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Dugan, Holly, *The Ephemeral History of Perfume: Scent and Sense in Early Modern England*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011; hardback; pp. xi, 259; 15 b/w illustrations; R.R.P. US\$65.00; ISBN 9781421402345.

According to Holly Dugan, early modern England is an ‘undiscovered country in the history of olfaction’ (p. 3). Despite a surge of interest in how pre-modern people sensed their worlds, how a basic physiological capacity is shaped by any culture’s understanding of perception, its preferential valuation of the five senses and their conditioning, to say nothing for the array of stimuli found within a particular environment, smell remains understudied because it is evanescent. Given the prevailing assumption that Tudor–Stuart England’s panoply of smells must, all the same, have been singularly noisome, Dugan focuses on ‘perfume’, the production and consumption of artificial scents. She traces why these scents functioned as socio-cultural cues and how they were invested with meaning by poetry, drama, and literature.

The first two chapters examine scents as markers of communion or command. In sixteenth-century England, the burning of frankincense was intended literally to inspire devotion. To inhale was to approach the divine and, at the same time, to purge minds of earthly thoughts. One might expect reformers to have protested that holy smoke was as much an idol as a statue or relic, yet its dissipation was gradual. Like the mystery plays in which exotic spices played a part in dramatizing faith, its scent lingered. Dugan argues that people’s encounters with these aromatics in the global marketplace, and its embarrassment of riches, were equally important for perfume’s desacralizing.

So too was Henry VIII’s royal supremacy. Shedding new light on that quintessential Tudor emblem, Dugan reveals how the distillation of damask rose gave the monarch a signature fragrance, which projected a majestic presence, particularly at court masques, as well as a sovereign absence when worn by his amours. Keeping in mind the belief that air quality had a profound influence on bodily welfare, the beautiful must have found the regal savour as invigorating as the royal touch was refreshing to the scrofulous.

Airborne ‘disease’ had a different meaning within the humoral paradigm, as the central pair of chapters demonstrates with reference to travel literature and plague tracts. Breathing was vital but also functioned as a barometer of one’s surroundings. However, to inhale was to risk smelling invisible substances with essential qualities that would disrupt or poison native humoral balances. Alien though it was, the first colonists had their noses to the Virginian ground. Before tobacco became a lucrative panacea, their hope was to root out sassafras. That colonists were prepared to encounter a harmful contagion rather than therapeutic balm was perhaps because of

their familiarity with this osmotic Catch-22. During epidemics, olfactory assessments of one's own health and the salubriousness of one's surroundings were necessary yet angst-ridden. Smelling rosemary from miasma, snorting plague rather than prophylactic, took only a fickle breeze.

Perfumes could mask corruption, even arouse the fleshly decadence that the plague was sent to scourge. A defining ingredient in luxury leather goods and genteel housewifery, proprietary contests over ambergris show animal-based perfumes became big business as well as morally ambiguous. From the later seventeenth century, Dugan traces a shift in favour of botanicals, like jasmine, as gardens were transformed from spaces of spiritual or material profit to allegedly natural places for wholesome sensuality.

This path-breaking work concentrates on the socio-cultural uplands, with only an occasional whiff from below. If the role of gender and sexuality receive some attention, social status – and with it, plebeian experience, are largely absent. The six chapters are like the gilt chambers of a pomander, each bearing a rich fragrance. In a book about perfumes, and their literary distillation, we cannot expect extended discussion of the reeking mess of humble life courtesy of popular print, such as ballad garlands, or street talk, as recorded in court depositions. Nonetheless, it would be interesting to know more about how these scents were situated in the wider smell-scape. Could people detect a piquant grocer, or a printer's inky apprentice, courtesy of an occupational bouquet, despite their having shifted apparel before visiting the theatre? Was there another dimension to cosmetics, and to passing for somebody one was not?

Elites re-odourized environments with perfume, but questions remain about these practices too. If potpourri turned bedchambers into bowers of bliss what was the larger purpose – did couples consider that a properly scented space would better the chances of conceiving a suitably beautiful child? Given the dominant view that the brain itself was the olfactory organ, but also critical to the concoction of paternal seed and maternal gestation, was nasal prophylaxis practised in bed as on plague-ridden streets? Perfumes might be designed, yet there is a tendency here to treat their smelling as an autonomic response. Should we speak of olfactory manners, and how were noses trained? If we want to write a historical, thick description of smell, in what circumstances was olfaction a deliberate gesture; when did a whiff become a sniff?

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