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# Forum

PMLA invites members of the association to submit letters, typed and double-spaced, commenting on articles in previous issues or matters of general scholarly or critical interest. The editor reserves the right to reject or edit Forum contributions and offers the authors discussed an opportunity to reply to the letters published. The journal omits titles before persons' names, discourages footnotes, and regrets that it cannot consider any letter of more than 1,000 words. Letters should be addressed to PMLA Forum, Modern Language Association, 10 Astor Place, New York, NY 10003-6981.

## The Last Taboo in PMLA

To the Editor:

Isn't it about time to eliminate the last taboo that's inhibiting the self-expression of contributors to this learned journal and others? For some years now we've been allowed to discuss sexual practices in our articles, and even to mention the organs of generation, so long as they're given polite names. And it's now all right to put a conjunction at the beginning of a sentence, which we're also permitted to put a preposition at the end of. There's no longer a rule against using the first-person singular pronoun, and when I refer to my colleagues I don't have to—in fact I'm told not to—include the academic titles that they've worked so hard to acquire. We won't see *ibid.* in footnotes anymore, and we'll never encounter another roman numeral designating the volume of a journal in the *MLA International Bibliography*. Each of these changes, we'd been warned, would mean a serious lowering of professional standards, but you'll see that the profession hasn't collapsed yet. So why can't we use contractions on the pages of *PMLA*?

RICHARD LEVIN

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## The Medieval Kiss

To the Editor:

I found Glenn Burger's "Kissing the Pardoner" (107 [1992]: 1143–56) sorely lacking in the historical groundwork necessary to support his central assertion, that the public kiss of peace between Chaucer's Host and Pardoner had to be a mouth-to-mouth kiss. Logically, Burger ought to have been at least open to the possibility or even the likelihood that it was a different sort of ritual kiss—a *baiser d'étiquette* on each side of the face. Or else he needed to provide historical evidence in his article that men unrelated by blood ordinarily gave each other mouth-to-mouth kisses as public, ceremonial signs in fourteenth-century England. Moreover, Burger seemed to lose sight of the public nature of this kiss as the essay developed, drawing conclusions as though it had been an intimate kiss. And yet the line between

public and private was deeply etched in the Middle Ages. Nicholas J. Perella notes that artists depicting intimacy between a man and a woman for public view hardly ever showed a mouth-to-mouth kiss but rather gave a “cheek to cheek representation” (*The Kiss, Sacred and Profane*, Berkeley: U of California P, 1969, 74). So the burden was on Glenn Burger, who built his entire essay on this single assertion, to provide historical proof for it.

ANNE BARBEAU GARDINER  
John Jay College of Criminal Justice  
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### Reply:

According to Anne Barbeau Gardiner, my central assertion is that the public kiss of peace between Chaucer’s Host and Pardoner had to be a mouth-to-mouth kiss. Yet nowhere in my paper do I make such a categorical statement. Because both Chaucer’s text and the historical evidence are ambiguous on this point, I chose instead to focus on what we can know: that the kiss—whether on the cheek *or* on the mouth—encourages an examination of the interpenetration of private and public, ideological and personal, occurring in such apparently transparent acts.

Throughout the Middle Ages, kisses on the mouth in all contexts—ceremonial and diplomatic kisses, kisses of fealty, and kisses of peace (between men and women *and* between men)—are more frequent than Gardiner would allow. True, Perella states that in medieval pictorial imagery, “rather than a clear labial kiss of lovers one often finds something like a cheek-to-cheek representation.” But he adds:

Partly, however, the reason for this seems to have been the desire to portray the faces in a full or three-quarters view. This may be observed in the many scenes . . . depicting the kiss of Judas or the theme of the Visitation, where again there is no question that a real kiss is intended, although in order to show as much of the faces as possible actual labial contact is hardly shown. (74)

In literature, by contrast, references to labial kisses are numerous, even commonplace. Indeed, George Fenwick Jones (“The Kiss in Middle High German Literature,” *Studia Neophilologica* 38 [1966]: 195–210) notes that in German texts, “unless the contrary is stated, it may be assumed that all kisses are on the mouth” (200), citing numerous examples of such kisses between men in rites of homage, in ceremonial and diplomatic greetings, and in contracts. Closer to

Chaucer is the moment in the *Roman de la Rose* when the Lover renders homage to the God of Love with a kiss on the mouth (translated without change in meaning some two centuries later in the Middle English *Romaunt*):

Fully, for thyn avauntage,  
Anoon to do me heere homage.  
And sithe kisse thou shalt my mouth,  
Which to no vilayn was never couth  
For to aproche it, ne for to touche. . . .  
(1997–2003)

Clearly the kiss here marks the intimate within and through the public, maintaining social and gender boundaries even as it blurs them.

While the kiss on the mouth in such public occasions seems to be dying out by the end of the medieval period, it is by no means clear exactly when this occurred or why. J. Russell Major (“‘Bastard Feudalism’ and the Kiss: Changing Social Mores in Late Medieval and Early Modern France,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 18 [1987]: 509–35) points out that in France the kiss on the mouth survives as an integral part of the ceremony of feudal homage until the end of the fifteenth century. And the English records from 1429 and 1439 that he cites would indicate a similar pattern across the Channel. Moreover, later changes to the ceremony in France, rather than substituting a kiss on the cheek, remove the kiss altogether. Major suggests that it was growing anxiety about and regulation of homosexuality in the later medieval period that contributed to the gradual abandonment of the kiss on the mouth. But the feudal kiss, both as a marker of class solidarity and as a hierarchical division between lord and vassal, may also have become increasingly problematic and unwelcome with the greater social competition and mobility of the later Middle Ages.

Any attempt to decide the significance of Chaucer’s kiss on the basis of objective, historical “facts” will, I think, prove as much of a red herring as will similar attempts to stabilize the meaning of the Pardoner in terms of the biological “facts” of his body. The one point in my essay that mentions mouths meeting—“with both Pardoner and Host silenced as their mouths meet, who speaks and with what voice?” (1146)—thus should be read in the context of my discussion of the socially and discursively constructed nature of the Host’s “authority” and the Pardoner’s “lack.” Whether the Host literally kisses the Pardoner on the mouth or on the cheeks, my point remains the same. That which has been constructed as “naturally”