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Cheryl Krueger, *Perfume on the Page in Nineteenth-Century France*. Toronto Buffalo London: University of Toronto Press, 2023. Xvii + 364pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$95.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9781487546557; \$36.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9781487546564; \$36.95 U.S. (epub). ISBN 9781487546571; \$36.95 U.S. (pdf). ISBN 9781487546588.

Review by Anne Green, Professor Emeritus, King's College London

In this fascinating and thoroughly researched study, Cheryl Krueger explores many aspects of nineteenth-century aromas, but as the title suggests, she is particularly interested in how they were written about during that period. Western languages are notoriously inadequate when it comes to describing smells. How does one convey the aroma of coffee, for example, to someone who has never experienced it? And how do modern readers respond to the unfamiliar odours that began increasingly to appear in French literature from the mid-century on? Realising that, like most of us, she had all too often skimmed over literary references to scents, the author—after studying theories of olfaction and “sniffing [her] way through hundreds of unfamiliar fragrance samples” (p. xii)—found her understanding of familiar novels and poems had changed. With an awareness of the semiotics of nineteenth-century smells, she discovered that “once unleashed, these fragrances contribute to an understanding of plot, rhetoric, style, and the cultural framework of the text’s production” (p. 7). One of the book’s aims, then, is to “investigate olfactory cues as markers of linguistic, aesthetic, and social codes” (p. 20), and to revisit a selection of literary texts whose scents take on new resonance.

The first chapter, “In a Violet Sillage,” examines changing attitudes to the wafts of scent a passing woman might leave in her wake. Nineteenth-century France saw a transformation in the production and wearing of perfume. A once artisanal craft became a science, and synthetic scents came to supersede natural floral fragrances, boosting the French perfume trade from 2 million francs in 1810 to 100 million francs in 1912 and seducing a new clientele into buying scented products. While trails of female fragrance might be indicative of taste and elegance, to some they were confusing and suspect. By 1905 Antoine Combe, the author of *Influence des parfums et des odeurs sur les névropathes et les hystériques*, was complaining that synthetic perfumes, some overpowering, were now available to women from all levels of society and could not be relied on as indicators of class. His observation that “Il suffit de sortir un instant sur nos grandes avenues pour être aussitôt dans le sillage odoriférant d’une femme du grand ou du demi-monde” (p. 25) is one of many instances where aromas help to blur conventional boundaries—social and moral in this case, but elsewhere physical, spiritual or psychological.

Early chapters draw on the views of anthropologists, linguists, historians, cognitive scientists, and literary scholars to explore how writers coped with the paucity of olfactory vocabulary. Perfumers, chemists, and medical practitioners sought ways of classifying odours with precision. Eugène Rimmel used visual analogies, producing charts that organised scents according to colours, while the extensive classificatory system devised by Septimus Piesse—his “odophone”—sought to translate odours into musical notes. Krueger points out that in his poem, “Une Charogne,” Charles Baudelaire vividly conjures the stench of rotting carrion despite using “few smell words” (p. 101). Instead, here as elsewhere, he invokes the smell by associations, juxtapositions, and human reactions, and by referring to other senses. Such writing about odour elicited polarised reactions. Like Arthur Rimbaud and Joris-Karl Huysmans, Baudelaire was ridiculed for his synaesthetic sense-associations. Although scent evocations such as the famous lines from “Correspondances”: “Il est des parfums frais comme des chairs d’enfants,/ Doux comme les hautbois, verts comme les prairies” are now seen as evidence of poetic genius, many contemporary critics viewed his attraction to scents and olfactory description with deep suspicion. “Baudelaire paraît avoir été un olfactif avec perversions sexuelles” wrote one; “il y avait en lui une sorte d’amour maladif des parfums,” commented another (cit. p. 96).

While Baudelaire’s poems, Huysmans’ *A Rebours* and Edmond de Goncourt’s *Chérie* may be obvious candidates for an exploration of “perfume on the page,” less so are novels such as *Paul et Virginie* or *Madame Bovary*, where scent is less immediately evident. But with an attentive eye, Krueger picks out a network of associations between Bernardin de St Pierre’s *Virginie* and the scent of violets; likewise in Flaubert’s novel she notes recurrent references not only to the gentle fragrance of iris but to a great range of subtle smells that “permeate the text, linking or confusing innocent and daring actions, thus creating an equivocal sillage that some critics may have correlated, consciously or not, with the novel’s ambiguity” (p. 203). Ambiguity is one of perfume’s characteristics. If the scent of violets connoted modesty, innocence and chastity—as it did in *Paul et Virginie* and as it continued to do for *jeunes filles* throughout the nineteenth century—that social message could also mislead. Krueger notes that as Emile Zola’s *Nana* rises in society as a high-class prostitute, she replaces her heavy, musky scents with that of violets. Permeating her luxurious home as well as her person, *Nana*’s violet perfume is described by Zola as “troublant,” for like many of the aromas examined here, it could be manipulated or misread. Like *Nana*, Goncourt’s *Chérie* subverts the modest violets of *Paul et Virginie*. She drenches the book with her own perfume in an act that Krueger sees as “render[ing] romantic pages naturalist by giving them odour” and articulating Goncourt’s new aesthetics against those of the past (p. 218). In her voluptuous passion for heavy, complex scents, *Chérie* enacts “an exaggerated refusal to follow the conventions of fragrance fashion: she enjoys blended bouquets, animalic notes, strong and oriental perfumes” which are presented as “anti-social, pathological, destructive, and toxic” (p. 221)—in keeping with the focus of much of Goncourt’s fiction.

Attention to the perfumes of fiction is only one strand of this densely researched and wide-ranging book. Interwoven with the literary insights are discussions of medical treatises (for distinctive bodily odours could be clues to diagnosis), etiquette manuals, and works on olfaction for professional perfumers. Moreover, the authors of these diverse categories of writing often borrowed from one another: novelists recycled material from perfume manuals, perfumers quoted novelists and poets, and medical writers referred to characters from fiction to support their diagnoses. Even so, their needs differed. Whereas doctors and perfumers had practical or financial motives for seeking to define smells with precision, writers of fiction could and did use olfactory

language more freely, following shifts in aesthetic taste or in readers' expectations and experience.

Krueger draws attention to a correlation often implicit in literary texts between perfume-wearing and "notions of the fascinating but disturbing other, in faraway lands or closer to home" (p. 237). Exotic, "oriental" perfumes abound, echoing the orientalist tropes common in works of fiction and beauty manuals in the later nineteenth century and exploited as marketing tools for scented products. Although such fragrances conjured mystery and distant allure, they also bore a whiff of danger. The Comtesse de Gencé, author of advice manuals for young women, was forthright in warning against the physical and moral threat they posed: "Défiez-vous surtout de ces bouquets exotiques.... L'Orient produit des essences qui sont de véritables poisons pour la pensée et presque aussi funestes que l'opium et le haschich" (cit. p. 247).

In the view of some, all perfumes, whether exotic or not, were dangerous and therefore in need of control: the modification of healthy, natural smells might signal physical or moral corruption, and the misuse or overuse of perfume risked putting not only the wearer but innocent bystanders at risk, unbalancing them in body and mind. The very language of smell came under suspicion of transmitting psychological disorders. Krueger cites the social critic Max Nordau, who vehemently objected to authors such as Goncourt, Huysmans and Zola because of the "unhealthy predominance of the sensations of smell" in their writings (p.131). Such fears, Krueger suggests, may have stemmed from a residual belief about the toxic consequences of inhaling miasmatic air. Was it a coincidence, she wonders, that many novels in which smell is a prominent feature were likewise considered dangerous in their time?

Intriguing details add to the interest of this study. We discover that musk, which comes from an excretory gland of the musk deer, was sold in the nineteenth century with fur and tail attached as proof of authenticity. We learn that one late-century advice manual warned young women against wearing musk, not only because the scent was so overpowering, but because for their elders it would be a traumatic reminder of 1870, when invading Prussian soldiers reeked of the musk they used to kill lice. We find that patchouli, too, was used as an insect repellent on fabric, this time in India; fashionable, high-quality imported shawls carried the scent, distinguishing them from inferior French versions until unscrupulous dealers started to add a whiff of patchouli to their fraudulent wares. And we read reports of Parisian women injecting themselves with perfume to infuse their whole body with fragrance (though this was almost certainly a sensational urban myth linked to morphine abuse), and about the alarming "lance-parfum" device which is said to have induced intoxication, hallucinations, heart problems, or worse.

Among the book's forty-five scent-related illustrations are advertisements for perfumes and colognes and paintings of women sensually inhaling fragrance. Perfume was mainly viewed as feminine, though Krueger acknowledges that men, too, used scented products. The social codes of male perfuming evolved during the period along with constructs of masculinity, and it is clearly a male hand that features in an arresting image of a "bague à jet d'odeur"—a finger-ring described as "both useful and ornamental" that squirts out a spray of perfume at the touch of the thumb (p.39).

With its wealth of original detail and analysis and its extensive bibliography, this book will be welcomed by French cultural historians and literary scholars as well as by those working in the growing research area of scent studies.

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