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Catherine Maxwell, *Scents and Sensibility: Perfume in Victorian Literary Culture*
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As the author of two other monographs involving the Victorian sensory imagination, *The Female Sublime from Milton to Swinburne: Bearing Blindness* (Manchester University Press, 2001) and *Second Sight: The Visionary Imagination in Late Victorian Literature* (Manchester University Press, 2008), Catherine Maxwell brings her vast historical knowledge of literary figures of the Victorian period to her latest study, *Scents and Sensibility: Perfume in Victorian Literary Culture*.

Scents and Sensibility is a work of literary history peppered with analysis of scent-related texts. Maxwell reads many of these texts as demonstrating a given author's idiosyncratic tastes but also as revealing deeper connections to cultural mores and metaphors. These connections, in turn, blossom into fuller readings of the texts themselves as we better understand them in their cultural contexts. The main organizing principle of this study, therefore, is a focus on the authors, whom Maxwell identifies as *olfactifs*, those particularly sensitive to odours as an indicator of their Decadent aesthetic credentials.

The helpful introduction outlines the goals of this study, confining it to the realms of the literary and the aesthetic, steering clear of 'bad smells' and everyday odours. In her first chapter, 'Top Notes: Victorian Perfume Contexts', Maxwell discusses the complex social mores surrounding the perception of scent in the Victorian era. She begins by exploring olfaction's paradoxical status as both potentially crudely corporeal in its connection with bodily odours and transcendent in its implementation as incense in religious rites. Perfume, which scents the body (or clothing) with pleasant smells, occupies a space of tension. Maxwell also discusses how Victorian beliefs about hygiene, the consumption of material goods, and the proliferation of synthetics had a role in perfume's wide proliferation in Victorian Britain, a proliferation which

has been the victim of generalizations and oversights in favor of comparisons to French culture. Using almanacs and advertisements, Maxwell demonstrates that the way Victorians wrote about perfume was not necessarily the way they actually used and enjoyed it. The animalic scent of musk, for instance, was not typically represented as appropriate for a well-bred Victorian woman to wear; however, Maxwell reveals that many popular scents were created with musk and that these products were sold in abundance. Additionally, men were not generally regarded as wearing scent, and yet perfumes in the guise of soap, buttonholes, and scented tobacco were common. Furthermore, the *fin-de-siècle* dandy often used cologne to signal urbanity, while it was also used as literary shorthand for corruption.

Maxwell's focus on the *olfactif* begins towards the end of the first chapter with an exploration of the connection between olfactory sensitivity and poetic nature. She notes that Romantic poets and their poetry were often compared to fragrance. Thus, the ability to detect the subtle scent of dying strawberry leaves, for instance, became a sign of aesthetic refinement. Chapter 2, 'Perfumed Melodies, Violet Memories: Scent and Remembrance in the Nineteenth Century' gives a sampling of the poetry that links scent with memory, including the work of Percy Shelley, Alfred Tennyson, and Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper writing under the name 'Michael Field.' In this chapter, Maxwell also notes that scent is often described in a synesthetic manner, using the language of music to describe its ephemeral character. This chapter introduces major themes of renewal, memory, and influence that return in the subsequent chapters.

Chapters 3 to 7 will be of particular interest to scholars of Decadence, as these closely investigate the personal character of aesthetic writers in relation to their use of scent in literature. Though Decadent poetry is generally associated with the narcotic scents of lily and tuberose, in Chapter 3 'Les Fleurs du Mâle: Algernon Swinburne and Walter Pater' Maxwell argues that some Decadent poets, particularly Swinburne, preferred more natural scents in their writing as well as personal lives, but that they were no less *olfactifs*. With Pater, Maxwell introduces the label of

flaireur, which goes beyond *olfactif* in the reliance of one's identity on the sense of smell. Pater's alchemy of scent and influence, in turn, influenced Oscar Wilde, who is more fully explored in Chapter 7, 'Dandies and Decadents: Oscar Wilde and Arthur Symonds'. Chapter 4 returns to scent's conflicted role in conjunction with the body and sexuality and discusses John Addington Symonds's comparisons between flowers and the male body in his *Studies of the Greek Poets*, and Lafcadio Hearn's descriptions of the scent of women of different races and cultures. Chapter 5 begins to show the fruit of Maxwell's labours in an extended reading of Mark André Raffalovich's *Tuberose and Meadowsweet*. In her reading, Maxwell capitalizes on previously discussed metaphors involving scent's capacity to indicate the ephemeral moment, male sexuality, and deadly pleasure. Chapter 6 extends the conversation to address feminine desire in the poetry of Michael Field. And Chapter 7 makes the intriguing choice of not only discussing Wilde's use of scent in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as an indicator of a fall into Decadent influence, but also addressing *Teleny* as a point of comparison to show further connections between scent, music, and desire.

The closing chapters explore how the use of scent in literature can metaphorically represent both the transient moment cherished by Pater, as well as the tenacity of a lingering memory within the work of Symonds. The sillage of scent is a particularly appropriate topic to introduce the final chapter, 'Victorian Drydown and Sillage: Virginia Woolf and Compton Mackenzie', which ends with a recognition that the thematic power of scent lingers into Modernism with authors such as James Joyce and T. S. Eliot, as well as neo-Victorian fiction. However, it is notable that Maxwell no longer uses the moniker *olfactif* or *flaireur* to describe these authors, but *aromancer*, a label, briefly introduced in reference to Pater, that suggests a wizardry employing the full range of scent as a transformative instrument. The reader is left with the impression that Maxwell need not have stopped with Woolf and Mackenzie, but might have wafted into the next century with ease.

Maxwell's work is of the highest level of scholarship, invaluable to anyone interested in Victorian conceptions of scent and the sensory experience. It is also of particular use to those interested in the *fin de siècle* Aesthetic movement, upon which it focuses much of its analysis, contrary to the title's punning suggestion that it may discuss Jane Austen's novels (which it does not). Many scholars will be interested in Maxwell's readings of individual poems, which, when read in the light of her cultural exploration of scent often have more to them than our current generalizations of Victorian relationships to scent would suggest. Maxwell's reading of Symonds's 'Mundi Victima' is a particular highlight its blending of historical analysis and close reading. Any criticism levelled against Maxwell's study is that which might be levelled against Wilde or Baudelaire: that its richness risks overwhelming the senses. However, Maxwell guards against this with refreshing clarity and precision, making this a significant addition to Victorian and Decadence studies.