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Past Scents: Historical Perspectives on Smell

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Author: Jonathan Reinartz

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Reviewer: William Tullett

Introducing a 1996 translation of Alain Corbin's now seminal work on the history of scent, *The Foul and the Fragrant*, Roy Porter lamented that 'today's history comes deodorized'.⁽¹⁾ As Jonathan Reinartz shows in this historical synthesis of recent work on the history of smell, Porter's complaint has since been enthusiastically answered. In the past few years a whole series of conferences have focused on the history of the senses, including smell, and their relationship with themes such as religion, decadence and the domestic in a variety of historical periods.⁽²⁾ *Past Scents*, arranged across an introduction, six themed chapters and a conclusion with thoughts for further research, serves to tie together some of the emerging themes in the published scholarship on this field.

In the introduction Reinartz sets out some of the reasons for the rising attention to smell in recent scholarship, especially following Corbin's work. In particular he brings attention to one of the central draws of smell for historians in allowing the consideration not just of the historical body but also the way it intersects with 'its cultural and social locations, experiences, roles and functions'. That it does so in new ways that encourage fresh insights into older debates is another important and oft-expressed strength of sensory history (pp. 3–4). Before proceeding to outline the contours of the study Reinartz briefly discusses the historical devaluation of smell and, at greater extent, changing medical and philosophical attitudes to the act of smelling. This section is exemplary of the rest of the book, a useful synthesis of scholarship on 'ways of smelling' from the Hippocratics to modern neuroscience. Here it might have been useful to more explicitly engage with the ongoing, somewhat paradoxical, tension between the ostensible devaluation of smell in intellectual and aesthetic thought and the continued use of smell in a variety of intellectual and social contexts. Indeed Reinartz's book succeeds in showing that such narratives of devaluation are, if not misplaced, at the very least an irrelevance to the continued use of smell in a variety of social situations.

The six chapters that form the main body of the work cover religion and smell, the perfume trades, race and smell, gender and smell, class and smell, and smell in the city respectively. The first chapter addresses religion and smell, primarily through the lens of Susan Harvey's work on scent in early Christianity. Reinartz first discusses sacrificial odours, incense and the odour of sanctity. He makes a useful distinction

by separating his discussion of incense as an offering and incense as the presence of the divine. He then follows this by treating fouler odours including the stench of hell and the use of foul odour in iconoclastic protest. The final section then examines religious critiques of perfume as a form of luxury. Reinartz brings the chapter together in a conclusion that emphasizes how odour ‘marked the chosen from the damned but not always in a straightforward manner’ (p. 50). Sometimes the stink of wounds could be more holy than the sweetest perfumes.

The perfume trade is the subject of the second chapter, rather than the usage of the scents themselves. Reinartz covers the changing techniques and material products of perfumery from maceration, *enfleurage* and distillation to modern synthetic chemistry and from powders and pomatums to atomisers and sprays. The chapter traces the early uses of perfume by the Egyptians and ancients through the incense trade in myrrh, frankincense and camphor to the intersection of perfumers and apothecaries in medieval and early modern cities. The last chronological section addresses the growth of a global perfume industry in the 20th century and the rise of large houses such as Chanel and Guerlain. The discussion of packaging and bottles is a welcome addition, connecting scent to its material culture, and Reinartz has done a great deal of work to integrate material from the large quantity of published biographies of famous 19th- and 20th-century perfumers. One correction is needed. Reinartz refers to a ‘history’ compiled by Charles Lillie in 1822. The book in question, entitled *The British Perfumer*, is in fact a collection of recipes and descriptions of perfume materials that were put together from manuscripts left by Lillie after his death in the 1740s. Reinartz concludes the chapter with interesting suggestions about the way in which contemporary interest in aromatherapy might signal a willingness to ‘reodorize’ our lives (p. 82). The chapters concluding arguments are perceptive, including the idea that the exotic became domesticated through the proliferation of consumable scents (p. 84).

The third chapter, ‘Odorous others’, focusses on race and smell. Again Reinartz raises the suggestion that scent ‘began to play a less important role in modern European society’ and that it was this development that led to the devaluing of the odours and olfactory sagacity of racial others (p. 85). As was pointed out earlier in this review this is a problematic set of narratives to entwine since the ability to smell the other depended on the use of a European nose. Nonetheless Reinartz moves on to make important points about the propensity for travellers to see their own social groups as inodorate (p. 88) and the fact that other groups also described the odours of ‘westerners’ as offensive (p. 91). By discussing food and its relationship to racial odours, primarily in the context of Antisemitism, Reinartz usefully emphasizes the cultural and environmental factors that played important roles in the conceptualization of racial odours (pp. 91–9). The chapter then proceeds to discuss Connie Chiang’s work on the Chinese fishing industry in the early 20th-century United States and Mark Smith’s work on race and the senses in nineteenth-century America (pp. 103–6). Chiang’s work shows how the odours of the trades the Chinese engaged in, the scent of drying fish, became associated with their racial identity, whilst Smith shows how smell could sometimes trump sight in marking the identity of the ‘black’ man. In the 1896 case of Homer Plessy, for example, a ‘visually white man’ was held to ‘smell’ black and hence consigned to a separate carriage (p. 105).

The penultimate section of the chapter, on ‘alternative cultures of smell’, addresses some of the anthropological work on smell in cultures beyond the west. Such interdisciplinarity has certainly been the hallmark of recent olfactory-minded scholarship but it might have been useful to relate some of these findings to specifically historical problems since, as it is, this section elides the distinction between temporal and geographical difference in a problematic way (pp. 107–10). In the concluding remarks Reinartz notes that ‘in the irrational world of racist politics, foreigners would always stink and possess the potential to contaminate’ (p. 111). This may be the overwhelming impression given by his chapter but it might have been useful to consider those, potentially exotic, foreigners and races that were considered to be associated with more aromatic scents. The Indians of the New World, for example, were at first noted for their cleanliness and sweet smelling bodies and it was not until later in the 18th century that they became associated primarily with stench.[\(3\)](#)

It was good to see, in the fourth chapter, an extended discussion of gender and its relation to olfaction, a

topic strangely neglected by much research thus far. Reinartz points out how gender has altered the historiography of perfume itself, with an artificial and ill-thought out distinction made in earlier histories between female perfume wearers and the male technical minds that created modern synthetic perfumery (p. 113). Indeed the idea that women have frequently been subject to a 'male nose' just as much as they have a 'male gaze' is a useful one that might be further pursued (p. 114). The following discussion of witches and prostitutes develops interesting linkages between the leaky odours of the female body and the stench of the sanitary body politic (pp. 117–23). Whilst much of the historiography, particularly the work of Constance Classen, has focussed on the scents of more or less desirable women from the saint to the prostitute, more might have been made of the relationship between masculinity and scent that gets much shorter treatment. The association of perfume with effeminacy at various historical junctures did not necessarily mean that it was seen as a 'homosexual scent' in all of these cases since the association between effeminacy and homosexuality is a complex and oft debated one (133–5, 141–2). Given such issues Reinartz's call for more research on the way women sensed and smelled men is an important one. Women were not silent on odours. Eighteenth-century women, for example, complained about the stink of tobacco on the clothes of their husbands. To restore such viewpoints to a historiography dominated by male noses would be a rewarding endeavor (p. 143).

Reinartz is at his best when he brings his own research to bear on the perspectives he examines. Chapter five, on class and scent, uses examinations of French royal perfumers, changing hygiene practices, and Janice Carlisle's work on smell in Victorian novels to demonstrate how 'a single sniff' was often 'more accurate than a fleeting glance' in confirming social status and identity (p. 167). Yet the most original perspective, and one which will hopefully receive more interest from researchers, is Reinartz's work on the use of smell by a variety of labourers including tea inspectors and maltsters. The latter used their noses to distinguish bad malt, smelling of rotten apples, from the 'unusually subtle scent' of good malt, which was said to smell like cucumber (pp. 171–2). This perspective ensures that Reinartz's summation of work on class and scent goes beyond the noses of middle-class sanitarians and points to ways we might excavate the olfactory worldviews of the lower classes themselves.

The following and final themed chapter, on the city and the senses, is concerned at heart with the history of public health and sanitation. This reflects a historiography that is only now beginning to move beyond the fecal and the fatal in examining urban odours.⁽⁴⁾ Reinartz opens the chapter with Corbin's work on the 18th-century Parisian public health worker Jean-Noël Hallé. A correction is due here since, as Mark Jenner has pointed out, contrary to both Corbin and Reinartz's assertions, Hallé's work *did* contain references to stimuli beyond the domain of smell and he invoked multisensory descriptions of the foul banks of the Seine including the varying colour and feel of its mud (p. 177).⁽⁵⁾ Reinartz goes on to chart the new 'hypersensitivity to odours' and decline in olfactory tolerance that, the historiography of sanitation argues, accompanied 'the rise of the modern state and subsequent sanitary campaigns' (pp. 178–9). The rest of the chapter explores sanitary campaigns from an alternative angle, taking in their role in demarcating and disparaging immigrant communities in European cities and the subjects of colonial rule in the new world (pp. 196–203).

Whilst a focus on sanitation predominates, Reinartz should be applauded for pointing to the comparisons between urban and rural odours often made in various historical cultures, an important point given the exclusively urban focus of many studies of smell (p. 180). What might have been better explored is precisely what separates 'modern' fears of odour in sanitary discourse from earlier attempts to clean and beautify cities. Nowhere is this more apparent than when a quotation from 19th-century sanitarian Edwin Chadwick is followed with one from the mischievous psychoanalyst Dominique Laporte, whose *History of Shit* located the beginning of the developments it described not in the age of 'Victorian refinement' and the 'sanitary gaze' but much earlier in the 16th-century (pp. 188–9).⁽⁶⁾ A page later we skip from Chadwick to Renaissance Italy and back again. Reinartz has done well to include references to sanitary odours beyond the 19th century, often showing his ability to find references to scents in texts beyond the canonical works on the history of smell. Yet given the importance of sanitation for historical arguments about the changing perception of smell, more might have been done here to try and explain what differentiated, or indeed did not differentiate, such early modern fears of stench and their later role in

sanitary discourse and the marking of 'bourgeois' identity.

The conclusion, appropriately titled 'Beyond the foul and the fragrant' (pp. 209–218), rightly attends to the formative influence Alain Corbin's study has had on the questions we ask when we examine past scents. Reinartz details a useful selection of gaps, temporal and geographical, in our knowledge of historical osmologies (p. 217). In particular his emphasis on moving beyond the foulest and sweetest fragrances to more subtle odours is an interesting suggestion (p. 210). Despite recent calls for more multisensory histories of the senses, *Past Scents* demonstrates the important work done by numerous scholars who have examined attitudes to smells and smelling in specific temporal and geographical contexts and points to the continuing need for such localised studies. This said, a more in depth consideration might have been given to the narratives of change historians deploy in thinking about smell and how work since Corbin has altered these. Perhaps the 'patchiness of the literature', which Reinartz admits in the introduction to the volume, militates against re-assessing and altering such narratives and leads instead to the 'perspectives' approach implied by the title of the text (p. 3). However if, as Mark Jenner has recently argued, 'every deodorizing is another olfactory encoding', then where does this leave Reinartz's acceptance of narratives that detail a modern 'deodorization project' (p. 23)?⁽⁷⁾ The synthetic nature of this book would have given a useful space to think through such issues.

The book may be aimed at a more general market and Reinartz admits not being able to develop all of the 'disparate theoretical perspectives' he synthesizes (p. 2). Yet it would have been helpful, both in the introduction and throughout the rest of the book, to engage more explicitly with the theoretical and critical tools and assumptions used by historians of smell. Recent work on smell has engaged with a diverse theoretical literature on corporeality, material culture and language, including authors such as Pierre Bourdieu, Michel de Certeau and Judith Butler. The volume could have benefitted from a discussion of this more theoretically informed literature and as a synthesis would have been an opportune moment to consider such interventions.

The recent increase in research devoted to the sensory, and specifically olfactory, elements of past societies is both helpful and a problem in Reinartz's book. Significant work has been undertaken on the odours of the past since Porter's remarks, including Susan Harvey's work on incense in early Christianity, Holly Dugan's history of perfume in early modern England, and James McHugh's excellent book on smell in Indian religious culture. All of these are the focus of detailed and useful discussion by Reinartz. The history of smell has been firmly interdisciplinary in its methods and *Past Scents* will be a useful introduction both to historians who have yet to open their noses to historical osmologies and to those in other disciplines with olfactory-minded research agendas who are seeking to historicize their findings. With this in mind and given the book's claim to synthesize existing scholarship in the field, a bibliography would have been a useful and expected complement to the endnotes provided.

The field is expanding quickly, perhaps to the extent that a synthesis of this nature will be overtaken with greater speed than in more established areas of research. Since Reinartz's book went to press Nicky Hallett has published her in-depth study of religion and the senses in a Carmelite convent whilst the next year will see the publication of studies on smell in ancient history and a large five-volume history of the senses from Berg.⁽⁸⁾ However the reader is aware that such criticisms might be applied to many good works of synthesis. *Past Scents* neatly summarizes many current historical perspectives on smell. More importantly it points to a number of other contemporary perspectives we might take as historians and past sensory perspectives, of women and the lower classes to take two examples, that we might better excavate from the archive. Reinartz shows forcefully the need for more studies of smells and smelling in different periods, both within and beyond Europe, and points the way for further work on the scents of the past.

Notes

1. Alain Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant: Odour and the French Social Imagination*, (London, 1996), p. v.[Back to \(1\)](#)

2. For a useful list of recent conferences see <<http://www.sensorystudies.org/events-of-note/> [2]> [accessed 27 May 2014].[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Kathleen Brown, *Foul Bodies: Cleanliness in Early America*, (New Haven, CT, 2011), pp. 156–7.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. For an approach looking at other odours in urban space see William. Tullett, ‘The macaroni’s “Ambrosial Essences”: perfume, identity and public space in eighteenth-century England’, *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, (2014, early view online <<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1754-0208.12177/abstract> [3]> [accessed 27 May 2014]).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Mark Jenner, ‘Follow your nose? Smell, smelling, and their histories’, *The American Historical Review*, 116 (2011), 350.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Dominique Laporte, *The History of Shit*, trans. Nadia Benabid and Rodolphe el-Khoury, (London, 2000), pp. 65–6.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Mark Jenner, ‘Civilization and deodorization? Smell in Early Modern English culture,’ in *Civil Histories: Essays Presented to Sir Keith Thomas*, ed. Peter Burke, Brian Harrison and Paul Slack (Oxford, 2001), p. 144.[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. Nicky Hallett, *The Senses in Religious Communities, 1600–1800: Early Modern ‘Convents of Pleasure’* (Farnham, 2013); *Smell and the Ancient Senses*, ed. Mark Bradley (Durham, forthcoming 2014), *A Cultural History of the Senses*, ed. Constance Classen (6 vols., London, forthcoming 2014).[Back to \(8\)](#)

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