

Annette Kern-Stähler, Beatrix Busse and Wietse de Boer (eds), "The Five Senses in Medieval and Early Modern England" (2016)

Smith, Simon

DOI:

[10.1086/695208](https://doi.org/10.1086/695208)

License:

None: All rights reserved

Document Version

Peer reviewed version

Citation for published version (Harvard):

Smith, S 2017, 'Annette Kern-Stähler, Beatrix Busse and Wietse de Boer (eds), "The Five Senses in Medieval and Early Modern England" (2016)', *Renaissance Quarterly*, pp. 1127-8. <https://doi.org/10.1086/695208>

[Link to publication on Research at Birmingham portal](#)

**General rights**

Unless a licence is specified above, all rights (including copyright and moral rights) in this document are retained by the authors and/or the copyright holders. The express permission of the copyright holder must be obtained for any use of this material other than for purposes permitted by law.

- Users may freely distribute the URL that is used to identify this publication.
- Users may download and/or print one copy of the publication from the University of Birmingham research portal for the purpose of private study or non-commercial research.
- User may use extracts from the document in line with the concept of 'fair dealing' under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 (?)
- Users may not further distribute the material nor use it for the purposes of commercial gain.

Where a licence is displayed above, please note the terms and conditions of the licence govern your use of this document.

When citing, please reference the published version.

**Take down policy**

While the University of Birmingham exercises care and attention in making items available there are rare occasions when an item has been uploaded in error or has been deemed to be commercially or otherwise sensitive.

If you believe that this is the case for this document, please contact [UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk](mailto:UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk) providing details and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate.

**Annette Kern-Stähler, Beatrix Busse and Wietse de Boer (eds), *The Five Senses in Medieval and Early Modern England* (2016).**

This ambitious collection of essays brings together voices from a range of disciplinary backgrounds to consider sensory culture from Anglo-Saxon England through to the Restoration. The scope of edited volumes on the senses is ever-increasing, as this book illustrates in almost every possible way: Old English sensory metaphor sits alongside late seventeenth century epistemology and John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*, whilst approaches drawn from linguistics, disability studies and the history of science complement the cultural-historical and literary-critical approaches of many contributors. The book does not aim to offer an overview for students, but gathers together research essays in order to "provide a diachronic investigation of the functions and development of sense perception in a given spatial context" (2). To be more than the sum of its parts, such a diverse collection requires shared research questions, explicit inter-connections, and clear insights that could not be offered by a study with a narrower historical or methodological focus.

Many chapters respond admirably to this challenge. Dieter Bitterli's subtle account of the Old English *Marvels of the East* opens up broader questions about how the senses determine boundaries of the human, animal and monster (and, incidentally, demonstrates the significant scholarly benefit of including colour illustrations). Richard G. Newhauser's case for the multisensoriality of place represents a significant contribution to the field of sensory studies, as well as offering insights into various Chaucerian works. Two precise chapters by Farah Karim-Cooper, and Rory G. Critten and Annette Kern-Stähler, on "The Theatre as Sensory Experience", stand as interrogations of the status of smell and touch as topics of historical enquiry, building on the work of Holly Dugan and others, even whilst making more local cases for the multisensory nature of Shakespearean playgoing and the dramatic significance of smell in the York Corpus Christi plays. Several other essays similarly address wider sensory concerns through carefully delimited subjects.

Some contributions engage rather less directly with current conversations within sensory studies, instead using the senses as a stepping-stone towards other, often valuable, insights, into the politics of *Paradise Lost*, or the unexpectedly conventional nature of much of John Wyclif's preaching. Such chapters feel more detached from the thrust of this broad-ranging volume than would perhaps have been the case in collections more narrowly concerned with seventeenth-century poetry, or medieval theology. The provision of a substantial introduction and an unusually full afterword by Elizabeth Robertson goes some

way towards making the volume's continuities explicit, but this task feels harder in relation to some chapters than others.

The juxtaposition of material from across so many centuries foregrounds important issues often marginalised in narrower studies, and some of these questions are thoughtfully examined by multiple contributors. Particular attention is given to the historically shifting relationship between knowledge and sensation, and to the significance of the full sensorium in many cultural moments. Other key issues are touched upon only in passing, perhaps representing a missed opportunity in a volume that brings together expertise in so many centuries of English culture. In particular, contributors' differing views of exactly how ocularcentrism, modernity and the classical privileging of sight interrelate could usefully have generated an internal conversation, rather than representing a slight discontinuity amongst those with specialisms in different historical periods. Relatedly, whilst Aristotelian sensory hierarchies are a constant thread, some chapters seem far more alive to the ways in which cultures might complicate, challenge or reimagine such hierarchies than do others that refer, for instance, to sight and touch as "traditionally ... a 'major' and [a] 'minor' sense" (38).

There is very little here that will not be of use as a stand-alone essay, and indeed, Brill's eBook platform allows for the purchase of individual chapters, each with its own selective bibliography and digital object identifier. As a collective endeavour, whilst parts of the volume admittedly offer a clearer rationale for its conjunction than do others, there is certainly material to interest sensory scholars of any stripe, and, perhaps, to tempt early modernists to spend a little time with Chaucerian fowls and tenth century monstrosities.

Simon Smith, *University of Birmingham*