

“LA BOCCA MI BACIÒ”: THE LOVE KISS
IN THE WORKS OF DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI

D.M.R. Bentley

The kiss itself is a story in miniature, a subplot.
– Adam Phillips, *On Kissing, Tickling, and Being Bored*

“Prudish people might perhaps think it not quite a young lady’s drawing. I don’t know. All the figures are draped – but I don’t quite know how people would feel about the *subject*.”¹ At first blush, John Ruskin’s remarks to Ellen Heaton about Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s just completed *Paolo and Francesca da Rimini* (1855) may indeed be an example of what “Michael Field” describes as his “speckled silliness in ... dealing with women” (qtd in Surtees 1:37n). Surely a woman in her late thirties (Heaton was born in 1816) with artistic interests could comfortably own a painting depicting Dante’s famous sinners and easily weather the frowns of any Mrs. Grundy who might happen upon it, especially since Rossetti’s treatment of the subject is far from celebratory: in the left panel Paolo and Francesca kiss for the first time, in the right panel their tormented souls swirl in the fires of hell, and in the centre panel Virgil and Dante respond feelingly to the pathos of the lovers’ story and suffering. No doubt, Ruskin’s misgivings about *Paolo and Francesca* stemmed in considerable measure from its depiction of an adulterous relationship *per se*, but is there perhaps a further aspect of the painting that gave him pause, something that since the mid-Victorian period has lost its power to perturb or scandalize? An indication that there is comes in a later, undated letter to Heaton in which Ruskin identifies what is “bold” about *Paolo and Francesca*: the “kind of kiss” that it depicts is not a “common – pretty – mistletoe bough kind of kiss” but precisely “what Dante meant”: a mouth-to-mouth kiss and thus a “*perfectly true* reading” of the account in Canto 5 of the *Inferno* (qtd. in Surtees 1:37).

As Ruskin would probably have known just as well as Rossetti, the mouth-to-mouth kiss of Paolo and Francesca needs to be read against the background

The Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies, 16 (Spring 2007)