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Recovering Bodily Pleasure: The Renaissance

THIS ARTICLE WILL PRESENT SOME of the primary strategies for the reconquest of bodily pleasure in the early Renaissance, strategies which were prompted by the new mentality of *dignitas hominis* and which arose in reaction to the *miseria hominis* characteristic of medieval Christianity's hegemonic discourse. Although our main attention will be focussed on how the body, previously considered an obstacle to salvation, could become its very instrument, a few notable exceptions to this trend will be considered.¹

In order to fully appreciate the underlying motivation for this reaction to the hegemonic discourse of the church, it is necessary to recall both the model of Christian happiness which exalts death over life, as well as the demanding Augustine concept, in full bloom in the Middle Ages, of sensual pleasure as an obstacle to Christian salvation. Positions such as these, which favoured the renunciation of earthly pleasure, were still in wide circulation in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. However, despite the conciliatory efforts of Thomism, the weight of this austere ecclesiastical discourse was unable to silence other conceptions of happiness, be they cultural creations of the Middle Ages such as *courtoisie* or legacies of classical pagan concepts such as Epicureanism.

¹ This article draws on a discussion of sensual pleasure presented in a more general article on the relationship between heavenly and earthly felicities in the Middle Ages and Renaissance: "Prolégomènes à une histoire de la félicité," in *Portraits du bonheur au Moyen Age et à la Renaissance: Douze modèles de félicité céleste et terrestre*, special issue *Memini, Travaux et documents*, ed. Brenda Dunn-Lardeau, 6 (2002): 5–58.

In reaction to this traditional trend, fifteenth-century Italy attempted to reconcile *honestas* and *voluptas*, often through a process of re-Christianization. The senses were praised in both Epicurean and Neoplatonic terms, in the former case as good by virtue of their divine provenance (e.g., Valla's *De Voluptate*), in the latter case as a means of attaining the divine (e.g., Marsilio Ficino's *Commentary on Plato's Symposium on Love*). However, the less noble senses of taste and touch presented particular problems. The sense of taste became the basis for a healthy and happy life in Platina's *De Honesta Voluptate et Valetudine* (the first manuscript of which is dated 1470), where a healthy and refined table is presented as the way to avoid vice. In the sixteenth century, the sense of touch, which appears to be the least susceptible to reason, remained the most difficult to defend of the five senses. But this was quickly resolved by its exalted spiritualization in Castiglione's *The Book of the Courtier*, in which Bembo praises the kiss. Nor were married couples forgotten, thanks to Erasmus, for one, who brought new ideas drawn from Christian humanism to the physical pleasure of men and women united by the sacrament of marriage. However, a few years later, in 1539, there was no echo of Christianization in the erotic poetry of Jean Second's *Basia*, with its classically inspired free love in direct opposition to his contemporaries' attempts to syncretize theology and classical philosophy.

Christian Happiness and the Senses in Augustine

Because of its clarity and its lexical precision with regard to happiness and bliss, it is instructive to recall Serge Bonino's definition of Christian happiness:

In the early Middle Ages, Boethius defined happiness as "The perfect state resulting from the union of all goods" (*The Consolation of Philosophy* III, pr. 2). In fact, happiness is generally thought of as the permanent state of rest in which all the true desires of Man are fulfilled through the possession of the sovereign good. Happiness therefore appears as the final end of human activity, and accordingly occupies a cardinal place in medieval anthropology and ethics. Thus, the section of Saint Thomas Aquinas's *Summa theologiae* that discusses

ethics is introduced by a reflection on bliss, the theological term for happiness.... The search for happiness is thus inseparable, particularly since Augustine, from the spiritual quest for God. But in the thirteenth century, some radical Aristotileans rehabilitated happiness as a more purely human thing, the immanent fruit of philosophical activity.²

Who has not read, with a pang of anguish tinged with incomprehension, the passage from *The Confessions* in which Augustine forbids himself, from the time of his conversion, the simple pleasure of watching dogs run, because that sight is likely to distract his soul from prayer to God? Without treating Augustine's attitude too indulgently, Charles Béné clarifies the abnegation of such pleasures, from the most noble ones, such as those of sight and hearing, to those procured through taste and carnal voluptuousness, towards which Augustine's reaction is even more severe. The key lies in that fact that in *The City of God* and *The Confessions* this Church Father still embraced both the philosophical heritage of Platonism, which affords reason a pre-eminent place over sentiment and passion, and, to an even greater degree, the Stoic concept of the tranquility of the soul, accompanied as it is by disdain for all sentiment. This helps to explain the philosophical and religious roots of his *contemptus mundi* and, especially, his *contemptus carnis*, which were not merely a form of *vanitas vanitatum* of transitory earthly things, inherited from the Old Testament, or expressions of the ardour of a pagan sinner recently converted to Christianity.³

² Serge Bonino, "Bonheur, Béatitude," *Dictionnaire encyclopédique du Moyen Âge*, ed. André Vauchez (Paris: Cerf, 1977) 1:218–19. It should also be noted that in "La théorie thomiste du bonheur et ses rapports avec le *Roman de la Rose*," in *L'idée de bonheur au moyen âge, Actes du Colloque d'Amiens de mars 1984*, ed. Danielle Buschinger (Göppingen: Kümmerle Verlag, 1990) 235–55, Hermann Kleber circumscribes the fundamental opposition of the ancient Aristotilean and Christian conceptions of happiness. For the first, "Happiness is considered rather, indeed foremost, as a species of human performance, the final goal resulting from human action" (235), while the second sees happiness as a divine gift rather than a result of human performance.

³ Charles Béné, "Félicité terrestre et félicité céleste chez saint Augustin," in *Portraits du bonheur au Moyen Age et à la Renaissance: Douze modèles de félicité*

Be that as it may, the description of the felicity of the hoped-for beatific vision, described so sensually by Augustine, indicates both the human cost of this tearing away from the pleasures of the senses and the suave bliss emanating from a soul turned uncompromisingly to God's infinite love. In the fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries, part of the moralist tradition (for example, Josse Bade's *Nef des Folles* of 1498) would relentlessly insist on the dangers of the five senses, in keeping with Augustinian precepts. Although Augustine took a radical position on marriage in *Soliloques*, Charles Béné recalls that he softened his position in *De bono conjugali*, written ten years later, and the latter work indeed evokes the joys, untrammelled by sin, of the natural companionship of the sexes offered to society by marriage.

Reconciling Voluptas and Honestas

In the face of the hegemonic discourse of the church, notably the mentality of *contemptus mundi* and *miseria hominis* in which true life only begins after death and the bliss of the divine beatific vision enjoys incomparable superiority compared to illusory worldly pleasures, the taste for celebrating life found only sporadic expression during the Middle Ages. Of course, the development of *courtoisie* from the twelfth century onwards had given rise to an art of living and an art of loving in which luxury and etiquette took an increasingly important place in social and love life, and which parted ways with the fragile notion of the *joi* of troubadours, still associated in the more or less short term with *dolor*. Yet *fin'amor*, adulterous of thought if not deed, in common with the other bodily and sensual pleasures, was still suspected of being a lure from the moral path of Christian salvation or from knightly duty to the realm. Thus, the ideology of *courtoisie* contradicted dominant standards of both Christianity and feudalism. On the one hand, its hedonistic valorization of woman and the flesh transgressed the standards attached to the body-soul duality of Christianity. On the other, its espousal of individual, rather than collective, happiness, opened a breach in the hierarchy of values of feudal ideology. In summary, in Christian thought, the idea of *civitas Dei* prevailed over that of *civitas terrena*, mirroring the superiority of the soul over the body.

Thus, parallel to the Christian discourse which exalted eschatological bliss and allowed the fleshly envelope to attain the dignity of glorious body, the twelfth century saw the multiplication of models of earthly pleasure. Saint Thomas Aquinas's *Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics* offers a Christianized version of classical ethics while adducing a response to the radical Aristotileanism (or the Latin Averroism) of Boethius of Dacia's *De Summo Bono*. It was in reaction to Boethius, for whom the only successful life was the one devoted to philosophical speculation (happiness therefore being purely intellectual, rather than sensual)⁴ that Saint Thomas Aquinas attempted to reconcile Aristotilean philosophy with Christian theology in his *Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics*, which portrays happiness positively, albeit limited in comparison with the promised satiation of heavenly bliss. Christian earthly happiness is thus not completely denied, although it is held to be inferior to *post-mortem* bliss. Nor, it should be added, did Thomas agree with the Stoics, for whom virtue was the only sovereign good.

In the thirteenth century, furthermore, Jean de Meun's second part of *Roman de la Rose* was a vigorous plea for naturalism. This, though, was a limited naturalism, denouncing as it did not only the courtly art of loving set out by Guillaume de Lorris in the first part of *Roman de la Rose*, but several other forms of erotic desire—such as homosexuality, narcissism, pathological jealous desire, up to and including marriage, so far from the free, unfet-

⁴ This idea of placing a philosopher, and only a philosopher, rather than a saint or a theologian, at the peak of the hierarchy of the happiest life is one of the 219 articles (at least thirteen of which directly concerned the ideas of Boethius) which would be condemned at Paris on 7 March 1277, by Étienne Tempier. For Boethius, however, this quest is led by reason and respects the natural order. The following extract of *De Summo Bono sive De Vita philosophi* gives a fair idea of the human goods attained in the Christianized Aristotilean framework of happiness: "And because the highest good possible for man is happiness, it follows that human happiness consists in knowing the true, doing the good, and taking delight in both.... He who shares more perfectly in that happiness which reason tells us is possible for man in this life draws closer to that happiness which we expect in the life to come on the authority of faith." Boethius of Dacia, *On the Supreme Good, on the Eternity of the World, on Dreams*, trans. John F. Wippel (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1987) 29.

tered unions of the Golden Age—considered against nature.⁵ To those who followed their heterosexual desires for the purposes of procreation went the rewards of paradise; to the others, infernal punishment, or excommunication by Genius (who, in Alain de Lille's *De planctu naturae*, pronounces similar judgement against those who refuse the laws of Nature and Venus, thereby rendering themselves guilty of several vices).⁶

Against this background of indigenous expression of happiness brought by courtly love and naturalism the Epicurean tradition survived, albeit in a modified form.⁷ Strictly speaking, Epicureanism is a method of attaining happiness through scientific knowledge, especially classical atomism, and the regulation of desire. However, in its popular form, Epicureanism was not differentiated from classical hedonism, which called for the immediate satisfaction of desire. Although Epicureanism, with its conception of pleasure as a natural end, is spontaneously associated with the Renaissance—which rehabilitated it with brio⁸—it is also present in the medieval texts addressed to clerics as well as to lay readers.

⁵ Despite egalitarian claims concerning sexual pleasure by Reason and 'la Vieille,' the pleasure that came with picking the rose remained above all the erotic pleasure of the male picker.

⁶ Another important text related to medieval debates surrounding natural law is *Architrenius* by Jean de Hauville (or Hanville) (1184), situated midway between *De planctu naturae* (prior to 1171), which was its inspiration, and *Le Roman de la Rose*. In this satirical poem, Architrenius, a student, is scandalized by the fact that everyone he knows, including himself, tends toward vice, especially those linked to money and success. Convinced that the blame lies in Nature, he resolves to meet the goddess to inform her of this state of affairs. Architrenius appears to be free of contemptus carnis, while at the same time valorizing marriage and criticizing adultery and other forms of sexuality. Finally, Nature promulgates her decree concerning procreation in the name of natural religion, which prohibits Man from hindering procreation. See Johannes de Hauvilla, *Architrenius*, ed. Wintrop Wetherbee (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994) xxxiii and 276 and the introduction for an analysis of the allegory of Nature.

⁷ For an in-depth understanding of the original Epicureanism as asceticism and the regulation of desire, consistent with nature and eschewing immediate and indiscriminating satisfaction, see the comments by Marcel Conche on *Lettre à Ménécée d'Épicure* in Marcel Conche, *Épicure: Lettres et maximes* (Villers-sur-Mer: Éditions du Mégare, 1977) 40–93.

⁸ See Don Cameron Allen, "The Rehabilitation of Epicurus and his Theory of Pleasure in the Early Renaissance," *Studies in Philology* 41.1 (January 1944): 1–15.

A detailed study by Robert Bultot provides a reminder of the medieval monastic tradition⁹ in which the depiction of paradise as a cloistered garden is linked to the prelapsarian paradisiacal state. To this tradition, in which figures a very specific conception of voluptuousness, should be added the “Epicureanism” of the Church Fathers from the twelfth century onwards. These, when they were not condemning Epicurus in order to show their openness to his asceticism, placed monastic life and even Christian life under his patronage—but only if they could “substitute religious, supernatural, values for ‘advantages’ and earthly joys, denounced as false goods,” in order to give this philosophy Christian content.¹⁰

Nor should we forget the delicate Epicureanism of the brigade in the prologue of Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, a wordly Epicureanism that gladly welcomes, although always in moderation, sensual voluptuousness. According to Francisco Javier Santa Eugenia, the little band comes to know, during its forced exile from Florence, the aesthetic (and therapeutic) exaltation of refined living sharpened by the background of plague:¹¹

Some there were, who considered with themselves, that living soberly, with abstinence from all superfluity; it would be a sufficient resistance against all hurtful accidents. So combining themselves in a sociable manner, they lived as separatists from all other company, being shut up in such houses, where no sicke body should be neere them. And there, for their more security, they used delicate viands and excellent wines, avoiding luxurie, and refusing speech to one another, not looking forth at the windowes, to heare no cries of dying people, or see any coarses carried to buriall; but hav-

and Lynn S. Joy, “Epicureanism in Renaissance Moral and Natural Philosophy,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 53 (1992): 573–83.

⁹ Robert Bultot, “Érasme, Épicure et le *De contemptu mundi*,” in *Scrinium Erasmianum*, ed. J. Coppens (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1969) 205–38.

¹⁰ Bultot, “Érasme” 212.

¹¹ Francisco Javier Santa Eugenia, “L’Epicureismo di Pampinea,” *Bibliothèque d’Humanisme et Renaissance* 62.3 (2000): 641–46. For this literary critic, Boccaccio was inspired by the Ciceronian Epicureanism of *Il sommo bene e il sommo male* (*De finibus bonorum et malorum*).

ing musical instruments, lived there in all possible pleasure.¹²

Santa Eugénias's critical analysis reveals that the proto-hedonist plan of some Florentines to combat the plague by forming distinct brigades within the city and practising a sober lifestyle coincided perfectly with Pampinea's plan to flee Florence with her joyful brigade, which, by virtue of its quest for survival, respected Nature's principle of self-protection.

Valla, Ficino, Bembo, Erasmus and Second

The early Italian Renaissance brought great enthusiasm for *dignitas hominis*, a concept derived from classical thought. Although the concept did not vanish during the Middle Ages, it was not until the Renaissance that it truly came into its own, thanks to writers such as Petrarch, Salutati, Valla, Manetti, and, especially, Picco della Mirandola, whose *Oratio de hominis dignitate* (1486) is its best-known crystallization.¹³ This would have clear consequences for earthly happiness' place in the framework of the two felicities and its various expressions as something other than the purely intellectual construct of the classical philosophers and thirteenth-century theologies.

But the question of the body, that object of variable scorn in all the hierarchies, remained. It would be up to other philosophies, and even medicine and dietetics, to take up the body's cause, for example in the delicate manner of the twelfth-century troubadours or the less oblique manner of thirteenth-century naturalists. Further support came from Ficino's Neoplatonism, with its openness to the intellectual senses of vision and hearing, and, of course, from earlier defenses of the senses by Raimondi and Valla. For, notwithstanding the all-out attacks of Stoicism and Epicureanism by the Christian in *De Voluptate*, it was Epicureanism with its notion of pleasure that emerged victorious in the end. By introducing the sensualistic idea that the world was created in all its glory for Man by God, Christian Epicureanism revalorized all the senses,

¹² Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, anon. trans. in 1620 with an introd. by E. Hutton (New York: AMS Press, 1967) 20.

¹³ Charles Trinkaus, "The Renaissance Idea of the Dignity of Man," in *Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, ed. Philip P. Wiener (New York: Scribner) 4:136–47.

rather than only the noble senses of vision and hearing, as the following passage from *De Voluptate* illustrates:

“But,” you ask “what is all this magnificence to me?” These things were created only so that in contemplating these sublime works, made for your good, you would come to know yourself, exalt your thoughts, and not regard the great dignity of your birth and origin as insignificant. Yet do not choose as rewards those contemptible earthly goods, such as riches, possessions, honors, and pleasures of the body, which I have just described; instead, promise yourself others as much greater and better—infinately better—than those great ones, as these are greater than the earthly ones. But if our mind, imprisoned in the body, is not capable of understanding what is subject to our vision, how much less can we appreciate what does not fall within the province of vision or any other sense?¹⁴

For Marsilio Ficino, who attempted to unite the philosophical truths of Platonism and Christianity in order to plumb the depths of divine knowledge, Neoplatonism, therefore, far from distancing man from God, was the route to salvation. The value of the study of Man as a means of attaining sovereign good flows naturally from this observation. Analysis of Marsilio Ficino’s *Commentary on Plato’s Symposium on Love* (late fifteenth century) reveals the Neoplatonic images of physical beauty whose contemplation contributes to the ascent of the soul to the Beautiful and Good. Several Platonic images, such as the ladder of Diotimus, the androgyne,

¹⁴ Lorenzo Valla, *On Pleasure (De Voluptate)*, trans. A. Kent Hieatt and Maristella de Panizza Lorch, introd. Lorch (New York: Abaris Books, 1977) 285. See also the Latin original: *Sed quo mihi, inquires, istec magnificentia? Nimirum ut contemplandis his rebus prestantissimis eis que tuo bono conditis te agnoscas, mentem in sublime erigas, ne tantam nature tue dignitatem ad humilia deicias. Nec tamen despicientia terrenorum bonorum qualia sunt divitiae, opes, honores, voluptates corporis, ea que nunc dixi pro premio statuas; sed quedam alia tibi proponas tanto maiora ac meliora his que dico magnis quanto hec ipsa maiora terrenis atque adeo infinito magis. Quare si mens nostra inclusa membris non est capax ipsorum que oculis subiiciuntur, quanto minus eorum que sub oculos aut alium sensum non cadunt? (284).*

and, the image, specific to Ficino, of double death and double resurrection, would enjoy rich literary careers. These ideas would be the object of discussion in the literature on sociability, such as *The Book of the Courtier*, while Bembo's *Gli Asolani* would return, in the form of a pleasant conversation, to the theme of ascent towards spiritualized love, albeit with some attention to its material aspects.¹⁵

In his *De Honesta Voluptate et Valetudine*, written, according to Mary Ella Milham, in the wake of efforts to reconcile *voluptas* and *honestas*, Battista Platina revalorizes the sense of taste by linking health to the physical pleasure of eating, although in a resolutely lay spirit more inspired by the correspondence of Filelfo than by Valla's *De Voluptate*.¹⁶ This work, written in 1465 (but whose first dated manuscript dates from 1470), is more than a simple recipe book, and constitutes a true dietary handbook which succeeds in raising the question of eating and drinking to philosophical heights. This treatise is based on a wide variety of sources, themselves inspired by ideas on moderation from Aristotle, Epicurus, Seneca, and Cicero, by passages on botany from Pliny and many

¹⁵ The English poets would, over time, appropriate this Italian Neoplatonic vocabulary marked by spiritualized eroticism, and transform its original ends into a constant exchange between vulgar and celestial love. Donald Beecher has examined the reception of several Neoplatonic treatises on love from the Italian Renaissance by four London Renaissance poets in "From Neoplatonic trattati d'amore to Seventeenth-Century English Poets on the Earthly Paradise of Spiritualized Bodies," in *Portraits du bonheur au Moyen Age et à la Renaissance: Douze modèles de félicité céleste et terrestre*, special issue *Memini, Travaux et documents*, ed. Brenda Dunn-Lardeau, 6 (2002): 202–23. The works studied were John Donne's "The Extasie," Edward Lord Herbert of Cherbury's "An Ode upon a Question Moved whether Love Should Continue for Ever," Sir Thomas Overbury's "A Wife," in which the Neoplatonic vocabulary results in an elevation of the discourse surrounding the erotic body, and Thomas Carew's "A Rapture," in which these terms are reduced to spicing up lowly Epicurean affairs. Thus, the Beautiful and the Good, objects of pure spiritual pleasure during the initial ascent, are transformed into prerequisites for the love discourse necessary for the attainment of the paradise of erotic earthly felicity. Despite this subversive counter-movement from the ethereal heights towards more earthly felicities, the love lexicon retains the halo of its initial elevation and infuses the erotic love-making elicited by vulgar Venus with some dignity.

¹⁶ Mary Ella Milham, *Platina On Right Pleasure and Good Health: A Critical Edition and Translation of De Honesta Voluptate et Valetudine* (Tempe, AZ: Medieval & Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1998) 511.

others, as well as by the recipes of Martino de Como, a famous Italian chef and a contemporary of Platina. These teachings, in common with the underlying erudition, are remarkable for their reliance on Galen's medical theory of humours and on the *regimen sanitatis* of the Arab tradition. Given this wide range of sources, it is hardly surprising that the book's recipes are complemented by advice on subjects ranging from the choice of physical exercises to ensure good digestion to the way to set a table and decorate it with seasonal flowers, to the best time of the year for sexual pursuits. According to Platina, adherence to this regimen of health and pleasure which integrates both moderation and elegance, together with obedience to Nature rather than one's own opinions, should allow every person to dispense with physicians, avoid vice, and, in short, live happily and healthily.¹⁷

The Sense of Touch and the Case of the Kiss

The sense of touch remained problematic, however, and an examination of the many meanings imbued in the kiss during this period is worthy of study because of the light it sheds on what was at stake in this act. Indeed, recent research has demonstrated that neither the Middle Ages nor the Renaissance was indifferent to the kiss. Yannick Carré has analyzed the manifestations of the medieval kiss in physical, emotional, and intellectual contexts (the kissing of lepers, medieval eroticism, social and familial greeting rituals, ritual kisses in contracts, and feudal acts of homage) as well as spiritual ones (the kiss in coronation ceremonies, dubbing, and of course the kiss of peace in the Mass and the mystical sense adduced for the kiss by Bernard of Clairvaux in his interpretation of the Song of Songs).¹⁸ This act reached its apogee in the twelfth century, when it came to symbolize the coincidence between earthly and celestial cities. Carré also provides a precise chronology, from the thirteenth to the sixteenth century, of the gradual disappear-

¹⁷ Several years later, Platina, along with other intellectuals of the Academy of Rome, was accused of Epicureanism (in the popular sense of moral paganism rather than the true classical sense). However, it can reasonably be assumed that his imprisonment was more attributable to the accusation of having participated in the 1468 conspiracy of Rome to assassinate Pope Paul II than to the authorship of a dietetic handbook.

¹⁸ Yannick Carré, *Le baiser sur la bouche au Moyen Âge: rites, symboles, mentalités, à travers les textes et les images XI^e-XV^e siècles* (Paris: Le Léopard d'or, 1992) 437.

ance of the kiss on the mouth from social and liturgical collective life (for example, the extinction of the ritual kiss in the sixteenth century in homages and greetings, as well as the displacement of the clerical kiss of peace on the mouth to the embrace of left cheeks in the *Roman Missal* promulgated in 1570). In addition, the widespread dissemination of the famed Song of Songs in the sixteenth century has been described by Max Engammare.¹⁹

Nevertheless, the honour for instilling the kiss with a religious-tinged dignity goes to Pietro Bembo, who, in his flamboyant envoy to Castiglione's *The Book of the Courtier* (1528), concedes it to men of ripe age engaged in the Neoplatonic ascent described by Ficino. Because the blood of these men is cooler than that of younger men, they are able to bring this act to a spiritual, rather than physical, level by engaging in rational, i.e., not sensual, love. This thus neither denies nor disdains the body, but makes it an instrument of divine love to be transcended. This requires spiritualized sensuality perfectly mastered by reason and, above all, inspiration by the kiss-mediated exchange of souls which blends the teachings of Plato, Ficino, and Solomon's Song of Songs:

Hence, a kiss may be said to be a joining of souls rather than of bodies, because it has such power over the soul that it withdraws it to itself and separates it from the body. For this reason all chaste lovers desire the kiss as a union of souls; and thus the divinely enamored Plato says that, in kissing, the soul came to his lips in order to escape from his body. And since the separation of soul from sensible things and its complete union with intelligible things can be signified by the kiss, Solomon, in his divine book of the Song, says: 'Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth' to signify the wish that his soul be transported through divine love to the contemplation of heavenly beauty in such manner that in uniting itself closely therewith, it might forsake the body.²⁰

¹⁹ "Qu'il me baise des baisers de sa bouche": *Le Cantique des cantiques à la Renaissance: étude et bibliographie* (Genève: Droz, 1993).

²⁰ Baldesar Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, trans. Charles S. Singleton (New

While the kiss, especially one between unmarried individuals, elicited so much commentary, it should be recalled that married couples were not forgotten, thanks to the revalorization of the sacrament of marriage by comparison with religious life, the corruptions of which were the object of unceasing criticism. Furthermore, even if Erasmus was not the only one to exalt marriage, he was able to do so without false modesty.²¹ For example, in the colloquium “The Mariage” (1523) he frankly discusses the sexual embrace and the sexual pleasure of couples as a question of equilibrium between the individual and the couple. Furthermore, Erasmus was one of the Christian humanists to see voluptuousness and tenderness between spouses as a blessing of Nature (while, nevertheless, preaching in the same colloquium the need for wives to submit to their husbands in matters other than conjugal intimacy):

Above all, in my judgment, you must be careful not to start an argument in the bedroom or in bed, but try to see that everything there is pleasant and agreeable. If that place, which is dedicated to dispelling grudges and renewing love, is profaned by any contention or bitterness, every means of recovering good will is clean gone. Some women are so peevish that they even quarrel and complain during sexual intercourse and by their tactlessness render disagreeable that pleasure which ordinarily rids men’s minds of whatever vexation may be therein – spoiling the very medicine that could have cured their ills.²²

York: Doubleday, 1959) 350. The contribution of Francesco Patrizi, whose rehabilitation of the kiss went even farther than Bembo’s, should be noted. In fact, his moral reflection on the kiss conserves the tripartite hierarchy of divine, human and bestial love, as with Ficino, but reintegrates all the senses, rather than merely the two intellectual ones of vision and hearing, into human love; see Francesco Patrizi, *Du baiser*, trans. Sylvie Laurens Aubry, introd. Pierre Laurens, preface Charles Melman (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2002) 92.

²¹ Émile Telle, *L’œuvre de M. d’Angoulême, reine de Navarre et la querelle des femmes* (Genève: Slatkine Reprints, 1969 [1937]) 315–43.

²² Erasmus, *The Colloquies of Erasmus*, trans. Craig R. Thompson (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1965) 123–24.

On the other hand, for a poet like Jean Second, the solution was to break with these models, all more or less Christianized and all excessively restrictive, and to exalt, as he did in *Basia* (1539), carnal desire and place it under the aegis of classical free love. By affirming his enjoyment on this earth of the beatitude of the classical gods, Second measures the degree of fulfilment of sensual and emotional ecstasy and hints at the abiding importance of ennobling the eroticism of bodily human pleasure, even though he considers celestial Christian bliss absolutely irrelevant to the eroticism of the 'Italian kiss.'²³

Jean Second's seductive neo-Latin poetry is at a huge remove from Bembo's exalted speech at the end of *The Book of the Courtier* on physical beauty as the first step on the ladder of perfection to the vertiginous Neoplatonic ecstasy procured by beatific vision of God. Second's poetry, vibrant with desire, celebrates the sensuality of the wholly earthly embrace and dispenses with Platonic and Petrarchian poetics. It does not strive for *post-mortem* bliss, since he considers the Neoplatonic metaphysical union of beings through the kiss sufficient, and humans superior to gods. A poetics of the pleasure of the five senses, salacious gestures, repeated praise of the Italian kiss and of the moist embrace, flight from the constraints of marriage and literary convention—the voluptuousness of free love is sung in both the hedonistic tradition of seizing the present to resist *tempus fugit* and the elegiac manner, even if the poet maintains his distance from classical models.²⁴

Conclusion

The authors discussed here, be they materialists, naturalists or Christian humanists, are all part of this Renaissance movement which revaluated traditional hierarchies that had heretofore given pride of place to contemplative and religious life rather than active and secular life. As a consequence of this reappraisal, greater importance was given to human happiness and the five senses were

²³ 'Italian kiss' was the term used to refer to an open-mouthed kiss with tongue contact—what is termed a 'French kiss' in English.

²⁴ These aspects have been analyzed by François Rouget, "Érotisme et félicité amoureuse dans l'œuvre poétique de Jean Second," in *Portraits du bonheur au Moyen Age et à la Renaissance: Douze modèles de félicité céleste et terrestre*, special issue *Memini, Travaux et documents*, ed. Brenda Dunn-Lardeau, 6 (2002): 225–39.

revalorized. Their texts illustrate a variety of audacious solutions that the spirit of the day brought to this issue by questioning and attempting to reconcile the traditional soul-body dualism, or at least cope as best one could with the medieval legacy in order for individuals and couples to achieve harmony and happiness.

In the search for recognition of the active secular life and for a more personal and guilt-free happiness, there remained, with some exceptions, a desire to follow high ideals of virtue. Thus, in this sample, there is a tendency to see the body as a rung on the way to, rather than an obstacle to, spiritual transcendency. The attempt to reconcile natural and religious laws was almost universal, and reflects well-established philosophical (regardless of whether it be the philosophy of Plato or Aristotle) and theological reflexes to satisfy more than simply fleshly pleasures. In general, the most reliable means of revalorizing the senses, especially those associated with Man's carnal nature, consisted of spiritualizing them and bringing them closer to their Creator. In this way, one by one, the senses won legitimacy. There remain the notable exceptions of Jean Second, enthralled by these bodily felicities, and Platina, inspired by lay philosophy and medical theory of humours rather than religion.

It is tempting to conclude by stating that these texts all reveal, to varying degrees, the liberating effect of the philosophical idea of *dignitas hominis*. Over time, this theme would make clear contributions to the efforts at reconciling the omnipresent discourse on Christian *post-mortem* bliss, with its sub-text of *miseria hominis*, on the one hand, and the exaltation of death, on the other, and would influence philosophical conceptions of existence in the literary world.

However, parallel to this stimulating effervescence of ideas on the capacities and possibilities of Man, is it not also true that it is as if each, in his own way, had discovered for himself what is described in the brief passage of the *Nicomachean Ethics* in which Aristotle apprehends the pleasure of pure being, unique to humans, and speaks—in a manner notable for its avoidance of the typical classical tendency of measuring happiness in the light of the beatitude of the gods—of the sensation of existing, pleasant in itself. Further, without worrying about inventorying the virtues necessary for the attainment of this “supreme happiness” that comes of itself, he claims:

But if life itself is good and pleasant (as it appears to be, because all men desire it, and virtuous and supremely happy men most of all, since their way of life is most desirable and their existence the most blissful); and if one who sees is conscious that he sees, one who hears that he hears, one who walks that he walks, and similarly for all the other human activities there is a faculty that is conscious of their exercise, so that whenever we perceive, we are conscious that we perceive, and whenever we think, we are conscious that we think, and to be conscious that we are perceiving or thinking is to be conscious that we exist (for existence, as we saw, is sense-perception or thought); and if to be conscious one is alive is a pleasant thing in itself (for life is a thing essentially good, and to be conscious that one possesses a good thing is pleasant); and if life is desirable, and especially so for good men, because existence is good for them, and so pleasant (because they are pleased by the perception of what is intrinsically good); and if the virtuous man feels toward his friend in the same way as he feels towards himself (for his friend is a second self)—then, just as a man's own existence is desirable for him, so, or nearly so, is his friend's existence also desirable. But, as we saw, it is the consciousness of oneself as good that makes existence desirable, and such consciousness is pleasant in itself.²⁵

This observation lies at the very root of the pleasure in life celebrated by the Renaissance with such enthusiasm, regardless of whether it stems directly or not from Aristotle. This *sui generis* pleasure of being, which in essence is self-sufficient, is inflected by temperament and the *varietas* of religious, erotic and intellectual experience of every individual conscious of his *humanitas* and seeing his way between *honestas* and *voluptas*.

²⁵ Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1956) 9.9.9. 565.