The Success of Sweet Smells

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What did an early modern perfumer’s shop smell like? Despite valiant attempts by those in charge of historical attractions, such as the scratch and sniff techniques of Yorvik Viking center and Hampton Court palace, we can never truly smell the scents of the past. However, Nicolas Bonnart’s engraving of the Habit de Parfumeur gives us a visual representation of the mingled concoction of odors that emanated from early modern perfumers’ shops. Bottles of essences and oils, perfumed lozenges for the breath, pomatums for the hair, fragrant fans, and scented handkerchiefs comprise the perfumer’s costume. A perfume burner rests upon his head and disperses fragrant smoke, with its religious, luxury and medicinal effects, around him. The powerful scents of the perfumer’s trade meant that in early modern England overly odorous men and women were regularly accused of smelling ‘like a perfumer’s shop’. Abel Boyer’s 1702 English Theophrastus described the start of the fashionable fop’s day thus

When his Eyes are set to a languishing Air, his Motions all prepar’d according to Art, his Wig and his Coat abundantly Powder’d, his Handkerchief Perfum’d, and all the rest of his Beauetry rightly adjusted… ‘tis time to launch, and down he comes, scented like a Perfumer’s Shop, and looks like a Vessel with all her Rigging without Balast.

Perfumers and their shops represented important physical and imaginative spaces in early modern England. Yet they have often been ignored in histories of smelling in favour of the stinking streets on which they often lay. Instead a picture is often summoned of a pre-modern world of dirt and disgust, supplying the foul foil to modernity’s clean and pleasant land. Western modernity, the French historian Alain Corbin has argued, is ‘founded on a vast deodorization project’ that found its roots in
the eighteenth-century. The Victorian sanitarian Edwin Chadwick’s famous dictum ‘all smell… is disease’ has come to represent, for many historians, a distinctly modern fear of odors, both good and bad. This distinction between a stench-ridden past and a clean modernity is often further encouraged by programs such as the BBC’s distinctly foul *Filthy Cities*. What such histories often do is to take the upturned nose of the bourgeois sanitarian as indicative of society’s collective attitude to smell.

The streets of early modern England may perhaps have been dirtier, smellier, and noisier than today. The sources used to demonstrate these facts, so often authored by medical writers and government officials who were charged with seeking out stench, naturally foster the conclusion that early modern towns would have stunk to modern noses. However the noses of Londoners in the period from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century were rather differently attuned. Modern neuroscience and neurobiology suggests that frequent exposure to the same smell renders the nose less able to perceive it: constant stench could eventually fall into the olfactory background. In diaries, correspondence, and print culture early modern individuals frequently foreground a whole range of other smells, particular those associated with the proliferating world of luxury and exotic goods. Perfume therefore points to a very different, more pleasant, way of examining odor in the past.

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We, that is to say the twenty-first century Western world, have inherited a view, born from the rise of synthetics and the atomiser in the late nineteenth-century, that perfumery is evanescent and immaterial. By contrast medical understandings and processes of production gave early modern perfumery very different material resonances. In early modern medical literature scents themselves were believed to be invisible but not immaterial. Odors were thought to be tiny parts of the object from which they came. These ‘corpuscles’, ‘atoms’ or, ‘effluvia’ floated through the air and touched the organ of smelling. It was not until the 1690s that the nose was widely accepted as the olfactory organ. Instead this was understood to be the brain, the nose merely being ‘the pathe or walke of odoriferous things’. This medical interpretation of olfactory objects and organs lent smells great power: the act of smelling involved material substances quite literally touching the brain.

The category of early modern perfumery also encompassed a materially diverse
range of compositions including powders, pomanders, pastilles, and pomatums alongside perfumed gloves, scented waters, and wash balls. The mortars, pestles, and stills, and the accompanying practices of grinding, mixing, and distilling used in perfumery were shared with the making of medicine and simple enough for many to practice at home. Whilst by the end of the eighteenth-century the market in readymade perfumery had expanded significantly, printed recipe books still recommended themselves as guides to the weary consumer.

The making of perfumery also involved an engagement with raw natural materials that has been obscured in the modern perfume industry with its chemical compounds and synthetic sprays. Hundreds of different ingredients were used in perfumery across the early modern period, ranging from the obvious, such as roses, to the downright dangerous, such as white lead. A multitude of herbs, flower petals, fruit rinds, animal excretions, aromatic gums, fragrant roots, exotic barks, oils, and essences, were all used in the manufacturing of odoriferous goods and determined the final scent, texture, and colour of the product.

Civet, for example, was an eminently popular ingredient in sixteenth and seventeenth century England. Some seventeenth century English texts described raw civet, collected from the secretions of the civet cat’s perineal glands, as ‘sweet’. Although synthetic civet continues to be used in modern perfumery many now identify its fecal qualities on first sniff. Yet whilst some early modern writers reflected on civet’s sweet odors, others made great play of its brownish colour and pasty texture. In his 1698 London Spy the grub street satirist Ned Ward told the story of a bathhouse owner who, whilst washing a gentleman, found a turd left by the previous visitor (a high class prostitute) amongst the water and herbs. The owner successfully convinced his patron that this was in fact ‘nothing but an italian paste’ and ‘incapable of distinguishing a fair lady’s irreverence, from the excrement of a civet cat’ the gentleman rose ‘out of his Bath extremely pleas’d, and gave him that attended him Half a Crown for his extraordinary Care and Trouble, so march’d away with great Satisfaction’. The look and feel of civet was just as important as smell in appreciating the material qualities of perfumery.

One of the most important uses of civet was in the perfuming of gloves, a process which appears in many seventeenth century household recipe books. Perfumed gloves, in the ‘Spanish style’, became particularly popular in sixteenth century England due to the taste exhibited for them by Elizabeth I. They subsequently became desirable
commodities, dispersing from the court outwards. A later recipe book compiled by one ‘Madam Carrs’ between 1681-2, contains a simple recipe ‘To perfume gloves’:

Take benjamin Civet Musk Ambergrease grind all these exceeding well on a painters stone with the oyle of sweet balsam and a little water, wash your gloves with sponges, putt them on litle sticks to dry…

Printed recipe books give similar insights into the types of perfumery available and how they were composed. As in manuscript recipe books, perfumery recipes might be included alongside other medicinal, cosmetic, or culinary receipts. One hugely popular book which included guidance on producing perfume was *Delights for Ladies* (1602), by the inventor-agriculturalist Sir Hugh Plat. A recipe for pomander asks the reader to:

Take two ounces of Labdanum, of Benjamin and Storax one ounce, muske sixe graines, civet sixe graines, Amber greece sixe graines, of Calamus Aromaticus and Lignum Aloes, of each the weight of a groat, beat all these in a hote mortar, and with an hote pestell till they come to paste, then wet your hand with rose water, & roll vp the paste soddenly.

Pomanders were scented balls of paste that were to be worn, once dry, in spherical metal pomanders or, once pricked with a needle, on necklaces and bracelets. Elaborate sixteenth century pomanders, made from gold and pearl, were hollow spheres in which such balls of perfume might be secured. By the seventeenth century smaller pomanders developed, sometimes in the shapes of skulls or female heads. These had between four and six compartments into which strongly scented materials such as ambergris, cloves, lavender, roses, musk, mace, and marjoram, might be inserted. Pomanders were not just luxury items. They were also used as odorous amulets to defend urbanites against the plague in their perambulations across the city. Leaky pomanders created an aromatic atmosphere around the individual, defending against foul air and disease.

The creating of such atmospheres might also be managed in homes, gaols, and hospitals, through the use of fumigations. This was the earliest role in which perfumers could be found: Henry VII paid a ‘maker of fumycacions’ in 1498 whilst in
Elizabeth I’s bed chamber was fumigated with orris powder burnt in a perfuming pan. By the seventeenth century, as perfumers themselves expanded into the production of a wider range of scented cosmetics, recipes for fumigations could be found in household manuscript collections. A late seventeenth century manuscript recipe for ‘A perfume to burn’ went as follows:

Take 2 ounces of the powder of juniper, benjamine, and storax each 1 ounce, 6 drops of oyle of cloves, 10 grains of musk, beat all these together to a past with a little gum dragon, steeped in rose or orange flower water, and roul them up like big pease and flat them and dry them in a dish in the oven or sun and keep them for use they must be put on a shovel of coals and they will give a pleasing smell.

Fumigations, ranging from the use of perfumes to hot vinegar, were used well into the nineteenth century, despite the increasing trend towards the use of ventilation. Even in the twentieth and twenty-first century practices of ‘airing’ and ‘cleanliness’ continue to smell. As anyone who has experienced the distinct hospital odor of carbolic soap will know, methods of disinfection and ‘deodorisation’ have often left, and continue to leave, their own unmistakable odors.

Yet, whilst some forms of fumigation survived across the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, other changes were afoot in the types of perfumery consumed. Recipes for pomander and perfumed gloves become less common in recipe books by the turn of the eighteenth-century. A second prominent recipe book, Simon Barbe’s *The French Perfumer*, which went through three editions between 1696 and 1700, illustrates this shift. Barbe’s text, deriving from his work as perfumer to Louis XIV, was popular amongst the perfumers of early eighteenth London. Whilst a small number of recipes for pomanders and burnt perfumes make an appearance, more of the text is taken up with powders, waters, and essences.

Charles Lillie, a perfumer on the Strand in the first half of the eighteenth-century, bemoaned the popularity of Barbe’s text and referred to it as ‘silly little book’ whose author was ‘so unfortunately ignorant, as not to know even the names, much less the composition, of the articles he undertook to write about’. Lillie himself, whose products were mentioned in the *Tatler* and *Spectator*, had written a manuscript recipe book intended for publication. The original is now missing but an edited version found its way into print in 1822 long after Lillie’s death in 1746. Whilst containing
only a single recipe for perfumed gloves, from which the formerly popular civet was absent, Lillie’s text contained a panoply of scented powders, pomatum, and waters including the ever popular lavender water and Hungary water.

By the mid eighteenth century perfumed gloves were increasingly advertised for their ability to soften and scent the hands rather than emitting a heavy perfume into the space around the body. These were superseded in part by powders, pomatums and pastes but more particularly by a massive growth in the popularity and availability of scented essences and waters. These usually had French sounding names such eau sans parille, eau de bouquet, and eau de cologne, the last of which was becoming increasingly popular in Britain by the end of the eighteenth-century. Scented waters, and mixtures of perfumed essences and smelling salts such as eau de luce, could be held in smelling bottles to be sniffed at when needed or dropped on to handkerchiefs. Whilst pomanders leaked and created atmosphere, smelling bottles, in cheaper glass or more expensive porcelain varieties, emphasized a more inward looking, contained, engagement with smell.

As liquid perfumery became increasingly popular the definition of perfume found itself loosened from its material moorings. In dictionaries of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries perfume was most often defined by its materiality: per fume in latin literally being to scent by smoking. By the later eighteenth century this definition was increasingly displaced by a simpler, more emotionally inflected one: perfume was simply a scent that was ‘agreeable’ to the sense of smelling. This more affective and inward looking engagement with scent was the sensory equivalent of the emergence of new ideas of selfhood and interiority during the eighteenth-century.

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The new importance of ‘agreeability’ in defining perfume did not, as some historians have suggested, remove perfume from the pharmacy and relegate it to the cosmetics counter. Throughout the early modern period and into the nineteenth century perfume was tightly intermeshed with the concepts and practices of medicine. Whilst the pomanders and fumigations of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries might rectify the atmosphere and prevent the inflow of foul air into the body, the smelling bottles of the eighteenth century contained scented waters, essences and salts to revive and energise the spirits.
The significant overlaps of perfumery with medicine meant that the selling and making of scented materials was itself contested ground. Holly Dugan has described the competition between seventeenth century London College of Physicians, the apothecaries, and the grocer’s guild over the right to sell and use the strongly scented ingredients common to all. Attempts to stamp out abuses and incriminate the opposition resulted in bonfires of ‘faulty’ aromatics outside the doors of their purveyor’s shops. During the sixteenth century perfumers began to emerge within London, first in the east end amongst the immigrants and women excluded from the guilds, and by the seventeenth century in the west amongst the blooming collection of luxury trades. This association of perfumery with the west end would continue into the eighteenth-century. John Gay reflected in his topographical poem *Trivia, or the Art of Walking the Streets of London* (1716):

O bear me to the Paths of fair Pell-mell,
Safe are thy Pavements, grateful is thy Smell!
...
Shops breathe Perfume, thro’ Sashes Ribbons glow,
The mutual Arms of Ladies, and the Beau.

Whilst many more individuals calling themselves ‘perfumers’ had emerged during the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, apothecaries continued to deal in many items of ‘perfumery’. In turn the trade cards of eighteenth-century perfumers listed large numbers of proprietary medicines such as Daffy’s Elixir, Dr. Hooper’s Pills, and Fryar’s Balsam, the ostensibly wondrous effects of which often attracted charges of quackery.

Many items of perfumery, especially the expanding and popular range of scented waters, could also be described as medicines. Under a 1785 act of parliament stamp duties had to be paid on licences to vend medicine and on many of the medicines themselves. A similar act in 1786 extended stamp duties to ‘Sweet Scents, Odors, Perfumes, and Cosmetics’. However the blurred line between perfume and medicine encouraged dirty tricks by informers. In Cambridge in March 1788 one informer was busy buying small quantities of essence of lemon from apothecaries and then informing against them as perfumers without licenses. The enraged populace forced the informer to be escorted to the local tavern (ironically named ‘The Rose’) where he
was held prisoner at the behest of the mob. Only after the riot-act was read was the informer able to escape. The attempts of the state to tax perfumery showed just how blurred the line between luxury and medicine, pleasure and health, continued to be.

Modern perfumery is dominated by key ‘noses’ often associated with brands or long-standing perfumery houses. A few eighteenth-century English traders in perfumery still survive but many of those that do owed their eighteenth-century origins chiefly to trades in other closely related goods including the paraphernalia of hairdressing. Rather than being big global or even national brands early modern perfumers were embedded in local economies defined by their overlapping relationships with other trades. It was only in the later eighteenth-century that we see the emergence of particular perfumers who built a much wider brand name for themselves, often on the back of a particular commodity. Richard Warren, who in the 1770s had shops in Marylebone, Cheapside, Bath, and Tunbridge-Wells was one such individual. Warren’s Milk of Roses, a mixture of almonds, rose water, spirits of wine, oil of lavender, and soap, was highly popular in the last quarter of the eighteenth-century. American shops advertised ‘London Milk of Roses’ whilst perfumers in Edinburgh assured their customers that their own milk of roses was just as good, if not better than, Warren’s much loved composition.

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The popularity of Warren’s brand signaled the rise of rose as a popular scent. This represented something of a back-to-the-future moment for British perfumery. Otto of roses had been popular during the early sixteenth century at the court of Henry VIII. Dispensed from casting bottles to infuse the spaces of the court, it became a key part of Henry’s performance of power. By the eighteenth century otto of roses had been resurrected, but now its meanings shifted from kingly magnificence to the exotic fragrance of the imperial east. Marketed as ‘Indian’ or ‘Persian’, the demand for otto of roses represented the growing influence of British imperial expansion on fashionable luxury goods.

In the intervening period other scents had risen and fallen in popularity. This shift in fashion could be traced through the trade cards and signs of perfumery shops. Perfumers trading under the sign of the ‘City of Seville’, ‘Civet Cat’ or ‘The Young Civet Cat’ had, by the end of the eighteenth-century, been joined by newer ventures
trading at the sign of ‘The Rose’, ‘Three Arquebusade Bottles’ (a medicinal water and perfume), or, drawing on more general associations of perfumery with luxury, ‘The Golden Fleece’. A geographic shift also occurred in perfumery fashions. Tastes shifted from Spanish gloves, to Italian essences, through French waters, to the ‘British’ perfumery, with its oriental roses, advertised in eighteenth-century trade cards.

Tracking changing attitudes to perfume usage is more difficult. Among the problems that a historian of smells and smelling faces is that the unexpected, inappropriate, or out of place odors are the ones that tend to be recorded. In diaries, periodicals, and satire it is the misuses of perfume that tend to be discussed. In the eighteenth-century the overuse of smelling bottles might be criticized for their role in the affected display of nervous sensibility. Yet most criticisms of perfumery were aimed at the use of highly scented hair powder, handkerchiefs, or pastes, all of which tended to infuse the atmosphere around the body with scent. By the late seventeenth century the fop, an effeminate figure of fun, was criticized for his use of overbearing perfumery and inability to stand the more masculine odors of tobacco. The macaronies of the 1770s, fashionable gentlemen who paraded London’s pleasure gardens to display their continental costume and cosmetics, were also criticized for their overpowering atmosphere of ‘ambrosial essences’ that invaded the nose of the passerby. Although such critiques built on a belief that perfumery connoted effeminacy, the more pressing point at issue was the amount of perfume that fops and macaronis wore. It was not necessarily the wearing of perfume, but the sheer strength of scent that was problematic.

Another criticism directed at the most pungent perfumery of the early modern period was that it tended to signify to the nose of the observer the very thing it attempted to conceal. To wear perfume was to suggest you had something to hide. Such criticisms are significant because they question a historiographical commonplace. According to some historians, including Alain Corbin and Constance Classen, a shift in attitudes to smell occurred in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. They suggest that changes in environmental science, public health, and manners combined to produce a bourgeois quest for an odorless modernity. One of the things that supposedly exemplified this new departure was a critique of the masking potential of perfumery.

In the eighteenth-century mockery was heaped on the wives of merchants who attempted to cover up the odor of filthy lucre; tobacco, train oil, and tar, with the
scent of lavender, amber, or rose. However earlier, in a theatrical allegory of the senses, first performed between 1602 and 1607, Thomas Tomkis has one character suggest to ‘Olfactus’ that

of all the senses, your objects have the worst luck, they are always jarring with their contraries, for none can wear civet, but they are suspected of a proper bad scent.

More significant was the conclusion drawn from this observation: ‘he smelleth best, that doth of nothing smell’. This early seventeenth century observation paraphrased the Roman writers Plautus (‘A woman’s best smell is to smell of nothing’) and Martial (‘He smells not well, whose smell is all perfume’). The renaissance essayist Michel de Montaigne had quoted the same authorities in his discussion of odors and their effects on his lively spirits. Critiques of perfumed masking and their consequent encomiums of odorlessness could therefore be found long before the supposed ‘perceptual revolution’ of the late eighteenth-century from which some historians have suggested they derive.

In his Treatise on the Diseases of Tradesmen, published in Latin in 1700 and translated into English in 1705, the Italian physician Bernardino Ramazzini noted that whilst ‘a great many things have been said of smells... a particular and exact history of them is yet wanting’. Whilst Ramazzini believed strongly that this ‘large Field of History’ would benefit from further plowing, he admitted he was not the man to do it: both the pleasantness and intricacy of the subject required more time and pain than he could afford. The history of perfume suggests the potential for historians to discover a more pleasant and intricate history of scent, more in keeping with that which Ramazzini had described.

Further reading

• Holly Dugan, The Ephemeral History of Perfume, (John Hopkin’s University Press, 2011)
• Alain Corbin, The Foul and the Fragrant, (Harvard University Press, 1988)
• Jonathan Reinarz, Past Scents, (University of Illinois Press, 2014)
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