

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

ESSAYS

Book 1 · Chapter 55

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Of smells and odors

IT IS REPORTED of some, namely of *Alexander*, that their sweate, through some rare and extraordinarie complexion, yeelded a sweete-smelling savour; whereof *Plutarke* and others seeke to finde out the cause. But the common sorte of bodies are cleane contrarie, and the best qualitie they have, is to be cleare of any smell at all. The sweetnes of the purest breaths hath nothing more perfect in them, then to be without savour, that may offend-us: as are those of healthie-sound children. And therefore saith *Plautus*;

Mulier tum benè olet, ubi nihil olet.

*Then smell's a woman purely well,
When she of nothing else doth smell.*

The most exquisit and sweetest savour, of a woman, it is to smell of nothing; and sweet, well-smelling, strange savours, may rightly be held suspicious in such as use them; and a man may lawfully thinke, that who useth them, doth-it to cover some naturall defect: whence proceede these ancient Poeticall sayings. *To smell sweet, is to stinke,*

*Rides nos Coracine nil olentes,
Malo quàm benè olere, nil olere,*

*You laugh at us that we of nothing savour,
Rather smell so, then sweeter (by your savour.)*

And else where.

Posthume non benè olet, qui benè semper olet.

*Good sir, he smells not ever sweete,
Who smells still sweeter then is meete.*

Yet love I greatly to be entertained with sweete smells, and hate exceedingly all maner of sowre and ill savours, which I shall sooner smell, then any other.

*Namque sagacius unus odoror,
Polypus, an grauis hirsutis cubet hircus in alis,
Quàm canis acer ubi lateat sut.*

*Sooner smell I, whether a cancred nose,
Or ranke gote-smell in hairie arme-pits lie,
Then sharpest hounds, where rowting bores repose.*

The simplest and meerely-naturall smels, are most pleasing unto me; which care ought chiefly to concerne women. In the very heart of *Barbarie*, the Scithian women, after they had washed themselves, did sprinkle, dawbe, and powder all their bodies and faces over, with a certaine odoriferous drug, that groweth in their countrie: which dust and dawbing being taken away, when they come neere men or their husbands, they remaine very cleane, and with a very sweete-savouring perfume. What odor soever it be, it is strange to see, what hold it wil take on-me, and how apt my skinne is to receive-it. He that complaineth against nature, that she hath not created man with a fit instument, to carry sweete smels fast-tied to his nose, is much to blame: for, they carry themselves. As for me in particular, my mostachoes, which are very thicke, serve me for that purpose. Let me but approach my gloves or my hand-kercher to them, their smell will sticke upon them a whole day. They manifest the place I come-from. The close-smacking, sweetnesse-moving, love-aluring, and greed-smirking kisses of youth, were heretofore wont to sticke on them many houres after; yet am I little subject to those popular diseases, that are taken by conversation, and bred by the contagion of the ayre: And I have escaped those of my time, of which there hath been many and severall kindes, both in the townes about me, and in our Armie. We reade of *Socrates*, that during the time of many plagues and relapses of the pestilence, which so often infested the Cittie of *Athens*, he never forsooke or went out of the towne: yet was he the onely man, that was never infected, or that felt any sicknesse. Phisitians might (in mine opinion) draw more use and good from odours, then they doe. For, my selfe have often perceived, that according unto their strength and qualitie, they change and alter, and move my spirits, and worke strange effects in me: which makes me approve the common saying, that the invention of incense and perfumes in Churches, so ancient and so farre-dispersed throughout all nations and religions, had an especiall regard to rejoyce, to comfort, to quicken, to rowze, and to purifie our senses, that so we might be the apter and readier unto contemplation. And the better to judge of it, I would I had my parte of the skill, which some cookes have, who can so curiously season and temper strange odors with the savour and rellish of their meates. As it was especially observed in the service of the King of *Tunes*, who in our dayes landed at *Naples*, to meete and enter-parly with the Emperour *Charles* the fifth. His viands were so exquisitely farced, and so sumptuously seasoned with sweete odoriferous drugs, and aromaticall spices, that it was found upon his booke of accompts, the dressing of one peacocke, and two fesants amounted to one hundred duckets; which was

their ordinary maner of cooking his meates. And when they were carved-up, not onely the dining-chambers, but all the roomes of his pallace, and the streetes round about-it were replenished with an exceeding odoriferous and aromaticall vapour, which continued a long time after. The principall care I take, wheresoever I am lodged, is to avoide, and be farre from all maner of filthy, foggy, ill-savoring, and unwholsome aires. These goodly Citties of strangely-seated *Venice*, and huge-built *Paris*, by reason of the muddie, sharp, and offending savors, which they yeeld; the one by her fennie and marish scituation, the other by her durtie uncleannesse, and continuall mire, doe greatly alter and diminish the favour which I beare them.