness—almost a variant of the treacherous Judas kiss! She offers him two kisses for one from him, and the young person responds politely, but without any emotions (3775), which deeply angers the queen, yet without achieving any of her goals.

Silence, however, ultimately manages to get himself extricated from the queen's traps, although this then means only that s/he has to face many more mortal dangers, until all the truth has been revealed, which condemns the queen, and liberates Silence from her mask because the king then revokes his own ban on women from inheriting their fathers' lands.

The kiss itself thus proves to be one of the most important media for human communication, particularly when exchanged with honest love. We could also confirm this phenomenon through a close study of such narratives as Gottfried von Straßburg's *Tristan* (ca. 1210) or the anonymous Middle English alliterative romance, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (ca. 1370), where both times love is expressed through the exchange of kisses, and where hence, just as in *Silence*, words of love find their crowning achievement in the kiss (Classen). Of course, the kiss shuts off the audience from the conversation between the lovers, and they plunge deeply into their own world of passion where no words are needed any longer.

Altogether, the kiss succeeds in facilitating communication in an ineffable manner, which transcends the physical barriers of all of human language. Of course, a kiss could also deceive, but Heldris demonstrates in this scene involving Cador and Euphemie how much the kiss here represents the ultimate expression of true love, superseding all efforts to communicate by means of spoken or written words. While historians have often examined the ceremonial and ritual function of the kiss in its political, religious, economic, and also military context [Harvey, ed.], here we can observe a further dimension. The kiss proves to be the pinnacle of human communication, especially in the case of erotic love. Historians have often identified the kiss as an important political, religious, ethical, moral, and military symbol, and we can now add to this long list the most important function of the kiss, to communicate love in its truest and deepest form [for more recent studies in *Le Roman de Silence*, see the contributions to Bozkaya, Bußmann, and Philipowski, ed.; for studies on words of love, see Classen, ed., *Words of Love*, though none of the contributors addresses Heldris's work]. As we can observe hence, Heldris insinuates that the ultimate truth, the final exchange between two people cannot fully be achieved by way of words; the kiss alone seals their fate and

creates a new community which keeps out everyone else since they keep their love for each other exclusively. Although the kiss does not speak in the narrow sense of the word, it proves to be most expressive gesture people can share amongst themselves.

Heldris also included a major scene with kissing involving the King of France and Silence whom his own lord, the King of England, has sent to his friend on the Continent. Silence, as we have heard above, is persecuted by the queen because 'he' had not submitted under her erotic desires. Consequently, she intends to get him killed, and since her husband does not comply with her request and simply recommends the young man to the king of France, the queen then falsifies the letter in which it now says that the latter ought to execute the messenger immediately [for a similar situation, see the Middle High German sentimental romance, *Mai und Beaflur*, ca. 1280; for the literary trope and the wide range of similar texts, cf. Black, who discusses the persecution of innocent women who suffer under similar circumstances]. However, the king first welcomes Silence and is so delighted by 'his' appearance, that he grants him his royal kiss, the kiss of peace, which automatically implies that the visitor would enjoy complete safety and protection (4423-27).

Yet to his shock, when he is then informed through the falsified letter that he is supposed to kill the young man without delay, the king is deeply chagrined because he had already kissed the messenger and can hence not follow through with the request. First, he admits: "His great beauty made me act rashly, / for I kissed and embraced him" (4469-70). He realizes and pronounces publicly that the kiss expressed a symbolic gesture of great significance that bounds him to his own honor as a king: "I cannot rightly ill-treat him, / nor rightly fail the king" (4473-74). Once a kiss has been granted, the other person enjoys, as he formulates explicitly, peace, i.e., safety: "The kiss signifies peace" (4488).

To get out of his dilemma, both wanting to carry out his friend's request (to kill the young man) and desiring to live up to his own ethical standards regarding the public relevance of the royal kiss, the king then asks his council of three major lords to consult him. One of them emphasizes that the kiss certainly granted Silence safety for forty days (4575)—a highly symbolic number in Christian thought (Christ's fasting for 40 days, e.g.). The others suggest not to do anything with Silence until the king has learned more about the background of this horrible request to have the messenger killed, so another letter is sent to the King of England, which ultimately unravels the evil machinations by the English queen against Silence. We also hear of a repeated warning by another councilor not to disregard the great importance of the kiss: "For our king kissed him just now, my lords; / he can do nothing to harm the boy / for any reason I can see, / as long as he is in this situation" (4613-16).

Altogether, then, the author undergirds his literary narrative with numerous references to kisses, which allows him to highlight the great ritual relevance of this gesture. Not surprisingly, however, as we have seen above in the erotic exchanges between Cador and Euphemie, Silence's future parents, as much as the kiss is a symbolic act, it ultimately substitutes for language and bonds two people in the most powerful and intimate communication. *Le Roman de Silence* thus proves to be an excellent literary reflection of highly important private and public forms of communication. Little wonder that medieval and modern artists have dedicated so much of their effort to the topic of the kiss or of kissing, but here we are confronted with truly insightful examples of the public and private relevance of kissing in erotic, political, and religious terms. What words, gestures, rituals, or objects such as gifts cannot tell, the kiss expresses in a most meaningful manner. Ironically, the Socialist kiss of brotherhood might be the most direct avatar of the medieval kiss in its political, religious, legal, economic, and other contexts, whereas in other contexts the meaning of the kiss has commonly become reduced to its erotic symbolism.

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