Love

Noses

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Ever since writers, philosophers, and poets have discussed the meanings and implications of love, they have also associated it with particular smells. For the Elizabethan playwright Christopher Marlowe, love was akin to 'beds of roses / And a thousand fragrant posies'. For Anne Eliot, the protagonist of Jane Austen's novel *Persuasion*, the joy of love was 'almost enough to spread purification and perfume all the way'. For the Victorian poet George Meredith, love was the sweet scent of the briar and the juice of ripe apples in the orchard. The intoxicating scent of

virtuous love was pure, sweet, fragrant, and floral, and was more widely indicative of qualities such as virtue and fidelity, particularly in the beloved woman. In stark contrast was the repellent stink of vice, the decaying odour of betrayal, or the bitterness which characterised love's departure.

ODEUROPA SMELL EXPLORER **0** texts - **0** images

SMELLS

Much like the odiferous rose in the tradition of courtly love, particular smells had the power to stimulate and strengthen feelings of love and sexual desire. Men and women accordingly utilised such scents as 'olfactory aphrodisiacs' to promote their romantic designs and

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help to attract a partner. In Shakespeare's play *Much Ado About Nothing*, first performed in 1612, the soldier Benedick rubbed his body with civet as his passion for Beatrice began to grow. His friends noticed the change in his behaviour and endeavoured to 'smell him out', concluding that it is 'as much to say, the sweet youth's in love' (Classen, Howes and Synnott 1994: 72-3). Women, too, used aphrodisiac scents to perfume their bodies and dressing rooms,

attempting to attract a mate by enveloping themselves in a 'seductive aroma'. As *The Ladies Dictionary* advised in 1684, 'pomanders, or perfumed bracelets, may be used, and by their odiferous scent conduce much, Ladies, to the making your captives numerous' (Tullett 2019: 170).

The predominant smells associated with romance and desire during the early modern era were scents derived from animals such as musk

(obtained from the caudal glands of deer), and civet (derived from the perineal glands of civet cats). These were used by animals to attract their mates and accordingly adopted by humans as aphrodisiacs due to their supposed 'potent natural vitality' (Classen, Howes and Synnott 1994: 72-3). Further animal scents such as castoreum (secreted from the testicles of beavers) and ambergris (produced in the digestive tracts of sperm

whales) were also recommended by medical writers for their aphrodisiac properties, believed to heat the reproductive organs, boost feelings of desire, encourage sexual pleasure, and improve fertility (Evans 2014).

The deep musky and leathery scents of the early modern period were supplanted during the eighteenth century by lighter and more delicate floral smells such as lavender, violet,

and rose, and herbal scents such as rosemary and thyme (Classen, Howes and Synnott 1994: 72-3). The century witnessed a further shift in the materiality of these scents, with solid balls of scented paste and fragrant accessories such as gloves and jewellery giving way to liquid scents and essences enclosed in perfume bottles (Tullett 2019: 160-8). The porcelain perfume bottle in Figure 4 is titled 'FONTAINE DAMOUR' in French, which

was widely understood as the language of flirtation and romance. It is typical of commercial scent bottles designed for lovers in the second half of the eighteenth century, produced by manufactories such as Bilston in the West Midlands and Saint James's and Chelsea in London. The bottle takes the form of the Fountain of Love held aloft by two cherubs and is hand-painted with pink roses. The stopper at the top could be removed to dab liquid perfume onto a lover's

body, or onto accessories such as handkerchiefs or gloves, which were themselves frequently offered as tokens of love.

With the spread of literacy and flourishing of Enlightenment cultures of letters and letter-writing, liquid scent was also applied to love letters to increase their olfactory and affective appeal. One of the most popular scents used in this manner was otto of roses, which surged in popularity from

the 1760s to become the *de facto* fragrance of love by the end of the century. In Maria Edgeworth's novel *Belinda* (1801), Lord Delacour presumes that a bundle of letters written by Clarence Hervey must be love letters because of their overpowering scent. The 'odious smell' is decried by Lady Delacour, who 'cannot stand perfumes' or his 'abominable perfumed papers'. She is reassured by the heroine Belinda, Hervey's future wife, that the

scent ‘is only attar of roses, to which few people’s olfactory nerves have an antipathy’. And once Lord Delacour has read the letters, he too finds that ‘even that perfume had from agreeable association become agreeable to him (Edgeworth 1801: 281-2, 381; Holloway 2019: 86-7).

Just as certain smells were believed to increase a lover’s allure, so others could render them fundamentally unappealing. This went far beyond physical

appearance, with a woman's scent in particular taken to be more widely indicative of her virtue, purity, fidelity, and morality. In Shakespeare's Sonnet 69, the virtuous woman's 'fair flower' was superseded by 'the rank smell of weeds' as her eye began to wander, with her rotting soil indicating her decaying morality (Classen, Howes and Synnott 1994: 76). Elizabeth Foyster further stresses this contrast between the sweet-smelling desirable

woman and sexually transgressive women such as adulteresses and prostitutes who were described in Kirk sessions as 'unclean, corrupted, and carrying the foul smell of venereal disease' (Foyster 2010: 227). The counterpart of the virtuous fragrant rose – which flourished in love's garden – was the putrid corrupted weed. Whilst one cast a powerful enchantment over men, the other was construed as equally revolting and

reviled.

Pornographic texts such as the pamphlet *Merryland* (1741), which proliferated in number and variety over the eighteenth century, imagined the female body as a mystical geographical terrain to be charted and conquered by men. The climate was said to be warm, and the soil moist and marshy, which contributed to its fecundity. The air had different qualities in each region, 'being in some Provinces perfectly pure

and healthy, in others extreamly gross and pestilential'. Whilst Merryland did have some scents in common with the sweet and floral smells celebrated throughout courtly and romantic literature – including herbs such as sweet marjoram – it was also notable for other, less alluring, smells such as fish:

Tho' this Country is so plentifully water'd by so fine a River and Canal, it is but indifferently stored with

FISH; yet when a Stranger comes to MERRYLAND, he would imagine by the Smell of the Air, that the Country abounded with Ling or Red-Herring; as we are told the River Tyssa in Hungary smells of Fish; so strong is this Smell sometimes, that it is very offensive; but here are no such Fish to be seen.

This same association can be found in poetry which likened the smell of female genitalia to salted ling. These passages

reflect the long-held misogynistic suspicion of and distaste for women's living, sweating, smelling bodies, the rank odour of which was taken as a sign of their ugliness and subjugation to men (Harvey 2004: 207). This was even more true in European encounters with black bodies, particularly those of enslaved women, which were described as having a 'strong smell of perspiration', and a stench that was 'almost beyond endurance'

(Tullett 2016: 311, 316).

Men's complaints about the odours of the female body persisted right through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with the young painter Dante Gabriel Rosetti bemoaning 'the smell of heated quims' during a performance of the can-can in Paris in 1849. Yet the association was not always a negative one, with others finding that the intoxicating smell beneath a woman's petticoats drove them 'wild with

lewdness'. Indeed, some medical writers in the later nineteenth century drew a direct connection between a man's nose and his penis, with stimulation of the former leading to an erection and orgasm in the latter (Maxwell 2017: 137-8; Harrington and Rosario 1992: 7-8). In 1924, Freud's disciple Sándor Ferenczi (1873–1933) postulated that the smell of herring brine produced by women's genitalia had a stimulating erotic effect which drove

men to copulate with them, 'harking back to the primeval ocean to which man seeks to return'. This olfactory association between women's sexualised bodies and fish has been preserved right up to the present day in the French slang terms *morue* (cod) for a prostitute and *maquereau* (mackerel) for a pimp, and in the contentious terms 'fish' and 'fishy' in modern drag culture (Muchembled 2020: 65).

PLACES

When love was symbolically situated in a particular site, it was typically in a verdant grove or blossoming garden, such as the untouched wilderness of Arcadia, the island of Cythera, birthplace of the Greek goddess Aphrodite, or in the biblical paradise the Garden of Eden. In Plato's *Symposium* (*c.* 385–70 BC), Agathon argued that Eros, the Greek God of love and lust, belonged 'wherever it is flowery and fragrant; there he settles,

there he stays'. This bright and lively fragrance also evidenced the youthful nature of love, since he 'never settles in anything, be it a body or a soul, that cannot flower or has lost its bloom' (Solomon & Higgins, 1991: 21). This connection between love and blooming can be found throughout cultures of courtly and romantic love, as seen in the heady bloom of youth, a young woman maturing to be 'in bloom', or the bloom of her cheeks taken as an indication of

her sexual appeal, fertility, and marriageability (King 2003).

The Roman God of love and desire Cupid was said to wear a wreath of blooming roses upon his head, with many later artists choosing to depict him swathed in or nestled amongst roses. In the intensely aromatic scene imagined by the painter G. F. Watts in Figure 1, a pink-cheeked Cupid sleeps beneath a blossoming rosebush, almost disappearing into it to

become part of the bush himself. Roses were also important symbols of sensuality and desire in the Bible, with the beautiful fragrant roses in the Garden of Eden only acquiring their thorns after Adam and Eve gave in to temptation and sensual pleasure.

The floral scent of love was a constituent part of the tradition of courtly love in medieval and early modern Europe, where Cupid sat on a throne within an enchanted garden, as

celebrated in allegorical poetry such as Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun's *The Romance of the Rose* (*c.* 1230–75). The tale began in the month of May, with the onset of Spring, 'that delicious season when everything is stirred by love'. The protagonist dreamt of a beautiful garden filled with 'an abundance of flowers…of various colours and sweetest perfumes'. The pungent garden thronged with laurel, pine and cedar trees, fruit trees bearing

quinces, peaches, apples, pears, plums and pomegranates, and fragrant spices such as cloves, liquorice, anise, and cinnamon.

As the courtly lover wandered through the garden, he soon came across the Fountain of Love, in which the mischievous Cupid dipped his arrows. The lover quickly found himself entranced by a blossoming red rosebush, where the 'delicious odour of the roses penetrated right into my entrails'. This odour 'spread

all around; the sweet perfume that rose from it filled the entire area. And when I smelled its exhalation, I had no power to withdraw'. It was at this exact moment – gazing upon and smelling the scent of the beautiful rose – that he was struck by Cupid's first arrow of love. Four further arrows followed, as he drank in the 'sweet perfume' which smelled 'sweeter than violets'. This onset of love was a direct result of olfactory experience, after which the lover was

irrevocably ‘taken’ (De Lorris and De Meun, 1995: 31-54). For women constructing emotionally intense relationships with their own sex, the same motif could be used to describe a passion that was felt but not declared: ‘love to have, but not to smell the flower’ (Faderman 1997: 70).

Both the Garden and Fountain of Love were widely depicted in visual culture, as in works from the Renaissance studio of Antonio

Vivarini, where couples eagerly wait beneath trellis' of roses to draw water from the fountain (*c.* 1465–70), by the Baroque painter Rubens, where courtiers dance and listen to music beneath Cupids holding garlands of flowers and pairs of turtle doves (1630–1), and by the Rococo artist Jean-Antoine Watteau, where couples frolic in a wooded grove beneath a statue of Venus and Cupid (*c.* 1718–19). In Jean-Honoré Fragonard's evocation of *The Fountain of Love* in Figure

2, a young man and woman emerge from a lush forest and eagerly approach the cascading fountain. The foamy water is filled with frolicking cherubs, who hold a golden basin up to the lovers' lips to inspire the first heady rush of love. This motif also found its way into the material culture of romance, as represented by the perfume bottle in Figure 4, where swans symbolising the goddess Aphrodite swim around the water.

Women building

romantic partnerships similarly utilised the rose as an emblem of their intimacy. In the early nineteenth century, the schoolteacher Charity Bryant and tailor Sylvia Drake planted vining roses around their home in Vermont as a symbol of their bond. Charity's nephew praised the Edenic beauty of the surrounding countryside, which was filled with white clovers and 'the atmosphere for many a league is perfumed with the odour

of its blossoms'. As the couple grew old the roses continued to thrive – signifying the everlasting nature of their love – blooming 'wild without their tendance'. Others found the metaphors of unfolding buds and red rose petals to be particularly apt means of encoding female same-sex desire (Hope Cleves 2014: xiv, 89, 114; Vicinus 2004: 235).

Clearly not all gardens could bloom eternally, with the departure of love necessitating

the death of its beautiful garden, and its once-sweet smelling flowers. In the Romantic poet William Blake's *Songs of Experience: The Garden of Love* (*c.* 1825), illustrated in Figure 3, the innocence and exuberance of his youth have been suffocated by the austere traditions of the church, whose policing of sexual behaviour bound 'with briars my joys & desires'. The 'sweet flowers' of the Garden of Love have been overlaid with 'tomb-stones where

Flowr's should be', before which sombre priests kneel to pray.

Whilst for Blake the Garden was stifled by religious morality, his contemporary Lord Byron used it as a metaphor for romantic betrayal, as 'the loveliest garden grows hateful / When Love has abandon'd the bowers'. In place of beautiful blossoming roses is the repellent flower hemlock, which will 'deeply embitter' the poison he mixes to hasten his journey to the grave. As

love withers and dies, so do its fragrant roses:

Now sad is the garden of roses, Beloved but false Haideé!

There Flora all withered reposes,

And mourns o'er thine absence with me (Byron 1819).

The places and spaces of love were thus defined by the smells which shaped them. As was so often the case with love itself, these evanescent scents were temporal and fleeting. The

emotive symbol of the blooming and withering flower at once captured the first flowering of love and desire, and the grief attendant upon their decay and departure.

PRACTICES

The love tokens selected by couples during rituals of courtship were often intensely aromatic items such as scented gloves. In Shakespeare's play *Troilus and Cressida*, written around 1602, Cressida presents Troilus with one of her gloves as a token, which

turns out to be symbolically empty of her hand. Gloves utilised as symbols of betrothal came steeped in perfumes such as ambergris, decorated with elaborate embroidery, and laced with gold as material signs of luxury and wealth (Giese 2006: 88-9, 143; Duggan 2011: 127-9).

By the eighteenth century, odiferous gifts extended to bunches of flowers (nosegays), pressed flowers, liquid perfumes, decorative

perfume bottles, snuff boxes, and *bonbonniéres* for storing sweets ('bonbons'). The period witnessed a new celebration and idealisation of romantic love, with embodied rituals of touching, gazing at, and smelling romantic gifts providing an essential way for courting couples to generate and intensify a romantic bond in anticipation of matrimony (Holloway 2019: 69-92). In addition to the sensory rituals of feeling, looking and

smelling, of course, was tasting, with the consumption of edible tokens such as cakes, comfits and sweetmeats playing a further important role in facilitating flirtation and providing a material source of delight and sensual pleasure (Holloway 2024).

In William Congreve's play *Love for Love; A Comedy* (1736), the naive young country girl Miss Prue rhapsodises to her mother-in-law Mrs Foresight about a whole host of

sweet-smelling objects from snuff-boxes to rings presented to her by the vain beau Mr Tattle:

"Look you here, Madam then, what Mr Tattle has giv'n me – Look you here Cousin, here's a Snuff-Box; nay, there's Snuff in't; – – here, will you have any – – Oh good! How sweet it is – – Mr Tattle is all over sweet, his Peruke is sweet, and his Gloves are sweet, – and his Handkerchief is sweet, pure sweet, sweeter than Roses – – Smell him Mother,

Madam, I mean – He gave me this Ring for a Kiss…And he says he'll give me something to make me smell so – Oh pray lend me your Handkerchief – Smell, Cousin; he says, he'll give me something that will make my Smocks smell this way – Is not it pure? – – It's better then Lavender" (Congreve, 1736: 42).

For the besotted young woman, the scent of love here was pure, sweet and uncorrupted, extending from the tokens utilised as

objects of love to the body of the lover himself, which was judged to be 'all over sweet'. 'Smell him Mother', she entreats, as smell enables these tokens to *become* the giver. But for her family, who were determined to prevent the match, this 'cunning Cur' was a 'filthy Creature' who smelled 'all of Pitch and Tar', with his lavish tokens of love failing to conceal his noxious scent.

As the century progressed, the objects selected by lovers became

increasingly commercialised and integrated into the consumer economy, with the rise of shopping as a leisure activity and popularisation of gifts such as books, inkwells, seals, decorative miniature accoutrements such as *etui*, and valentine cards purchased from retailers (Holloway 2019: 93-117; Holloway 2020). This trend only escalated through the nineteenth century, as valentine cards became ever-more elaborate, featuring real

flora and fauna, expensive materials such as velvet and silk, and novelties such as inset mirrors. Particularly significant for the olfactory experience of love was the perfumed valentine, an innovation which appeared in the 1860s. These embossed lace paper cards were impregnated with popular floral scents such as lavender or violet, either through a padded sachet attached to the inside of the envelope, or affixed to the card itself as

part of its design (Staff 1969: 100). Such cards could be purchased from the growing number of department stores such as Rimmel's on the Strand in London, which was said to 'perfume the whole street' with its wares (*The Graphic*: 1870).

As love continued to develop as a commercial industry, the Victorians also invented further ingenious olfactory tokens designed to entrance and

delight the senses. These included aromatic jewellery such as lockets containing solid perfume or sponges impregnated with essential oils, designed to be worn around a woman's neck, and pendants attached to chatelaines around her waist. In addition were rings akin to miniature perfume bottles which emitted a spray of perfume when pressed (Maxwell 2017: 34-5). Such romantic tokens delighted in both the love of

novelty and the pleasures of scent.

Yet material practices of love did not necessarily require a substantial financial outlay, and it could also be more modestly conveyed through tokens such as nosegays and pressed flowers. The particular flowers selected by individuals were important for their symbolic meanings, with women frequently opting for violets as signs of their modesty,

simplicity, truthfulness, and faithful love. Both Venus and the ancient Greek poet Sappho were said to be 'violet crowned', with the latter using crowns of violets to recall the happy moments she passed with her female lovers, inspiring a whole tradition of violets as floral emblems of love between women (Maxwell 2017: 73-4). The meanings of these flowers also extended beyond love to memory and remembrance. In the romantic novel *Paul et Virginie* (1788),

set on the tropical island of Mauritius, the heroine presents her beloved Paul with violet seeds because of their 'delicious perfume', requesting that he plant them at the foot of his coco palm. He believed that the flowers 'seemed to have some resemblance to Virginia's nature and circumstances', and duly sowed them in his garden to remember their connection (Bernardin de Saint-Pierre 1788: 43, 119-21).

The longstanding symbolic meanings of violets were formally codified in the Victorian language of flowers, where they were understood to be humble and unshowy flowers distinguished by their sweet scent. The motif was widely adopted by artists such as John Everett Millais, in *The Violet's Message* (1854) where a young girl opens an envelope containing a bunch of violets, signifying the sender's fidelity, and G.

F. Watts' portrait of the actress Ellen Terry in Figure 5, where she brings a gaudy camelia flower to her nose using her right hand, whilst holding a pile of unassuming violets in the palm of her left, as if evaluating their relative moral worth. The suggestion, as with the intoxicating rose of courtly love, was that the pure odour of the violet would, or at least *should*, prevail (Holloway 2019: 69; Bradstreet 2022: 22-25). This same language of flowers was co-opted as a

symbolic means of conceptualising homoerotic pleasure and homosexual identity, as in the intoxicating scent of the meadowsweet as figured by the French poet Marc-André Raffalovich – 'O flower, O love, most mystical and fresh, / Whose breath can thrill us with a breath most sweet, / As with the touch of warm seraphic flesh, / Of meadowsweet I sing, of meadowsweet!' (Madden 1996).

FEELINGS AND NOSES

The olfactory experience of love was transformed by the cult of sensibility which swept across Western Europe and America in literature, philosophy, art, and music between the 1720s and 1790s, prioritising physical displays of feeling by a fundamentally sensitive, sensate, and refined body. This expansive cultural movement placed renewed importance on heightened sensory perception as central to the

formation of intimate relationships, and to the construction of selfhood and personal identity.

In the Genevan philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau's bestselling novel *Julie, or the New Heloise* (1762), the tutor Saint-Preux set out how his infatuation with his pupil Julie had fascinated his senses and changed the way his body experienced the world:

I find the country more gay, the green more fresh and vivid, the air

more pure, the sky more serene. The song of the birds seems to be more tender and voluptuous; the murmur of the brooks evokes a more amorous languor; from afar the blooming vine exudes the sweetest perfumes; a secret charm either embellishes everything or fascinating my senses (Solomon & Higgins, 1991: 113).

This greater olfactory appreciation for blooming vines and sweet

perfumes was indicative of Saint-Preux's total physical absorption in love, his physical and moral refinement, and identity as a person of sensibility, able to experience the finest sensations. It was echoed in later novels such as Mary Hays' *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1796), at the apex of sensibility, where the lovelorn heroine likened herself to Rousseau's Julie, and professed her desperation to:

experience

those sweet sensations, of which nature has formed my heart so exquisitely susceptible. My ardent sensibilities incite me to love – to seek to inspire sympathy – to be beloved!

Yet, like Saint-Preux, Emma's amorous dreams were left unfulfilled, and 'the parterre of roses' when viewed up close was revealed to be nothing but 'a brake of thorns'.

For critics, the cult of sensibility was self-indulgent and insincere,

encouraging narcissism and insipid affectation. This was personified by figures such as fop, the beau, and macaroni, who were entirely beholden to their senses, and to perfumed accoutrements such as snuff boxes and smelling bottles. The defining traits of these effete identities were demarcated in Jean-François Dreux du Radier's *Dictionnaire d'Amour* in 1741, which was translated into English and substantially updated by the

novelist John Cleland in 1753. The fop was not able to marry, for 'being properly speaking so married to himself, that it looks to him like cuckolding himself, to afford any love to any other but his own sweet person'. The beau was similarly self-absorbed, making fashionable dress 'his principal attention'. Whilst these men were perfectly satisfied to indulge in fashion, flirtation, and dissipation, they had no interest in the

serious business of love, for it was attended by ‘so many disagreeable sensations’ that it was ‘not worth the pursuit’ (Cleland 1741; Friedman 2016; Tullett 2014). As one macaroni declared in Robert Hitchcock’s comedy on the subject:

Oh, Lord! what a horrid thing love must be! – To take off all attention from ourselves, and study to be what you call manly, brave, noble, and generous, in order to appear amiable in the eyes of the fair

– Ha! ha! ha! – No, no, by all that's ridiculous, it will never do (Hitchcock 1773: 5).

The cult of sensibility was superseded by the Romantic movement, which flourished between *c.* 1770 and 1850, and was equally transformative for the olfactory experience of love for its emphasis on the sublime power of nature and its ability to captivate the senses. While falling in love with the young Teresa Viviani, daughter of the

governor of Pisa in 1820, the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley underscored his 'excessive susceptibility' to nature, finding that the 'wind, the light, the air, the smell of a flower affects me with violent emotions'. Shelley's poem *Epipsychidion* addressed to her (as 'Emilia') was published the following year, providing a powerful evocation of the sensory experience of an idealised love. It entreated Emilia to sail away with him to an odiferous island Paradise:

The light clear element which the isle wears

Is heavy with the scent of lemon-flowers,

Which floats like mist laden with unseen showers,

And falls upon the eyelids like faint sleep;

And from the moss violets and jonquils peep

And dart their arrowy odour through the brain

Till you might faint with that delicious pain.

And every motion, odour,

beam and tone,

With that deep music is in unison:

Which is a soul within the soul —they seem

Like echoes of an antenatal dream.

The dreamlike poem invokes romantic tropes from Cupid's darts of love to the 'mist laden' isle of Cythera, birthplace of the goddess Venus. Love, here, is evident in floral motifs from the scent of lemon flowers to the powerful odour of moss violets and jonquils,

which were symbolic of desire and the longing for a lover's feelings to be reciprocated.

Shelley was an important influence in the development of the aesthetic movement between 1860 and 1900, which championed the pursuit of beauty in art and life, and elevated sensual pleasure into an art form which transcended the ugliness and materialism of the modern world. Aestheticism prioritised

contemplation over action, the artificial over the natural, and art over any moral limitations, giving it a propensity to sexual transgression (Hanson 2013: 151). A prime example of this is Joris-Karl Huysmans' decadent novel *Á Rebours* (*Against Nature*) (1884), in which the reclusive aristocrat Des Esseintes becomes obsessed with the science of perfumery, using fragrances such as jonquil and violet to subvert nature and create a

higher realm of sensuality. The author's aim was 'to abolish even love, womankind' in place of sensual gratification, with his protagonist indulging himself 'in unnatural love affairs and perverse pleasures'. This 'abnormally keen' preoccupation with and fetishing of smell was taken by early sexologists such as Havelock Ellis as an indication of sexual perversion (Ellis 1931: 73).

Á Rebours famously

inspired Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), where Dorian likewise immersed himself in the heady world of perfume-making to discern what there was 'in ambergris that stirred one's passions, and in violets that woke the memory of dead romances, and in musk that troubled the brain'. Dandies such as Wilde were distinguished by their sensual luxuriance, and the distinctive aroma generated by odiferous accessories

such as buttonholes, hair oil, snuff, cologne, and perfumed handkerchiefs. Indeed, they could even be transfigured *into* these objects, with one parody of Wilde's work in *Punch* featuring a character called 'Dorian – a button-hole'. Yet, like the fop and macaroni before him, the artificiality and stifling aroma of the dandy also implied that he was not to be trusted in romantic matters (Maxwell 2017: 42-8; Hanson 2014: 152; Raby 2014: 166).

During Wilde's sensational trial for gross indecency in 1895, he was questioned by the prosecution about his lover Lord Alfred Douglas' poem 'Two Loves', which was taken to allude to homosexual love – 'the love that dare not speak its name'. In the poem, two figures walk through an overgrown garden, like the fabled Garden of Love, which is bursting into bloom. The contrasting floral motifs demarcate the men's differing identities, with the first joyous youth (true

love) said to be blooming, with his hair twined with flowers, and his neck draped in garlands of roses like Cupid himself. But the second sad figure (shame) sighed his way through the garden, with his head wreathed with 'moon-flowers pale as lips of death'. The moonflower provides one of the most powerful floral clues as to the identity of transgressive love, since it only blooms at night. In court, Wilde countered that the contrast was not between

'natural' and 'unnatural' love, but rather the deep spiritual and intellectual bond between an older and a younger man, which in line with Platonic philosophy should be seen as 'the noblest form of affection'.

The very nature of love, its presence or absence, desirability or deceit, conformity or transgression, can all be judged through scent, with the frisson of flirtation, the intensity of desire, and pain of betrayal all distinguished by particular

odours. These have ranged historically from the sweet perfumes of roses and violets to the earthy tones of musk and civet, to the herbal scents of rosemary and thyme, enabling us to situate love firmly in its distinct olfactory environment. Whilst certain smells have unequivocally shaped the experience of love, love in turn has determined how these scents are experienced by the body, creating greater sensitivity to and

receptiveness toward the natural world. Even the memory of a love departed can be most powerfully captured in the smells which live on, quickening the senses and preserving the identity of the beloved through time:

Odours, when sweet violets sicken,

Live within the sense they quicken.

Rose leaves, when the rose is dead,

Are heaped for the belovèd's bed;

And so thy thoughts, when thou art gone,

Love itself shall slumber on.

Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Music when Soft Voices Die* (1824)

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TAGS

Aestheticism ● Ambergris ● Aphrodisiacs ● Arcadia ● Beau ● Castoreum ● Civet ● Commercialisation ● Courtly love ● Courtship ● Cythera forest ● Dandy ● Decadence ● Desire ● Fertility ● Fish ● flowers ● Fop ● Fountain of Love ● Garden of Eden ● Garden of Love ● Gazing ● Gift exchange ● Herring brine ● Homosexuality ● Intimacy ● lavender ● Letter-writing ● Ling ● Literacy ● Love tokens ● Lust ● Macaroni ● Marriage ● musk ● Otto of roses ● Perfume ● Perfumery ● Perspiration ● Print culture ● Quims ● Red-Herring ● Romantic love ● Romanticism ● rose ● Rosemary ● Selfhood ● Sensibility ● Shopping ● Smelling ● Soil ● Sweet marjoram ● Tasting ● thyme ● Touching ● Venereal disease ● Violet ● Weeds

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