

T H E K I S S

A brief history of osculation — from Emperor Tiberius' ban to John Barrymore's record. By Eve Glicksman

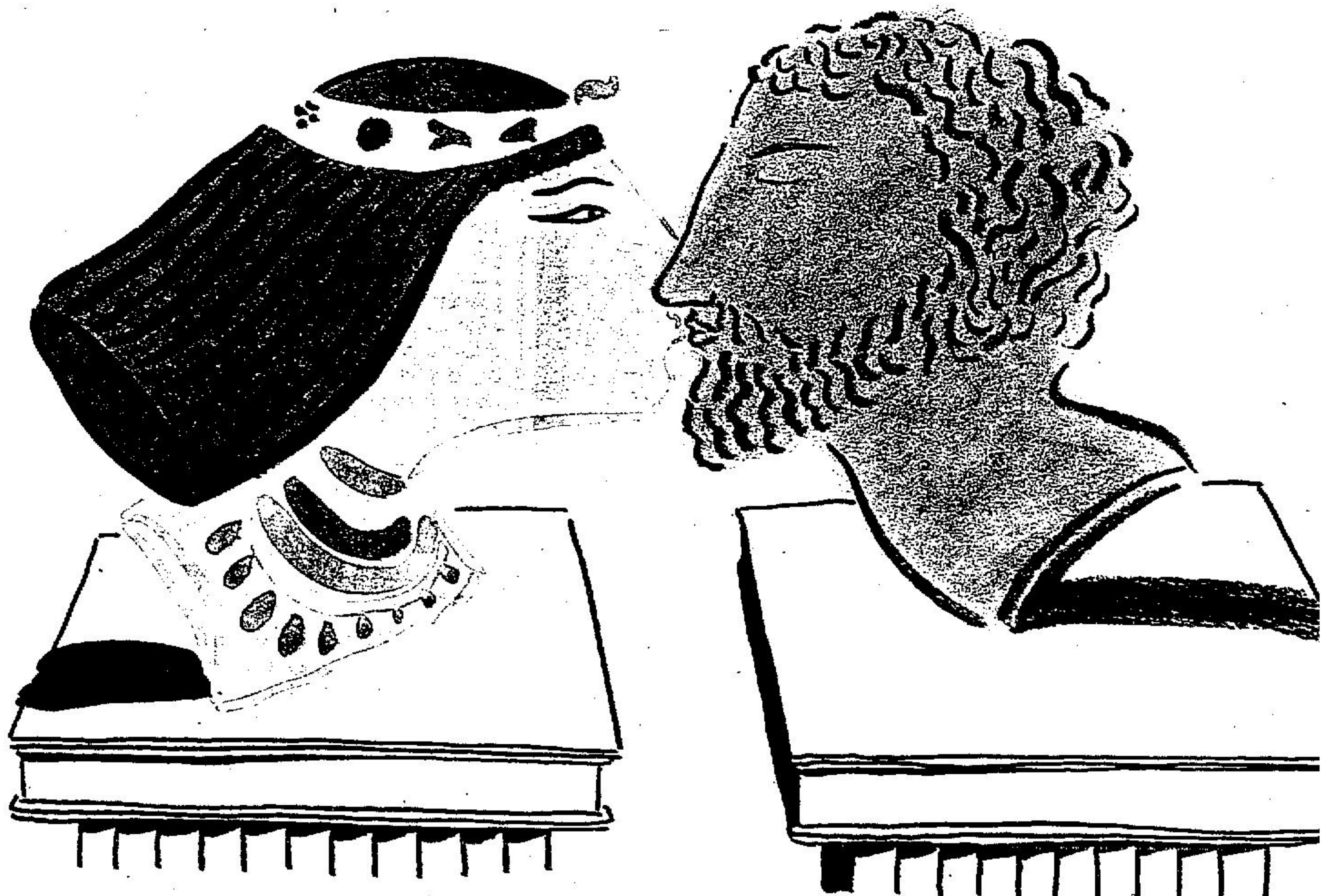
IF ON THIS VALENTINE'S DAY YOU FIND YOURSELF in the mood to smooch your sweetie, buss your lover, peck your sister on the cheek, or just indiscriminately air-smack any celebrities you happen to pass on the street, you might want to consider this: A kiss, despite what the song says, is most definitely not just a kiss. In fact, it can be just about anything.

Americans kiss to greet each other or to say farewell, to congratulate or console. We kiss lovers on the lips, infants on the head, and children on their cuts and bruises. Indeed, kissing plays many roles in human affairs; our folklore, rituals and everyday behavior brim with examples. There

was the traitorous kiss of Judas (from whence the phrase "kiss of death"). Gamblers kiss their cards to deflect divine wrath (sort of the flip side of the pious kissing Bibles, crosses or Torahs). Patriots kiss their native soil. Irish kiss the Blarney stone (for the luck of the blarney). Politicians kiss babies (more blarney). Even princesses kiss frogs, to turn them into princes.

On a personal level, note that the whys and hows of kissing can have less to do with romance or friendship than with cultural and historical forces. Frenchmen, for instance, will kiss you twice, once on each cheek; Belgians, three times. Chinese don't do it in public, and Nigerians don't do

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it at all. Austrians kiss on the hand; Indonesians kiss only the cheek. In Mediterranean and Latin countries, men traditionally kiss each other; not so in America.

In America, the story of the kiss can be read in the nation's cyclical mood swings, conservative and liberal, and in its reactions to world wars and Model T's, matinee idols and Puritan forebears. But whatever the American experience, or your own personal experience for that matter, kissing does not seem to be a universal pastime.

For a look at all this, let's start at the beginning.

The First Kiss

Theories on the earliest smooch range from a need for oral contact that begins in infancy — when the tactile satisfaction is enhanced by the reward of obtaining mother's milk — to an attempt by prehistoric men and women to demonstrate that they didn't intend to bite. Another explanation is that kissing began when primitive humans licked each other's faces for salt.

If you're more romantically inclined, it's also thought that ancient lovers believed a kiss would literally unite their souls, since the spirit was said to be carried in one's breath. The heart, as an age-old symbol of love, may symbolize pursed red lips.

However, don't be too quick to assume that humans invented kissing. Even chimpanzees instinctively press warm wet lips against your neck when they're glad to see you.

The First to Kiss and Tell

For the record, it happened in India, more than 4,000 years ago. A passage in the *Rig-Veda* describes people pressing their noses together. And, according to Vaughn M. Bryant, chairman of the anthropology department at Texas A&M University, it's not hard to figure out what happened next. Bryant, who lectures on the origin of kissing, surmises that while nose to nose with another, "somebody must have slipped and found that the lips were a lot more sensitive than the nose."

The Most to Kiss and Tell (so far)

The romantic kiss as we know it today was first popularized by the ancient Romans. Texas A&M's Bryant calls the Romans "the kiss-iest culture that ever existed." They puckered up on every conceivable occasion, he says, and it even became stylish to perfume one's mouth with Oriental spices to enhance the pleasure of a kiss. Casual public kissing grew to such outrageous proportions in those

days, in fact, that Emperor Tiberius banned what we now call the social kiss. (As has Miss Manners; more on her later.)

Boot Lickers — and Worse

People didn't kiss simply for pleasure in ancient Persia, where manners of kissing reflected class distinctions. Equals could kiss each other on the lips, and those of slightly different status would kiss on the cheek. The lowest subordinates had to kiss at a level symbolically low enough to match their inferiority; this usually meant kissing the superior's foot. For those ranking slightly better, it was permissible to kiss the garment hem or knee of the upper-class person. For the lowest abject prisoner, even kissing a foot was considered too good, and he or she was forced to kiss the ground near the nobility's shoes. From such practices came the phrases "kiss the dirt," "bite the dust," and "boot-licker."

In Renaissance Europe, these kinds of kissing protocols were replaced by bowing, curtsying and the doffing of hats — apparently a consequence of rising fears about the spread of the Great Plague.

In a similar vein, another theory holds that the handshake evolved as a diluted version of the hand kiss, a popular European gesture of respect to women. As the kissing of hands became more stylized, a gentleman's pucker would relax to the point that his mouth might only graze the back of the lady's hand, or even miss altogether. As the custom became antiquated, the man would merely take the lady's hand while bowing slightly, sort of a weak handshake.

The Tummy-Tickle Alternative

Though Americans take an inordinate amount of pleasure from kissing, the passion doesn't seem to be universal. Many peoples express intimacy in other ways.

For example, the kiss at the close of the American wedding ceremony is regarded as the standard symbol of love and sexual union. But not at a Cambodian marriage rite; there, the groom will touch his nose against the bride's cheek. In Korea, where Confucianist tenets de-emphasize physical intimacy, the bride and groom, to symbolize their new bond, bow to each other and then to their guests. Traditional Chinese and Japanese consider it a breach of decorum to kiss in public — even at weddings — as do Black Muslims.

Elizabeth Eames, a lecturer in social anthropology at Haverford College, recalls her three years in Nigeria, where, she says, kissing is just short of lunatic behavior. "Kissing is like someone tearing

their clothes off in a busy street here," she says. "West Africans get grossed out when they see tourists kissing. To them, it's inappropriate — comparable to intercourse in public. They'll move away from the kissing couple, make faces, or point."

West Africans don't kiss at all, Eames says. In greeting, a girl will kneel and a boy will touch his hand to the ground or lie prostrate. Best friends might spit into each other's hand and shake, symbolizing that a piece of you goes to the other person. "The only time you'll see a kiss in this part of Africa is as a sign of respect to an old grandmother," Eames says. "A younger person might press lips against a grandmother's chest to show she's the mother who's fed them all."

Among Eskimos, nose-rubbing replaces mouth contact. Indonesia is another place where not even lovers kiss on the mouth, at least not where people can see them. Variations elsewhere include nose-pressing, sniffing, nuzzling, or placing one's lips close to a partner's face and inhaling. In some cases, these non-kissing cultures harbor mythical or spiritual fears about exchanging saliva, because it is considered to be part of the soul.

In East Africa, the accepted way to show affection is to tickle the other person's stomach.

Kissing American-style

In the summer of 1969, the town of Swedesboro, N.J., passed a law banning kissing in public. The acting police chief's explanation — "We don't want any hanky-panky here" — would have been music to the ears of the early Puritans.

From their first days in North America, these church reformers were forever forbidding kissing. A favorite Puritan sermon concerned a Boston mariner condemned to two hours in the public stocks as punishment for kissing his wife on the doorstep — after returning home from three years at sea. (An aside here. Either the Puritans weren't really the prudes they're often portrayed to have been or else it has always been true you can't legislate morality: Allen F. Davis, a professor of American cultural history at Temple University, reports that 30 percent of Massachusetts brides in the 1790s were "in the family way.")

By the 1800s, attitudes about courtship loosened up with the stresses of westward expansion and the declining practice of chaperoning young couples, and the dating goodnight kiss became accepted as an extension of the childhood goodbye kiss. Around

1830, the handshake also replaced the kiss as the established greeting in many circles.

By the end of the 19th century, Philadelphians looking for a really hot time would take their sweeties to Coney Island or Atlantic City, where, says Temple's Davis, they would do things they'd never do at home — such as kiss their dates in the street. It was about this time, too, that the movies heralded the modern era of the kiss.

In 1896, a 30-second nickelodeon, *The Kiss*, created utter shock among theatergoers. "Magnified to gargantuan proportions, [the kiss] is absolutely disgusting," wrote one critic. "Such things call for police interference." Even so, in the early silent flicks, the kiss was at best a hasty affair — the man grabbed the woman, bestowed a peck, then jumped back abruptly.

Taboos crumbled in the permissive 1920s with the silver screen's great lovers. Rudolph Valentino brought flair to kissing, and John Barrymore, playing the lead in *Don Juan* (1926), probably set the cinematic record for kissing his co-stars — a total of 191 times. The liberal swing in behavior after World War I reflected many things — the Lost Generation, the discovery of Freud, new freedoms for women, more college-educated

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women, the influence of the first slick magazines, and the coming of the Model T, which allowed courting couples privacy from strict parental eyes.

Modesty returned with the Depression; gangster movies of the '30s portrayed kissing more realistically than ever before. This also was the era of a Hollywood code that allowed only dry screen kisses lasting no more than three seconds, during which one foot of each party involved ostensibly had to be cemented to the ground. Soon, of course, Clark Gable and Cary Grant managed to overcome these limitations, and young men everywhere sought to imitate their steamy love scenes. "It was directly through the movies that I learned to kiss a girl on her ears, neck, and cheeks as well as on the mouth," said one avid moviegoer.

(Another aside here: Sexual kissing skills are generally acquired in our teens, says Scot M. Guenter, assistant professor of American studies at Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pa., who points out that applied kissing education is a primary rite of passage in adolescence. "Junior high school kissing games like Post Office or Choo-Choo probably go way back in time," Guenter says.)

The next big boost for romance and kissing came at the end of World War II, when the boys returned home. Then there was a real blow to the kisser — the repressed '50s — followed by (what else?) the sexual revolution of the '60s, when kissing was the least of concerned parents' worries.

Today, says Guenter, "teen kissing in television programs like *Fame* is exceedingly more realistic than it was for Dobie Gillis and Tuesday Weld. On a recent episode of *Who's the Boss?*, a hickey was portrayed as a mark of distinction."

That, too, soon may pass: The Screen Actors Guild decided two

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years ago that its members were entitled to refuse mouth-to-mouth kissing with anyone they feared might have AIDS.

So, Why Are Americans So Kissy?

Michael Ascher, a psychologist and professor at Temple University Hospital, blames two influences: politicians and entertainers. When show-business people kiss, it's to portray to the public that they're close friends, he says, with the less popular person wanting to show the TV audience that he or she is Johnny Carson's kisser cousin. Politicians, he says, peck their spouses in public to present an image of family solidity.

Andrea Weiss, assistant professor of psychology at Drexel University, agrees that public kissing is often more a social statement than a gesture of affection. "We kiss to convey an impression to others that we're getting along and that we care about each other, even if it's not true privately. We learn we're supposed to do this from the media — television, movies and reading — and by observing others."

"Thirty years ago, you kissed people you were friendly with," but nowadays, Ascher complains, "kissing is a false affectation dispersed too freely. . . . Whether you kissed or not on the first date really meant something in the '50s; now it's irrelevant. We kiss much like we'd shake the hand of a stranger."

Which brings us to the social kiss, or "air-smack." This type of kiss functions in lieu of a handshake, and not infrequently to project a certain image or rapport. The gesture consists of a puckering noise usually made a few inches from the cheek, or merely a light brushing of cheeks with the intention of not mussing anyone's makeup.

This practice thrives particularly well at fund-raisers, galas, receptions, state dinners, airports, campaign trails and Hollywood variety shows. "Anyone who ventures backstage at the theater or to any reception honoring the arts must in this day and age be prepared to kiss first and converse later," Joanna Powell observed in a 1985 *Harper's Bazaar* article about current fashions in kissing.

This kind of kissing is what piqued the indignation of Miss Manners, a.k.a. Judith Martin. The etiquette guru has implored her Gentle Readers to return to the civilized handshake greeting, which she laments has become completely devalued by the social kiss. Likewise, cheek-kissing has declined in meaning to the near-neutral emotional content of a handshake, she observes disapprovingly.

If you must kiss each other's lips in greeting, it should be "ladies choice," Miss Manners maintains. A woman should request a kiss by "tilting her face upward without moving it to either side." As Miss Manners sees it, the gentleman has no choice but to perform — unless, as is always the gentleman's prerogative, he chooses to kiss the lady on the hand.

Concludes Powell on the subject: "The final step in kissing cleverly is understanding the variety of kisses and choosing them, like vintage wines, in tandem with the proper situation." □