

Religious Manifestations of the Five Senses in Early Medieval Christianity:

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This paper sets out to investigate why references to the five senses in Middle English literature almost always portray them negatively. By way of answer, Greek philosophy provides the starting-point, notably the works of Plato and Aristotle. They paint a picture of the senses (sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch) as problematic in the philosophical search for happiness and the fulfilment of human potential, as a force that often conflicts with the workings of the soul (Plato) or undermines the 'moderation' required for a harmonious life (Aristotle). Aristotle's views on the potential harm of the senses, especially touch, was transmitted to the West via writers such as Calcidius (before 400 AD) and Macrobius (*fl.* c. 400 AD). The latter, although not a Christian, ridiculed the sensual pleasures of eating and sex. It appears that such negative views were well received by early Christian theologians such as Lactantius (c. 250-325 AD) and Jerome (c. 347-420 AD) who adapted Greek philosophical strictures to a system of Christian morality built around the concept of sin. The former distinguished between the necessary use of the senses for survival (shared by humans and animals) and their pleasurable use, unique to humans, who tended to abuse this divine gift by sin and vice. In his 'Divine Institutes' (Bk 6), Lactantius discusses each of the senses, illustrating their abuse with vivid examples, such as the defiling of the sense of sight by watching realistic pornographic scenes played out in mime on the Roman stage. A century later, in his 'Against Jovinian', Jerome took up the same theme with lurid accounts of the consequences of debauchery. Jerome went beyond Lactantius (his model) by introducing the innovation of characterizing such examples as manifestations of particular sins, notably, gluttony, avarice, and lust—a type of categorizing which later coalesced in the Seven Deadly Sins (Pope Gregory the Great, c. 540-604 AD).

Even more formative on early medieval Christian thinking about the five senses was the influence of the seven sacraments, in particular those of Penance and Extreme Unction. The first involved the private confessing of one's sins to a priest in order to gain absolution from the spiritual punishments incurred by these sins, a system which had its origins in the 6th/7th-century Celtic churches. From manuals composed in Old English (Archbishop Wulfstan of York, c. 1000) to facilitate the process of confession we learn that the penitent, *inter alia*, specifically asked pardon for sins committed with the five senses. Later, in the High Middle Ages, when annual confession became obligatory for all Christians, the roles were reversed with the priest now asking the penitent about sins specific to the senses which they had committed, as in John Mirk's 'Handbook for Priests' (c. 1400 AD).

Extreme Unction ('the Last Rites'), a sacrament received by Christians in imminent danger of death, also directly addressed the close association of the senses with sin and depravity. It involved a highly tactile ritual in which the priest anointed with holy oil (chrism) the five members of the dying person's body (eyes, ears, mouth, nose, and hands) in order to purify them of the sins they had been instrumental in committing. Clearly this sacrament, and that of Penance, in their very ritual, conveyed that the senses were conduits of sin, while reinforcing the same message latent in much of Western Patristic literature. Of course, medieval theologians could emphasize the positive role of the senses—Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225-1274) described them as essential pre-requisites for apprehending knowledge and for intellectual growth—but the vast majority of medieval English Christians would have been taught to regard them as potentially sinful, an attitude reflected in sermons, confessors' manuals, and vernacular literature, both religious and secular.