

field has evolved over the past thirty years, to actively promote and produce that change by engendering a space of multidisciplinary exchange and collaboration.

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Katelynn Robinson.

*The Sense of Smell in the Middle Ages: A Source of Certainty.*

London–New York: Routledge, 2020. X + 228 pp. \$165 (pb. \$51).

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Katelynn Robinson's book provides the first scholarly investigation into the theories of smell elaborated by Latin medieval scholars, from roughly 1100 until 1400 CE. The book also discusses actual applications of these theories in the medical and religious practices of the time. Robinson's study is motivated by an ambition to fill a twofold lacuna in current scholarship. On the one hand, by focusing especially on the late centuries of the Middle Ages, it aims to complement scholarship on the earlier phases of European history, which already boasts a number of well-researched studies. On the other hand, by providing an exploration of medieval olfactory theories, Robinson has the merit of focusing on topics neglected by scholars, who have traditionally been more interested in studying the cultural practices related to smells than in unpacking the complex theoretical views supporting them. These theories, which are discussed at length in the works of leading medieval schoolmen such as Albert the Great, William of St.-Thierry, Vincent of Beauvais, and Bartholomew the Englishman (to mention only a few), are the result of a long and often-tortuous process of *translatio* from the Greek world into the Latin one through the mediation of Arabic thinkers. Robinson reconstructs the main trajectories of this journey by relying on the Latin translations of Greek (Aristotle, Galen) and Arabic scholars (Avicenna, Haly Abbas) produced during the Middle Ages. In addition to this, Robinson shows how Latin medieval views of olfaction were far from being simply the object of mere intellectual speculations, for they served in fact as theoretical foundation to two crucial spheres of medieval life: medicine and religious practice.

The book is composed of three parts, each one consisting of two chapters. Part 1, entitled "The anatomy and physiology of olfaction", discusses the development of medieval olfactory theory from its Greco-Arabic background. Robinson shows that the "mainstream" theory of olfaction that Latin medieval thinkers elaborate starting from the twelfth century was the result of a long-standing quarrel that originated in the Greek world and was later taken over by prominent Arabic philosophers and physicians. Aristotle was allegedly the first to express the difficulty of defining smell in rigorously philosophical terms. Its objects, odors, are very difficult to describe, as opposed to, for instance, colors and sounds. The very names we use for odors, he continues, are derived from the sense of taste – we say that something smells sweet because we know that it tastes sweet, but we do not have a proper vocabulary for odors. Because of its relation to taste, smell occupies a middle

position in Aristotle's system of the senses: it leans towards the lower ones (taste and touch), since these involve physical contact; yet, smell does not exactly involve contact, in this being more similar to the higher senses (sight and hearing). Another major issue was the question of whether odors are material or immaterial (or, as Scholastic thinkers would put it, whether their *esse* is transmitted *materialiter* or *intentionaliter* through the medium); and, in close connection to this, whether the sensory organ of smell should be located in the nose or, as Galen would claim in open contrast with Aristotle, in the brain. Robinson does a good job of unpacking the main phases of this debate, and in showing what each thinker's position was. She also argues that a crucial role in the story was played by Avicenna, who basically combines the two accounts provided by Aristotle and Galen respectively, and builds a more "conciliatory" theory that would eventually become mainstream in the medieval West thanks to the Latin translations of his works (first and foremost, of his *Qānūn fī ṭ-ṭibb*, known to Latin readers as *Canon medicinae*). In the Western fringes of the Islamic empire, however, a fierce advocate of Aristotle, the Muslim thinker Averroes, questioned Avicenna's account of smell and tries to rehabilitate Aristotle's genuine theory instead. The second chapter traces how some prominent Latin medieval thinkers handled the theories they found in their Greek and Arabic predecessors in order to build what Robinson calls "the medieval standard account of olfaction" (p. 4).

Part 2 of the book is devoted to the first of the two applications of medieval olfactory theory discussed by Robinson, namely medical practice. Chapter 3 provides a survey of the main Greek and Arabic treatises of medicine, along with a number of Scholastic texts devoted to medical theory and surgery such as Bartholomew the Englishman's *De proprietatibus rerum*, the *Trotula* (an anonymous collection of texts on the treatment of women's illnesses), the *Prose Salernitan Questions*, and Guy de Chauliac's surgical manual. In medieval medical practice, odors were not only essential in diagnosis, since bad or unnatural odor always signifies corruption and decay, whereas a good or natural odor its opposite, but they also played a crucial role both in the treatment and in the judging of medicines. The importance of smell in medical practice was so central that this sense was considered the second most reliable of the five, right after taste, showing that its placement in the hierarchy strictly depended on the activity to which it was connected. This is clear, for instance, from the *Summa de saporibus et odoribus*, an anonymous twelfth-century text from the Salernitan school of medicine that overturned the traditional Aristotelian hierarchy of the senses by placing taste and smell at the very top, since these are the only two senses in which some of the matter of the object perceived actually reaches the sensory organ (p. 77). In chapter 4, Robinson presents a concrete case in which medieval olfactory theory reached popular audience: through urban regulations regarding cleanliness and public health that followed the 1348 pestilence in Europe.

Part 3 of the book discusses the role of olfaction in the religious life and devotional practices of medieval Europe. Since Christianity had already developed a "theology of olfaction" well before the arrival of Greek and Arabic texts into medieval Europe, Robinson is able to outline the contours of a genuinely Christian set of olfactory theories independent from the legacy of Greco-Arabic culture.

Chapter 5 deals with the theology of odor and the spiritual nose up to 1200, while chapter 6 explains how these theological concepts penetrated into popular culture.

Robinson's book is an original and well-researched contribution to our knowledge of the theories, debates, and applications of smell in the European Middle Ages. By combining diachronic and synchronic analysis, Robinson is able to account for the historical development of this topic through time as well as to delve deep into major texts and problems revolving around the issue of smell in the medieval period. The book also does a good service to scholars, providing a reliable and well-documented account of the theory of olfaction that was standard in the Latin Middle Ages, while showing at the same time how complex and pervasive this topic was. Through the six chapters of her book, Robinson takes advantage of the instruments provided by both intellectual and cultural history, showing that the argument she puts forth is one that eschews such compartmental delimitations.

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Marco Santagata.

*Boccaccio indiscreto. Il mito di Fiammetta.*

Bologna: Il Mulino, 2019. 199 pp. €13.99.

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Marco Santagata's (28 April 1947 - 9 November 2020) *Boccaccio indiscreto. Il mito di Fiammetta* can be considered a biography of Giovanni Boccaccio's early life. But this reading is only partially correct. As the title itself discloses, in addition to the biographical reconstructions (chapters 1-3), Santagata has a more precise goal in mind. He tries to answer one of the still unresolved aporias within Boccaccio's biography, namely his sudden relocation from the Kingdom of Naples to Florence in 1340 (chapters 4-7). Santagata links this absence to Fiammetta's history, noting that it emerges in different times and places with a span of silence in between, and argues that this character and the way she is portrayed may have been one of the reasons why Boccaccio was forced to leave.

The book starts *in medias res*, without a preface or an introduction, and focuses on Boccaccio's first years within the Florentine school and his move to Naples, where he discovers his natural inclination to poetry (1. *Apprendista mercante*). In the Angevin Reign, the author makes his debuts in the literary scene with his first work, the *Caccia di Diana*, which is analysed for its contents and peculiar sources and framed by its cultural context and its audience (2. *Il debutto letterario*). In Naples, Boccaccio attends university, studying canon law, while simultaneously becoming part of the court (3. *Lo studente di diritto*). Santagata proceeds by investigating the myth of Fiammetta, a fictional character who probably represents a natural daughter of King Roberto of Anjou (4. *L'apparizione di Fiammetta*). In Boccaccio's *Filocolo*, considered by Santagata written after his *Caccia*, this myth is still *in nuce*; nonetheless, it demonstrates some of the autobiographical references and historical elements recurrent also among the author's other works. Excepted