

Making a Stink in Roman Comedy

Are odors meaningful if we do not—or cannot—smell them? Characters in the comedies of Plautus often mention in-play scents; for example, when complaining about foul surroundings (e.g., *Curc.* 101), describing the act of smelling (e.g., *Capt.* 808), or mocking another character (e.g., *Most.* 41–50). These moments are remarkable because the odors being reported do not, in fact, exist. Even if comic actors carried props emitting the same smell(s) they describe (possible but unlikely; cf. Ketterer 1986 and Marshall 2006) almost none of those watching the performance would have been able to experience these scents themselves. The stage was too small and most spectators were too distant from it (Goldberg 2018). The ambient odors of their fellow audience members, of the actors themselves, and of the surrounding cityscape would also have competed, and been much more present in the nose (Bradley 2015; Skotheim 2016). Nevertheless, in-play, imaginary odors were readily accepted. Characters report them as genuine, and they could be important narrative cues, as when the *anus* Leaena is enticed onstage by the smell of wine, (*Curc.* 96–157). Performed scent was thus tangible imagination, shared between actor and audience.

Since the audience experiencing “performative odors” did so indirectly, to maintain the cooperative illusion of the play they had to supply their own sensation—they did not “smell” so much as apply analog memories they already had (Revermann 2006). However, audiences at comic performances were mixed and included people from every background (Richlin 2017). And, since everyone experienced the “olfactory reality” of ancient Rome differently (Morley 2015), each would have brought different associations to in-play odors. Consider for example the varying reactions the scents goat (*hircus*, *Cas.* 1018), garlic (*alium*, *Most.* 39), swineherds

(*scrofipasci*, *Capt.* 807), or tanning fluid (*nautea*, *As.* 894) would have evoked, let alone the compound odor of “theft, prostitute[s], and lunch” (*furtum, scortum, prandium*, *Men.* 170). “Goats and garlic” were the conventional aromas of low-status country people and could be insulting, as in *Mostellaria* when the urban slave Tranio tells the country slave Grumio that he “stinks of garlic” (*obolui sti alium*, 39; cf. Lilja 1972). Some would no doubt have laughed here, but others—possibly smelling of garlic themselves—would instead have laughed more when Grumio in turn mocked Tranio for “smelling of fancy perfume” (*olere unguenta exotica*, 42). The qualities of garlic or perfume were not so important; what they evoked for different individuals was. As in the modern English phrases “smells like a pig” or “smells fishy to me,” certain odors—here of genuinely valuable consumer goods—became conventional metaphors, with a negative moral or social value.

Indeed, “smelly” metaphors are everywhere in Plautus, whose characters rarely describe odors in detail—how could they?—but instead judge scents (and their sources) according to basic values: good, bad, strange, familiar. Smell metaphors are so common in comic dialogue that all primary olfaction verbs—*olere, obolere, olfacere, fetere*, etc.—are used figuratively as often as they are literally (Stevens 2008), and one, *subolet* (“to suspect”), is exclusively metaphorical: e.g., *subolet hoc iam uxori quod ego machinor*, “What I’m up to smells fishy to my wife!” (*Cas.* 277). The audience made sense of both literal and metaphorical in-play smells because both relied on abstraction, not literal detail. A lack of specificity was, ultimately, what made “performed odors” effective: by requiring the out-play audience to supply their own sense-memories, from their own experiences, the audience was drawn into the world of the play. The imagined odor—and its narrative context—became personal, something known and not just described, thereby making the performance more affecting, engaging, and immediate.

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