

Britta K. Ager, *The Scent of Ancient Magic*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2022. Pp. 225 + xii. Hardcover. ISBN 978-0-472-13302-4. US\$75.00.

In the sixth season of the podcast *Invisibilia*, Alix Spiegel visited Joy Milne, a seventy year-old Scottish woman who has the proven ability to smell the presence of diseases – Parkinson’s, Alzheimer’s, cancer, diabetes, tuberculosis – in people before the illnesses are medically detectable.¹ “What would it be like to have this power?” Spiegel wondered before meeting Milne. Her wonder soon turned to worry. Proximity to person with prescient senses would be disconcerting: Milne could divine so many undisclosed details of Spiegel’s life (“What kinds of things would she smell on me? Would she know if I’d had a glass of wine the night before we met? Maybe detect from my coat that my mother is a two-pack-a-day smoker and I’d gone home to see her the weekend before?”). Even more unsettling, Milne could know things about Spiegel that Spiegel herself did not (“Then ... there was my deeper fear, that she would smell Alzheimer’s on me. ... If she did smell it, would I be able to tell? How good was her poker face? Good enough to disguise such an ugly truth?”).

As Spiegel’s and Milne’s interactions make clear, smell – both noun and verb – is more than an olfactory process: it is revelation, it is knowledge, it has the power to influence physical responses and transform relationships. As Britta Ager shows in this book, the characteristics, powers, and complexities of smell make it a prime participant, indeed, fundamental element, of Greek and Roman magic, itself understood by its practitioners as a process of understanding, influencing behaviour, and controlling perceptions. Smell, until now largely overlooked in favour of words and then materials in the practice of magic, comes into its own in this study.

Discussion consists of six substantial chapters and an epilogue that identifies directions for further study. The first chapter (“The Breath of the Leopard: Scent and Magic”) demonstrates with insights from anthropological studies the parallels and contact points between scent and magic; each is invisible yet efficacious, each depends upon context for its identification and interpretation, and each provides frameworks or contexts for the achievement of a goal. In Greek and Roman society, scent and magic were often closely connected, even indistinguishable from each other. Ager’s definition of “magic” is broader than those which insist on ritualized action as a component (pp. 34-41). This allows her to include in the following chapter (“Fragrant Panacea: Scent and Power”) agronomist and medical sources to trace broadly-held ideas of the power and efficacy of odiferous plants. For such sources, “scientific” concepts (e.g., sympathy and antipathy) rationalized folk beliefs which governed identification and usage. Positive, healthful attributes smelled good, harmful things smelled bad; just as healthful and harmful were antithetical, so too were good and bad smells; harmful things could be banished with good smells. “Good” and “bad” are not objective markers, however, but labels that reflect social moral codes. Ambivalence sometimes reigns,

¹ <https://www.npr.org/programs/invisibilia/818645842/an-unlikely-superpower>

rendering, for example, pleasing and sweet-smelling perfumes morally dubious (and thus able to attract the morally-dubious libidinous goat while repelling the chaste, simple-living bee). Multifunctional garlic – perhaps Homer’s *moly* – serves as the focus of a chapter-ending extended study of the magical potency credited to and associations projected upon pungent plants.

Next, (“Scent in the Magical Papyri”) considers magical recipes from late antique Egypt to explore how real magicians employed scent to create ritual space and ambience, and how they aggressively deployed scent as the medium through which another’s body was to be invaded and affected. The long association of incense with divine presence, even divine anatomy, in Egyptian tradition secured the role of scent in theurgic spells in particular, in which the practitioner sought divine visitation. Scent insinuated itself in multiple ways in preparations and materials, sometimes existing only in the realm of suggestion; ink made of the charcoal of odiferous plants, for example, might be used in magical writing. Ager observes that, in light of anthropological comparisons, scent together with other sensory ritual elements could affect practitioners’ perception, and suggests that we should re-evaluate our tendency to explain away the recipes’ confidence in success as simply aspirational or metaphorical.

Chapter 4 (“Perfumed Enchantments: The Smell of Witches’ Magic”) and Chapter 5 (“Rot and Roses: The Smell of Witches”) respectively treat the odours associated with Greek and Roman female witches. In contrast the previous chapter’s focus on “real” (and male) magical practitioners’ use of scent, these discussions are situated in the realm of literature and focus on “how magical odors encode ideas about gender, sex, pollution, and danger” (103). While Ager considers the literary presentation of Roman witches to depend upon their Greek predecessors, she draws attention to some significant non-sequiturs. Apollonius of Rhodes’ *Medea* occupies centerstage in Chapter 4, which ultimately shows that witches in Greek literature are attractively young, pleasingly fragrant, and (from a male perspective) worryingly able to deploy alluring perfumed spells to the detriment of the men who surround them without being negatively affected themselves. Roman witches were somewhat different. Taking Horace’s *Canidia* as a prototypical example, Ager argues that Roman witches similarly deploy sweet odours but themselves occupy foul and fetid bodies. She points to discursive means of degrading women of real power (such as *Clodia* and *Cleopatra*) as a significant but under recognized influence on the creation of the threatening confections that are witches in early imperial Roman literature. Cosmetics, as often smelly substances intended to influence the reactions and behaviour of others, also receive attention.

The final chapter (“Scented Space, Scenting Space”) looks primarily at the use of visible scent, scented smoke, to delineate, characterize, and control space and the beings that occupied it. Religious space occupies the first half of discussion, since the gods were inextricably associated with smell. Gods smelled, ate, drank, and smelled of ambrosia, that is, of immortality; they could transfer the quality of immortality by

transferring this scent. One knew that the gods were present because of scent, and human-built places for the gods and interactions with them consisted in fact and in imagination of heady smells of incense. The discussion then turns from the gods to pests. Fumigations allowed humans to attempt to control their environment, as evil and harmful presences were banished through purifications. The issue of control, this time not of vermin but of gardens and of the women for whom gardens were a metaphor, takes a different turn in the final discussion, which compares the treatment of Medea's garden in the late *Orphic Argonautica* with the garden of Columella's tenth book.

Ager provides a wide-ranging discussion embracing a broad expanse of time, place, evidence, and genre to present the ubiquity of scent in ancient Greek and Roman (and Egyptian) conceptualization of their relationship with nature, with their gods, and with each other. This study effectively demonstrates the interconnections between magic and smell, but its greatest success is perhaps proving the cultural salience of both of these concepts in tandem.

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