

The Ephemeral History of Perfume: Scent and Sense in Early Modern England by Holly Dugan. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011, 280 pages. ISBN: 1421402343, Hardback, £34.

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In 1994 Constance Classen, David Howes, and Anthony Synnott lamented:

‘Odours form the building blocks of cosmologies, class hierarchies and political orders; they can enforce social structures or transgress them... But smell is repressed in the modern West, and its social history ignored.’¹

Holly Dugan is amongst a number of historians seeking to redress this ignorance.² Dugan’s aim is to use the ‘archive of everyday life’ (p. 6) in early modern England (1500-1700) to study the shifting cultural resonances of smells.

The study demonstrates the rich nature of this archive for writing sensory history. Laura Gowing led the way in *Common Bodies* (2003) by using Bridewell and church court records to demonstrate the role of touch in knowing, marking and subordinating women’s bodies.³ Dugan’s focus is ostensibly literary but her book is firmly interdisciplinary, using material, visual and medical sources in supplementing her poetry, prose and plays. Dugan and Gowing’s works show two different ways of approaching early modern England’s sensory history and creative connections between the two should be encouraged.

Avoiding Alain Corbin’s ‘great divide’ between a clean post enlightenment present and a smelly pre enlightenment past, Dugan’s history is less a history of *smell* and more a history of *smells*.⁴ Eschewing a universalist conception of sensory experience, Dugan argues, as Mark Jenner recently has, for the culturally constructed nature of sensory perception (pp. 6, 17).⁵ The introductory chapter should be required reading for those seeking to study the history of the smell in the early modern world. Though its briefness does not allow for deeper theoretical analysis, it does offer a number of stimulating points. Histories of the body have so often wavered between investigating how medical discourses structure perceptions of the body and the material and experiential nature of the body itself.⁶ Dugan suggests that olfaction enables us to study the space between material and immaterial conceptions of the body (p. 9). The paradoxical nature of smell - at once material and invisible - and its ability to create unease about bodily boundaries is thus

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¹ C. Classen, D. Howes, A. Synnott, *Aroma: The Cultural History of Smell*, (New York: Routledge, 1994), p.ii

² For an excellent, though not completely up to date, bibliography of recent research see M. Smith, *Sensing the Past: Seeing, Hearing, Smelling Tasting and Touching in History*, (California: California University Press, 2008), pp.157-173.

³ L. Gowing, *Common Bodies: Women, Touch and Power in Seventeenth-Century England*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003). Gowing also uses letters and popular literature including advice manuals.

⁴ A. Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant: Odor and the French Social Imagination*, (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1988), Part One pp.11-89, pp. 229-235,

⁵ M. Jenner, ‘Civilization and Deodorization? Smell in Early Modern English Culture,’ in P. Burke, B. Harrison and P. Slack (ed.), *Civil Histories: Essays Presented to Sir Keith Thomas*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 127-145.

⁶ Thomas Laqueur has been criticized by Lyndal Roper for taking the former approach at the expense of the latter, see L. Roper, *Oedipus and the Devil: Witchcraft, Religion and Sexuality in Early Modern Europe*, (New York: Routledge, 1994), pp.15-16.

useful to historians. This echoes Gina Bloom's argument that in early modern England sound's uneasy materiality meant it was perceived as 'unruly matter' which Bloom turns to her advantage, examining how sound could undermine gender hierarchies.⁷ This innovation is an important strength; it suggests sensory history should be used, as Mark Smith suggested, as a 'way of thinking about the past' rather than simply a 'field' of enquiry.⁸

Dugan uses a scent, a material object and a space, to subtitle each chapter; these three factors are then examined together. In all the six chapters the shifting nature of olfactory meaning is prominent. The first two chapters focus on the connection of scents to power, both ecclesiastical and royal. Chapter one, subtitled 'Frankincense, Censers and Churches', shows how the mixture of native and foreign perfumes, coupled with the impact the religious divisions of the Reformation, could complicate ideas like the odour of sanctity, giving smells multivalent meanings. Dugan is right to nuance her presentation of the attacks on the Catholic concept of odour of sanctity. My own research shows the concept did survive, for example in female conduct literature where the good behaviour of women was seen to create 'a sweet perfume that sendeth forth a good savour into Christ's nostril'.⁹ Dugan presents a welcome literary perspective in contrast with Matthew Milner's recent multi-sensorial treatment of the English Reformation, which has focused on theological and political rather than literary themes.¹⁰ Chapter two, subtitled 'Rosewater, Casting Bottles, Court', argues that the scent of the damask rose, distilled in England, came to play an important role in the Tudor performance of royal power and national identity. The study of court life, a burgeoning area of enquiry, could benefit greatly from such insights. Dugan further argues that the scent of the damask rose could take on subversive meanings in the context of London Bankside's Little Rose Brothel, the Rose Theatre and the dirty streets that surround them.

Chapters three and four follow a similar pattern, this time focusing on medicinal scents. First Dugan examines the scent of sassafras and olfaction's role in exploring the new world. Unlike Charles Peter Hoffer's focus on 'sensory imperialism', Dugan presents a more nuanced depiction of the uncertain role of the senses in imperial exploration.¹¹ The smell of sassafras, an aromatic used to treat the pox, imported into Europe in large quantities, became intimately linked to the dangers of exploration. Yet olfaction could be a weapon used to subordinate native 'sensualism' to European weaponry or a technology of exploration (pp. 72-81, 93-95). The latter could be further explored in light of a recent focus on the embodied, as opposed to scientific, nature of exploration and navigation. One case in the High Court of Admiralty records, for example, shows how the sailors on board the *Diamond* in the 1640s knew they were reaching Barbados when they detected the 'sweet smell' of cedar wood.¹²

One of the central points of the book is to examine the paradoxical and multivalent meanings of scents. The sixth chapter demonstrates this, examining the paradoxical role of perfume as both a curative for plague-ridden households and as a stimulant to dangerous erotic contagion. The last two chapters shift focus to the economic and commercial history of perfume. Chapter five charts the emergence by the 1630s of the perfumer as an occupation and the disputes between guilds, housewives, artisans and merchants over the right to control the production,

⁷ G. Bloom, *Voice in Motion: Staging Gender, Shaping Sound in Early Modern England*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), p.6.

⁸ M. Smith, *Sensing the Past*, p.5.

⁹ William Gouge, *Of Domesticall Duties*, (London, 1622). See also Richard Allestree, *The Ladies Calling*, (Oxford, 1673), who asserts a woman 'will cast a much sweeter savor in Gods nostrils, with the smell of unguents and balsoms, then with the most exquisit odors and perfumes.'

¹⁰ M. Milner, *The Senses and the English Reformation*, (Surrey: Ashgate, 2011). Milner's study was published only a few months after Dugan's, which explains the omission of her work from the book.

¹¹ P. C. Hoffer, *Sensory Worlds in Early America*, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2003), pp. 49-76.

¹² Deposition of John Pagee, 23 July 1640. TNA PRO HCA 13/56. With thanks to Richard Blakemore for this reference.

consumption and ownership of knowledge about aromatics. The destruction of 'faulty' aromatics by rivals is intriguing (pp. 139-142) but the chapter could have benefitted from some quantitative evidence regarding the proliferation of perfume, perfumers and printed recipes to better illustrate the developments described. Chapter six finally demonstrates, using potpourri, the cross-fertilization between the space of the pleasure garden and the emergence of the private bedroom as an erotic scented zone (pp. 154-182). This raises interesting comparisons that could be further explored by using diaries, correspondence and architectural sources. This is especially true in the light of the vigorous debate over the emergence of privacy in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Dugan's book is a well-researched, lucidly written, and timely intervention in the field of sensory studies, which demonstrates the need to see the cultural meaning of smells as unstable and shifting. The case studies she presents portray the need to see sensory history as a new way of thinking about many different fields of enquiry rather than simply a field in itself. Historians, in approaching other sources and questions using a sensory paradigm, should take up the gauntlet she has thrown down.