The Smell of Macbeth

Jonathan Gil Harris

mercury    Peace, good squib, go out.
crites     And stink, he bids you.

—Ben Jonson

Did the Shakespearean stage stink? The Jonsonian stage certainly did. In the prologue to Bartholomew Fair, the Scrivener complains that the Hope Theater, where Jonson’s play was first performed in 1614, is “as dirty as Smithfield, and as stinking every whit.” Such a description may stir the worst suspicions of modern readers, who all too easily imagine the early modern playhouse—in an age before deodorant, showers, and air conditioning—to have been a malodorous cesspit of the great unwashed, populated by reeking groundlings against whom the only available protection was the plague-palliating nosegay or pomander. But while Jonson refers here to the space of the theater as a whole, he also knew something of the bad odors that could be produced specifically on the stage. Among the early modern theater’s most dazzling special effects were two fireworks mentioned by the Caroline playwright Richard Lovelace in his epilogue to The Scholars: “rosin-lightning flash” and “Squibs.” Low-tech these fireworks may have been, but they packed an explosive theatrical punch. Rosin powder was thrown at candle flames to produce flares; squibs, famously called for in the stage directions to Doctor Faustus, were employed to produce flashes and loud bangs.

I thank audiences at the Folger Shakespeare Library symposium “Early Modern Terrorism,” the University of South California, the University of Maryland, Tufts University, the University of New South Wales, and the University of London for their comments and suggestions about earlier versions of my argument. Special thanks are due to Holly Dugan, Lee Edelman, Mimi Godfrey, Joseph Litvak, Madhavi Menon, Barbara A. Mowat, Gail Kern Paster, and, most of all, Nicholas Moschovakis, each of whom did much to make this essay smell less bad than it might otherwise have done.

4 Christopher Marlowe, Doctor Faustus: A- and B-Texts (1604, 1616), ed. David Bevington and Eric Rasmussen (Manchester, Manchester UP, 1993), 169 (3.2.28); the stage direction is
Because of their visual and acoustic impact, it is easy to overlook how both effects also stank—especially the squib, which became a virtual synonym for bad odor, as my epigraph from Jonson’s *Cynthia’s Revels* suggests. Like all gunpowder products, the squib combined foul-smelling ingredients—sulfurous brimstone, coal, and saltpeter—that reeked all the more when detonated. In his 1588 manual on the manufacture of explosives, Peter Whithorne writes that the saltpeter of gunpowder “is made of the dunge of beasts, . . . and aboue all other, of the same that commeth of hogges, the most and best is gotten.” If saltpeter’s fecal origins were not enough, gunpowder’s customary mode of preparation served to amplify its malodorousness: Whithorne explains that its ingredients “must be compounded with the oile of egges, and put . . . vnder hot dung for a moneth.” Little wonder, then, that Jonson’s Crites insists on the squib’s “stink.”

Squibs, perhaps in tandem with rosin powder, were almost certainly used at the beginning of *Macbeth* to produce the effect of its famous stage direction: “Thunder and lightning” (1.1 sd). The controlled detonation of fireworks would have helped to create not only the necessary sound and light effects for the opening scene, but also the poor air quality described in the three witches’ bizarre incantation, “Hover through the fog and filthy air” (1.1.11). In its first performances, then, the play most likely started not just with a bang, but also a stink, which would have persisted through the first scene as the fireworks’ thick smoke wafted across the stage and into the audience. Even in the open-air Globe, the smell would have been strong; if the play was performed indoors at court for King James, the odor would have been stifling. Given the squib’s dungy provenance, its stench might have lent an extra olfactory charge to Lady Macbeth’s invocation of the “dunnest smoke of Hell” (1.5.49).

---

found in the A-text (see note to 3.2.28.1 sd). See also Alan C. Dessen and Leslie Thomson, *A Dictionary of Stage Directions in English Drama, 1580–1642* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999), s.v. “squib.”

5 Peter Whithorne, *Certaine VVaiies for the Ordering of Souldiours in Battelray, and Setting of Battailes, after Diuers Fashions with Their Manner of Marching* (London, 1588), fol. 4r.

6 Whithorne, fol. 46r.


8 The conventional wisdom has been that thunder was produced on stage by rolling a cannonball on the floor, as Ben Jonson alludes to the “rolled bullet” in the prologue to *Every Man in His Humour*, ed. Martin Seymour-Smith (London: Ernst Benn Limited, 1966), 7 (l. 18). Significantly, though, this “bullet” is an afterthought to the “nimble squib” to which he refers in the previous line, which suggests that the two practices may have been used in tandem.

9 Andrew Gurr notes, “Fireworks or rosin for lightning flashes were available at the amphitheatres but unpopular at the halls because of the stink”; see “The Tempest’s Tempest at Blackfriars,” *Shakespeare Survey* 41 (1988): 91–102, esp. 95.
This essay, then, considers what may seem like a familiar subject in *Macbeth* criticism: gunpowder. It does so less to cast light on the infamous historical Plot of that name, however, than to ponder the ways in which the smelly materials of early modern theatrical performance worked on their audiences or, for the purposes of this essay, their olfactors. I consider how the smell of *Macbeth*'s "thunder and lightning" was as theatrically important as its visual and acoustic impact, and how playgoers' responses to the odor of the squibs were not just physiologically conditioned, but implicated within larger cultural syntaxes of olfaction and memory. But I do not seek to explain the smell of *Macbeth* simply according to the cultural poetics of its historical moment. Indeed, I am interested in how the play's smells put pressure on the very notion of a self-identical moment as the irreducible ground zero of historical interpretation. For I locate in smell what I will term a polychronicity: that is, a palimpsesting of diverse moments in time, as a result of which past and present coincide with each other. In the specific instance of Shakespeare’s play, smell’s polychronicity generates an explosive temporality through which the past can be made to act upon, and shatter the self-identity of, the present. How, then, did the smell of Shakespeare’s explosive stage effects allow a supposedly superseded religious past to intervene in and pluralize the Protestant present? And how might theorizing the untimeliness of theatrical smell effects in plays that were probably part of the King’s Men’s repertory—not only *Macbeth* but Barnabe Barnes’s *Devil’s Charter*—work to challenge conventional understandings of the definition of “material culture” and the task of reading historically? What, in short, does it mean to experience these plays not just with one’s eyes and ears, but also with one’s nose?

**Historical Phenomenology, Anachronism, and the Palimpsests of Olfaction**

Thus posed, my questions place this essay in dialogue with the new critical movement that Bruce R. Smith has termed “historical phenomenology.” In a series of important studies, Smith and other scholars such as Wes Folkerth

---

10 *Macbeth*s date of composition and early performance history remain speculative. The earliest date for which we have a record of performance is 1611, but the play is usually regarded as having been written and first performed in 1606. This is largely because of the Porter’s joking reference to “an equivocator” (2.3.8), which most editors regard as an allusion to the recently executed Jesuit priest Henry Garnet, who had authored a treatise defending equivocation for persecuted Catholics. For a discussion of the play’s date of composition and first performance, see Stephen Greenblatt’s introduction to *Macbeth* in the *Norton Shakespeare*, 2555–63, esp. 2555–56.

have attempted to move beyond a purely textual approach to Shakespeare’s plays by insisting on the embodied experiences of those who saw and, in particular, heard them. Hence, for Smith, the sound of thunder and lightning at the beginning of *Macbeth* significantly shapes what he calls the play’s “auditory field” and the way in which audiences respond to the play as a whole. But a historical-phenomenological analysis of *Macbeth*’s thunder and lightning need not be confined just to the fireworks’ acoustic dimension; we might think also about the visual impact of the opening scene’s pyrotechnics. And the powerful stink of *Macbeth*’s fireworks also calls for a theorization of the scene’s, and the play’s, smellscapes.

So far, smell has been absent from historical-phenomenological studies of *Macbeth* or Shakespeare’s stage. There are many reasons for this omission. Olfaction—at least in the wake of Freud—has been subject to a pervasive cultural and, until recently, critical undervaluation; while sight has been linked since at least the nineteenth century to reason and civilization, smell has frequently been regarded as the province of the primitive. As a result, there has often been a whiff of the scandalous in studies of smell, which have tended to treat the topic as a subset of scatology. There is the additional practical difficulty of unearthing historical evidence of smells; these are less accessible than sounds, which can often be recovered by extrapolating from printed texts. What, one might ask, would constitute an archive of smell? Our language also

---


constrains us. We have a complex, differentiated array of terms for colors and phonemes, yet have no such terminology for the spectrum of odors. The words we use to represent smell tend not to be nominal, but comparative—an object smells like something. Smell, therefore, has a tendency to slide referentially.

It also slides temporally: as Proust repeatedly attested, smell can trigger memory. Mallarmé, picking up his abandoned pipe, expressed amazement at how its odors sent him back in time to another country: “Amazed and touched, I was breathing the smells of the past winter which came back to me. I had not touched my faithful friend since my return to France, and London, the London I had experienced all by myself in the past year, came back to me.” Shakespeare likewise remarks on the time-traveling effects of smell in the Sonnets, where he observes that perfume is not simply an object in the present:

Then, were not summer’s distillation left,
A liquid prisoner pent in walls of glass,
Beauty’s effect with beauty were bereft,
Nor it nor no remembrance what it was.
(Sonnet 5.9–12)

Smell can conjure up for “remembrance” an otherwise-inaccessible past experience and make it crash into the present with exceptional vividness. As neuroscientists have come to realize, the part of the brain that processes olfactory experiences is located in the cortical nucleus of the amygdala, which is also involved in the consolidation of memory. From a neurological as well as an experiential perspective, then, smell and memory are metonymically associated with each other.

The referential and temporal slipperiness of smell equally illuminates a potential problem in historical phenomenology—its express goal of translating sensory experience into meaningful information within and about a single historical moment. In an important study, Folkerth seeks to identify what Shakespeare’s sounds “would have meant, and how their meanings would have been

---

16 For a useful discussion of the relations between smell and memory in Proust, see Diana Fuss, The Sense of an Interior: Four Writers and the Rooms That Shaped Them (New York: Routledge, 2004), 151–212.
17 Mallarmé, quoted in Rindisbacher, 158.
received by the people who heard and understood them in specific contexts, with early modern ears.”

Folkerth’s analysis has two related agendas: sensory perception is converted into the perception of sense, which in turn permits the articulation of a systematic cultural grammar of sound. Smith does something similar when he speaks of “the boundaries of the auditory field... established in the cacophony that opens” a play like *Macbeth*: “cacophony”—an incoherent noise—resolves itself into an “auditory field” with coherent “boundaries.”

Like all spatial metaphors, the “auditory field” implies a synchronic mode of analysis, whereby the terrain of a single historical moment can be mapped. But smell’s slipperiness resists any such mapping.

*Macbeth* is a play that repeatedly smudges the boundaries dividing the present moment from other times, as evinced by Lady Macbeth’s remark, “Thy letters have transported me beyond / This ignorant present, and I feel now / The future in the instant” (1.5.54–56). Indeed, the coherence of linear time is repeatedly fractured in the play, as suggested by Macbeth’s insistence that the future is not ahead of, but behind him (1.3.115). This is the play in which Shakespeare most dabbles in the untimely. *Macbeth* uses the word twice: in the first instance, Macduff explains the effects of “Boundless intemperance,” which leads to “Thuntimely emptying of the happy throne, / And fall of many kings” (4.3.67, 69–70); in the second, he describes how he was “from his mother’s womb / Untimely ripped” (5.10.15–16). Both instances play off the commonsense meaning of “untimely” as premature.

My thoughts here are influenced by Joseph Campana. In a brilliant and as-yet-unpublished essay (presented at a 2007 Shakespeare Association of America seminar, “Shakespeare and the Question of Time”), “The Bloody Babe and the Crowned Child: Killing Time in *Macbeth*,” Campana notes how both *Macbeth* and Walter Benjamin deform *chronos*, or numerable, linear time and embrace *kairos*, or the contraction and cessation of sequential time.

Shakespeare uses the word “untimely” on nineteen occasions. In every case, the word suggests a supposedly premature occurrence. Often, it is death that is untimely: the corpse of...
generates an effect of the untimely that is altogether closer to what Friedrich Nietzsche—or rather, Nietzsche’s English translators—called the “untimely.” The word Nietzsche used was *Unzeitgemässe*. It derives from the negative *un* plus *Zeit*, meaning both “time” and “a time,” and *gemäss*, a slippery term employed as both an adjective (“appropriate” or “fitting”) and a preposition (“in compliance with”). For Nietzsche, the *Unzeitgemässe* is that which is out of time, inhabiting a moment but also alien to and out of step with it. Hence, it is often translated as “the unfashionable” and “the unmodern.” Both terms suggest the anachronistic apparition of a supposedly superseded past in the present, of a “before” that refuses to remain temporally confined by the slash that divides it from the brave new world of the “after.” In this, Nietzsche’s *Unzeitgemässe* anticipates the critical power of the past in Walter Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (which, incidentally, cites Nietzsche’s *Untimely Meditations* as an epigraph). Benjamin’s historical materialist does not regard the past as hermetically sealed from the now. Rather, the materialist “seizes on a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger” in order to explode the empty homogeneous time of the present.

*Macbeth* anticipates both Nietzsche’s *Unzeitgemässe* and Benjamin’s “moment of danger,” inasmuch as it involves an explosive memory of the past that shatters the present. This explosive untimeliness is most apparent in the stage effect that introduces the play’s first scene. As I will show, *Macbeth’s* squibs not only produce a polychronic compression of diverse moments in time; they also suggest how the past can critique the present. In this, they demand a different governing metaphor from the synchronic auditory field of the historical-phenomenological project.

Richard II is carried off the stage in an “untimely bier” (*Richard II*, 5.6.52); Richard III’s enemies are “[u]ntimely smothered in their dusky graves” (*Richard III*, 4.4.70); death is supposed to lie on Juliet like an “untimely frost” (*Romeo and Juliet*, 4.4.55) while the dead Romeo and Paris “untimely lay” (5.3.257); and after Oswald is slain by Edgar, his last line is “O, untimely death!” (*King Lear*, Conflated Text, 4.6.245). Yet this prematurity is also notably associated with birth, with an interruption that ushers in an unexpected and even monstrous future. Lady Anne wishes that any child of Richard of Gloucester be “abortive . . . , / Prodigious, and untimely brought to light” (*Richard III*, 1.2.21–22), so that it may frighten its mother. The untimely has a monstrous power in its refusal of “proper” time; moreover, it is perceived to have an almost supernatural agency, a power to do work on the time by virtue of its not being of the time.

---


The metaphor I propose instead is the palimpsest. In contrast to the synchronic field of historical phenomenology, the palimpsest necessitates that we read transtemporally. The palimpsest is, after all, not the product of a single moment, but a site of ongoing textual production that fails to erase the traces of earlier inscriptions. In a palimpsest, the present coexists with multiple pasts. To this extent, it might appeal to proponents of what structural linguists term diachronic analysis—the study of phenomena not as they are organized within a moment but as they move through time. The palimpsest’s transtemporality is not, however, straightforwardly diachronic. If diachronic analysis examines sequences through time, the palimpsest is obstinately antisequential; it compresses different “moments” into one plane of legibility, superimposing the present onto the past (or vice versa) without assuming any linear relation between them. The palimpsest’s temporality—neither quite synchronic nor diachronic—might therefore be dubbed “polychronic.” Rather than presenting time as an orderly progression, the palimpsest performs a polychronic coupling of nows and thens, allowing one to feel not just the future, but also the present and the past “in the instant.”

The palimpsest is a particularly useful metaphor for smell: both the literary palimpsest and the memory-inducing odor involve a compression of different temporalities, of multiple historical fields, into one space. The polychronicity of smell, however, is in one respect different from that of the palimpsest. The latter comprises plural temporalities contained inside the object. By contrast, the centrifugal nature of smell—its propensity to smell like something else and hence to evoke the past by metonymic association—locates its polychronicity ambivalently inside and outside the object. Whereas a transtemporal plurality of materials is visible or audible within a collage that mixes contemporary and old printed matter or a new hip-hop song that samples old recordings, smell tends to generate polychronic experiences that branch outside of its object and into the subject who perceives the odor.

Thus, if the textual or sonic palimpsest is a polychronic object experienced by the subject, the olfactory palimpsest is the subject’s polychronic experience of an object—an experience that significantly expands the definition of materiality. Much recent scholarship on so-called material culture has tended to equate

26 Indeed, Folkerth himself resorts suggestively to the metaphor of the palimpsest. In his analysis of the 1888 sound recording of Henry Irving performing the opening soliloquy of Richard III, Folkerth writes that “the recording of the opening speech of Richard III . . . is a deceptively complex historical artefact. While listening to Irving speak, you are not only listening to a particular historical event, you are listening through history as well. What sounds like obtrusive background noise is actually layer upon audible layer of acoustic technology, a sonic palimpsest of different temporalities” (6).
materiality with the physicality of objects. But we might do well to remember Karl Marx’s criticism of those materialist philosophers who limit their understanding of materiality only to the form of the object and thus neglect the equally material “sensuous human activity” that interacts with, transforms, and is transformed by the object. Similarly, the materiality of smell is not quite synonymous with the object; it embraces the subjective olfactory experience of the object, an experience that also reworks the object. This confusion is embodied in the very word “smell,” which as a noun tends to refer to an object, but as a verb can refer to the practice of both subject (in its transitive form: “I smell the coffee”) and object (in its intransitive form: “the coffee smells”). The subjective reworking of the olfactory object is, I shall argue, what happened to the squibs detonated in the earliest performances of plays probably included in the King’s Men’s repertory of 1606. Playgoers could have supplied, by olfactory association, a variety of phenomenological receptive horizons—among them, the contemporary Gunpowder Plot, but also memories of older theatrical and religious experiences. Each of these memories would have transformed the plays’ fireworks into something else, something unstuck in time. If synchronic analysis maps the field of a single moment and if diachronic analysis traces a progression over time, these plays call for a polychronic analysis, one sensitive to the multiple memories potentially evoked by the plays’ smells.

Stygian Odors: The Stench of the Political Present

Because the sulfurous odor of Macbeth’s fireworks was every bit as strong as their bright flash and loud crackle, early modern audiences would have begun their experience of the play with a keen awareness of the smell of gunpowder. This must have been a highly charged encounter in the wake of recent events. The play, written and staged in the months after the discovery of the Gunpowder Plot of Guy Fawkes and his Catholic co-conspirators, is clearly attuned to the scandal’s most publicly discussed details: the horror unleashed by a supposedly loyal subject who seeks to kill a king and the treasonous role of equivocation. The play even echoes certain keywords from the scandal—the “vault” beneath the House of Parliament in which Guy Fawkes stored thirty kegs of gunpowder and the “blow” about which one of the conspirators had...
secretly warned a relative who planned to attend the House of Parliament on 5 November.29

One of the most famous phrases in Macbeth may have likewise conjured the specter of the Gunpowder Plot for at least some audience members, including King James. In the first of ten annual sermons before the King on 5 November 1605, Lancelot Andrewes observed that, despite their intentions, the plotters failed to make the day over to diabolical disorder, for it remains God’s day: “‘Be they fair or foul, glad or sad (as the poet calleth Him) the great Diespiter, “the Father of days” hath made them both.’”30 Shakespeare likewise yokes “fair” and “foul” in the witches’ and Macbeth’s first appearances (1.1.10, 1.3.36). Even though the Plot is never alluded to directly, its presence is everywhere in the play, like a pervasive odor.

Or rather, less like an odor, than in the form of an odor. The smell of the King’s Men’s fireworks may well have been a ruse designed to evoke the Plot subliminally, as it almost certainly was in another play performed by the company: Barnabe Barnes’s Devil’s Charter. Barnes’s play contains many echoes of Macbeth. Its characters equivocate, and its Lady Macbeth-like antiheroine, the evil Lucretia, speaks of Arabian perfume, is afflicted by spots, and is observed by a physician who cannot cure her. But it is the play’s use of fireworks that most connects The Devil’s Charter to Macbeth and to the Gunpowder Plot. The play cannot stop detonating squibs—it does so on at least five occasions—yet the stage directions make explicit that these are meant to smell: “the Monke draweth to a chair on midst of the Stage which hee circleth, and before it an other Circle, into which (after semblance of reading with exorcisms) appeare exhalations of lightning and sulphurous smoke in midst whereof a divill in most ugly shape.”31 After one such “exhalation” of “sulphurous smoke,” a devil ascends, claiming that he is “Sent from the foggy lake of fearefull Stix.”32 With this line, The Devil’s Charter alludes unmistakably to the Gunpowder Plot. In his speech to Parliament immediately after the Plot’s discovery, James anticipated Barnes’s devil in identifying the sulfurous exhalations of the plotters’ gunpowder with the stench of “lake of fearefull Stix”: “so the earth as it were opened, should haue sent forth

29 William B. Barlow, quoted in Garry Wills, Witches and Jesuits: Shakespeare’s ”Macbeth” (New York: Oxford UP, 1995), 21. Compare “the mere lees / Is left this vault to brag of” (Macbeth, 2.3.91–92) and “but this blow / Might be the be-all and the end-all” (1.7.4–5).


32 Barnes, 120.
of the bottom of the Stygian lake such sulphured smoke, furious flames, and fear full thunder, as should have by their diabolicall Domesday destroyed and defaced, in the twinkling of an eye, not onely our present living Princes and people, but eu en our insensible Monuments reserved for future ages." With their squibs, then, *The Devil’s Charter* and *Macbeth* provided London theatre-goers with a powerful sulphurous whiff of the Stygian lake that James could imagine only in his mind’s nose.

As King James’s remark suggests, the Gunpowder Plot prompted imaginings of eschatological time—a “diabolicall Domesday” that would have usurped the end of the world as prophesied in Revelation. If the sulphurous smell of gunpowder evoked for James the prospect of apocalypse, *Macbeth*’s squibs may have likewise been the olfactory prelude to its characters’ powerful experiences, after Duncan’s murder, of apocalyptic time. “By th’ clock ‘tis day,” Ross remarks, “And yet dark night strangles the travelling lamp” (2.4.6–7); “A falcon,” the Old Man adds, “Was by a mousing owl hawked at and killed” (ll. 12–13). These inversions of cosmic and animal order are characteristic of the upside-down nightmare world of medieval apocalyptic prophecy, a world presided over by Satan. As I will show later, Shakespeare arguably uses the smell of gunpowder to produce other experiences of eschatological time in *Macbeth*, albeit ones suggestive less of medieval apocalyptic prophecy than of the “weak messianic” explosions of Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History.” Benjamin’s may be an eschatological temporality without Christ or devil, but *Macbeth*’s explosions retain a connection to Satan; after all, the odor of sulfur in Shakespeare’s time—and indeed in our own, if Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez’s notorious remark about George W. Bush’s “smell of sulfur” is any indication—was a stinking sign of diabolical activity.

---

33 [King James I.], *His Maiesties Speach in This Last Session of Parliament, as Neere His Very Words as Could Be Gathered at the Instant. Together with a Discourse of the Maner of the Discovery of This Late Intended Treason . . .* (London, 1605), sig. E3v.

34 Shakespeare employs the logic of inversion with his parody of apocalyptic prophesy in *King Lear*, where the Fool predicts a time “When priests are more in word than matter; / When brewers mar their malt with water; / When nobles are their tailors’ tutors,” etc. (3.2.80–83). The genre’s most famous instance is the medieval “Merlin’s Prophecy,” which appeared in many guises; see Lesley Coote, “Merlin, Erceldoune, Nixon: A Tradition of Popular Political Prophecy,” *New Medieval Literatures* 4 (2001): 117–37.

When James made his pronouncements after the revelation of the Plot, the sulfurous smell of gunpowder had long been linked to Satan and hell. Despite gunpowder’s Chinese origin, European myth attributed its invention first to the devil (a canard reiterated by Edward Coke in the wake of the Plot) and then, after the Reformation, to an apocryphal evil German friar named Bartold Schwarz who supposedly served Satan. English references to gunpowder’s provenance repeatedly invoke its devilish inventors. Jonson lambasts the friar “Who from the Divels-Arse did Guns beget”; Thomas Dekker describes the cannons of war as “Hells hot Sulphurous throats,” pausing to “curse that sulphurous wit, / Whose black inuention, first gaue fire to it.” Both these remarks suggest that playgoers could easily have reacted to the smell of Macbeth’s fireworks in ways that reinforced James’s linking of the “sulphured smoke” of hell to the gunpowder used by Guy Fawkes. But the memories potentially triggered by the diabolical stink of Macbeth’s fireworks were by no means confined to recent political events. They may also have pointed further back in time, to earlier theatrical experiences.

The association between bad smells and hell had been exploited on the English stage since the Corpus Christi drama. The annual play presented by the Chester Cooks, for example, included a hell mouth that probably emitted smoke and a hideous stench. As gunpowder manufacturing technologies became widespread in England in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, theatrical performances increasingly resorted to cheap fireworks as a foul-scented stage effect in order to conjure up the illusion of the satanic. Records of guild entertainments in Coventry list numerous expenditures on gunpowder; in The Castle of Perseverance, the stage directions call for the devil Belial to sport spark-spouting gunpowder “pypys” (pipes) in his hands, ears, and arse; as this scatological image suggests, the whistling squibs of stage devils in late medieval drama drew heavily on traditions of carnivalesque representation. Even after

---

the Reformation banished representations of the sacred from the stage, cheeky firework-toting devils remained a recurrent feature of the public playhouses. The stage directions for plays from Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus* (“Enter [Mephistopheles] . . . with fireworks”) to Heywood’s *Silver Age* (“the Dieuls appeare at euery corner of the stage with seuerall fire-workes. . . . fire-workes all over the house”) suggest a profusion of gunpowder-reeking devils whose sulfurous odor probably provoked holiday excitement rather than political outrage.40

In other words, the dungy stink at the beginning of *Macbeth* may have made its olfactors remember not just the recent Gunpowder Plot and its supposedly Stygian agents, but also a festive countertradition of representing the demonic that was rooted in popular Catholic entertainments. The play thus superimposes current political events upon archaic theatrical practice—a polychronic palimpsest paralleling that of the Porter in Act 2, who simultaneously evokes the “equivocators” of the Gunpowder Plot and the stock porter of hell gate from medieval mystery drama.41 In both cases, *Macbeth* invited playgoers to contemplate “real” horror in the present yet to distance themselves from it by recalling the play’s festive antecedents. But the temporal indeterminacy prompted by the play’s fireworks was not the only way that *Macbeth* used smell to make confusion’s masterpiece.

**Confusing the Nose of the King: Nasal Ethics**

I understood that my work must, if it was to have any value, acquire a moral dimension; that the only important divisions were the infinitely subtle gradations of good and evil smells. Having realized the crucial nature of morality, having sniffed out that smells could be sacred or profane, I invented, in the isolation of my scooter-trips, the science of nasal ethics.

_Salman Rushdie, Midnight’s Children_*

As King James’s remarks about the Gunpowder Plot’s relation to the sulfurous smoke of Hell and “diabolical doomsday” suggest, the official representation of threats to the realm easily marshaled the language of olfaction. Indeed, James had already resorted to this very strategy before the Plot. In his infamous 1604 attack on tobacco and the dangers it posed to the nation, he had called

---

40 *Doctor Faustus*: A- and B-Texts (see n. 4 above), A-text, 2.1.151 sd; and Thomas Heywood, *The Silver Age*, in *The Dramatic Works of Thomas Heywood*, ed. R. H. Shepherd, 6 vols. (London: John Pearson, 1874), 3:64–164, esp. 3:159; and Dessen and Thompson (n. 4 above), s.v. “fire”.


smoking “hatefull to the Nose,” and proceeded to compare—in language that uncannily anticipates his response to the Plot—“the blacke stinking fume” of tobacco to “the horrible Stygian smoke of the pit that is bottomelesse.”43 In William Drummond’s poem on the five senses, the King’s nose was likewise singled out as the means whereby the nation’s troubled subjects might be protected from devilish machinations:

Give him a feeling of their woes  
And then noe doubt, his Royall nose  
Will quickly smell, those Rascalls forth  
Whose black deedes, have eclips his worth.44

Likewise, the “black deedes” of the Gunpowder Plot were understood to have been foiled by the King’s nose. The official story was that James had cracked the code in the intercepted letter that warned of a “‘blow’” in the forthcoming November 5 session of Parliament;45 but a ballad composed shortly thereafter attributed the success of James’s sleuthing to his literally smelling out the Plot:

Our King he went to the Parliament  
to meet his Noble Peers-a;  
But if he had knowne  
where he should have been blown,  
He durst not have gon for his Eares-a.

Then, “Powder I smell,” quothe our gracious King  
(now our King was an excellent smeller);  
And lowder and lowder,  
quoth the King, “I smell powder”;  
And downe he run into the Cellar.46

This last example draws more on festive than demonological traditions of representation. But like James’s Covnterblaste to Tobacco and Drummond’s poem on the senses, the ballad fantasizes an absolutist nasal ethics, to adapt Salman

43 [King James I,] A Covnterblaste to Tobacco (London, 1604), sig. D2v.
45 James’s father had perished from gunpowder burns and, suspecting that the letter’s “‘blow’” might refer to a similar threat, he ordered a search of the House of Parliament’s vaults, where the kegs—and Fawkes—were found. See Wills (n. 9 above), 23–24.
Rushdie’s felicitous phrase, by which the King’s nose is valorized as the organ uniquely equipped to tell the difference between fair and foul morality.

This ethics is perhaps not surprising in a culture where both virtue and sin were repeatedly coded olfactorily. Catholics had long distinguished between the odor of sanctity emitted by saints and priests and the putrid stench of moral corruption. The Protestant Reformation may have shaken belief in the physical odor of sanctity, but the opposition between the sweet scent of virtue and the stink of sin persisted in Protestant writing in a fashion that was only ambivalently metaphorical. In his poem “The Banquet,” George Herbert asks whether the “sweetnesse in the bread” of the Eucharist can “subdue the smell of sinne.” He discounts the possibility that there can be any physical deodorant strong enough to perform such a task: “Doubtlesse, neither starre nor flower / Hath the power / Such a sweetnesse to impart.” Rather, “Onely God, who gives perfumes, / Flesh assumes, / And with it perfumes my heart.”

This spiritual perfume affirms a perhaps typically Protestant understanding of the Eucharist, where the physical matter of the communion wafer no longer has power over the spirit, let alone the nose. Even as it shifts the odor of sanctity outside the realm of physical olfaction, however, Herbert’s Eucharist arguably strands the “smell of sinne” in the premetaphorical domain of the material, where it strikes the nostrils rather than the heart.

Likewise, Shakespeare has a tendency to register sin in olfactory terms. Hence, Claudius’s “offence is rank! It smells to heaven” (Hamlet, 3.3.36), and Emilia not only “thinks upon,” but also “smell[s]” Iago’s “villainy” (Othello, 5.2.198). The opposition is most poignantly illustrated in Lady Macbeth’s remark that “Here’s the smell of the blood still. All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand” (Macbeth, 5.1.42–43). The “smell of the blood” may be imperceptible to audiences, but it is certainly not just a metaphor to Lady Macbeth. Smell is in all these instances an index of inner moral truth—a connection that may also be glimpsed in the dual olfactory and ontological meanings of the word “essence” in early modern English. In its entry for “essence,” the Oxford English Dictionary notes how its divergent meanings of “that which constitutes the being of a thing” and “a fragrant essence; a perfume, a scent” were both in use by the early seventeenth century.


48 Oxford English Dictionary (OED), J. A. Simpson and E.S.C. Weiner, prep., 20 vols., 2d ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989), s.v. “essence” (n.), 7, 10. The movement of the word from an ontological to an olfactory sphere was in large part enabled by sixteenth-century Swiss physician Paracelsus, who applied the term to “solutions containing the volatile elements or ‘essential oil’ to which the perfume, flavour, or therapeutic virtues of the substance are due”; see the OED, s.v. “essence,” 9a.
Yet olfaction in *Macbeth* is hardly a reliable means of ascertaining virtue or sin. In marked contrast to James's supposedly preternatural ability to sniff out essences, it is significant that the saintly King Duncan fails utterly as an olfactory arbiter. Just as he cannot read the signs of treason on the first or the second Thane of Cawdor's countenance—"There's no art / To find the mind's construction in the face" (1.4.11–12)—so he fails to smell the evil lurking in Macbeth's castle:

**King Duncan**

This castle hath a pleasant seat. The air
Nimbly and sweetly recommends itself
Unto our gentle senses.

**Banquo**

This guest of summer,
The temple-haunting martlet, does approve
By his loved mansionry that the heaven's breath
Smells wooingly here. . . .

. . . I have observ'd

The air is delicate.

(1.6.1–6, 9–10)

In the words of the ballad about King James and the Gunpowder Plot, Duncan is not "an excellent smeller." His discovery of heaven's breath in the castle where Lady Macbeth has just wished "the dunnest smoke of hell" (1.5.49) is decidedly odd, perhaps all the more so given that castles were traditionally associated with the stench of gunpowder. As Ulrich von Hutten noted in 1518, castles were built "not for pleasure but for defense, surrounded by moats and trenches, cramped within, burdened with . . . dark buildings for bombards and stores of pitch and sulfur. . . . Everywhere the disagreeable odor of powder dominates." 49

And in the playhouses where the King's Men performed *Macbeth*, "the disagreeable odor of powder" may well have been perceptible during the first scenes set in Macbeth's castle (1.4–6) if the sulfurous odor of the squibs detonated at the beginning of 1.1 and during 1.3 had not yet dissipated. 50

Yet the play does not ask us to believe that Macbeth's castle really *does* stink or that its true essence should have been sniffed out by a more gifted smeller. Rather, Duncan's mis-olfaction underlines how easily foul blurs into fair, and vice versa, in this relentlessly equivocal play. It also provides a reminder that *Macbeth*’s inversions, confusions, and palimpsests are not simply semiotic problems—they are also integral aspects of the experience of smell. In Thomas Tomkis's university play *Lingva*, Phantastes tells Olfactus (the sense of smell)


that “of all the Senses, your objects have the worst luck, they are always jar-ring with their contraries, for none can weare Civet, but they are suspected of a proper badde sent.”

In other words, a good smell is no longer a reliable sign of a good essence; foul odors might be masked by the fair. Perfume, in particular, was a growing source of suspicion. Indeed, Shakespeare may have had the smell of perfume partly in mind when, in language redolent of Macbeth, he accuses modern women of “Fairing the foul with art’s false borrowed face” (Sonnet 127.6); developing the theme, he praises his Dark Lady, whose breath “reeks” (Sonnet 130.8) without any cosmetic scent. Similarly, some writers welcomed the unadorned honesty of gunpowder’s sulfurous odor when compared to what perfume might hide: “Musk and Civet / Have too long stifled us,” says the Captain in James Shirley’s The Doubtful Heir, “ther’s no recovery / Without the smell of Gunpowder.”

Macbeth, then, is a play mired in olfactory confusion—whether the temporal confusion of contemporary politics and archaic stagecraft prompted by the smell of the play’s fireworks or the ontological confusion of fair and foul prompted by Duncan and Banquo’s apprehension of Macbeth’s hellish castle as a haven for “heaven’s breath.” If we assume that the play was performed in part for a king who supposedly derived certainty from the essences he smelled, Macbeth leads us to ask: why is the play so invested in the temporal and moral slippages induced by smell? Indeed, why problematize the absolutist nasal ethics that Drummond and popular ballads associated with James? I would argue that these conundrums resonate (or reolfactate) with a relatively recent historical development that has had important implications for the cultural history of smell: the Protestant removal of incense from churches.

“Smoke, like Incense”: The Missing Scent of Ritual Time

In Tomkis’s Lingva, Olfactus describes his services to the body. He claims to minister odors to the brain that

... cleanse your head, and make your fantasie
To refine wit, and sharpe inuention
And strengthen memory, from whence it came,
That old devotion, Incense did ordaine
To make mans spirits more apt for things diuine.

51 Thomas Tomkis, Lingva: Or the Combat of the Tongue, and the Five Senses for Superiority (London, 1607), sig. H4'.


54 Tomkis, sig. I1'.
In this passage, Tomkis connects the unusual mnemonic power of smell to the effects of Catholic incense. As Montaigne remarked in his essay on smells, “The invention of odours and incense in our Churches (a practice so ancient and so widespread among all nations and religions) . . . was aimed at making us rejoice, exciting us and purifying us so as to render us more capable of contemplation.” The odor of incense thus both signifies divine presence and provides a mnemonic association with the state of mind befitting religious devotion. Yet even as Lingva presents incense as a spur to memory, it was by 1607 (the year of Lingva’s publication) equally an object of memory, as its use had been substantially curtailed by the Protestant Reformation. Although no official ban was issued, the burning of incense in churches was progressively discontinued during Elizabeth's reign. Celebrating this change, John Bale sneered at the Catholics with whom he identified the ritual: “‘They will be no more at cost to have the air beaten and idols perfumed with their censers at principal feasts.’” If anything, the Protestant antipathy to the smell of incense only increased in the century after the Reformation: an anonymous 1623 sermon against the “perill of Idolatrie” inveighs against the specific dangers of rituals that involve “incense, and odours.”

The abolition of censing in the English churches was aided and abetted by a widespread pathologization of olfaction. In his Essaies vpon the Five Senses, Richard Brathwait observed that smell “is an occasion of more danger to the body than benefit, in that it receives crude and unwholsome vapours, foggie and corrupt exhalations, being subject to any infection.” Coupling the pathologization of smell with a partisan reinterpretation of Galenic physiology—for Galen, “to smell” was to take a substance into the brain—Protestant English writers transformed the once-beneficent odor of incense into brain poison.

57 Quoted in Atchley, 351.
58 Certaine Sermons or Homilies, Appointed to be Read in Churches in the Time of Queen Elizabeth I (1547–1571), ed. Mary Ellen Rickey and Thomas B. Stroup (Gainesville, FL: Scholars’ Facsimiles and Reprints, 1968), fols. 11, 71.
59 Richard Brathwait, Essaies vpon the Five Senses, 2d ed. (London, 1635), fol. 72 (sig. D12*).
THE SMELL OF MACBETH

Hence, in the Folger manuscript version of Drummond’s poem on the five senses, the poet prays that

When Myrhe, and frankinsence is throwne
And Altars built to Gods vnknowne
Oh lett my Soveraigne never smell
Such dampned perfumes, fitt for hell.
Let not such Sent, his nostrilles stayne,
From Smells, that poison canne the Brayne.61

Isabella likewise employs the sweet fumes of incense to poison Livia in Thomas Middleton’s Women Beware Women.62 For Middleton and Drummond, then, the formerly fair is transformed into the lethally foul.

But if Middleton and Drummond fantasize scenarios in which the unequivocally sweet smell of incense conceals its poisonous essence, Shakespeare goes even further in Titus Andronicus, where Lucius refers to Alarbus’s burning entrails, “Whose smoke like incense doth perfume the sky” (1.1.145). Lucius’s remark, despite the play’s explicitly pagan setting, might seem designed to travesty Catholic ritual: the sacrifice of Alarbus smudges the olfactory boundary between the fair and the foul, blurring the sweet-scented odor of incense with the acrid stench of burnt human flesh. It is unlikely that this episode was accompanied in performance by a smelly stage effect such as a squib. Nevertheless, the scene undermines any univocal Catholic association of incense’s odor with divine presence by overlaying it with the olfactory trace of something altogether more unsettling. It is a confusion that in some ways anticipates Macbeth’s presentation of a king for whom “heaven’s breath / Smells wooingly” amidst scenes reeking of diabolical gunpowder.

Titus Andronicus’s dubious “smoke like incense,” however, is no doctrinaire debunking of Catholic ritual. Rather, I see it as a symptom of a widespread sense of confusion and loss generated by the abolition of censing and the pathologization of smell. With the removal of incense from the churches, Englishmen and -women came to inhabit a new olfactory universe in which sweet smells no longer suggested the presence of the divine. Of course, all representations of God—visual, as well as olfactory—had been expunged not just from the churches, but also from the playhouses. This transformation has been thoroughly studied with respect to the visual and verbal conventions of the early modern theater. But its impact must also be understood in relation to rituals of smell. The departure of God’s sweet-scented presence from the sphere of

61 Drummond, Quinque Sensus (see n. 44 above).
dramatic representation is evident in those few plays which called for the burning of incense. The King’s Men resorted to censing on at least two occasions. In Ben Jonson’s Sejanus His Fall, performed by the company in 1603, stage directions describe a scene of worship in which a priest “after censing about the altar placeth his censer thereon.” And in Shakespeare and Fletcher’s The Two Noble Kinsmen, performed ten years later, a stage direction requests the conveyance of “incense and sweet odours” to an “altar” (5.3 sd). These scenes might seem to offer Catholic representations of the sacred, and indeed, Jonson was still a practicing Catholic when he wrote Sejanus. Yet in both instances, incense is an olfactory mnemonic not for God, but for pagan deities—Fortune in Sejanus, Diana in Two Noble Kinsmen. As Gary Taylor has argued, to read these plays “as allegories of Catholicism requires us to ignore their paganism, to act as though the signifier was transparent, and therefore irrelevant.”

The King’s Men could burn incense as well as explode squibs; but the smell of incense in their plays was commandeered for self-consciously theatrical, and fictional, paganisms. To this extent, the plays exemplify Stephen Greenblatt’s famous argument about how the Reformation “emptied out” the rituals of the church and, by turning them into forms of theater, made them available for appropriation by the playhouses.

The ambivalent emptying out of Christian olfactory ritual in Titus Andronicus, Sejanus, and The Two Noble Kinsmen finds a far darker corollary in Macbeth. Like Herbert’s “Banquet,” in which the “smell of sinne” lingers in the nostrils while Christ’s “perfume” has become literally immaterial, Macbeth shows that, after the Reformation, all that remained for the nose in religious representation was the foulness of the diabolical. Thus, the stench of the play’s squibs might have prompted associations with the scent of Catholic churches not because firework and censer smelled alike, but because they had, in a prior olfactory episteme, presumed each other: the odor of holy scented sticks was the missing valence in a formerly widespread olfactory binary of sweet and sulfurous. It is this binary that Macbeth so comprehensively undoes by collapsing the fair into the foul—or by making of the fair a desirable but ineffectual absence, as with Lady Macbeth’s longed-for, but unavailable, “perfumes of Arabia.” Indeed, not just divine scents but holy ritual of any kind is strikingly absent from Macbeth. Although Neville Coghill has argued that an earlier version of Macbeth staged Edward healing scrofula, the playtext as we have inherited it—including the alterations by Thomas Middleton—is suffused with a sense of deus abscondi-

63 Wilkes, ed., 2:324 (5.177 sd).
As a result, it also reeks of *bonus olfactus absconditus*. The absence of fair smells in *Macbeth*, underscored by the pungent stink of its squibs, thus may have provided audiences with a reminder of England’s Catholic past and of a lost temporality associated with ritual olfaction. Sweet scents in the church brought eternity into living time; foul stenches in the theater, however, could only highlight a profound absence in the symbolic order: “nothing is / But what is not” (*Macbeth*, 1.3.140–41). In performances of *Macbeth*, then, the smell of gunpowder could have done far more than simply evoke the recent Plot and a tangled web of theatrical associations with Hell. For some playgoers, it may also have enabled a simultaneous longing for and recoiling from an older, now-forbidden religious culture of the senses.

The antitheatricalists were certainly onto something when they discerned echoes of the Catholic church in the pansensuality of the early modern theater. What they failed to recognize, however, is that the theater did not spell a straightforward return to the sensory world of the old faith. A play like *Macbeth* derives much of its power from its polychronic ambivalence: it powerfully evokes the scented rituals of the past, but that evocation less recovers the past than fractures the present. In short, the smell of gunpowder unleashed by *Macbeth* is temporally double, a past in the present. Such doubling is not surprising in a play that thematizes equivocation, “palter[ing]” with its playgoers as much as its characters “in a double sense” (5.10.20). But the temporal doubling prompted by the squib’s odor suggests neither a playful plurality of interpretation (the carnivalesque perspective of the punning Porter) nor a diabolical duplicity (King James’s perspective on the language of traitors, Catholics, and witches). Rather, it is intimately connected to the palimpsest-like nature of smell itself, to its uncanny power to evoke multiple memories and associations across a broad spectrum of time. Like Benjamin’s historical materialist, who “seizes on a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger” in order to explode the empty homogeneous time of the present, Shakespeare and the King’s Men used their smelly squibs as temporal explosives, transforming stage materials into *matériel* that shattered the olfactory coordinates of Protestant time.

The odor of gunpowder in *Macbeth*, I have speculated here, might have served as a metonymy for contemporary political scandal, archaic stagecraft, and the

---


67 In their complaints about the theater, the so-called antitheatricalists chafed obsessively against the playhouses’ supposedly decadent sensuality. Henry Crosse, for example, fumed that in the theater “euery sense [is] busied”; see *Vertues Common-wealth: Or the High-VVay to Honour* (London, 1603), sig. Q2’.
suppressed religion that linked the two. But this list is by no means comprehensive. The stink of Macbeth’s squibs must have prompted audience experiences that are simply too culturally elusive or quirkily subjective to be readily legible to us now. More attention by future scholars to the historical phenomenology of theatrical odors might help to recover some of these other memories and associations. But the particular challenge posed by the smell of Macbeth is less one of maximizing the recovery of early modern playgoers’ responses than of recognizing the extent to which the vagaries of matter, time, and memory on the Shakespearean stage—and within early modern material culture in general—demand special, and necessarily incomplete, practices of interpretation. As satisfyingly total as historical phenomenology’s panoptic mappings of moments and sensory fields may seem to be, we might also do well to embrace the more speculative, provisional, and temporally unfixed mode of polychronic reading I have begun to sketch here. In particular, this kind of reading can make us more sensitive to the explosive temporalities produced by the untimely stage matter of Shakespeare’s plays. And that’s nothing to sniff at.