
Perfumes and perfume-making in the *Celestina*

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Celestina's house, as Dorothy Sherman Severin notes, is at the same time 'a bawdy house, a factory for perfumes and cosmetics, and a symbol of the misrule of a woman empowered by her illegal professions of sorceress, witch and bawd' (Severin 1995: 45). In these pages I will endeavour to set Celestina's skills in the context of making perfume and uses of it in the early 16th century.¹

Celestina's possessions: her perfume-making equipment

Material culture together with all the portable objects which belong to it 'is dictated by people's economic and social power, and their need to give physical expression to their status and aspirations' (Hinton 2005: 260). Fernando de Rojas's description of Celestina's workshop lists an array of items used in her craft, including both ingredients and the vessels employed to mix them. Severin indicates that the 'paraphernalia was influenced by the set-piece of the witch' in Mena's *Laberinto de Fortuna* (Severin 1995: 9). Celestina's laboratory possesses a formidable battery of items of different types and of different values: 'tenía una cámara llena de alambiques, de redomillas, de barrilejos de barro, de vidrio, de arambre, de estaño, hechos de mil facciones' (Rojas 2000: 111).

Alambiques are documented in all contemporary perfume-making handbooks and, according to Sebastián de Covarrubias Orozco, are vessels used for distillation. He describes them as a 'cierto género de vaso torcido en muchas vueltas e injeridos en él otros vasos menores, adonde de uno en otro se va evaporando o destilando lo que se saca por el alambique con la fuerza del fuego, templado al modo que conviene' (2006: 75).

Redomas are wide-mouthed flasks, which can be used by pharmacists, according to Covarrubias (2006: 1398). Celestina possesses glass vessels and Covarrubias

1 All references to the text will be to Dorothy S. Severin's edition (2000). It is with pleasure, and no small degree of trepidation, that I seek to add a mite to *Celestina* studies with an article in homage to her own enviable scholarship.

indicates that both *alambiques* and *redomas* are made of glass, without mentioning the possibility of their being made of another substance. Both, as well as *redomillas*, or vials, are standard household items.² Hinton's classification of the relative cost of each type of vessel shows that glass vessels cost twice as much as pewter ones (2005: 236), while a single pewter pot cost the same as twelve in clay. In the *Manual de Mugeres en el qual se contienen muchas y diversas re eutas muy buenas*, the vessels used are of a higher quality than Celestina's, with gold and silver as well as glass vessels used to store perfumes (Mart nez Crespo, 1995: 26, 44). The *Manual* indicates that civet-based unguent, for example, is best kept in gold or silver receptacles (39).

In addition, Celestina's workshop contains *barrilejos*, according to Covarrubias 'vaso de tierra de gran vientre y cuello angosto, en que ordinariamente tienen los segadores y gente del campo el agua para beber' (2006: 295).³ Clay was the least expensive way of making vessels and one which was to be found in the homes of some of the poorest members of society.

The possession of copper vessels marks Celestina out as having turned a tidy penny from her craft, because tin and copper vessels were more costly than clay ones. Hinton describes how copper alloy vessels found in Wales were personalized with a warning to potential thieves about the perils they would face hereafter if they stole them (2005: 235, fig. 8.1). Hinton notes that spending on copper alloy cauldrons and other vessels and utensils is one 'indication of greater spending on commodities from the end of the 13th century onwards' (234) among the artisan class. In Celestina's case, her various offices were in decline and her possessions may indicate vestiges from a more prosperous life. In any case, they denote a willingness to have invested in the necessary equipment for this aspect of her business.

Celestina's perfumes

P rmeno's knowledgeable description of Celestina's life and activities includes a list of the outcomes of her perfume-making:

Y en su casa haz a perfumes, falsava estoraques, menjuy,  nimes,  mbar, algalia, polvillos, almizcles, mosquetes. [...] Sacaba aguas para oler, de rosas, de azaar, de jasm n, de tr bol, de madreSelvia y clavellinas, mosquetadas y almizcadas polvorizadas con vino. (111)

Rojas's listing of Celestina's household production of scented items, according to Mabbe's translation, include 'storax, benjamin, gumme, animes, amber, civet, powders, musk, and mosqueta' (Rojas 1894), although it must be remembered that some of the perfumes used are counterfeit (I will return to the counterfeiting of perfumes later).

2 See also *Libro*, Biblioteca Nacional (Madrid) MS 6058, fol. 134r: 'Tomen agua rosada en una redoma'.

3 The definition is copied into the *Diccionario de la Real Academia Espa ola* (1992: I, 270).

According to Covarrubias, who follows Dioscorides closely, storax is ‘licor de un árbol que se parece al membrillo’ (2006: 852). According to Dioscorides:

storax is the sap of a tree which resembles the quince tree. The best is yellow, fatty and resinous; it has whitish lumps, its scent lasts for a very long time and when softened, it releases some honey-like moisture. Such are the Gabalitic, Pisidian, and Cilician storaxes, but storax that is black, friable and bran-like is inferior. (I, 66, in Beck 2005: 47)

Storax features in a number of Castilian household hints books, and, whether in counterfeit or real form, was used in a variety of perfumes. The 15th-century *Vergel de señores*, ‘en el qual se muestran a hazer todas las conseruas, electuarios, confituras, turrone y otras cosas de açucar y miel item se muestran a hazer todos los azeites asi de olores como de medicina’ provides a recipe for ‘azeite de estoraque’ (BN Madrid MS 8565, fol. 81r).

Benzoin, benjamin, or benjoin, the English terms for *benjuy*, derive from the Arabic *luban jawi*, by way of the Spanish *benjuy* and the French *bejoim* (Little et al. 1962: 170). According to a 16th-century description:

Benzoin is of a grateful Smell, resembling *Xylo-Aloes*. This *Resin* dissolves in *Spirit of Wine*, into a *Tincture*; and the Flowers of it are good opening *Pectorals* (Floyer 1687: 280–81).

John Floyer, following Dioscorides, indicates that benzoin, a resinous gum, is good when dissolved in spirit of wine; and this is not dissimilar to the scented waters Celestina makes by dissolving ground perfume substances in wine.

In his English translation of *La Celestina*, James Mabbe retains ‘animes’ as the translation of *ánimes*. Covarrubias describes them as ‘una lágrima o resina de cierto árbol muy a propósito para perfumar la cabeza’ (2006: 172).

Celestina also uses amber, musk, and civet. Edmund Launert reminds readers that pomander derives from ‘pomme d’ambre’, a round container devised to hold solid resinous perfume. He comments that it is uncertain when the pomander came to Europe from the Arab world, but he notes that it had been ‘known for a long time’, adding that its first mention in literature is in the mid-13th century (Launert 1987: 17). According to John Floyer, liquid amber ‘is an oily resinous Liquor: It is of an excellent sweet Smell’ (1687: 284).

The uses of perfumes were not just for female adornment, and according to contemporary medicinal guides perfumes had prophylactic properties. Floyer comments: ‘*Styrax-Calamita* is a *Gum-Resin* of a sweet Scent, tasting *Gummy*’ (1687: 281). In the ancient world, as in the 16th century, perfumes used to be tasted. According to Floyer, ‘*Liquid-amber* [...] is given for *Coughs*, and outwardly used for *Palsies*’ (1687: 284). Benzoin, or bisabol, is good for a number of applications, including fumigating clothes, but it is also applicable to a range of ailments:

It is reportedly capable of slimming obese people, if a quantity of 3 *obols* is drunk with water or with vinegar and honey for several days. It is given to splenetics, epileptics, and asthmatics, and when combined with hydromel, it treats dim-sightedness when diluted with wine, and for pyorrh[o]ea and toothache there is nothing better. (Dioscorides I, 24; Beck 2005: 22)

Storax, another of Celestina's perfumes, was particularly useful for female complaints. According to Dioscorides, 'it is suitable both for cervical stoppages and indurations, it draws down the menses when drunk and when applied, and it gently softens the bowel when a small amount is swallowed with turpentine' (2005: 47). Its usefulness in drawing down menses may explain why Celestina counterfeited it (111). Her use of storax, or counterfeit storax, to draw down menses closes the circle of Celestina's activities in a satisfying way. Her work begins with fabrication of perfume, starting with storax, and ends on the remaking of virgins.

Floyer follows Pliny and Dioscorides in categorizing each of the perfumes in respect of medicinal purpose transmitted through smell. Scientific writing, such as Philip Stubbes's *Anatomy of Abuses*, less than one hundred years later than *Celestina*, held that use of scents had a detrimental effect on the brain:

These [...] palpable odors, fumes, vapours, perfumes, balmes and such like, ascending to the braine, do rather denigrate, darken, and obscure the spirit and senses, then either lighten them, or comfort them (Stubbes 1583, repr. 1877–82: I, 78)

According to Stubbes, it is musk and civet which are used to confuse or to dull the senses, exactly what a *hechicera* fabricating love potions would have wished to achieve in her workshop.

Celestina's perfume-making activities thus complement her other interventions to perfect the female body, including her production of cosmetics. These perfecting activities are then taken to extreme lengths by the time Pármeno completes his speech. Contemporary writing about the nature of perfumes show that they were thought to be used to change the nature of the body or the skin, and further that their production was allied to the devil's handiwork, as Alfonso Martínez de Toledo's description of the method for making a handwash demonstrates:

¿E non son peores éstas que diablos, que con las reñonadas de ciervo fazen dellas xabón? Destilan el agua por cáñamo crudo y ceniza de sarmientos, e la reñonada retida al fuego échanla en ello cuando faze muy rezio sol, meneándola nueve días – al día una ora – fasta que se congela. Mezclan en ello almisque o algalia, clavo de girofre, remojadas dos días en agua de hazaar, para untar las manos, que tornen blandas como seda. (1985: 134)

Perfume and the virtuous woman

Despite such views of the dubious nature of perfume-making and the fears expressed by many writers about it, its household use was presented positively by at least some medieval writers. Christine de Pizan enumerates perfuming among the activities of the virtuous housewife: 'She will have very fine linen – delicate, generously embroidered and well made [...]. She will keep it white and sweet-smelling, and neatly folded in a chest' (2003: 130–31). Pizan's source for the virtuous woman is the text in Proverbs where the model housewife rises early, undertakes her daily tasks, and supervises her staff with due care:

She selects wool and flax, she does her work with eager hands [...]. She puts her back into her work and shows how strong her arms can be [...]. She sets her hand to the distaff, her fingers grasp the spindle. [...] She makes her own quilts [...]. She weaves materials and sells them, she supplies the merchants with sashes. [...] She keeps good watch on the conduct of her household. (Proverbs 31.13–27)

Pizan has adapted the household chores enumerated in the Old Testament to include perfuming of linen, which is one of the domestic uses of scented waters in Iberian domestic handbooks dating from the end of the 15th century.⁴

Many 15th-century writers see perfume as evidence of female guile. In their view, women seek to mislead unwary men through the application of various methods of corporal enhancement. Cosmetics, hair dyes, and fine clothing are mentioned by Jane E. Burns (2002: 83). Perfume could be added to her list. Perfume enables women to cover up their natural foul-smelling bodies, making themselves appear sweeter than they really are.

Perfumes were also closely allied to sanctity. Leonardo de Nogarola's liturgy mentioned perfumed flowers or perfumed substances like nard, applying them to the Virgin (Twomey 2006: 339). Enrique Fernández (2006) has argued that *Celestina* is the antithesis of the Virgin, and it is probable that her perfume production, which echoes that of the good housewife, particularly her falsification of perfumes, is to be taken as another aspect of that counter-positioning of the good mother and the bad.

Much ink has been spilt allying *Celestina* with the devil because of her *conjuro* in Act III. Yet, according to Martínez de Toledo, devilish intervention is even apparent in the production of the most common of household commodities, soap. He writes that the mixing of the soap using ingredients like chopped up pieces of deer fat, the distillation of extract of vine shoots, and stirring the potion over a number of days, and the addition of musk and civet, already place women in the devil's camp, especially when the resulting product has the miraculous effect of softening their skin. The very purpose and nature of the production of perfumes, not only *Celestina*'s but those produced by ordinary women, provide further evidence of the *burlas* which were part of *Celestina*'s, and every woman's, world.

Russell includes *Celestina*'s perfume workshop as part of his discussion of her deployment of magic:

En la larguísima descripción de su 'laboratorio', ocupan mucho más lugar lo que fabrica o utiliza para sus oficios de perfumera, maestra de hacer afeites y maestra de hacer virgos que las noticias de sus actividades hechiceras propiamente dichas. (Russell 1978: 256–58).

Russell argues that although Pármemo downplays *Celestina*'s activities as a sorceress in his discussion with Sempronio, alleging she is 'un poco hechicera',

4 See, for example, the *Manual*, which has recipes for 'aguas olorosas' (Martínez Crespo 1995: 64). See also *Libro* (BN MS 6058), fols 128–36. A distinction is made between waters 'para la persona' and 'aguas que se huelan bien' (fols 133v and 134r).

Pármeno is mistaken and that magic is a key theme in the *Celestina*.⁵ He goes on to argue that there is a supreme form of dramatic irony in the words, in that it is Pármeno, the one most sceptical of Celestina's powers at this point in the plot, who is the one most deceived.

Perfumes falsified

From his first words on Celestina's activities, Pármeno makes it clear that she not only makes perfumes but also counterfeits them: 'falsava estoraques' (111). The falsifying of ingredients might suggest Celestina's swindling of clients, who believe that they are getting the more expensive substance in the perfumes they acquire from her. Falsifying storax has a long history and evidence for it is provided by Dioscorides, who indicates that the unwary might be misled by unscrupulous counterfeiter:

Some, after odourising wax or suet, soften it thoroughly with storax when the days are very hot and sunny, squeeze it through a strainer with wide holes in cold water, forming little worms, and sell it, calling it *scolicits*. Those who are inexperienced regard this kind as genuine, paying no attention to its scent. For storax that has not been adulterated has a penetrating smell. (Beck 2005: 47)

However, 16th-century evidence shows that once again all is not as it seems. Floyer's guide to the 'vertues of plants' indicates that counterfeiting of less readily available perfumes was permissible in the 16th century. Floyer includes hints for 'counterfeiting' balm of Gilead, using turpentine (terebinthium) and 'oyl of juniper' (1687: 283). Celestina's counterfeiting may provide another angle to strengthen Pármeno's allegation that, with regard to her workshop 'todo era burla y mentira' (113). On the other hand, Celestina's counterfeiting fits into the accepted norms of production. It is only the use she may have made of her counterfeit products which is suspect.

Conclusion

Burns has argued that 'the courtly lady [...] often emerges through association with imported fabrics as a hybrid creature providing an important contact zone between Eastern and Western cultures' (2002: 15). The imported riches of the perfumery are another crossing point of cultures where eastern substances are combined and recombined and their odours inhaled or ingested for medicinal purposes. Celestina does not merely run a perfume factory, but her craft and its implications for a rival norm of production from within the female household set her at the edge of society, in direct opposition to established, university-trained professionals. She is the marginalized female equivalent of the doctor fabricating perfumes. She can use her perfumes to counter a range of ailments,

5 See also Severin (1995) and Botta (2004), both of which provide bibliographies dating back to the 1920s on the subject.

including female ones. The scents she employs have dangerous effects on the body and can be used, like her needles, to change female states and to counterfeit female bodily perfection.

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