The Senses in Late Medieval England

Review Number: 708
Publish date: Monday, 1 December, 2008
Author: Christopher M. Woolgar
ISBN: 9780300118716
Date of Publication: 2006
Price: £25.00
Pages: 384pp.
Publisher: Yale University Press
Place of Publication: New Haven, CT
Reviewer: Bronach Kane

The five senses of the body were imbued with moral significance in the high and late Middle Ages, and 13th- and 14th-century confession manuals afford ample evidence of this belief. Contained in these treatises were interrogatories that urged priests to examine penitents on their sins, using the five senses as the starting point for ways in which the laity might lapse. In his recent monograph, *The Senses in Late Medieval England*, C.M. Woolgar uses this initial example to articulate the intimate relationship of sin and virtue to the senses (pp. 11-13). His study analyses how this relationship came about and the way in which senses were interpreted in everyday life. This is an important book that pulls together existing material on the senses and situates them in a new and refreshing context.

Woolgar focuses on the period from the mid-12th to the mid-16th century. This chronology is justified with the reminder that little evidence survives for the study of the senses prior to the former date. The 16th century witnessed profound changes that radically altered attitudes towards the senses. Presenting his aims in a brief introduction, Woolgar identifies a lacuna in published work on the senses which derives from an emphasis on ideological rather than practical aspects of sensory experience. He aims to address this deficiency by concentrating on the senses in everyday life. Woolgar is not the first medievalist to research late medieval attitudes to the senses. Significantly, the work of Michael Camille has directed our attention to the experience and representation of image-making and vision in medieval culture while Carole Rawcliffe’s research has charted developments in the medieval hospital as an institution and her recent work on leprosy reveals cultural attitudes and myths that surrounded this section of society. A volume that synthesises diverse source material on the senses, and medieval interpretations of their malfunction, is sorely needed.

Woolgar artfully combines medieval theories with little studied archival material to produce a book that is both a survey and an original addition to the study of the senses.

Arranged into two halves, the first section of the book deals with learned theories on the five senses and how they were interpreted in medieval society. The latter half of the book seeks to unravel how the senses operated in practice, in predominantly household contexts. It is not surprising that the elite household governs discussion. Woolgar has produced editions of household accounts, authored an excellent monograph on the organisation and domestic culture of elite households, and makes it his business to uncover the quotidian aspects of medieval society. This most recent study is a natural progression from a chapter in his book on late medieval great households that examined the senses, alongside religion and intellectual life.
The admirable desire to refocus the lens of sensory experience outside the five classical senses drives the first half of the book. Woolgar considers speech and traits of holiness alongside the senses that classical antiquity handed down to medieval culture, namely sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch. The author addresses a wide range of issues related to the senses in the Middle Ages. Demonstrating the existence of ‘popular’ and intellectual approaches to the senses of the body, chapter two outlines vernacular and elite discourse on sensory experience. In a fascinating discussion, Woolgar emphasises the fluidity and overlap between terms used in Latin, Anglo-Norman French and Middle English, the three main languages of late medieval England.

In the chapters on the senses which include a treatment of speech and the virtues associated with touch and holiness, Woolgar masters an impressive array of material. Some of the examples cited are at once recognisable, such as the odour of decay used to symbolise the transience of the fleshly body, and sweet smells to signify sanctity. Woolgar presents many archival gems to accompany these familiar themes, demonstrated in a fascinating discussion of bathing, cosmetics and perfume (pp. 132-8). Similarly, the choice of examples offers great insight into the cultural and religious attitudes that pervaded late medieval perceptions of hygiene and sanitation. For example, Ranulph Higden, writing in the mid-14th century, viewed daily bathing of genitalia with disdain, dismissing it as a Jewish practice. The first half of the book is impeccably referenced, containing many trails for interested readers to follow.

The second part of the book contains thematic chapters that flesh out the initial survey half of the study. Immersed in detailed research of the sort evident in his study on the great household, Woolgar charts the ‘sensory experiences’ present in three high status households: episcopal, queenly and aristocratic. Drawing on manuals directed at the lord’s male attendants, notably the Harleian household regulations and the First and Second Northumberland Household Books, Chapter 11 examines the great household through the lens of daily and occasional routines. In his meticulous treatment of sensory environments in elite contexts, Woolgar inhabits familiar terrain, as his adeptness with the source material demonstrates.

These final chapters which make up the second half of the study place ceremony and ritual, often situated in the civic context, in a domestic milieu. The rituals that Woolgar chronicles, from bathing of the nobleman or queen to arrangements at table, focus on the elite. His discussion of the great household at the close of the late Middle Ages contains an interesting treatment of how the confinement of a countess, recorded in the Second Northumberland Household Book, influenced the sensory environment of the great household. In chapter ten, Woolgar examines queenly households in the 14th century, alongside those of English princesses who married abroad. He brings together detail that will doubtless prove useful for future research on feminine domestic culture in elite settings.

The book concludes with a discussion of how perceptions of the senses shifted within the period analysed. Woolgar’s intriguing comments on the blurring of ideas on the senses amongst parish priests and the congregation emphasises the extent to which the often strict dichotomy between elite and ‘popular’ concepts needs to be broken down further. Similarly, the brief discussion of individual experience and group identity, namely the ways in which sensory experience created and bound together larger groups, devotional and religious, points towards an area that merits further analysis.

For all the scrupulous examples included and the thorough research on which the arguments rest, the book does possess weaknesses. In the first section of the book, the inner senses, known as the sensus communis, receive only a cursory mention, appearing almost as a distant cousin of the five senses of the body. Despite the intimate relationship between the sensus communis and the bodily senses, little emphasis is placed on the former’s role in the interpretation and reception of the latter. Similarly, memory, a crucial element in medieval theories on perception, receives little attention beyond chapter two. Though Woolgar himself articulates the importance of perception in understanding daily life, the book fails to theorise its operation in quotidian experience. What did these sensory encounters mean to the individual? Should the senses of the body and those of the mind exist in a strict dichotomy?
The study refrains from analysing in a more theoretical way intriguing areas such as sartorial taste and influence in high status households. The study of clothing has already begun to attract serious attention. Recent work on the late medieval and early modern household focuses on material domestic culture, and how it was imbued with meaning in everyday life. (3) Woolgar’s analysis implies that high status individuals have become inured or desensitised to these sensory environments, seemingly rich or sensual to the modern mindset. The domestic interiors of the types of households that his study considers, and the sensory encounters that they facilitated, would indeed have launched an assault upon the senses. Yet Woolgar’s demonstration of the daily usage and demand for goods that otherwise appear luxurious, underscores the collapsed boundaries between luxury and everyday items in certain contexts.

Though admirably detailed, the summaries of household goods that make up ‘sensory environments’ lack consistent analysis, and on occasion become narrative lists of household objects (pp. 213-9, 233-8). Woolgar’s analysis of every physical object or ‘sensory experience’ which the medieval high status individual may have encountered cloaks a lack of engagement with theories of material culture. It also prompts the question of how far the second half of his study actually deals with domestic interiors and the built environment rather than the senses themselves. Woolgar notes that relating the first section of the book on beliefs to the latter part on the senses in daily life makes for a difficult task (p.189). This troubled relationship represents the primary weakness of this study. If the second half of his study is concerned more with domestic culture, an analysis of the cultural meaning attached to various objects and items the elite consumed would have been a useful exercise. (4) What values and meanings were drawn from household objects and did they have a ‘cultural biography’ that can be usefully analysed? Despite these drawbacks, attention to the inner confines of the household raises questions of the use of household spaces and the daily routines that occurred within these areas. Woolgar’s delineation of these settings reminds us that routine actions were often imbued with ritual meaning. The lack of theoretical clarity will hopefully cause readers to reconsider the points where the bodily senses and domestic environment converged.

This book demonstrates that many stones are left unturned in the research area of domestic culture. The examples cited in the chapters on touch and those on the environment in elite households feed into areas that demand further analysis. More detailed study of domestic interiors may reveal much about sensation, gesture and embodied experience in the medieval household, shedding light on the values and identity of these groups, whatever the status of its inhabitants. The book is infused with an infectious enthusiasm for archival material and embraces an interdisciplinary approach that extends this fervour to art history, material culture and the built environment. Richly illustrated and thoroughly referenced, the study provides plenty of material for further reading on the senses and high status households. In common with Woolgar’s other works, it combines an extensive chronological range with a remarkable amount of detail. His study offers a laudable antidote to previous research on the senses which Woolgar himself perceives as divorced from social practice. There is no doubt that this volume will be appreciated by students and academics alike. The Senses in Late Medieval England breathes life into a research area which often appears to suffer from a paucity of relevant sources. Woolgar has set an exciting new agenda for the study of sensory experience in the late Middle Ages.

Notes


Other reviews:
[2]

Source URL: https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/708#comment-0

Links
[1] https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/3685
[2] https://reviews.history.ac.uk/