

Scents and Sensibility: Perfume in Victorian Literary Culture by Catherine Maxwell. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2017. ix, 361 pp. ISBN 978-0-19-870175-0. £27; \$40.95.

Quick: what is your favourite scent or perfume? Which fragrance provokes the most intense memories or the promise of future pleasures? Which smell makes you think immediately of late autumn, or uneasily of death? In his essay “On Smells,” Michel de Montaigne opines that, “Of scents, the simple and natural seem to me the most pleasing, and I have often observed that they cause an alteration in me, and work upon my spirits according to their several virtues.” The fictional Montaigne shares these insights with Walter Pater’s Gaston de Latour, who appreciates both the “fineness of sensation” generated by “these unpremeditated thoughts” and the “exquisite words” Montaigne employs to express his responses. Catherine Maxwell’s learned study of Victorian scents and sensibilities, and the most accomplished *olfactifs* of the era, is equally attentive to literary sensory stimulation and the cultural politics of smell. “Deprecated as one of the lower senses,” she explains, “smell, too often associated with a primitive corporeality, is a potential embarrassment to a hygienic, rational, modern-day society. Yet while smell as both sense and sensation can connote a rude or raw physicality at odds with civilized manners and values, it can also signal the transcending or sublimation of that rawness.”

How thorough is this exemplary study? The reader not only learns which brand of scented soap A.C. Swinburne preferred (J.C. and J. Fields of Lambeth’s samphire soap), but which of two kinds of samphire was distilled to make it, how it was marketed with a quote from *King Lear* (“Half way down / Hangs one that gathers samphire, dreadful trade!”), and how Swinburne’s own *Atalanta in Calydon* was misquoted in Fields’s advertisements. The book is meticulous in its details, ample in the range of authors (Swinburne, Pater, Oscar Wilde, and Arthur Symons of course, but also Michael Field, Mary Robinson, and Virginia Woolf), and persuasive in its argument.

Given the attention paid to the pleasures of scent, it seems only right to outline the intellectual pleasures of the book. The multifaceted argument is presented in the lucid, engaging style one expects in Maxwell’s work. The research is not only impeccable but extensive (not just aestheticist and decadent authors, but early Modernists, and the history of perfumery, especially in England). Maxwell obviously enjoyed the work required for the project – evident in the list of blogs consulted, the perfume “study day” at the Victoria & Albert Museum, the visits to Versailles and the Guerlain headquarters in Paris to experience the recreation of famous scents. Overall, it is a capacious book. Like Isobel Armstrong’s *Victorian Glassworlds: Glass Culture and the Imagination, 1830–1880* and Michel Pastoureau’s *Blue: The History of a*