

## What Makes the *Olfactif* of Victorian Literature?

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Maxwell, Catherine. *Scents and Sensibility: Perfume in Victorian Literary Culture*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2017. xviii + 361 pages. ISBN 978-0-19-870175-0. Hb. £30.00.

Catherine Maxwell, Professor of Victorian Literature, Queen Mary University of London, left her readers with a fascinating cliff-hanger at the end of “Scents and Sensibility: The Fragrance of Decadence” (2013). The apparently preliminary essay, in its conclusion, admitted that this teaser was only “an initial foray into this field and show[ed] the potential for further investigation of this kind” (Maxwell, “Scents and Sensibility” 222). Four years later, *Scents and Sensibility* picks up the thread and proposes the first ever book-length study of perfumes in Victorian literary culture. By the word “perfume,” the volume means “a pleasing scent relished for pleasure’s sake” (1), and the term includes both natural and artificial olfactory products. This definition highlights the exclusive and unique approach of the book, as earlier scholarship focused on unpleasant smells; this volume\* intends to break from this tradition. *Scents and Sensibility*, however, intends to offer more than just simply stating that there are references to pleasant smells in Victorian literature. The title suggests that the monograph wishes to reconceptualize the network of literary influences in the period by taking perfume as the operative theme of the texts. An ambitious project, indeed, since *Scents and Sensibility* attempts to reveal the relevance of olfactory sensation in nineteenth-century literary texts by discussing the cultural context of olfaction, flower symbolism, myths surrounding perfumes, and a more material aspect: the sheer chemistry behind perfumery. By doing so, the book opens new horizons to the interpretation of Victorian literature.

The opening chapter of the book, “Top Notes: Victorian Perfume Contexts” discusses the science and culture of perfumery, Victorian hygiene, and olfactory conventions of respectability. After a brief coverage on only two, nevertheless indisputably prominent perfumers, Eugene Rimmel and Septimus Piesse, the chapter outlines two different attitudes towards perfume in literature: a dismissing one in fiction and a more welcoming one in poetry. The chapter proceeds with the discussion of the “aggressive reaction . . . by male modernists” (62) against the perfumed effeminacy of Victorian decadence. The second chapter, “Perfumed Melodies, Violet Memories,” is the first in the book to focus on one particular scent. After a brief revision of

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relevant literary history about the scent of violet, it shows how scent-memory works. Maxwell argues that the presence of violet “encrypts memories of Shelley and Keats that haunt the Victorian imagination” (12). The chapter proposes a new reading of the scent, which in Maxwell’s analysis connects violet to music and poetry in particular.

Consecutive chapters, unlike the previous one, do not focus on a particular scent but on two authors, who, at least in Maxwell’s view, represent a characteristic trend in their works when it comes to perfumes. “Les Fleurs du Mâle” first studies Algernon Charles Swinburne, more precisely, Charles Pierre Baudelaire’s effect on Swinburne’s poetry in terms of both appeal and aversion to heavy scents. Secondly, Walter Pater’s creative and critical writings come under scrutiny for their “unmistakable perfume” (13), that is, his unique taste and appreciation of literature by other authors. In this chapter we see a parallel between what Pater called “soul perfume” (116), which outlines one’s identity, and the (figurative) scent of a text as the essence of literature. The next chapter, “Scent, the Body, and the Cosmopolitan *Flaireur*” reads the works of poet and literary critic John Addington Symonds and the Japanophile writer, Lafcadio Hearn. They both represent the “keen consumers of the literature of other lands” (13) and were authors susceptible to both female and male body odors. Unlike what works in the previous chapters suggest, Symonds and Hearn’s interest in olfaction did not solely come from literary sources but from sexological studies, too (144, 169).

Chapter 5, “Carnal Flowers, Charnel Flowers” focuses yet again on one particular flower, the tuberose as the “fragrance of decadence” (13). Maxwell reads the English works of three minor poets: the British Mary Robinson and Theodore Wratishaw, and the French Marc-André Raffalovich. The chapter hypothesizes that the lyric tuberose was meant to challenge the notions of Victorian respectability and sexual conventions. The next chapter, “Michael Field’s Fragrant Imagination” goes on to decrypt the scented verse of Katherine Bradley and her niece, Edith Cooper. Maxwell shows that these two female aesthetes understood perfumes as “the spirit of a substance” and something that has a particular meaning that communicates silently, yet eloquently (208-209).

The penultimate chapter, “Dandies and Decadents,” studies the works of Oscar Wilde and Arthur Symonds. Scent memory evoked by the smell of the heliotrope is the major theme of the investigation concerned with Wilde’s canonized novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the controversial erotic novel *Teleny* attributed to Wilde and his circle, and Symonds’s poem, “White Heliotrope.” The heliotrope, Maxwell argues, triggers memories of a sexual encounter in the imagination of these authors. The last chapter, “Victorian Drydown and

Sillage,” reads modernist authors, Virginia Woolf and Compton Mackenzie, and how their works were influenced by the scent trail of Victorian literature. Woolf, unlike the female aesthetes of Chapter 6, “maintains [a] sense of intellectual and social superiority” (284) and holds a rather hostile attitude towards “perfumed” and “powdered” women due to her “anxious suspicion of a confident, expressive, and sensuous female sexuality” (283). Mackenzie, in contrast, shows a more liberal approach to *fin-de-siècle* aestheticism. Mackenzie’s essays, autobiography, and early *belles-lettres* “reveal his skill as an aromancer” (14), who had strong personal and critical ties to turn-of-the-century decadence and perfumes.

*Scents and Sensibility* is immensely rich in sources in various fields from culture to chemistry to literature. It revives and introduces key concepts which are indispensable for the study of perfumes of a broad definition in the long nineteenth century. One of the recurring ideas pervading the texts under Maxwell’s scrutiny is scent-memory or perfume nostalgia. The investigation gains further depths with the definition of acceptable perfumes and smells in terms of Victorian virtues, which essentially boils down to the very axis of natural-artificial scents. The book introduces the *olfactif*, “the cultivated individual with a refined sense of smell” (4), along with another key figure, the *flaireur*, who is not a citizen observer of the city landscape but of “the fragrance of travel” (13). These concepts, such as scent-memory, the *olfactive*, and the *flaireur*, present a reliable network of keywords for the overall coherence of the analysis. Nevertheless, one of the greatest achievements of the book may not occur to readers at first: one may find it extremely difficult to describe odors in written words; Maxwell’s study, however, provides an extensive vocabulary and vivid descriptions to sensitize the reader’s nostrils to a wide range of olfactory sensations. Moreover, the descriptions of the aromatic compounds make the chemistry of perfumery completely comprehensible to cultural historians and literary scholars, too. Thus, Maxwell offers complex but absolutely intelligible and compelling analyses for the reader to understand the stake of tracking a scent trail in Victorian literature.

Having said that, I must remark on the fact that the book can give only a preliminary insight into the cultural history and literature of Victorian scents and sensibility, as a pioneering monograph of its kind is likely to do. The book gives the impression that it does not sample a wide range of perfumes based on broad research but elaborates on and extrapolates from the literary occurrence of a few. This approach risks that the book may miss apparently relevant parts of the cultural history of the period. For instance, “Hungary water” is not mentioned at all, though there was virtually no Victorian perfumer, nor reference book that did not include several recipes and uses of

the legendary perfume. Singling out one neglected item, of course, does not prove my point.

The structure of the book, however, makes it blatantly obvious that, as the result of Maxwell's approach, the monograph is thrown completely off balance when some chapters focus on specific scents, some others on specific attitudes and philosophies concerning perfumes or authors. The structure, thus, compartmentalizes knowledge in a way that hinders the study of literary networks, the subject that the very title of the work otherwise refers to. For instance, Marc-André Raffalovich and Oscar Wilde are discussed in detail in two different chapters, each focusing primarily on one flower—Raffalovich's tuberose and Wilde's heliotrope, respectively. Although each pays a visit to the chapter devoted to the other, little insight into a perfumed literary network is gained by this approach. For instance, it is odd that Maxwell did not give a comparative analysis of Wilde's "Flower of Love" (1881) and Raffalovich's poem with the same title (1885)—or of any of their many poems with a floral theme, for that matter. Instead of studying the texts to shed light on the obscure relationship of the two poets, more importantly, on a perfumed literary network, Maxwell simply retells several popular anecdotes about their deteriorated friendship just like every single article about Raffalovich does.

The ever-changing focuses and approaches seem fortuitous; each chapter would be worth an individual monograph. Despite this criticism, I would not do justice to *Scent and Sensibility: Perfume in Victorian Literary Culture* if I do not state as clearly as possible: the book is a highly anticipated and more than welcome addition to the study of Victorian literature and cultural history. Not only is it a compelling read but an indispensable source for lay-readers and scholars alike, who are interested in the period. As it most certainly has proven that the study of perfumes delineates a fruitful focus to reconceptualize both canonized and non-canonized literatures, *Scents and Sensibility* initiates a long overdue dialogue that is absolutely worth carrying on.

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#### Work Cited

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