

ENCYCLOPEDIA OF SMELL HISTORY AND HERITAGE

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Shoes, Stockings, and Feet

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Shoes, socks and feet are proverbially smelly. The foot is often regarded as an unclean extremity of the body, and the shoes and socks that cover them create an environment for the growth of malodorous bacteria. As the podiatrist William Rossi remarks, ‘most foot odors are shoe odors’ (1996). Modern footwear is partially to blame here, since the use of inorganic materials does not allow the foot to breathe, and sweat is absorbed by fabric linings and foam padding: we are all familiar with the stink of old sneakers. The premodern world was similarly preoccupied with the smell of feet and their coverings, but they understood it in a different way and it highlighted distinctive social anxieties from the time. The feet had an important place in the humoural body, since they sweated and purging was vital to maintaining the body’s healthy balance. They were also regarded as the sink of the body, where impurities were carried off to the extremities. The smells emanating from the feet were therefore a factor in the body’s general health, and were of interest to medical science. A medical dictionary from 1722 defined ‘dysodia’ as a genus of disease consisting of ‘stinking exhalations from the whole body, or from a particular part, as stinking breath, stinking feet, &c.’ (Quincy 1722, 294).

SMELLS

Introduction

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We often remark that feet smell ‘cheesy’. In fact, the odorous bacteria that are found on the foot are also used in cheesemaking: *brevibacterium* is present in milk and is added to cheese to develop its texture and flavour (Harvey 2023, 40). The warm, damp, salty and dark environment of sweaty shoes is a breeding ground for these bacteria, whereas an unshod foot would be unlikely to create this smell. Humans have more sweat glands in their feet than other parts of the body, and it is the sweat produced by these eccrine glands that goes on to produce the distinctive odour (Kanlayavattanukul and Lourith 2011, 300).

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This sweating function of the feet was recognised in the Georgian period. George Nicolson's treatise *On Clothing* noted that 'the feet are as great and important an emunctory as any in the human body'. Great attention should therefore be paid to what covered them, and in particular the materials from which they were made. Georgians were more concerned with smelly stockings than shoes as such. Nicolson cautioned against wearing cotton or silk stockings, since they become 'saturated with the sweat of the feet' and the material 'soon rots'. By contrast, wool carried moisture away from the body so kept the feet dry: 'Let any one desirous to see it proved, wear cotton stockings one day and worsted the next, and afterwards say which was the more free from humidity and smell' (1797, 16). Other authors agreed with this preference for wool, and insisted that socks should be changed daily, 'not only for neatness but for health' (Anon. 1818, 206).

The concern was therefore not just with the smell itself but the wider health of the body. The feet had to purge in order to maintain the body's fluid economy, but such waste material should not remain next to the skin since putrescence was another cause of disease. Those who could not afford to keep clean or to change their garments frequently were therefore pathogenic. Kevin Siena argues that the uncleanliness associated with sweat therefore had a class dimension (2019, 42) and it arguably had a racial one too. The heat and humidity of the tropics meant that bodies had to live in putrescent surroundings, and those who were accustomed to it could not purge corrupting humours through perspiration (Seth 2018, 132). Although shoes were a sign of civilisation, podiatric writers lauded the foot health of races that did not wear shoes. This was both a romanticisation of the 'noble savage' and a dig at the corrupting effects of luxury in their own country.



Pair of men's shoes, late eighteenth century, leather:
Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2002.537.2a, b,
<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/87526>

PLACES

Eighteenth-century Britons complained about smelly feet, stockings and shoes in a range of locations. Body odour could be present in

public spaces. Much of Georgian sociability took place after dark in hot candle-lit rooms, where men in particular would wear layers of heavy fabric. During a dance, men and women would engage in vigorous physical activity that involved a lot of bouncing on the balls of the feet. In Tobias Smollett's *Expedition of Humphry Clinker*, Matt Bramble complains about the 'compound of villainous smells' at Bath's Assembly Rooms, including 'sour flatulencies, rank armpits, sweating feet' (1984, 66). Such an odour is 'so peculiarly unpleasant as to render it impracticable to be in the same apartment with a person so afflicted'. In extreme cases this could even be an issue in the open air: 'they appear to draw after them a train of infection that corrupts the passing atmosphere' (Anon. 1818, 204-5). Miasma theory meant that foot odour could be a matter of public health.

Foot odour was more likely to be noticeable in private locations, particularly where footwear was removed. Jonathan Swift's satire *A Lady's Dressing Room*, a young man sneaks into the closet of his sweetheart and is distressed at the stinking mess within:

No object Strephon's eye escapes,

Here petticoats in frowzy heaps;

Nor be the handkerchiefs forgot

All varnished o'er with snuff and snot.

The stockings why should I expose,

Stained with the marks of stinking toes;

Or greasy coifs and pinders reeking,

Which Celia slept at least a week in? (Swift 1732, 5)

The evidence of grime and bodily effluvia suggests to him that the woman's flawless public image is but a superficial front. While Swift's satire is clearly misogynist, it does highlight the sheer amount of time and effort required to make oneself presentable in order to participate in the world of polite sociability.

Not all spaces were polite and the places where shoes were manufactured were some of the smelliest of all. The process of leather tanning was notoriously smelly and often took place on the edge of towns for this reason. Raw animal hide had to be stripped of hair and fat, and the materials used to tan the leather included urine and rotting vegetable matter. Shoemakers had to work with this finished material as well as other strong-smelling substances like glues and polishes. Tanners and shoemakers were known to lose their sense of taste and smell, so in shoemaking centres like Northampton they brewed strong ales as they were unable to taste regular beer.



Thomas Rowlandson, 'Men dancing in a coffee house, an illustration from Tobias Smollett's *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker*' (1793): Metropolitan Museum of Art, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/738940>

PRACTICES

Georgians used a range of practices to combat foot odour. Household manuals contained methods for deodorising shoes: one cure 'for stinking feet' recommended burning alum, grinding it into a powder and sprinkling on feet and stockings (Carter 1736, 313). Others were sceptical about medical interventions that might block the pores, not least because they believed that it was important for the feet to purge in order to keep the rest of the body healthy.

One treatise argued that 'the perspiration of the feet is an excretion that ought never be tampered with' and cautioned against the use of 'astringent lotions, or absorbent powders'. Instead, stockings should be changed regularly and shoes should be allowed to air and dry out. (Of course, this was only an option for those who could afford multiple pairs, which most did not.) Feet should be kept clean but should be bathed with care. Bathing too often or in hot water would soften the skin or affect the flow of humours, so lukewarm water should be used. And they should immediately be dried by rubbing with a 'coarse, rough, but soft towel' (Anon. 1818, 208, 210).



Henry Bunbury, 'The Paris Shoe Cleaner' (1771): Metropolitan Museum of Art,
<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/395519>

FEELINGS AND NOSES

Studies of foot odour today note that it can be a cause of embarrassment and social isolation (Kanlayavattanakul and Lourith 2011, 298) and it is fair to assume that this was also the case in the premodern period. A tourist visited Sanssouci and learned that the Castellian there owed his employment 'solely to a pair of stinking feet'. He had worked at the court of Frederick William II of Prussia, who was offended by the odour but was unwilling to dismiss someone for something they could not help. He therefore declared, 'Send the fellow to Sans Souci, and there let him stink, in the devil's name!' (Jürgensen 1817, 315)

As such, foot odour could be the subject of humour in the Georgian period, which commonly laughed at bodily functions. As one jest from the time went: 'One smelling stinking feet, said, Who wears Socks here? One close to him, said, That for his part, he never wore Socks in his Life, nor knew what they were.' (Hicks 1720, 95)

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