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## ***On the Scent of Mary: The Power of Perfume in the Espill*** **Lesley Twomey**

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# ON THE SCENT OF MARY: THE POWER OF PERFUME IN THE *ESPILL*

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines Roig's use of perfumed items as a way of typifying the Virgin's immaculate nature. It examines how perfumes were embedded in early conception liturgies, particularly Leonardo de Nogarola's office, written with papal approval in the late 1470s. Perfumes were used for a variety of reasons, such as in religious ceremonies, to embalm, and to adorn the bride for her nuptials. These uses are examined and their application to the nature of the Virgin determined. Finally, the uses of perfumes in Roig's household, for medical and household purposes, are described. The essay concludes that Roig may have been surrounded by the very perfumes he incorporates into his *Espill*, even as he wrote it.

The study of liturgical and poetic imagery I undertake in this essay is dedicated to the recognition of David Viera's outstanding research into religious writers in the kingdom of Aragon and particularly to his work on their approach to women (see Viera and Piqué). My approach to Jaume Roig's use of scent sets it in the context of pre-sixteenth-century liturgies.<sup>1</sup> In the *Espill*, Jaume Roig associates Mary with sweet aromas of cinnamon, vine, and balsam:

Déu saludà  
en lo mig jorn lo món entorn  
tot, d'orient fins al ponent,  
ab la sabor, suau olor  
de tal canyella, sarment novella  
de bàsem planta, filla tan santa (161)

In fact, this passage follows a section of the *Espill*, in which he praised the Virgin as sweet-smelling gum, whilst defending the Immaculate Conception. The possible meanings of this perfume will be drawn out as the second section of the essay:

<sup>1</sup> I have used a corpus of eighty-two conception liturgies from across the Peninsula to determine how perfumes are used. My study excludes some breviaries still to see, at date of writing, in Tarazona, Zamora, and Salamanca. I have excluded from the study eight further liturgies where the conception is mentioned but celebrated using another Marian feast, generally the Nativity.

Déu sols n'absolta  
 De totes una, lluent com lluna,  
 Cintil·lant stella, més que cel cel·la,  
 Ab lo sol sola, com voltor vola,  
 Abella bella, ovella vella  
 E signat signe, fènix insigne  
 Colent coloma, ben olent goma [...]. (155)

Mary's conception has no mention in the Bible but supporters of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception illustrated it by interpreting biblical figures according to their *sensus mysticus* (Tellechea Idígoras 196-97; see also Auerbach). Marielle Lamy singles out Jean de Romiroy as one of the chief exponents of the technique. His treatise, written for the Council of Basle, pre-dated the *Espill* by just over twenty years. Lamy observes that Romiroy:

s'était appuyé sur l'Écriture comme sur un repertoire de figures, parmi lesquelles il avait abondamment puisé pour exalter la sainteté sans faille de Marie: la femme écrasant la tête du serpent, la femme de l'Apocalypse ayant le soleil pour manteau et la lune sous ses pieds, mais aussi la vigne au parfum suave, l'arche en bois incorruptible, le cèdre et le cyprès imputrescibles, la myrrhe, le jardin de roses, les lys au milieu des épines (tous ces éléments vont bientôt constituer l'iconographie de l'Immaculée Conception), l'aurore qui se lève, l'étoile de la mer [...]. (16). [drew on Scripture, as if it were a repertoire of figures, which he mined to exalt the unblemished holiness of Mary: the woman crushing the head of the serpent, the woman of the Apocalypse with the sun as her cloak and the moon beneath her feet, but also the vine with soft perfume, the ark in incorruptible wood, cedar and cypress which never rot, myrrh, the garden of roses, the lily among thorns, the first signs of dawn, the star of the sea. *Translations mine*.]

Amid the series of prefigurations that are mentioned is the sweet-scented vine, together with other aromatic plants, similar to Roig's.

The attributes of the female figures from the Old Testament, particularly of the Shulamite from the Song of Songs and of Wisdom, are staples of Marian liturgy: "Sicut mirra electa odorem dedisti suavitatis sancta dei genetrix" [Like choice myrrh you gave forth an odour of softness, holy mother of God] is adapted from Ecclesiasticus 24.15, in praise of Wisdom.<sup>2</sup> It was used in the Little Office of the Virgin (Ricossa 58), and is generally present as an antiphon at first night prayer in conception offices.<sup>3</sup> Juan de Segovia's office adapts it:

<sup>2</sup> For a study of how attributes of Wisdom were applied to the Virgin Immaculate, see Twomey.

<sup>3</sup> It is found in the Benedictine *Diurnale* (ACB 22), in the *Diurnale monasticum* (Montserrat 51), in the Osma Breviary (ACBO 2B), and in the *Breviarium gerundense* (ACG 125).

"Sicut mirra electa et aromatizans balsamum maria uirgo semper suauem diffundit odorem" (ACG 125, f.4v) [Just like choice myrrh and sweet-smelling balsam, Mary the ever-virgin exudes a soft perfume] (see also Ricossa 54). In a book of hours of the Virgin with Catalan rubrics, the comparison had been used as the third reading: "sic[ut] cinnamomum et balsamum aromatizans odorem dedi" (BL Add.18193) [Like cinnamon and sweet smelling balsam I give forth odour]. The two plants are those that Roig will use. Mary's perfume is mentioned on no fewer than nineteen occasions at first night prayer in breviaries and devotional works: "germinauit enim florem qui uitalem dat hodorem" [the flower has bloomed which gives forth life-giving odour].<sup>4</sup>

At compline, the early fourteenth-century Girona office uses another text redolent of perfume from the Song of Songs: "Ista est que ascendit per desertum sic uirgula fumi ex aromatibus mirre et thuris et uniuersi pulueris pigmentarii" (ACG 125, f.350r) [What is this coming up from the desert like a column of smoke, breathing of myrrh and frankincense and every exotic perfume?]. The same antiphon appears in Juan de Segovia's office, adopted in Girona (ACG 125, f. 7r).

Of all the conception liturgies, Leonardo de Nogarola's (BC 1043), approved by Pope Sixtus in 1478, places most emphasis on Mary's perfumes, referring to them no fewer than nine times, and this without taking account of individual perfumes. The office associates scents with another prefiguration, the enclosed garden, which was applied first to her perfect virginity and later to her immaculate nature:

Emissiones tue paradisus: ortus delitium in quo sunt confita vniu[er]sa florum genera et odoramenta uirtutum. Sicque signatus ut nesciat uiolari neque corrumpi nullis insidiis fraudibusque diaboli. [Your scent is of paradise: a garden of delights in which is enclosed all types of flowers and fragrances of virtues. And so sealed that it may not be violated or corrupted by any of the traps or tricks of the devil] (BC 1043, f. 13v).<sup>5</sup>

The verses echo Song of Songs (4.12-14) [She is a garden enclosed, my sister, my promised bride; [...]. Your shoots form an orchard of pomegranate trees [...]; nard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon, with all the incense-bearing trees; myrrh and aloes with the subtlest odours].

<sup>4</sup> ACS B272, ACS B288, ACT 33.6, 33.7, 33.9, BN Res. 186, BN8902, BN9082, ACB 51, ACB 22, ACBO 2A, ACC 17, ACC 18, BB 2, and Escorial A.III.14. It is also present in a small number of breviaries from the Kingdom of Aragon: ACSU incunabile 147, AEV 82 and 83.

<sup>5</sup> The enduring quality of these verses to express Mary's sanctity and original purity is shown by response of the maculists. One hundred years later, P. Maldonado in his treatise against the Immaculate Conception dismissed it, arguing that the Fathers of the Church applied it indiscriminately to Mary, to the Church, or to the soul (Tellechea Idígoras 210).

Although Nogarola's office does not refer to cinnamon, it may have been suggested to Roig by the biblical garden of delights.

Among the specific perfumes Nogarola uses is cedar, associated with purity and sinlessness: "et tigna domorum nostrarum cedrina: quoniam ambo sine macula" (f. 20v): "compingamus illud tabulis [tabulis] cedrinis: omni puritatis odore repletis" [Let us construct it (the temple) with boards of cedar: full of the odour of purity]. In both cases cedar is associated with freedom from blemish and with sanctity. Nogarola is citing 1 Kings 6, and associating Mary with the construction of the temple by Solomon.

As well as echoing the Song of Songs and Wisdom literature, perfume could be considered appropriate as a descriptor of the Virgin, because of its purpose in religious ceremonies. Fragrance rises heavenward from the altar and mirrors the way the saint aspires to spiritual relationship with God (Dronke 77). It acts in application to the Virgin as a signifier of her perfect relationship with God.

According to Dentan in his commentary on the Song of Songs, "que est ista" and its column of incense suggests the coming of Yahweh (326). Since the New Testament coming of Christ was through Mary at the Incarnation, it suggests her flesh, a supreme example of consecrated matter (Boss 15, 77).

Another aspect of the use of perfumes and spices lies in the preparation of Mary's perfect body for nuptial unification with the deity. Bathing and adorning with perfumes indicates the initiation before consummation of a marriage (Merz 145). The perfuming of the body was another aspect of costly adornment alongside jewels and rich garments appropriate for a bride. In Mary's case, her assent at the Incarnation is often described as a betrothal and her conception and birth without sin form part of her adornment. Nogarola's office explicitly links perfume, purity, and nuptials:

Dum esset rex in a[c]cubitu suo: nardu[s] nostra dedit odore[m] suauitatis: nardus humilis satis herba; humilis maria odore[m] dedit; mea carissima que ex [fasciculo] mirre reservata est ex mei morte dilecti filii sui congerie passionis nostre. Qui mirra et aloe perlinit[us] fui; qui inter ubera commemoratus est; (BC 1043, f.20v; BUZ incunable 60, f.373v). [Whilst the king was in his chamber, nard gave sweet perfume; nard is a humble herb; humble Mary gives forth a sweet odour; my dearest is reserved from a bundle of myrrh, from the death of my dear son, from his accumulation of our passion. He reclined with myrrh and aloe; and he recalled being on her breast.]

In the *Espill*, Jaume Roig praises Mary, the perfect bride, for her scent of cinnamon and balsam. Other women, like Roig's wife, spend time at their toilette to try to improve their natural odour, whilst Mary is attractive to God because of her odour of sanctity. Roig's wife



perfumes herself before matins: "Ans de matines/ Ella's llevava i 's perfumava /fent-se ben olre" (59). The emphasis Roig places on elimination of smelly bodily odours and adding perfume, adorning oneself because of being sexually available, is devised as a contrast between Mary's perfection and other women's faults.<sup>6</sup>

Some of the biblical and liturgical perfumes, like myrrh, were used for preservation of the body following death, and their connection with non-corruption and with conservation led to initial association with the Assumption of the Virgin and then by extension to other aspects of her preservation from corruption, like her immaculacy. This meaning is drawn out by the *certamen* poet Narcís Vinyoles who points to Mary's preservation from sin by the myrrh of love: "Mirra d'amor vos ha tant conservada" (in Ferrando Francés 287, ll. 3-4). From death, the perfumes shifted easily to referring to the death of sin and to embalming or preservation from it.

To categorize Mary's immaculate nature, Roig selects a series of natural elements, including birds, celestial bodies, and then evokes the Virgin's perfume in "olent goma". In order to establish what Roig means by "goma," I will examine some of the properties of aromatic plants.

"Ben olent goma" may be a reference to myrrh. Myrrh is present in conception liturgies, and in Larousse's encyclopaedia of perfumes it is described as one of the resinoids, which fix perfumes (149). It is used in Proverbs 7:17 as the perfume used for the marriage bed. It was also used in medieval times as an antiseptic and it is probable that, as a doctor, Roig was used to handling it.

He may also be referring to incense. The column of incense is present in liturgies and according to Isidore of Seville, it is:

Tus arbor Arabiae immensa atque ramosa lenissimi corticis, ramis ad aceris qualitatem, amygdalae modo succum aromaticum fundens album et masticatione veluti in pulverem resolutum, et cum frangitur, intus pingue et igni adpositum facile ardescens. Et appellatur apud nos masculum, eo quod sit natura rotundum in modum testiculorum. (1187-9)

árbol de Arabia de enorme corpulencia, dotado de abundantes ramas, de una corteza muy suave; sus ramas se asemejan a las del arce; destila un jugo aromático blanco, a manera de almendra; [...] puesto en el fuego arde fácilmente. Entre nosotros se denomina *masculum* por su conformación redonda, a modo de testículos [...]. Se adultera mezclándolo con resina o goma, pero se le reco-

6 Archer does not consider that Roig contributed to any kind of misogynist debate in Valencian letters but merely that he followed traditional sources which denigrate women (10, 19). His conclusions are at odds with those of previous commentators on the debate about women, including Rosanna Cantavella, who has seen the Valencian debate as an extension of the French one ("Els cards" 20; "Isabel de Villena"; "Debate on Women").

noce por su propiedad, pues el incienso puesto en el fuego arde, la resina provoca humo, y la goma al calentarse, se licúa”.

Although Isidore describes incense as a “juice” he also says it has an almond shape. The mixing with gum or resin which he describes might make it also a candidate.

There are other contenders. Isidore also describes the use of cedar, another of the biblical perfumes as described above and a resinoid perfume, and associates it with preservation:

Lignum vero iucundi odoris estet diu durans, nec a tineas umquam exterminatur: unde et in templis propter diuturnitatem ex hoc ligno lacunaria fiunt. Huius lignum cedria dicitur, quae in conservandis libris adeo es utilis ut perliniti ex ea nec tineas patiantur nec tempore consenescent (1178-79).

[...] al cedro los griegos lo denominan *kedros* [...] su madera es de agradable olor y dura mucho tiempo, y nunca es atacada de carcoma. Debido a su durabilidad de esta Madera se construyeron los artesonados de los templos. La resina de este árbol se conoce con el nombre de cedria, y resulta tan útil para conservar los libros que, cuando se los barniza con ella, no sufren la acción de las polillas ni envejecen con el tiempo (7.7).

Could it be to cedar that Roig is referring when he describes Mary as a gum? It would have been particularly applicable to her because of its incorruptibility. In his description, Isidore mentions its resin, which, according to him, has a practical application in preserving books and it continues today to be recommended on the internet as a substance which will prevent moth damage, although only aromatic or incense works, not the standard type. Perhaps Roig was aware of the substance, using it for his own books.

Perfumes were also in constant use in households such as Roig's, and the scents he used to depict the Virgin would have been familiar. Housewives made their own perfumes, as is shown by a sixteenth-century book of recipes for preparing scents for sprinkling on clothes and rubbing on gloves. The recipe for making musk water includes the use of two resinous perfumes, musk and ambar:

Para azer agua amizcada

A quatro libras de agua rosada dos libras de flor de mosqueta vna libra de azar de açugas toda buelta en vna redoma y tomar quatro onças de benjuy y molello y echallo en una redoma y una quarta destoraque y vna quarta de anbar y media quarta de almizque y tanto como media avellana de algalia y echar la mitat dello en vna caldera de agua y ponello al fuego y yerua media ora y apartalda y ansi dentro en la caldera de que se vaya enfriando sacar la pasta para azer panecitos y el agua pasalla a otra redoma y moler la mitat del anbar y el almizque que quedo y echarlo dentro y algalia y desatalla con poluillos y

echarlo dentro y tenello bien atapado y de que quieran sacar della menealla dentro en la redoma (f. 132v).

The recipe book is from the sixteenth century but Roig's wife would have been using these or similar recipes in their household to perfume the linen, the gloves, and the clothing. Sprinkling with rose-water or musk-water made the perfect alternative to laundering. It is not impossible that the "ben olent goma," which Roig mentions, is ambar or musk, and was suggested to him, as he wrote the *Espill*, by the scent of home-made perfumes which his wife was preparing.

In this essay I have shown that Roig follows the liturgies of his day as he applies perfumes to the Virgin to exemplify her Immaculate Conception. Donna Spivey Ellington argued that "use of the Song of Songs as a source of Marian allegory in sermons and Biblical exegesis was first inspired by the book's use to praise Mary in the liturgy" (61).<sup>7</sup> But her assessment should be amended on two counts. First, its use in literature was inspired by the liturgy too. Second, to her point that the Song of Songs provided sermon writers, exegetes, and poets with material should be added Wisdom literature, like the passage from Ecclesiasticus examined earlier.

But at the same time the choice of perfumes, particularly the "olent goma" to which he compares her, may have been suggested also by familiar scents in his home, as he wrote. The scent of household objects is particularly evocative. If it were these Roig is recalling, it would turn his use of perfume as a negative comparator for women inside out. At the same time as using perfume to elevate the Virgin above all others, could he be subtly evoking the work of the diligent housewife, his wife, whose task is to perfume the objects in everyday use in his home?

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<sup>7</sup> This is true but the time-scale she suggests for it is wide of the mark. She notes a two-hundred-year tradition of allegorizing it to represent the relationship between Jesus and Mary by the time of Jean Gerson (d.1429). Other scholars point to different starting points. Hilda Charlotte Graef argues that Ambrose was the earliest (83), whilst E. Ann Matter held that the Song of Songs had first been applied to Mary in the liturgy in the seventh century and she notes a ninth-century Marian commentary, *Cogitis me*, by Paschasius Radbertus, which makes an important connection between the Song of Songs and Mary's Assumption (151-55). She later indicates that it was with Rupert of Deutz (b.1075) that Marian commentary on the Song really began (159).



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