

## ORAL IMAGERY IN CATULLUS 7

Quaeris, quot mihi basiationes  
 tuae, Lesbia, sint satis superque.  
 quam magnus numerus Libyssae harenae  
 lasarpiciferis iacet Cyrenis  
 oraculum louis inter aestuosi 5  
 et Batti ueteris sacrum sepulcrum;  
 aut quam sidera multa, cum tacet nox,  
 furtiuos hominum uident amores:  
 tam te basia multa basiare  
 uesano satis et super Catullo est, 10  
 quae nec pernumerare curiosi  
 possint nec mala fascinare lingua.

How many kisses will be enough for Catullus? That is the question that opens Poem 7. The answer: as many as are the grains of sand in the Libyan desert, as many as are the stars in the nighttime sky. Yet in this poem sand and stars do not function simply as quantitative symbols. Each is in fact described in a manner that subtly alludes to the mouth – the organ from which Lesbia's kisses could come.

The sands are those of Cyrenaica, a land rich in silphium (*lasarpiciferis* . . . *Cyrenis*: 4). Silphium (*lasarpicium*) was a plant highly valued by the Romans for its medicinal properties; taken orally, it could cure many maladies.<sup>1</sup> Thus it is analogous to Lesbia's kisses which, when administered like medicine to her lover's mouth, would bring rest and relief to *uesano* ['raving', 'mad'] . . . *Catullo* (10).<sup>2</sup>

Cyrenaica, moreover, is bounded – as the poet notes (5–6) – by the oracle of Jupiter and the sepulchre of Battus, Cyrene's founder. The word *oraculum* (5) signifies divine utterance but by its derivation (<oro<os, oris) refers to the mouth. The name Battus is significant also. According to Libyan tradition (see Herodotus 4:155) Battus' name was given to him because he suffered from a speech defect (*Bárros* <βαρραρίζω, 'stammer'), thus another reference to the mouth. The name of Cyrene's founder is connected with kisses in yet another way, for in the poem his name (Batti: 6) echoes and is echoed by the special words for kisses and kissing used by Catullus: *basiationes* (1), *basia* (9), and *basiare* (9).<sup>3</sup>

As to the stars in the night sky, Catullus says (7) they belong to a time (*nox*) that could speak but is silent (*tacet*). While the eyes of the night (the stars) look down upon illicit love-affairs, the lips of the night are sealed.

<sup>1</sup> Pliny the Elder speaks of it as one of the greatest gifts of Nature ('inter eximia naturae dona numeratum': *H.N.* 22.101). For its curative powers see Pliny, 22.101–6; see also 'Silphium' in Daremberg-Saglio and 'Silphion' in *RE* 2 Reihe, iii. 1.

<sup>2</sup> See A. C. Moorhouse, 'Two Adjectives in Catullus, 7', *AJPh* 4 (1963), 418. Moorhouse also sees in *aestuosi* (5) not only

a reference to the heat of the desert but also to the fever of passion (cf. J. P. Elder, 'Notes on Some Conscious and Subconscious Elements in Catullus' Poetry', *HSCP* 60 (1951), 109).

<sup>3</sup> Catullus is the first author to use these words. See C. J. Fordyce, *Catullus; A Commentary* (Oxford, 1961), on 5.7.

Catullus wants so many kisses, in fact, that their number cannot be counted, for if busybodies were to know the total they would cast an evil spell upon the poet and his love (11–12). It is specifically *oral* magic that Catullus here fears, as the subject *lingua* (12) demonstrates — not the ‘evil eye’ of 5.12 (*aut ne quis malus inuidere possit*). That *lingua* is nominative gives the word a syntactic prominence it would not otherwise have.<sup>4</sup> It is, moreover, the final word of the poem. Just as the poem’s first verse ended with kisses (*basiationes*), so the poem’s last verse ends with the tongue (*lingua*). This structural antithesis is no accident, for the only magic potent enough to defeat the *mala lingua* is the magic of the *basiationes* themselves.

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<sup>4</sup> K. F. Quinn, ‘Docte Catulle’, in *Critical Essays on Roman Literature: Elegy and Lyric*, ed. J. P. Sullivan (London, 1962), p. 46.