

Scents of a Courtesan

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Throughout my research, resoundingly the major difference between a courtesan and a prostitute was that a courtesan was to be appealing in every aspect. She was expected to fill all the senses: have the most luxurious clothing, be intellectually stimulating and provide the most spectacular table for feasting and entertainment. But the most enduring and yet subconscious sense, that of smell, is often forgotten. We now know that from birth, it is the earliest form of identification newborns use, even before their eyesight completely develops. It has been used for centuries to elicit responses that the conscious mind is often unaware.

The ancient Egyptians are among the first peoples documented to have utilized fragrances for both secular and non-secular use. The temples were filled with the heavy odors of incense made from resins, flowers and herbs to please the senses of the gods and goddesses. Nobles of the time would often place cones of fat scented with fragrant oils and resins on their heads that would melt with their body heat in a sort of natural time-release.

In Medieval times, scents were used to mask foul odors in rooms and on bodies. They also were used medicinally in these times, much as the "new" trend towards aromatherapy. Medieval man possessed a deep knowledge of and a great appreciation for the fragrances of the natural world. Herbs, flowers and perfumes formed a large part of every day existence and were inextricably linked with magic and medicine. The oldest surviving English herbal manuscript is the *Saxon Leech Book of Bald* written about AD 900-950. Its wisdom formed the foundation of every succeeding English medical treatise.

To read the Leech Book is to find vapor and herb baths prescribed for all manner of ailments. It shows how common it was to 'smoke' the sick (animal as well as human) with fragrant woods and plants. Scented garlands decorated homes and bodies. Every herb, every tree and every flower had its own special quality.

Essential oils were the distillation or enflourage of a substance to capture the scent of the particular flower, herb or fruit. They are the building block of the many forms of perfumery: incense, perfume, cologne, scented waters and scent bags.

The earliest essential oil is probably "Oil of Roses", thought to have originated in the Arab world and most likely brought to Europe through the increase in trade with the Middle East, perhaps helped along by the Crusades. This was widely adopted and often forms the base of many period recipes.

By the mid-1500s, perfuming was utilized for much more than just one's person. They often scented their clothes, bed and table linens, hand-washing water and

some of their clothing accessories such as gloves, handkerchiefs and jewelry in the form of pomanders. Consider this quote from Pietro Aretino's book *Dialogues*:

"...decorated gaily like the room of a courtesan...They had set out a table very prettily, spreading over it a cloth that looked like white damask, perfuming it with lavender more pungent than the musk the muskrat makes..."

or this quote from Boccaccio's *Decameron* referring to various fruited and "flavored" waters:

"Without permitting anyone else to lay a hand on him, the lady herself washed Salabaetto all over with soap scented with musk and cloves. She then had herself washed and rubbed down by the slaves. This done, the slaves brought two fine and very white sheets, so scented with roses that they seemed like roses; the slaves wrapped Salabaetto in one and the lady in the other and then carried them both on their shoulders to the bed . . . They then took from the basket silver vases of great beauty, some of which were filled with rose water, some with orange water, some with jasmine water, and some with lemon water, which they sprinkled upon them."

Methodology

When I first started to investigate this field, I was immediately struck by the intrinsic value of scents for a courtesan. On the one side she was expected to be the most cultured, refined and savvy politically and economically and yet she also had to present herself as soft, alluring, romantic and even erotic. By using the full complement of scents available, she could achieve that dualism. Flowers in abundance, both in vases and strewn about a table, expensive and exotic fragrances from all over the known world, and skilled craftsmen to create all the various items that she would use every day. I started my research well over a year ago but wanted to wait to start my essential oils so that I wouldn't need a preservative. In the early part of March 2006, I started these oils:

- Rose
- Orange
- Rosemary
- Clove
- Cinnamon
- Nutmeg

I fed them every week or so. The roses I used were given to me by Garren of Aston Tor and his lovely lady Saige and were specifically grown to be perfume roses (using damask cultivars). The petals had incredible scent and I was quite pleased with how they were coming along. About two weeks ago our air-conditioning broke down and I hadn't thought to check to see if it was okay until I went to combine some of my items and discovered that it had developed an off-smell. I was very disappointed. None of the other oils had any problems. I ended up using a

commercial rose oil instead for the below recipes. I also purchased the lavender and sandalwood oils at the same time. I already had musk oil from a previous project.

Hand-washing water

At cultured tables, a meal always started with scented water to wash their hands. These were often scented with flowers, herbs or fruits or a combination of any of the three categories. Here is one period recipe from Hugh Plat's *Delightes for Ladies* 1594 on the subject of making scented waters with essential oils:

"Diverse sorts of sweet handwaters made suddenly or extempore with extracted oyles of spices. First you shall understand, that whensoever you shall draw any of the Oyles of Cinnamon, Cloves, Mace, Nutmegs or such like, that you shall have also a pottle or a gallon more or lesse, according to the quantity which you draw at once, of excellent sweet washing water for your table; yea some doe keepe the same for their broths, wherein otherwise they should use some of the same kinds of spice. But if you take three or foure drops only of the oyle of Cloves, Mace, or Nutmegs (for Cinamon oyle is too costly to spend this way) and mingle the same with a pinte of faire water, making agitation of them a pretty while together in a glasse having a narrow mouth, till they have in some measure incorporated themselves together, you shall find a very pleasing and delightful water to wash with and so you may alwaies furnish yourself of sweet water of severall kinds, before such time as your guests shall be ready to sit downe. I speake not of the oyle of Spike (which will extend very far this way) both because every Gentlewoman doth not like so strong a scent and for that the same is elsewhere already commended by another Author. Yet I must needs acknowledge it to be the cheaper way, for that I assure myself there may be five or six gallons of sweet water made with one ounce of the oyle, which you may buy ordinarily for a groat at the most."

I chose to make my handwashing water using rose oil as a base with orange oil and oil of cloves.

My redaction:

2 cups Water
5 drops of rose oil
10 drops of orange oil

Place water into a large jar, add essential oils. Put cap on jar and shake vigorously to blend water with oils. Before using always shake contents to be sure that they are mixed thoroughly.

Perfume

The first true perfume extract in the modern sense was not created until the 10th Century A.D., when the famous Islamic physician, Avicenna, first discovered the process of distilling oil from the petals of roses. This essence, diluted with water, became rose water, the first modern perfume. Because home distillation is illegal in this country, many sources suggest adding essential oils to a grain alcohol base (like Everclear or vodka). Vodka is preferred for its lack of scent. I have chosen to make a perfume using vodka.

My redaction:

½ cup of vodka
10 drops of rose oil
15 drops of lavender oil
10 drops of musk oil
Enough distilled water to fill the rest of the bottle

Place vodka into a large jar, add essential oils. Put cap on jar and shake vigorously to blend vodka with oils. Before using always shake contents to be sure that they are mixed thoroughly.

Bath oil

William Langham's *Garden of Health* (1579) suggests Rosemary: 'Seethe much Rosemary, and bathe therein to make thee lusty, lively, joyfull, likeing and youngly.'" (Clarkson, *Magic Gardens*, p 118).

My redaction:

1 cup sweet almond oil
5 drops of rosemary oil
15 drops of orange oil
5 drops of lavender oil
1 sprig of rosemary

Place almond oil into a large jar, add essential oils. Put cap on jar and shake vigorously to blend oils. Before using always shake contents to be sure that the contents are mixed thoroughly.

Massage Oil

One of a courtesan's tools would have been massage oil for her patrons. Massages often were part of a patron's visit.

My redaction:

1 cup of almond oil
5 drops of rose oil
2 drops of clove oil
5 drops of nutmeg oil
15 drops of sandalwood oil

Place almond oil into a large jar, add essential oils. Put cap on jar and shake vigorously to blend oils. Before using always shake contents to be sure that the contents are mixed thoroughly.

Mouthwash

Sweet breath was very desirable and would have been very important to a courtesan. Dental hygiene was a subject that was discussed in many of the “manners” books of the time. There are many recipes for mouthwashes, tooth scrubs and polishes. The original recipe below also added mint but since one of my family is extremely allergic to mint, I left it out. I have seen recipes using just sage and rosemary so I felt justified in leaving the mint out.

My redaction:

2 teaspoons of dried sage
2 teaspoons of rosemary
2 cups boiling water

Combine herbs thoroughly in a deep bowl and then pour water over the mixture. Let steep for 2 hours and cool. Strain and store the tincture.

Body powder

Body and facial powders were popular to prevent chafing and also to achieve the pale look so in vogue at the time. These powders were composed of a powder base (ground orris root, ground calamus root, starch, rice powder, talc) with a variety of ground spices and herbs: cloves, dried rose petals, lavender. I had also seen references to crushed mother-of-pearl and would have made the facial powder if I could have found it.

My redaction:

¼ teaspoon of ground cinnamon
⅛ teaspoon of ground cloves
¼ teaspoon of ground nutmeg
¼ teaspoon of ground mace
¾ teaspoon of ground lavender
1 cup of rice flour

Mix spices and lavender together in a mortar and pestle. Add ¼ cup of the rice flour to the spices and blend. Then in a large mixing jar place ½ cup of the rice flour, add the spice mixture and the remaining ¼ cup of rice flour. Put cap on jar and shake vigorously until the contents are thoroughly combined.

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Nostradamus, The Elixirs of Nostradamus: Nostradamus' original recipes for elixirs, scented water, beauty potions and sweetmeats. edited by Knut Boeser. Wakefield, RI: Moyer Bell, 1996

A few web resources:

Scents of the Middle Ages: Uses of the aromas of herbs, spices and resins, Jadwiga Zajaczkowa, <http://www.gallowglass.org/jadwiga/herbs/scents.html>

A History of Fragrance, Kathi Keville and Mindy Green
<http://www.healthy.net/library/books/aromatherapy/history.htm>