

Romeo and Juliet's first kiss, Act One, Scene Four

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ROMEO [To JULIET]

If I profane with my unworhiest hand
This holy shrine, the gentle fine is this:
My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand
To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss.

JULIET

Good pilgrim, you do wrong your hand too much,
Which mannerly devotion shows in this;
For saints have hands that pilgrims' hands do touch,
And palm to palm is holy palmers' kiss.

ROMEO

Have not saints lips, and holy palmers too?

JULIET

Ay, pilgrim, lips that they must use in prayer.

ROMEO

O, then, dear saint, let lips do what hands do;
They pray, grant thou, lest faith turn to despair.

JULIET

Saints do not move, though grant for prayers' sake.

ROMEO

Then move not, while my prayer's effect I take.

Form:

The 14 lines in question form a sonnet, a perfect Shakespearean sonnet: with three ABAB quatrains and a rhyming couplet at the end. Easy to miss when seen/ heard and even quite subtle when read. This is the first meeting between Romeo and Juliet at the Capulet ball. Shakespeare goes to pains to write the encounter as a sonnet. As you know, the sonnet is traditionally associated with love, so it is no surprise that Shakespeare chose this form to detail the first exchange of words between our young lovers.

Romeo takes the lead with the first quatrain, Juliet the second, they share the third (Romeo taking three lines and Juliet one) and the final couplet is split evenly between the two. Why? Well, what we get is a gradual intermingling of speech, a conversational to-and-fro that culminates with two people perfectly in sync, speaking in a shared rhyming couplet. The sonnet so naturally fits into the dialogue of the scene highlights

just how compatible these two are – they speak in shared verse, complementing each other to create a fixed meter and rhyme scheme.

Language:

The conflict in this sonnet is basically between sex and religion – the body and the spirit. You get two semantic fields with the vocabulary of the body (hand, lips, kiss, palm et cetera) meeting the vocabulary of religion (holy, shrine, sin, Pilgrims, saints, devotion et cetera). The combination is electrifying. Our young lovers are seething (ribollire)¹ with physical desire and lust whilst simultaneously discussing their religious concerns. The religious language also attests to the seriousness of their relationship. Their love is not limited to physical attraction – it transcends into the realms of agape. Readers are meant to take them and their love seriously.

Romeo, the bold lover, kicks off the sonnet with a sly conflation² of physical and religious language. In his metaphorical description of his lips as ‘blushing Pilgrims’ he is attempting to convince Juliet of the purity of his intentions. Yes, he wants to get physical, but he is overtly spiritual in his request. Juliet, coy³ and intelligent, picks up on this and extends the metaphor, using her own metaphor to describe the act of prayer (joined palms) as a ‘kiss’. Romeo clearly has his work cut out for him.

By the end of the poem, they have reached an understanding. A kiss is a prayer and vice versa, so they can kiss without problem. On this note it is⁴ telling that Juliet repeatedly calls Romeo (a hard-headed⁵ romantic from a rival tribe) a ‘Pilgrim’. This label validates his love and tells her, and the audience, that he is worthy of a kiss. (Romeo immediately calls this kiss a ‘sin’, playfully perhaps, but also in acknowledgement of the inappropriateness of snogging⁶ on a first date).

The rhyme in this poem is more than simply out of necessity.⁷ Key words are linked by rhyme, one example being the rhyming of ‘prayer’ and ‘despair’ in the third quatrain. Here, Shakespeare is making reference to the tragedy that will befall⁸ the couple – the ‘prayer’ of their sacred kiss will ultimately lead to ‘despair’ and grief. The audience knows this already (thanks to the Prologue) and are reminded in this initial exchange.

Imagery:

As discussed above, the sonnet is replete⁹ with images of **prayer** and **kissing** – two very contrasting actions. The former is carried out in isolation, seeking personal enlightenment. The latter is an act of shared intimacy between two people. That said, prayer does also involve the recipient of that prayer, suggesting that both positions are intimate in different ways.

What is worth noting is the way in which Shakespeare subverts imagery. ‘Palm to palm’ prayer is an innocent, entirely religious image that we are invited to equate¹⁰ with lip to lip kissing, when Romeo says ‘let lips do what hands do’. The prayer becomes the kiss.

¹ To seethe = (ribollire)

² Sly conflation = astuta combinazione

³ Coy = falso modesto, ritroso

⁴ On this note it is telling = Si dice che

⁵ hard-headed = insensibile, cocciuto, testardo

⁶ Snogging= sbacucchiarsi

⁷ more than simply out of necessity=è più che necessariamente per necessità

⁸ To befall = accadere a qualcuno, succedere

⁹ Replete = pieno di, colmo di ...

¹⁰ To equate = equiparare

Rhythm:

As all sonnets go, it is written in clear iambic pentameter. This natural, flowing rhythm is undisturbed and subsequently, a sense of steadiness¹¹ is achieved. These two people are on the same beat¹², so to speak. They speak in rhythm and are constant in pace. Admittedly, all of Shakespeare's plays are written as such but in the context of a shared sonnet, the effect is highlighted.

Tone:

On the one hand you have a gentle conflict and tension between Romeo and Juliet, the young Montague trying to persuade Juliet to allow him his 'gentle sin'. There is nothing excessively shocking in this however, and the language of the sonnet is only quietly shocking.

After the first two quatrains, taken by Romeo and Juliet respectively, the sharing of the third quatrain introduces a sense of urgency. The exchange becomes more passionate and fluctuates, as the pair move closer towards their kiss. Also, in keeping with the nature of the sonnet, there is a turn (or volta)¹³ after the octet. Romeo asks a question that highlights a fundamental problem in religion/ physical conflict – 'Have not Saints lips and holy Palmers too?' Don't spiritual types have physical, sexual urges? This turn could potentially lead to disaster if Juliet refuses to play along, but, thankfully, she does not. The reader overcomes this hiccough¹⁴ and reach an assured, content resolution.

Subject matter:

So what is this sonnet about?

Easy:

- Love. Love in the broadest sense – love that spans¹⁵ physical attraction and sexuality to religious adoration and a deeper, spiritual connection. Romeo and Juliet have both from the outset, and this sonnet serves as evidence of this fact.
- Unseen Flirtations

Adapted from < <https://unseenflirtspetry.wordpress.com/2011/01/20/romeo-and-juliets-first-kiss-act-one-scene-four/>>

¹¹ Steadiness = stabilità, fermezza, costanza

¹² on the same beat = sullo stesso ritmo

¹³ turn (or volta) = svolta

¹⁴ Hiccough = singhiozzo

¹⁵ Spans = abbracciare, attraversare, fare da ponte