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"Wicked with Roses": Floral Femininity and the Erotics of Scent
by Christina Bradstreet



Fig. 1. Charles Courtney Curran, *Scent of the Rose*, 1890. Oil on panel. Private Collection.

For the cultural historian of smell, representations of the act of smelling are rich with evidence about social and cultural formations.¹ In particular, the abundance of paintings and other visual images featuring women inhaling floral fragrance c.1860 – 1910 forms a compelling body of evidence about nineteenth and early twentieth-century constructions of gender. Though more often represented as a solitary rather than a socialized activity, pictures of women smelling flowers impart a variety of messages. Flowers can be shown to be smelled in manifold ways, and interpretations of such images depend on subtle distinctions in the visual presentation of the olfactory experience. A variety of factors, such as the precise way in which the flower is held and its distance from the nose, as well as body posture, facial expression, open or closed eyes, clothes, and environment have a significant bearing upon the representation of femininity. Whether the female figure is shown daintily tilting the rose to her face, presenting the blossom to her lover, or lustily burying her nose into a lavish bloom, the simple gesture of smelling flowers can present a number of different meanings including eligibility for polite courtship, sexual impropriety, and the fantasy of sexual abandon.² It can suggest a pre-sexual innocence and a child's inquisitiveness about the world or the sexual awakening of a young girl entirely overcome by the scent of the flowers around her.³ Indeed, the sense of smell invited such a variety of symbolic attachments that nineteenth-century artists were able to use this motif as a versatile sign of female sexuality to represent anything from moral laxity to innocent chastity.



Fig. 2. John William Waterhouse, *The Soul of the Rose*, 1908. Oil on Canvas. London, Pre-Raphaelite Inc, Julian Hartnoll.

Depictions of women smelling flowers defined femininity not only through body language and the representation of the physical gesture of smelling but also with reference to contemporary popular and scientific ideas about odor, olfaction and female sexuality. Yet to date, almost nothing has been written about the ways in which the cultural history of smell might influence the reading of those works. This article aims to integrate the mechanics of cross-sensorial representation into a discussion of the nineteenth-century debates surrounding smell and female sexual morality. Through a detailed visual analysis of Charles Courtney Curran's *Scent of the Rose* (1890, fig. 1) and John William Waterhouse's *The Soul of the Rose* (1908, fig. 2), I want to attempt a new synthesis of art analysis and the cultural history of the senses, in order to demonstrate the level of enhanced analytical appreciation that can be attained when these works are considered in the context of the interplay between smell and femininity.⁴

Through the thematic comparison of the work of an American impressionist with that of an English artist often labeled as Post-Pre-Raphaelite, transatlantic commonalities regarding the cultural connotations of smell and female sexuality will be revealed. In particular, due to the cross-cultural pervasiveness of popular and scientific ideas, knowledge about the effects of odor upon women will be shown to have filtered into the art of two seemingly

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disparate artists. Moreover, by demonstrating the mutual inspiration that such ideas held for Curran and Waterhouse, this article will challenge the traditional art historical division between Victorian Neo-classicism, with which Waterhouse, a Royal Academician, is generally associated and the ostensibly more progressive impressionist style adapted by Paris-studio-trained artists like Curran.⁵ Most importantly however, I will demonstrate the ways in which these paintings engaged the sense of the smell and I will also pursue the continuities between English and American cultural connotations of that sense with regard to female sexuality.

The cultural associations of smell have received growing scholarly attention since the publication of Alain Corbin's *The Foul and the Fragrant* (1982) opened the way for a cultural history of smell.⁶ Yet, while scholars have begun to explore the cultural connotations of smell as physically experienced and as described in literature, very little attention has been given to the visual representation of odor. Indeed, to what extent can the scent of roses affect mood and meaning or act as an emotional or intellectual marker when represented visually in a painting or other image? Given that the essence of invisible scent evades capture in pictorial design, with much of the experience of olfactory perception lost in translation, it is useful to consider the degree to which the personal and cultural nuances of the olfactory can nevertheless influence the reception and interpretation of an image in which scent is represented.⁷

I would argue that it is because odor is intangible and ethereal that the visual representation of both its conception and its reception plays such an important role in locating the place of smell within society and culture. This is a methodology that owes much to Richard Leffert, who, in *The Sight of Sound* (1993), considers the way in which music acts not only as sound but also as sight, as something both observed and represented as well as heard. Leffert "reads" artistic depictions of music-making c.1600–1900 for what they suggest about sound's social meaning and the way in which musical activity contributes to socio-cultural formations. He argues that although paintings cannot replicate music, visual records of the sight of music's performance can provide an important account of what, how, and why a given society heard; and hence in part what the sounds meant within a particular social and cultural order.⁸ Connections between sound and society, he suggests, are revealed through artistic engagement with semiotic codes that operate as sight when music is made in real life, such as bodily expressions, gestures, interactions between audience and performers, use of instruments, costume and surroundings. The sight of musical performance, he argues, is no less a part of the music than the fabric of the notes and helps situate sounds within social space. He cites the Flemish painter David Teniers as an example of an empowered bourgeois artist, who, in his peasant paintings, associated the sounds of the lower classes with anarchy, which he registered visually in rowdy scenes such as drunken jigs danced to bawdy folk music.⁹ Such images can thus be seen to preserve a particular social order of sound and act as an agent of prestige formation. In much the same way, it can be argued that late nineteenth-century sights of smell and smelling were infused with class and gender politics, to which today's viewer remains sensible, though the smells represented evaporated long ago. Thus, in this article, representations of the visual-performative aspect of women smelling roses will be analyzed in conjunction with the specific cultural associations of floral fragrance in order to

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attain a nuanced reading of Curran's and Waterhouse's scent-evocative paintings.



Fig. 3. Charles Courtney Curran, *The Peris*, 1892. Oil on canvas. Collection of Dr. Ronald Berg, Monticello, New York.



Fig. 4. Charles Courtney Curran, *The Perfume of Roses*, 1902. Oil on canvas. Washington, National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.



Fig. 5. Charles Courtney Curran, *The Cobweb Dance*, 1904. Oil on canvas. Cragmoor, New York, Blake Benton, Fine Art.

During his early career, both while training in Paris and on his return to New York, Curran painted a number of small allegorical oil paintings, which included the *Scent of the Rose*, *The Peris* (1892, fig.3), *The Dew* (1900?), *The Perfume of Roses* (1902, fig. 4) and *The Cobweb Dance* (1904, fig.5) and which were based upon the Persian myth of the peris or furies.¹⁰ These fairy fantasies, in which fairy-women "lie in beds of soft rose petals, press their noses to the flowers, and luxuriate in an atmosphere that one can sense palpably" belong to the genre of what Annette Stott has described as American "floral-female painting."¹¹ That is to say, in these works a visual analogy is drawn between flower and female figure, with composition, color and texture manipulated to "make the women look as much like flowers as possible."¹² For example, the dresses worn by the fairies in *The Perfume of Roses* are described in the painting's copyright certificate as "green, red and yellowish costumes" and these correspond with the shades of the adjacent "Bride," Jaquemint", "Golden Gate" and pink roses festooned about the figures' thus promoting the metaphor of woman as flower through the simple expedient of juxtaposition.¹³ However, what is most remarkable about these paintings is the way in which the swooning rose-fairies are made to resemble flowers not only in visual but also in olfactory terms.¹⁴

The peris, as Curran explained in an article for *Palette and Bench*, (a student art journal of which he and his wife were co-editors), were fairy-like figures "condemned as a punishment to live in the air and subsist on the perfume of flowers" and as such these works are rich with the visual suggestion of floral fragrance.¹⁵ In his synesthetic explorations of the floral-female equivalency, Curran employed a number of visual techniques to suggest the idea of perfume and to draw out the visual comparison between woman and scent. In these paintings, the airiness of the fairy figures acts as a metaphor for the insubstantiality of scent, although this does not appear to have registered directly with critics, whose comments were focused mainly upon Curran's use of delicate coloring.¹⁶ Yet, as becomes clear from his comments in *Palette and Bench*, Curran specifically intended the soft-tinted lighting diffused throughout these works to "suggest the idea of perfume" and the scented realm within which the fairies dwell. Thus in *The Perfume of Roses*, "a warm yellow light falls across the roses and figures from the left, and from the upper right side, [while a] cool, pearly light gives an opalescent play of colour on the shadow sides."¹⁷ Other techniques were also employed. Of *The Peris*, he noted "the linear scheme of the composition is that of a swinging movement, symbolizing the life in the air" contributing to a sense both of the swooping and flitting motion of fairies on the wing and of flowing currents of scent.¹⁸ In *The Cobweb Dance*, the dewy threads of spider silk radiating from the white lilies appear like jets of scent spurting into the vapory night sky. Moreover, in *The Peris* diaphanous dresses worn by the fairies float like fragrance trails through the air and seem to diffuse into visual nothingness. These sheer, gossamer-like gowns are particularly evocative of scent, due to the way that they drape against the tea rose blossoms, with loose swirls of fabric seemingly spiralling out of the surface of the petals, like fragrant emanations. Thus perfume and peris are coalesced in these works in which the simple gesture of holding a flower to the nose as well as effects of color and composition work to suggest the scented air within which the fairies live and breathe.

Curran's sylph-like figures, in their elegant wispy dresses, can be read as visual embodiments of insubstantial perfume and, as such, one can read the title *The Perfume of Roses* as a dual reference to both the olfactory and the female subjects of the painting. Curran explained that in this painting each fairy personifies the perfume of the type of rose that it tends to.

In this painting the effort is made to personify the odors of different kinds of roses. The seated figure at the left holds in her hands one Jacqueminot rose, her auburn hair rests against another, and she is half intoxicated with the rich, spicy odor of that rose. The standing figure beside her inhales with delight the fruity sweetness of a pink rose, while the floating figure, adorned with light draperies and opal strings, is caressing the faint-scented white rose.¹⁹

Thus Curran's paintings of fairy-women, subsisting on the scented air they breathe, present a fantasy in which not only is femininity depicted as rose-scented, but also rose scent is endowed with a visual presence through the female form.

Curran's paintings present a fascinating definition of womanhood that fuses floral scent with feminine mystique, and nowhere is this more evident than in *Scent of the Rose*. As in the slightly larger pieces already discussed, this miniature painting offers an intimate window onto a fairy domain, a rose bush at night. Measuring just over 11 x 31 cm, (approximately 4 1/3 x 12 1/4 inches), the size is appropriate for a painting that negotiates the limits of the visible and the world of the invisible through the representation of fairies and scent. Moreover, the small-scale nature of the work also contributes to a sense of an object for personal, tactile involvement and private pleasure. In the painting, scent drifts on airy currents, wafting from and against opulent petals, endowing the painting with a mysterious aura and forming a tantalizing veil through which the pleasures of a feminine realm can be voyeuristically enjoyed. Behind this perfume screen, a nude, fairy-like figure can be glimpsed, seated within the cupped petals of a rose. Her body emerges pistil-like from among the splendid corolla; a dainty, doll-like embodiment of femininity that instantly associates female sexuality with flowers—the reproductive organs of a plant. All around her, roses are blown open; their petals peeled open, uncurled and outspread in seductive disarray, as if simultaneously proffering their scent while lapping it up with their tongue-like forms. These overblown roses form a kind of floral constellation about her, endowing the painting with a celestial ambience. Eyes closed, she seems lost in reverie. Her presence signifies calmness, a lull among the scent-tossed blooms. There is a sense of quiet about her and her solitude is suggested through the visual emphasis upon the space that engulfs her. By meandering through the dark chasmic spaces about her, scent, as visualized, works to emphasize the idea of self-absorption, reverie and the feminine pleasures of the olfactory imagination.

Perfume has of course a long association with the feminine—with sentiment, home-making and seduction, the privacy of the toilette and the intimacy of lovers—as well as with personal, womanly experiences of intuition, memory and the imagination. In that context, the conjunction of floral fragrance and the female form in Curran's paintings seems to promote a traditional ideology of middle-class femininity in which women are associated with love-making and home-making rather than the wage-earning of the

burgeoning body of financially independent career-minded women.²⁰ While advocates of the "New Woman" ideal were campaigning for women to liberate themselves from male domination and to manage their own lives, deciding for themselves, for example, if and when and whom to marry and how many children to have, Curran presents the male voyeur with a fantasy of femininity in which sexually available women while away the hours by tending to flowers.

If one reads the flower/women metaphor as a conservative response to women's increasingly active presence in public and political life, the fusion of the fragrant and the feminine in these works might be seen as integral to an attempt to preserve a hyper-image of passive femininity. Such a reading may help explain the strong appeal for Curran's works among middle-class, male patrons of the arts who favored the suggestion of a floral femininity embodying, in Stott's terms, "cultivated beauty, silence, moral purity, graceful but limited movement, decorative function and a discreet suggestion of fertility."²¹ Thus, for example, *The Peris* and *The Perfume of the Roses* were bought by William T. Evans, a dry-goods magnate who, from 1891, housed his large collection of contemporary American art in a purpose-built picture gallery in his New York mansion.²² Such works were also of national, public interest. *The Peris* earned the artist an honorable mention when lent by its second owner, C. C. Glover, to the 1900 Paris Exposition, while *The Dew*, was bought at the fair by Georges Leygues, the French Minister of Public Instruction and Fine Arts, possibly on behalf of the Ministry of Fine Arts.²³ *The Perfume of Roses* meanwhile, was sufficiently valued by Evans to be included in his donation of prized art works to the Smithsonian American Art Museum in 1909.²⁴ It seems likely that in offering a conservative reaction to the emergence of feminist ideals in Europe and North America during the 1890s and early 1900s, these works satisfied a nostalgic demand among private collectors and national institutions for an earlier ideal of a passive and genteel fertile-femininity.

In *Scent of the Rose*, the rose incense permeating the air, suggested by the violet smoky haze that caresses the sumptuous blooms as it spirals out of the thurible held by the rose fairy, is suggestive of feminine fecundity. Like some mystic form of sexual consummation, scent wafts out from the censer towards the luminous, radiant bloom opposite, to mingle among its yellow, pollen-smearred stamens. Since a single flower contains both male and female reproductive organs, it is interesting to note the way in which Curran genders these two voluminous white blooms. While the highly visible stamens of the flower on the far right suggest a male gendering, the visual emphasis on the fairy clearly marks out the left-hand bloom as female.²⁵ In addition, one can note that the censer that she holds is spherical in shape and might be likened to the flower's ovary which, when fertilized, will mature into a rosehip, packed with ripening seed. Indeed, the fairy-woman is visually associated with the thurible, to which she is connected by her clasp, her gaze, and her deluge of long black hair, streaming down to her lap. She holds the object in front of her, in line with her womb, drawing a clear connection between the female reproductive parts of the flower and that of the woman. Moreover, her erotic sensuality, her heat, is suggested by the jets of flame spurting from her thurible /womb and the reddish glow that they cast upon her body. Sexually speaking, she is ablaze.

In her book *Bloom*, Amy M. King has traced the broad

popularization of Linnaeus's system for the gendering of floral parts and has revealed the impact of this widespread legibility of the sexuality of flowers upon the Victorian literary imagination. Most notably, she has demonstrated the pervasiveness of the metaphor of feminine "bloom" in nineteenth-century novels to suggest sexual promise (attractiveness, availability and nubility) and eligibility for marriage.²⁶ Although as a painting *Scent of the Rose* lacks a marriage plot such as is to be found in Louisa May Alcott's *Rose in Bloom* (1876), a novel about the coming of age of a Boston society debutante, the "bloom" metaphor nevertheless still works to emphasize the sexual maturity and erotic appeal of the female figure.²⁷ Indeed, in Curran's painting, the female figure (a bloom among blooms) being cupped by petals is, quite literally, *in bloom*.

The metaphor of female bloom was often associated in literature with the historic symbolism of the rose as the female flower or genitalia and also with ideas about the erotic potential of scent. Ivan Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* (1861), offers a case in point. In the seduction scene leading up to the duel between Bazarov and Pavel, Bazarov, a young doctor, joins Fenichka, the housekeeper and mother of Nikolai's child, as she sits on a bench arranging red and white roses into a bouquet. The beauty of this restless, dreamy and languorous girl is like that of the roses she sorts. She is approaching her zenith, for as Turgenev explains, "there is a period in the life of young women when they suddenly begin to expand and blossom like summer roses; such a time had come for Fenichka."²⁸ During their flirtatious exchange, Bazarov requests payment for medical services but states that he does not require money, leaving her to guess as to how he would like to be paid. Eventually he tells her he will settle for one of her red roses, which, suggestively enough, are described as "still wet with dew."²⁹ As she leans forward to inhale its "wonderful scent," he kisses her, and the moment is described in sensuous detail.

Fenichka stretched her little neck forward and put her face close to the flower, ... The kerchief slipped from her hair on to her shoulders, disclosing a soft mass of black shining and slightly ruffled hair. "Wait a moment; I want to smell it with you," said Bazarov; he bent down and kissed her vigorously on her parted lips. She shuddered, pushed him back with both her hands on his breast, but pushed weakly, so that he was able to renew and prolong his kiss.³⁰

In this scene, "the wonderful scent" incites her arousal and orgasmic "shudder" and is suggestive of her peaking bloom and the fresh, youthful scent of her own "rose" or vagina.

Conflations of human and floral sexuality were as common in the visual arts as King has demonstrated them to be in literature. For example, John William Waterhouse maintained a "longstanding association of women with the beauty, simplicity and decay of flowers" which was conveyed in a recurring motif of flower-women, as Peter Trippi has observed.³¹ For example, in *The Soul of the Rose*, the lure of the female figure to the fragrance of the flower might, through association, suggest the enticement of insects to scented petals. Indeed, this metaphor of attraction is reinforced in Waterhouse's *Summer* of 1882, in which butterflies appear to be drawn as much to the female figure as to the flowers that she holds.³² As sociologists Gale Largey and Peter Watson have suggested, the rose acts as a symbol of attraction since we are

drawn to its smell and invite others to admire its aroma.³³ Thus by alluding to ideas about scent and pollination, such paintings can be seen to evoke female sexual allure and fertility. As such they are in striking contrast to stock images, found in cartoons such as those published in *Punch*, of the mannish and androgynous "New Woman" for whom both heterosexual intercourse and childbirth were neither necessary nor desirable.³⁴ However, such allusions were not always so straightforward and I want to suggest that Waterhouse's *The Soul of the Rose* reflects contemporary challenges to conventional gender roles to a greater degree than it might at first appear.

The Soul of the Rose can be read as an aesthetic response to the erotic olfactory imagination.³⁵ In this painting, an auburn-haired beauty is depicted leaning against a garden wall, drinking in the scent of a rose which she presses to her face. Her thick, elongated Pre-Raphaelite neck is extended, stretched out to reach the flower, and every muscle of her body is strained to the act of smelling. She tilts the flower towards her and her lips caress its petals with tender passion, suggesting a fusion of olfactory and gustatory pleasure. However, the conjunction of nose and petal provides the compositional focus, making the painting primarily about the act of smelling and the effect of odor upon body and mind. By collapsing the space between the petals and the sweeping profile of her long, aquiline nose, the direct passage of the inhaled scent into the female body is visually suggested. The figure's eyes are closed, suggesting total concentration upon this one sensory impression, and her left hand clutches the wall, as if for support, as the heady perfume takes its intoxicating effect.

Waterhouse's painting can be read as a rare and fascinating depiction of a woman in the throes of a passionate scented vision that is visually implied but not directly rendered. It reflects a contemporary fascination with the immediacy and emotional poignancy of smell for raising sentimental visions and visual memories of matters close to the heart, which was prevalent both in the literature of the period as well as in psychological research.³⁶ In this context, one can suppose that the scent has aroused her imagination, raising before her closed eyes the near hallucinatory image of a lover. Indeed, her pose provides strong support for this reading, inviting the speculation that while clutching the garden wall, she imagines leaning upon him, her palm flat against his chest. Moreover, we might infer that the bloom, pressed so sensuously against her mouth, has, in her mind, taken on the form of her lover's lips. Certainly, the power of rose scent to arouse the image of a loved one was proverbial. For example, as early as 1868 a writer on the senses for the popular *Penny Illustrated Paper* had mused:

Who cannot recall mingling with the perfume of some favourite flower the still more subtle scent of those glossy tresses, the delicate touch of that dainty hand as it held the bloom? Alone with a rose for fifteen seconds, a man might be a fool to all his senses, and, with his arm, in imagination, round some slim, rounded waist, his eyes looking for a miniature of himself in those mirrors that look back at him, his ears waiting for a whispered word, his lips—well never mind.³⁷

Waterhouse's painting, similarly, suggests the ability of rose-scent to evoke visions. Indeed, we can read the rose-covered wall as the space in which her scent-fuelled imagination has projected the

form of her lover. It calls to mind the passage in Marie Corelli's romance *The Life Everlasting* (1911) in which a red rose, like a rescuing knight, "climbers" up the turret in which the heroine is imprisoned, to reach her as she looked out of her "lofty window," its opening petals lifting themselves towards her like "sweet lips turned up for kisses."³⁸ Moreover, we can also read the rose bush and wall as reflecting herself, since clear comparisons are drawn between rose and woman, which are pressed together like a mirror image. Her cheeks are suffused with a warm roseate flush that ricochets from the bloom pressed against her face while her green, patterned robe seems to replicate the tones and undulating forms of the rose bush that dresses the body of the wall.³⁹ In this way, her amorousness might even be read as self-directed and hence the act of smelling flowers as an autoerotic act, particularly when one considers the rose / vagina metaphor and that the painting is sometimes known by the alternative title of *My Sweet Rose*.⁴⁰ Indeed, if we interpret the act of touching and smelling the rose while fantasizing about a male lover as having masturbatory overtones, the implications of perversity are heightened by the suggestion of "self-harming," as the female protagonist presses her palm against the thorny stem of the rose bush. In any case, there can be no doubt that scent is posited as an erotic entity and a sexual stimulus. Indeed, by matching the hue of the figure's flushed physicality to that of the rose against her cheek, the idea of pleasure aroused and even consummated through the act of smelling is visually conveyed.

Given the title's allusion to a line from Tennyson's *Maud*: "And the Soul of the Rose went into my blood..." it is clear that Waterhouse's painting not only reflects popular and scientific interest in the seemingly mysterious affinity of smell and the memory, but also the contemporary interest in the bodily effects of scent.⁴¹ It conveys much the same sentiment as an article on "flower odors" published in the literary magazine *Continental Monthly* in 1864, which described how perfumes "knock on the heart-doors of memory" and hence "fire the eye or blanch the cheek" or cause one to "blush and smile."⁴² Indeed this connection between the "soul" of the rose and the stimulatory action of odor upon the blood stream and heart-rate is made explicit in Corelli's *The Life Everlasting* as the heroine bends her face over the rose against her breast to inhale its "delicious, soft and penetrating scent" and "half unconsciously" kisses its "velvet petals."

And so for a while we made silent friends with each other till I might have said with the poet—"the soul of the rose went into my blood." At any rate something keen, fine and subtle stole over my senses, moving me to an intense delight in merely being alive... I forgot everything except that I lived and life was ecstasy!⁴³

In the literature of Corelli and the art of Waterhouse, the inhalation of "penetrating" scents into the body is imagined to possess an overwhelming erotic charge of orgasmic intensity.

During the 1880s and 1890s there was considerable physiological interest in the effects of odor stimulation and tranquilization, both sexual and non-sexual. For example, in *Sensation et mouvement* (1887), Charles Féré published his findings in this field, concluding that a kind of "sensorial intoxication" could be produced by the

inhalation of odors leading to heightened visual acuity and general bodily excitation.⁴⁴ His work was developed by Benjamin Ward Richardson, a London anesthetist and specialist in the bodily effects of chemical stimuli, who in 1891 outlined the need for enhanced understanding of the "direct action of odours on the nervous system." He urged for an investigation into why different odors cause drowsiness, wakefulness or even nightmares in some people.⁴⁵ Five years later, T. E. Shields, a student at John Hopkins University, published findings from his thesis on "The Effects of Odours, Irritant Vapours and Mental Work upon the Blood Flow" in the *Journal of Experimental Medicine*, that suggested that pleasant olfactory sensations led to a reduction in the volume of blood supplied to the arm, due to an acceleration of the heart rate and a simultaneous increase in the supply of blood to the brain.⁴⁶ Sweet scents, it seemed, could cause head-rush and a pounding heart.

This research was closely associated with experiments also being undertaken at that time into the reciprocal relationship between the nose and the genitals, including "nose to body" reflexes, such as scent-stimulated sexual arousal as well as "body to nose" reflexes such as orgasmic convulsions induced by fits of sneezing.⁴⁷ Thus for example, in 1898, Ephraim Cutter referred readers of the *Journal of the American Medical Association* to studies made some thirty years earlier into the action of the scents of cologne, rose, camphor, and the fumes of ammonia and sulphur upon the "erectile turgescence" of the nasal mucous membrane. Cutter, a New York physician renowned for the diversity of his contributions to medical literature, claimed to have discovered in 1866 that just

a few whiffs through the nose of any of these odors increased the blood flow and produced immediately a livid injection and turgescence of the erectile tissues on the turbinated bones that stood out as clearly and positively as the erection of an excited turkey cock.⁴⁸

Given that a connection was frequently made in the 1890s and early 1900s between genital arousal and the erection of nasal tissue, it is clear that Cutter not only used highly sexualized vocabulary but also made thinly veiled reference to the sexually arousing powers of perfume. By the end of the nineteenth century, olfactory arousal remained controversial (for example, imbuing Huysmans' writings with their notoriously risqué edge) but the concept was familiar nonetheless.⁴⁹

The Soul of the Rose can also be seen to echo sentiments expressed by sexologists in this period about the properties of odor and color as an aphrodisiac. For example, Havelock Ellis highlighted the nineteenth-century tradition of associating female sexuality with floral scent in *Sexual Selection in Man* (1905). He argued that "it is really the case that in many persons—usually, if not exclusively women—the odor of flowers produces not only a highly pleasurable, but a distinctly and specifically sexual, effect."⁵⁰ Moreover, Ivan Bloch, in *The Sexual Life of Our Times* of 1908, noted the "awakening of libido sexualis in women by the smelling of a bouquet of flowers."⁵¹ He cites Paulo Mantegazza's *The Psychology of Love* (1875) to demonstrate the effect of scent-stimulation upon "sensitive" women and the resemblance between the facial expressions of a woman when smelling a flower and when experiencing orgasm:

Make the chastest women smell the flowers she likes best ... and she will shut her eyes, breathe deeply, and if very sensitive tremble all over, presenting an intimate picture which otherwise she never shows, except perhaps to her lover.⁵²

While enjoyed by the "chastest women," this solitary activity was seen to have clear aberrant overtones. Bloch cites a lady who claimed "I sometimes feel such pleasure in smelling flowers that I seem to be committing a sin."⁵³ The idea of the pleasure of scent inhalation as a mild transgression was well established in nineteenth-century thought. This "sin" of scent arousal is presented in licentious detail in Mantegazza's and Bloch's writings and I would suggest that *The Soul of the Rose* is imbued with a similar voyeuristic charge.

By the 1890s, eroticized ideas about the lewd effects of odor upon the female sex had been in circulation for many decades. As early as 1851, an article in the *Journal of Psychological Medicine and Mental Pathology* described the effect of odor upon heterosexual males as a necessary and healthy part of the reproductive process, but a luxury for women

that in some constitutions cannot be indulged without some danger to the morals, by the excitement of the ovaria which results. And although less potent as aphrodisiacs in their action on the sexual system of women than of man, we have reason to think they cannot be used to excess with impunity by most.⁵⁴

While for men, female body odor and artificial perfumes worn by women were generally thought to lead to arousal, copulation, and the propagation of the human race, female scent arousal was described in masturbatory rather than reproductive terms, with women being attracted to floral rather than male body odors. The erotic appeal of this displaced female sexual attraction from the odor of men to the scent of flowers seems to have been due to its suggestion of something intimate and contrary to the natural order, from which men were excluded but could nevertheless watch or imagine.

In *The Smell of Class* (2004), Janice Carlisle has argued that in Victorian literature "the artificiality of perfume marks the women who are unfit to be wives of the middle-class men of these stories, whilst the faint hint of flowers, the subtle scent of cultivated nature and refined fertility, identifies their proper mates."⁵⁵ Indeed, just as etiquette demanded that refined women wore just a "faint hint of flowers," an emphasis was also placed upon the importance of smelling roses in moderation. One is reminded of the conservatory scene in George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* of 1860 in which Maggie represses her sexual feelings for Stephen out of respect for her childhood sweetheart Philip and her best friend Lucy. In the novel, Stephen and Maggie's passion reaches such a rapturous intensity that Maggie, conscious of Stephen's gaze and her own turbulent emotions, rejects Stephen's advances.

She blushed deeply, turned away her head, and drew her

arm from Stephen's, going up to some flowers to smell them ... "Oh, may I get this rose?" said Maggie ... I think I am quite "Wicked with Roses"; I like to gather them and smell them till they have no scent left.⁵⁶

As Stephen showers Maggie's arms with kisses, the rose becomes a distraction upon which she lavishes her displaced passions, until "quivering with rage and humiliation" she orders him to leave.⁵⁷ The gesture of spurning Stephen and greedily devouring the scent of the rose instead is suggestive of her rejection of productive sexual activity and as such Maggie can be contrasted with Fenichka in *Fathers and Sons*, who is sexually compromised in the act of smelling, when she allows herself to be kissed by Basarov. In a "quivering" rage, Maggie is shown to be in a near hysterical state and it seems that the scent, which she breathes so deeply, excites rather than calms her nerves, leaving her "trembling and panting."⁵⁸ It is as if by experiencing the frustrations of sexual continence, Maggie is left particularly susceptible to the arousing potential of scent. In a scene in which Maggie "is quite "Wicked with Roses", " smell, as the basest sense, serves as the sign and agent of her sexuality and of its illicit nature.⁵⁹



Fig. 6. John William Waterhouse, *The Shrine*, 1895. Oil on Canvas. Private Collection.

If Waterhouse's *The Soul of the Rose* suggests passion through the depiction of voracious smelling, then his earlier painting, *The Shrine* (1895, fig. 6), in which a younger girl, dressed in white, stoops to smell a jug of roses, suggests youthful sexual inquisitiveness and loss of innocence.⁶⁰ As in *The Soul of the Rose*, the viewer assumes the role of voyeur upon a private and intimate moment. Though succumbing to the pleasures of scent, the girl's posture suggests a readiness to spring apart from the flowers, should she be disturbed, and this imbues the scene with a sense of surreptitious pleasure. Indeed, the scene is crying out for someone to come around the corner and catch her in the act. At the top of the steps, the newcomer would have the moral high ground, looking down upon the girl. Indeed, it may have been this sense of inappropriate female behavior that prompted the *Athenaeum* to report that the protagonist's face and figure were "no means of a high or fine type" and that she appeared "rather sensual and not so pure as she ought to be."⁶¹ So while in both *The Soul of the Rose* and *The Shrine* smelling roses within an enclosed garden space might symbolize the traditional constraints of domesticity, the insinuation of a solitary woman attending to her own sexual desires might also be suggestive of contemporary challenges to prevailing attitudes to sexual relations made by the New Woman and her male supporters.

When examined collectively, as in this article, it becomes clear that paintings of women and flowers bring to awareness the connections of smell with both sex and sexual innocence. The representation of smell can range from innocently sensual and wholesome pleasure to perversely sexual and "unnatural" wickedness, and the central paradox of smell as both morally elevated and base, and as spiritual and sensual, lies at the heart of these works. Interestingly, a critic for the *Athenaeum*, writing of Waterhouse's *The Shrine* which was exhibited at The New Gallery in the summer of 1895, was unable to reconcile the inviolability of a shrine with the vulgar, animal, act of smelling; he proposed that this apparent depiction of the act of smelling must simply be a false impression caused by the sketchy nature of the painting.

The lady's attitude is so incompletely represented that we are not quite sure that she is not smelling the flowers, an act which is quite out of keeping with the subject, and therefore it could hardly be within the artist's intention.

Yet, I would argue that while the theme of smell as the sense of sensuality, sexuality and earthly pleasures runs through Curran's and Waterhouse's perfumed pictures, these aspects run hand in hand with the long, historical association of scent with spirituality and the soul.⁶² Far from being "quite out keeping with the subject," it was possible to consider the representation of rose inhalation as entirely appropriate for a spiritually symbolic painting.⁶³ Indeed, one might even argue that the titles *Scent of the Rose* and *The Soul of the Rose* are interchangeable.

In a religious tract entitled *The Ministry of Nature* (1871), the Reverend Hugh Macmillan wrote that "no sense is more closely connected with the sphere of the soul than the sense of smell." He argued that this is because smell "reaches more directly and excites more powerfully the emotional nature than either sight or hearing ... leading at once ... into the ideal world ... [and] going down to the very depths of our nature."⁶⁴ This connection of the body, mind, and psyche was powerfully evoked in *The Soul of the Rose*. As we have seen, the suggestion of introspection and personal reflection, as well of matters of the heart, are inherent in the painting and it is surely no coincidence that the rose is growing up the walls of what appears to be an Italianate cloistered space, suggesting a monastery or other place conducive to meditation and spiritual growth.

Scent was also seen to evoke the soul in other ways. Aromas or essences (from the Latin verb *essere*, to be) were often understood as signifying inner or inherent reality and floral fragrance was particularly associated with the soul while petals were a recurrent symbol of material as opposed to spiritual finery.⁶⁵ Thus, scent in *The Soul of the Rose* can be seen to indicate both the soul of the flower and the true inner beauty of a woman, whose purity is perhaps symbolized by the flawless white pearls that she wears in her hair. Moreover, in Curran's fairy fantasias, the visual juxtaposition of fairies and scent suggests that these nebulous spirits can be thought to personify the scent or spirit of the flowers, the essence even of nature. Indeed, I would argue that in line with Christian iconology, floral scent and the female soul symbolized, in Waterhouse's painting, the bountifulness of God and the essence of nature.⁶⁶ As such, scent in these paintings can be seen not only to symbolize passion but also the life principle itself.

Yet, it is through the idea of floral scents as offering, in Macmillan's words, "an important means of communication with heaven and a direct avenue for the soul's approach to the Father of Spirits" that the conflation of scent, sexuality and soul in these works is best understood.⁶⁷ Just as Teresa of Avila was transfixed by the angel's dart of divine love, the orgasmic rapture of the female protagonist in *The Soul of the Rose* might be read as due to the penetration of the scent, or divine soul of the rose, as it is inhaled into the body. In Curran's and Waterhouse's paintings, erotic excitement and religious ecstasy are aligned and the transgressive nature of sexuality is given a transcendent significance through imagery of women smelling flowers and breathing floral-scented air. Indeed, referring to Waterhouse's *The Shrine*, Rose Sketchley observed that "in its poetry of fair colour,

form and arrangement, art such as this has a ministry that reaches beyond sense" enabling the attainment of a "final fulfilment beyond—say, rather through, the visible ends of the world."⁶⁸ Thus to conclude, by uniquely establishing how the complex olfactory significance of Curran's and Waterhouse's scent-evocative paintings builds up a multifaceted presentation of late-nineteenth-century femininity, I hope to have demonstrated the exciting potential for a new art historical approach that allows for a richer, multi-sensory aesthetic.

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1. On the cultural history of smell see Jim Drobnick, ed., *The Smell Cultural Reader* (Oxford: Berg, 2006); Constance Classen, *Worlds of Sense: Exploring the Senses in History and across Cultures* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993); Constance Classen, David Howes and Anthony Synnott, *Aroma* (London: Routledge, 1994).
2. Compare, for example, the following engravings: "Illustrations of the Senses: Smell," *Penny Illustrated Paper*, May 23, 1868, 12, and Frederick Wentworth, "Marie," *London Society* 26 (July 1874): 66.
3. See for example Leon Frederic, (1856–1940) *The Fragrant Air*, 1894, Oil on canvas, 100 x 66 cm, Dr. De Guide, Tournai.
4. Curran 1861–1942; Waterhouse 1849–1917
5. On the art historical division between Victorian art and modernism see Elizabeth Prettejohn, "From Aestheticism to Modernism, and Back Again," *19: Interdisciplinarity in the Long Nineteenth Century* May 2006), <http://www.19.bbk.ac.uk/Issue2articles/Liz%20Prettejohn.pdf>, (accessed August 14, 2006). Though impressionism had lost its radical edge by the mid-1880s and had become firmly established as a valid style of painting for American artists, impressionism has, nevertheless, traditionally been regarded as a first phase in the trajectory towards modernism. Curran attended the Academie Julien from 1889–1891.
6. Alain Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant: Odour and the Social Imagination* (London: Papermac, 1996).
7. On the resistance of smell to representation see Hans Rindisbacher, *The Smell of Books* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1992), 1.
8. Richard Leppert, *The Sight of Sound: Music Representations and the History of the Body* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1993), xxii.
9. Teniers (1610–1690). Leppert, *Sight of Sound*, 9.
10. Charles Courtney Curran painted over 20 allegorical paintings.
11. Annette Stott, "Floral Femininity: A Pictorial Definition," *American Art* 6, no. 2 (Spring 1992): 68, 61.

12. Ibid. 61. Other artists working in this vein were William Gerdt and Robert Reid. See also Beverly Seaton, "Semiotics of Literary Flower Personification," *Poetics Today*, 10, no. 4 (Winter 1989): 679–701.
13. Charles Curran, *The Perfume of Roses*, Register of Copyright, Library of Congress, number 4932, October 18, 1892. My thanks to Kaycee Benton for indicating this document to me.
14. Charles Eldridge, *American Imagination and Symbolist Painting* (New York: Grey Art Gallery and Study Center, 1979), 77. As Stott suggests, turn of the century etiquette required women to "look, smell, and 'think' like flowers." Stott, "Floral Femininity," 68.
15. Charles Curran, "Picture Notes," *Palette and Bench* 1, no. 3 (December 1908): 56. According to Curran, *The Peris* was inspired by Thomas Moore's poem "The Paradise and the Peri." The Peris were fairy-like beings between angels and demons. They were deemed harmless and beautiful but were excluded from paradise. See Thomas Moore, "Paradise and the Peri," in *Lalla Rookh: An Oriental Romance* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme and Brown, 1871), 133–60.
16. See, for example, "American Art at the Lotos," *New York Times*, December 17, 1898, 9. Constance Classen has noted the association between the "airiness" attributed to spirits and the airiness of odors. Constance Classen, "The Odor of the Other: Olfactory Symbolism and Cultural Categories," *Ethos* 20, no. 2 (June 1992): 149.
17. Curran, "Picture Notes," 6.
18. Ibid., 54.
19. Ibid., 56.
20. See Carolyn Christensen Nelson, ed., *A New Woman Reader* (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2000).
21. Stott, *Floral Femininity*, 76.
22. William Truettner, "William T. Evans: Collector of American Paintings," *American Art* 3, no. 2 (Fall 1971), 50–79.
23. *The Dew*, unlocated. In Curran's original record book, held in the private collection of Kaycee Benton, he recorded the following information regarding this painting: "1902 - *The Dew*, 20 x 30 inches - Exhibited at Paris Exposition 1902 - Sold to Monsieur Leygues Ministry of Fine Arts - Paris." See also Diane P. Fischer, ed., *Paris 1900: The "American School" at the Universal Exposition*, exh. cat. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999), 175.
24. "American Art at Paris," *New York Times*, February 28, 1900, 6. "The Evans Picture Sale," *New York Times*, February 3, 1900, 6. "Lotus Club," *New York Times*, April 1, 1906, 7. According to artists such as Mary Cassatt it was considered a great distinction to be included in Evans's gift. See Truettner, "William T. Evans," 57.
25. Stott introduces the idea of gendered blooms with relation to other works by Curran. Stott, "Floral Femininity," 65–66.
26. Amy M. King, *Bloom: The Botanical Vernacular in the English Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, New York, 2003).
27. Louisa May Alcott, *Rose in Bloom* (Boston: Roberts, 1876).
28. Ivan Turgenev, *Fathers and Sons*, trans. Richard Hare (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1948; New York: Rhinehart Editions, 1960), <http://www.ibiblio.org/eldritch/ist/fas.htm> (accessed August 14, 2006).
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid.
31. Peter Trippi, *J. W. Waterhouse* (London: Phaidon, 2002), 195–96.
32. John William Waterhouse, *Summer*, c.1882, oil on canvas, 31 x 25 cm, private collection.
33. Gale Peter Largey and David Rodney Watson, "The Sociology of Odors," *American Journal of Sociology* 77, no. 6 (1972): 1024.

34. See Susan C. Shapiro, "The Mannish New Woman: Punch and Its Precursors" *The Review of English Studies* 42, no. 168 (1991): 510–22.
35. Also on this theme see Emma Barton, "The Soul of the Rose," 1905, Photograph, Royal Photographic Society, Science and Society Picture Library. On Waterhouse's *The Soul of the Rose* see the catalogue entry by John Christian for lot 166 in "Fine Victorian Paintings, Drawings and Watercolours," *Christie's Sale Catalogue*, Friday June 3, 1994, 142. Christian identifies the girl in the painting with the girl sought by the "pilgrim" in Chaucer's *Romance of the Rose*.
A. L. Baldry, "Some Recent Works by Mr. J. W. Waterhouse, R.A.," *Studio*, (July 1911): 176, 180.
36. Besides the well-known scene in Marcel Proust's *The Remembrance of Things Past* (1913), in which the taste and smell of madeleine cake dipped in tea evokes long forgotten childhood memories of visits to an elderly aunt, see also: Margaret Elenora Tupper, *The Scent of the Heather* (London: Leadenhall, 1985); Samuel M. Warns, "Odors," *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* 61, February 1898, 269–72; Charles C. Abbott, "Autumnal Memories," *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* 66, no. 394, October 1900, 637–40; Elizabeth Maury Coomb, "Odors and Memories," *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* 61, no. 521, May 1911, 621–22. For scientific investigations on the power of smell to raise mental visions see, for example, Alice Heywood and Helen Vortriede, "Some Experiments on the Associative Power of Smells," *American Journal of Psychology* 16, no. 4 (October 1905): 537–41; E. M. Bolger and Edward Titchener, "Some Experiments on the Associative Power of Smells," *American Journal of Psychology* 18, no. 3 (July 1907): 326–27; J. W. Harris, "On the Associative Power of Odors," *American Journal of Psychology* 19, no. 4 (October 1908): 557–61.
37. "Illustrations of the Senses: Smell," *Penny Illustrated Paper*, May 23, 1868, 13.
38. Corelli (1855–1924). Marie Corelli, *The Life Everlasting: A Reality of Romance*, 2 vols. (Leipzig: Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1911), vol. 2, 125.
39. According to Annette Stott, it was common for artists to interweave patterns and textures to unite women visually with floral environments in floral-female paintings. Stott, "Floral Femininity," 75.
40. Barbara Seward, *The Symbolic Rose* (Dallas: Spring Publications, 1960). It is not known when the title *My Sweet Rose* was first coined. The painting was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1908 under the title *The Soul of the Rose*.
41. Alfred Tennyson, *Maud and Other Poems*, (London: Moxon, 1855).
42. "Flower Odors," *Continental Monthly: Devoted to Literature and National Poetry* 6, no. 4 (1864): 469.
43. Corelli, *Life Everlasting*, 125.
44. Féré (1853–1907). Charles Féré, *Sensation et mouvement: Etudes expérimentales de psycho-mécanique, etc.* (Paris, 1887), 370.
45. Richardson (1828–1896). Benjamin Ward Richardson, "The Physical Action of Odours," *Asclepiad* 8 (1891): 234.
46. T. E. Shields, "The Effect of Odours etc upon the Blood Flow," *Journal of Experimental Medicine* 1, no. 71 (1896): 38. In contrast, unpleasant odors led to a diminution of the blood supply to the heart and brain.
47. See Anne Harrington and Vernon Rosario, "Olfaction and the Primitive: Nineteenth-Century Thinking on Olfaction," in *The Science of Olfaction*, ed. Michael Serby and Karen Chobor (New York: Springer, 1992), xxi.
48. Cutter (1842–?). Ephraim Cutter, "The Action of Odors, Pleasant and Unpleasant upon Blood Flow," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 30 (June 1898): 366. Cutter is known for the invention of the laryngoscope, as well as for his work on medical licensing laws and links between cancer and nutrition.
49. See, for example, Joris Karl Huysmans, "The Arm Pit," in J. K.

Huysmans, *Parisian Sketches*, trans. Brendan King (Sawtry, UK: Dedalus, 2004). First published as "Le Gousset" in *Croquis Parisiens* (Paris: Léor Vasler, 1880), section 5.

50. Henry Havelock Ellis, "Sexual Selection in Man," in *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* (Philadelphia: Davis, 1905), 102. He cited the case of a "lady living in India" for whom roses had little effect and who was only aroused by the more "penetrating, heavier scents of lillies, tuberose and gardenia." The inference was that while sensitive English women could be aroused by the delicate scent of roses, Eastern women required more potent olfactory stimuli. The sexologist Collet also posited a close relationship between smell and female sexual arousal; Frédéric Justin Collet, *L'odorat et ses troubles* (Paris, 1904), 51.

51. Iwan Bloch, *The Sexual Life of Our Times in its Relations to Modern Civilisation* (London: Rebman, 1908), 626.

52. Bloch cites Paulo Mantegazza, *Fisiologia dell amore* (Milan: Bernadoni, 1873), 176. See also Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant*, 81.

53. Bloch, *Sexual Life of Our Times*, 626.

54. "Woman in her Psychological Relations" in *Journal of Psychological Medicine and Mental Pathology* 4, (January 1851): 27.

55. Janice Carlisle, *Common Scents: Comparative Encounters in High-Victorian Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 7. She writes "because middle-class women use their bodies to produce children, those bodies are marked by the floral scents that render them attractive to the men who will father those children."

56. George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss* (Edinburgh and London: Blackwood, 1860; Ware: Wordsworth Classics, 1995), 388. Citations are to the Wordsworth edition.

57. *Ibid.*, 389. Janice Carlisle has argued that in high-Victorian fiction, women whose floral odor is detected by men are, as a general rule, marriageable. In contrast, women such as Maggie Tulliver, who are acutely sensitive to the odor of flowers, usually prove ineligible. Thus, "Maggie is here reversing what the osmology of the 1860s presents as the order of nature." Carlisle, *Common Scents*, 87.

58. Elliot, *Mill on the Floss*, 389.

59. On the role of smell within the sensory hierarchy see Steven Connor, "Intersensoriality," (A talk given at the Conference on the Senses, Thames Valley University), February 6, 2004, www.bbk.ac.uk/eh/skc/intersensoriality, (accessed August 14, 2006).

60. Another Waterhouse painting that features a girl smelling a rose is *The Enchanted Garden* of 1916.

61. "The Royal Academy," *Athenaeum*, no. 3524 (May 11, 1895): 615.

62. On scent and soul see Constance Classen, "The Breath of God: Sacred Histories of Scent," in Classen, *The Color of Angels: Cosmology, Gender and the Aesthetic Imagination* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 36–60.

63. See also Sir Alfred Gilbert, R. A. (1854–1934), *The Virgin*, 1884, bronze; polychrome with ivory face; height with base 45.7 cm; variant replica of figure on Clarence Tomb, The Kirk Session of Kippen Parish Church, Stirlingshire.

64. Hugh Macmillan, *The Ministry of Nature* (London and New York: Macmillan, 1871), 26.

65. On this theme see Catherine Lake, *The Use of the Senses When Engaged in Contemplating the External World* (London: Nisbet, 1848), 29–30.

66. Macmillan, *Ministry of Nature*, 24, 27.

67. *Ibid.*, 26.

68. Rose E. Sketchley, "The Art of John William Waterhouse," *The Art Journal* (Special No. Christmas 1909): 25.

