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Andrew Kettler

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Making the Synthetic Epic
Septimus Piesse, the Manufacturing of Mercutio Frangipani, and Olfactory Renaissance in Victorian England

Andrew Kettler

ABSTRACT In late-nineteenth-century London, George Wilhelm Septimus Piesse drove perfume markets to find new wealth through a previously repressed English sense of smell. Piesse created a romantic fictional character, Mercutio Frangipani, to reinvigorate scenting into the English sensorium. Piesse fashioned his mythical hero Frangipani, a botanist who discovered the shoreline through his sense of smell on one of Columbus’ voyages to the New World, to tie his product to exotic encounters of the Atlantic World. The perfumer’s construct became a historical figure despite a lack of documentary evidence. Piesse’s invention of Mercutio as a New World discoverer left that figure available to later discourses, altering the
history surrounding Columbus’ encounter with the Caribbean, the discoveries of the Jesuit botanist Charles Plumier, and the Frangipani household’s true fragrant bequest as the creators of synthetic perfume in the seventeenth century. In order to tie his synthetic product, the Frangipanni perfume, to the luxury of early modern French courts and the mysterious nature of the pre-European Americas, Piesse offered an agnotological misstep; the story of a counterfeit man, his exceptional nose, and a tantalizing scentful detection of the West Indian shoreline.

KEYWORDS: perfume, sensation, historical memory, Atlantic World, public sphere

The synthetic perfumer George Wilhelm Septimus Piesse and a clique of fellow chemists in nineteenth-century London, including the Paris perfumer Wilhelm Lubin and the Brough family of British polymath playwrights, created a mythological figure to supply an etiology for an imitation odor. The historiographical tale of that romanticized figure, Mercutio Frangipani, a “learned botanist” who detected the New World through his sense of smell on one of Columbus’ voyages across the Atlantic, offers an opportunity to perceive how historical memory can be constructed through myth, and how myth can become fact within popular remembrance despite the lack of validating evidence. The liberties which Piesse took from history were not without consequence. With Mercutio as their literary talisman, Piesse’s ensemble attempted to construct an aesthetically divining nose beyond that allowed within the Kantian dulled bourgeoisie public sphere which had stripped the organ of artistic and scientific capabilities during the nineteenth century. Piesse’s capitalist goals to integrate an olfactory market into the bourgeoisie public sphere whose members were previously educated with repression of the sense of smell within Victorian sensual education succeeded as his product became the most popular perfume of the era and crossed the Atlantic to enter American luxury markets. To attain these goals Piesse and his entrepreneurial faction created a hero of the sinuses, as myth and hero worship can alter cultural sensoriums.¹

The senses are educated through cultural entities that attribute discursive weight to sensory signs, and how those signs should properly be sensed (Merleau-Ponty 2002: 26). Language, as the manufacturer of culture, is both dependent upon and a contributive architect of sensory perception (Foucault 1971). These culturally dependent sensory experiences are articulated through narratives which surround and inform individual senses as they exist within
phenomenological spaces of the public sphere. Narratives give weight to the values of improper or appropriate social functioning, and therefore proper or indecorous sensory acuities. The senses need their heroes within discourse as much as cultural concepts diverse as truth or freedom. Signpost figures offer societies paradigms of proper sensory behavior. If discourses including smelling contained the semiotic weight of heroic acts: discovering the New World, curing diseases, creating luxurious perfumes, or categorizing aromatic plants, that sensation would implicitly be of greater value and therefore increasingly perceived.2

The influence of literary heroes in the creation of sensory understandings has not been sufficiently studied. As part of a cultural education of the senses idols and their tales altered historical sensory perceptions (Smith 2007: 28). Literature, as partially promulgated into a cultural sensorium through narratives, created a desire to emulate exemplars of heroic sensory functioning, thereafter altering the cultural education of the senses and sensory roles of the mimetic masses. These heroes and their paradigmatic sensory functions transform the “economy of the senses” which cast a “dividing line between the properly perceptible and imperceptible” altering “the ontological and political status any perception by defining it as significant or insignificant” (Banes and Lepecki 2007: 2–3). The story of Mercutio, and the value accorded to scent in that myth, made the process of smelling more esteemed in the perceptions of late-nineteenth-century English bourgeoisie. As Paul Cezanne, Johannes Gutenberg, and Zacharias Jansen were heroes of the sense of sight, their very mention enlivening the sense of vision through narratives of their influence, the sensory myth of Piesse and his cohort supported goals of a luxurious nasal skill above the base sense of smelling deemed too unclassifiable to be taxonomically valuable to Carolus Linnaeus or aesthetically beneficial to Immanuel Kant.3 In this phenomenological contest to entrench smelling against the relatively deodorized bourgeoisie public sphere, Piesse and his syndicate constructed a mythical hero to hold up for perusal to Anglo-American perfume markets. Historical myth thus tied together the many aspects of the fictional with numerous factual concurrences to create a concretely perceived real within English culture. Sensation, linked with such constructed and coincidentalized myths, spiraled out into a continual relationship between body and mind cyclically perceiving the world based upon subconscious sensory pedagogies.

To Piesse, the Victorian Era middle-class needed a novel literature to create subconscious sensory alterations. His cadre of perfumers in question applied an innovative narrative to create a new respect for odor and smelling through the creation of a mythical nasal champion with capitalist objectives of exploiting a previously repressed sense of smell. The synthetic scents so proudly hailed by Piesse in print advertisements for his fragrances, and in frequent reprints of
his *The Art of Perfumery and the Methods of Obtaining the Odors of Plants* (1856), were industrial replicas of famous perfumes from previous eras made popular because of a new public interest in olfactory chemical compounds during the late nineteenth century. One such scent formulated by Piesse was the “Frangipanni.” The mythos of that Frangipanni scent, particularly its connection to the discovery of the New World, was shaped in the mid-nineteenth century. That fable persists as fact within the historical academy. Tracing the historical roots of the surname, scent, and flower often named a derivative of Frangipani enlivens our understanding of the process and media of historical myth-making and sensation implicitly reliant upon mythmaking fancy.

**The Columbus Documentary Trail**

Many encounters with the New World included the use of the nose as a bulwark against the novel scents of fresh environmental exposures. Tales of lost sailors drifting towards the odorific smells of nearby islands filled the pages of numerous texts from the early Atlantic era. The perpetual responsiveness implicit in the use of smell made the tale of Mercutio Frangipani and his olfactive detection of the New World plausible to late-nineteenth-century Western populations whose own noses faced the unrelenting siege of London’s sulfuric coal smoke and choleric filth, Paris’ pungent ancient sewage buried beneath the permeable walkways of the *haute couture*, and the huddled and stinking fish markets of recently filling American port cities.

Stories of the smell of nearby islands prior to visual detection of American shores do not exist within the written record of Columbus’ voyages. Crew lists for the first voyage do not mention the surname Frangipani. On that voyage, a bounty was provided for the first man to discover land. Debates surrounded who visually observed the land off the Bahamas first on October 11, 1492. The initial claimant to the reward, Rodrigo de Triana, was given credit for first noticing land though others, Columbus among them, observed a “light bouncing” upon the shore the night before land was encountered (Columbus and Markham 1970: 30–8). Promoter Samuel Purchas was the first to summarize the discovery tale of Triana for English readers (Purchas 1625: 11). During the seventeenth century, the chronicler Oviedo embellished Purchas’ summary. He discussed Columbus stole the reward from Triana because of his jealousy at another finding land first. Thereafter, Triana became a Muslim in Africa jilted by the betrayal afforded to him by the Queen who supported Columbus’ defamation of Triana as a fabricator (Abbott 1877: 162–3). James Howell Street’s *The Velvet Doublet* (1953) attempted to attach historicity to the Triana tale of discovery through a fictional account from Rodrigo’s perspective. The doublet central to Street’s tale was provided by Isabella to the first man to sight land, in addition to a lifetime pension from the Crown and a ten thousand *maravedis*
reward offered by Columbus (Street 1953: 220–50). Though debate continues as to whether Columbus or Triana was the first to sight land, none of the early chroniclers of the encounter discussed scent as the first sensation used to discover the New World.

After discovery Columbus employed scentful language to describe his encounters with numerous environs, testifying to the fact that if smelling had been a part of initial discovery it would have been mentioned (Columbus 1893: 52–71). Columbus’ second voyage left to historians no crew lists or relatively significant documentation as many of the documents relating the discoveries and settlements therein were concealed as state secrets to prevent English familiarity to the perceived link to Asia. This smokescreen introduced by Spanish authorities may have been the foremost cause for the naming of the American supercontinent after the later explorer Amerigo Vespucci, rather than the geographically confused Columbus (Knight 1856: 337). Columbus’ second voyage, where Mercutio could have traveled if he existed, was therefore not well documented. The pertinent narrative with the most chronological proximity to this second voyage was Niccolò Syllacius’ *De Insulis Meridiani Atque Indici Maris Nuper Inventis* (1494). However, like all literature about Columbus, until Piesse three and a half centuries after the discovery of the New World, Syllacius’ narrative did not name Mercutio Frangipani or his scentful first discoveries of any Caribbean isles (Syllacius et al. 1859[1494]).

Because no evidence remains within the documentary record of Mercutio Frangipani regarding the discovery of the New World, the knowledge of his existence on Columbus’ voyages came from later sources. The question remains whether those sources were fabricated or simply confused within the subconscious of a band of nineteenth-century perfumers. Once created, the story of Mercutio’s nose penetrated the popular memory and continued to infiltrate sensory history, botany, and cosmetics. His existence and roles are now treated as historical truisms, not requiring substantiation or investigation of the tale’s origins; the wavering truth of surviving history remaining altered by the aromatic canards of the past.

**Progenies of Salesmen: Modern Myth Supporters**

The history of Mercutio Frangipani told in the last few decades usually contained a variation of Piesse’s original version composed in C.J.S. Thompson’s *The Mystery and Lure of Perfume* (1969). Thompson’s summary of the roots of the European perfume industry stated that a botanist Frangipani smelled the shore of Antigua before the sight of land by another in Columbus’ crew on the second voyage, as it is widely understood Antigua was discovered by Europeans on that expedition. Mercutio was said to have discovered the aromatic *Plumeria alba*, vernacular frangipani or white jasmine, on the island. He returned to Europe and passed on his discovery to his grandson, the Marquis de Frangipani, who discovered the
process of spreading the fragrance derived from the frangipani plant on the gloves of Charles IX's toadies (Thompson 1969: 97–8).

Though Thompson became the source for later writers who borrowed the Frangipani discovery tale in substantial detail, the fabled history of Mercutio was provided in the preceding years by sundry authors. In James Knox Millen’s Your Nose Knows: A Study of the Sense of Smell (1960) readers were asked to recall “the story of Frangipani, the Italian perfumer who accompanied Columbus on his voyage. He … told the despairing others that the perfume which was wafted to them, approaching the unseen isle of Antigua, came from flowers—sure proof that land was near.” Embellishments altered different versions of the story, such superfluities proving the very instability associated with the documentary record. To Millen, the crew was miserable before the hero Frangipani and his adept nose encountered intense floral scents floated forth on Caribbean breezes. Minor divergences within versions of Mercutio Frangipani’s history, here using the first voyage (implied by the use of “his”) and including the use of Antigua as opposed to the widely accepted Bahaman first sighting, highlight the hollowness of the original tale as the chain from one story to the next succumbed to alterations failing the métier of historical veracity (Millen 1960: 21).

The myth of Mercutio’s nasal discoveries most likely adhered stringently to the collective memory through the myriad works of the historian of scent Roy Genders. Genders presented the tale repeatedly, in both brief notation and full detail, most likely drawing from the Thompson and Millen tales of years prior. He elaborated on the tale in Scented Flora of the World (1977) which noted links to the Marquis de Frangipani, the roots of the flower’s discovery, and the use of perfumed gloves in the court of Elizabeth I of England. Genders summarized:

Gloves presented to Elizabeth would be scented with frangipani, one of the most famous of all perfumes which owes its origin to a prominent Roman family, several members of whom served in the Papal army at the time of the Italian Renaissance. It was distilled from the flowers of plumeria alba, which grows on several of the West Indian islands, and its scent was first brought to the attention of Europeans by Mercutio Frangipani, a botanist of renown who accompanied Columbus … in 1492. (Genders 1977: 33)

As Columbus’ small armada “approached Antigua, they noticed a delicious scent in the air which Mercutio said came from some sweet-smelling flower. On landing they found the island filled with small trees bearing white flowers which became known as Frangipani, to commemorate the man who first recognized the perfume” (Genders 1977: 33). Genders’ chronology was disordered throughout his many histories as “1492” implied the first voyage while “Antigua” denoted the second; faults born of unhinged documentation.
Later tales of the Mercutio discovery included no documentary proofs within citation, but offered the tale in different variations of nasal profundity. In *The Scent Trail* (2009), Celia Lyttelton noted that perfumed fragrances became popular after the Medici family encouraged research into the medicinal properties of plants. She understood correctly that the historically verifiable frangipane perfume, which previous authors transcribed as directly from the plant discovered on Antigua by Mercutio, was a concoction which included no flowers but rather involved a powder of spices added to orris root, with a touch of civet. The influence of this novel scent helped to invigorate the nascent perfume industry in Florence, and later spread perfumery throughout assorted European courts. However, even though she removed *Plumeria alba* correctly from the aromatic recipe, Lyttelton kept the discovery tale of Mercutio, perpetuating the fallacy of his nasal heroism when noting the frangipane scent “became popular when Mercutio Frangipani, a learned botanist, sailed to the New World with Columbus, and when they approached the shores of Antigua, he breathed in the delicious scent of the sweet-smelling flowers that were called *plumeria alba*” (Lyttelton 2009: 89).

Mercutio Frangipani was therefore in different variations on a myth: a botanist who discovered the New World through his sense of smell on Columbus’ first voyage, discovered a fragrant plant in the West Indies on the second voyage of the Genoan seaman, was a perfumer himself preceding either voyage (prior to the historiographical tradition of the invention of alcohol based perfumery in the early seventeenth century by the Marquis de Frangipani), and added *Plumeria alba* to his frangipane fragrance recipe rather than simply providing synthetic aromatic formulae to his progeny. Like clay in the hands of gods, the promethean tale of the Frangipani family was altered to include a new nobleman who gained and lost traits with each telling of his legend. The tale thus contained numerous elements of a historical myth in viral form: the magnificent situation of Columbus’ discovery, the heroic nose saving the lost crew as a marvelous feat of human cleverness, and the instability and dynamism of the tale in later works. Myth penetrated the already astonishing history of the discovery of the New World and its related truths, altering their values within discourse through the creation of a legend based upon nothing more than a tripartite chronological coincidence of Columbus, the discovery of novel olfactory environs in the New World, and the escalation of the perfume industry in France during the seventeenth century.

**Surnames, Floras, and Mythical Fragrances**

References to Frangipani within primary documentation noted the surname within accounts connected to elite social circles within Renaissance era Italian city states. A branch of the family had been part of an influential imperial faction who maneuvered within papal politics in the late Medieval Era to become leading figures...
in French and Italian courts thereafter. This recognized noble kin Frangipani were implicated in a papal conspiracy of the twelfth century when Pope Gelasius II was kidnapped and held as a hostage for Frangipani family goals aimed at placing a more favorable pontiff on the Chair of St Peter. Portions of the Frangipani ancestral line moved to the east by the thirteenth century, settling in areas now Croatia and Hungary, where they retained power as traders governing some Mediterranean exchange near the Aegean Sea to protect fledgling Christian settlements against Ottoman Turkish powers (Nedham and Selden 1652: 33). This family progeny near the current state of Croatia was overcome in Hungarian revolts set against the Catholic Church of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. During these Hungarian uprisings against the Church, lineages of the Frangipani family were implicated alongside the Ottomans and Magyars and in the next two centuries the house line was exterminated by Church powers maddened by the Frangipani’s possible alliances, culminating in the oft-referenced execution of Francis Christopher Frangipani in 1671 (Brown 1685: 7). By the 1670s chronicler Jean Gailhard wrote that the Frangipani family line was “extinct” from Italy stating: “In Rome are still some noble and ancient families,” however, Frangipani “is extinct, for the late Marquess left out one Daughter” (Gailhard 1671: 28). In 1693 Paolo Sarpi thus wrote of the Frangipani homes in the past tense as the family had lost their landholdings in Gorizia and Gradisca in what is present-day northeastern Italy (Sarpi and Aglionby 1693: 71). This branch of the clan ancestry faded in the winds of history thereafter, but the legacy of wafted perfume, and later nominal integration into botany kept the Frangipani redolent in the minds of those who remembered the families’ noble lineage and famed aromatic inventions.

Much of the ability to record the fragrant aspects of the Frangipani narrative arose from the work of French antiquaries of the late seventeenth century who repeatedly discussed the Frangipani household’s immersion in the early perfume industry. These references to the surname Frangipani related to perfume came from the family’s seventeenth-century ties to the burgeoning artisanal industry of fragranced gloves made famous by Catherine de Medici. Louis Moréri’s *Grand Dictionaire Historique* (1707) supplied mention of the invention of frangipane perfume by a soldier in the army of Louis XIII. An Oxford *Notes and Queries* article from 1859 noted, using Moréri as their principal source, that a Mutio Frangipani served in the Papal army of Charles IX, who reigned from 1550 to 1574, too late for Mutio to be the Mercutio of legend. His grandson, the Marquis de Frangipani served with Louis XIII (1601–43) and became the first to invent the process for perfuming gloves. The *Notes and Queries* commentary continued using Louis Ménage’s *Origini della Lingua Italiana* (1685) to summarize that the Marquis de Frangipani’s invention had been noticed quickly thereafter within the courts of Europe (*Notes and Queries* 1859: 509–11).
As noted by these encyclopedists, by the middle of the seventeenth century Frangipani was a famous name in the courts of Europe due to the dissemination of the fragrance applied to the perfumed gloves of the early modern elite (Lester et al. 2004: 158). These verifiable histories, retold countless times within recent studies, tell of the Marquis de Frangipani, who lived during the seventeenth century, as a forefather of the European synthetic fragrance industry, but do not relay tales of relatives who may have journeyed with Columbus across the vast Atlantic on any of the four substantial Spanish voyages. Rather, the history of the discovery of the plant in question led to the oft-studied Jardin du Roi, the highly bureaucratized French bio-prospecting organization of the Early Modern Era. The Jardin du Roi, or King’s Garden of France, used numerous mercantilist blocs to profit from the botanical wealth of the New World (McClellan and Regourd 2000: 32). Among those groups, as historian Marguerite Duval summarized, were the Jesuits whose “quest for new plants was sustained by the Court’s passion for flowers.” Before his journey to the West Indies a Jesuit father Charles Plumier, in the charge of the Jardin du Roi, studied the botany of the Old World at length. In France, “he gathered plants in the Alps and … assembled a sizeable herbarium, complete with a number of drawings. Time went on until one day … his chance came: He was invited to leave for the West Indies,” where he was to earn the title the “King’s Botanist” (Duval 1982: 32–7).

Undoubtedly, it was Plumier who discovered the famed Antiguan plant, to later be called frangipani, for Europeans during the 1690s. Plumier’s discovery was named Plumeria alba in his honor within French botanical guides of the early eighteenth century synthesized by Joseph Piton de Tournefort (1716: 659). Later French guides collecting botanical knowledge took to calling this discovery of Plumier the name frangipanier due to the plant’s odor, likely due to the resemblance to the almond perfume for gloves popular in France at the time (Sequin et al. 1749: 279–80). Tournefort, the creator of the French system of binomial naming of plants in the late seventeenth century, was a professor of botany at the King’s Garden. In his Elemens de botanique (1694) he had not begun using the French term for the flower, frangipanier, but did note the discoveries of Plumier whose name would provide the plumeria to a fragment of the name of the shrub Plumeria alba in later English and Linnaean binomial systems.11

The original perfume frangipane of the Marquis de Frangipani of the seventeenth century thus did not contain the plant Plumeria alba as it predated the discovery of Plumeria alba/frangipanier by Plumier (Barbe 1696: 29–31).12 Its florid scent must have reminded Tournefort of the plant’s aroma. Thereafter, French botanists applied his use of the scent and the discoverer Plumier in a vernacular binomial system as Frangipanier plumeria; predating the more replicable and scientific binomial system of the Linnaean Plumeria alba. Testifying
to the confused timeline, the perfume frangipane had passed into cultural metaphors prior to the discovery of the plant *Plumeria alba*. Such that in playwright Francis Fane’s 1675 romance *Love in the Dark* frangipane was referenced for use as an insult for the olfactory bouquet of promiscuous women (Fane 1675: 60).

Derivations of the Frangipani cognomina were thus applied for numerous terms in their original era and in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France and England. The metamorphosis combining the term for plant and the perfume in the English vernacular came with the myth builders who would place the start of all, the perfume and the discovery of the flower, with a formulated character, Mercutio Frangipani, who was said to have journeyed to the New World with the famed Genoese seaman. Their construction was vital to their salesman causes regarding an endeavor to tie their synthetic products, attempting to simulate the frangipane scent of the historically verifiable Marquis, to an even more ancient past of the discovery of the New World and the exotic magnetism of the vacuum domicilium.

**The Myth-makers: Exclusive Markets, Promethean History**

From what perception, what analytical gaze, can one suppose myth if it exists stringently as fact within the collective memory as history? In the nineteenth century the true discover of *Plumeria alba*, the link between *Plumeria alba* and *frangipanier* through the early French synthetic perfume industry with the taxonomical influence of the *Jardin du Roi*, and the discoverer of the New World on Columbus’ voyages were all partially laid aside for the goals of profiteers within elite luxury perfume markets of Victorian England, New York City, and La Ville-Lumiere.

*Haute couture* markets developed within Paris perfumery in the middle of the nineteenth century. The generation of perfumers of which Piesse was a part appropriated the “vocabulary of the masters of the Conservatoire” to articulate their products to middle-class French, English, and American strivers who hoped for conspicuous olfactory consumption to prove their place among the modern. These perfumers of the nineteenth century created a vocabulary “refined in accordance with the new aesthetic claims. The wider variety of products and the search for comparisons called for a corresponding verbal effort of imagination.” Many perfumers strained to tie their scents to the perceived mysteries of the Orient, others attempted to connect their product names to the leading figures of the French aristocracy and elite ruling families of the past (Corbin 1986: 197–9). As Eugénie Briot noted of this era, “nineteenth-century perfumers developed marketing strategies to build the value of their products and to position them as luxury goods” (Briot 2011: 273). Many of these French and English sellers partially ensnared by emergent Orientalism attempted to tie their innovative products to the French...
The first summary of Mercutio’s discovery of the frangipani shrub originated in an article advertisement attributed to Piesse which appeared in the *Scientific American* of August, 1857. The widely disseminated piece noted:

One Mercutio Frangipani, who lived in 1493, was a famous botanist and traveler, famous as being on one of the Columbus expeditions when they visited the West India Islands. The sailors, as they approached Antigua, discovered a delicious fragrance in the air. This Mercutio told them, must be derived from sweet-smelling flowers. On landing they found vast quantities of the Plumeria Alba, in full bloom, rendering the air redolent with rich odor, and from this plant, which the present inhabitants of Antigua call the Frangipani flower, is distilled that exquisite fragrance which is now so popular in fashionable circles. (*Scientific American* 1857: 370)

The most extensively circulated printing of this Mercutio Frangipani tale of New World discovery came in Piesse’s third edition of his *The Art of Perfumery and the Methods of Obtaining the Odors of Plants* (1867). Within that work he cited numerous French sources from the *Notes and Queries* article on the Frangipani family lineage. However, none of those references contained the Mercutio discovery tale. As well, Piesse’s original edition of *The Art of Perfumery* (1856) included no account of Mercutio Frangipani. However, later editions of Piesse’s work, beginning with the 1867 edition, included a paragraph summarizing the tale of Mercutio and the falsehood of his aromatic discovery (Piesse 1867: 24–6).

Piesse worked with Wilhelm Lubin, an elite Paris manufacturer of perfumes, beneath Two New Bond Street in London selling fragrances as early as 1855. Underneath their store the two budding profiteers of modern chemistry housed numerous flowers and scentful products to use in their aromatic concoctions. The chemist Piesse, who had studied at University College London, became the premier perfumer on the London scent scene in the 1860s after the publishing of numerous works on the use of flowers for creating perfumes (Boase 1897: 1530–1). In 1867 his *Art of Perfumery* included similar histories of perfumery and recipes for synthetic scents as his 1856 edition of the same work. However, it also included the historiographically mercurial Mercutio and his valiant nasal passages adept at sensing proximate West Indian shorelines.

Piesse’s tale of Mercutio from 1867 included a line width space between the Mercutio Frangipani myth and a later paragraph on the perfume trade in the East Indies attributed to Dr A. W. Hofmann. In a later 1879 edition both paragraphs were cited to Hofmann by the removal of the single space between. Hofmann was not listed
in Piesse’s footnotes, but was a chemist at the Royal College of Chemistry during the era and was used often in Piesse’s numerous editions of the *Art of Perfumery*. Piesse, Hofmann, Lubin, or whoever concocted or misremembered the story, inserted exactly the tale from Piesse provided to *Scientific American* a decade prior into later editions of the *Art of Perfumery* (Piesse 1867: 24–6, 1879: 14–17). The 1879 edition moved the paragraph on Mercutio’s nasal discovery of the New World, on later Columbus voyages (as opposed to Millen and Gender’s later attribution which placed Frangipani on the first voyage), one line lower to attribute it to Hofmann, an ascription not evident in the 1867 edition of the work. The 1891 edition kept this informal attribution to Hofmann without citing any reference beyond the doctor (Piesse and Piesse 1891). All post-1856 editions included numerous footnotes for references to the Frangipani family which had been included in the *Notes and Queries* article, but did not reference the Mercutio story within the footnotes or summarily in their texts (Piesse 1879: 14–17). This confused use of Mercutio seems more improbable considering a letter from English botanist W. J. Hooker, author of *Flora Vectensis* (1856), contained within the post-1856 editions of Piesse’s work, describing the possibility that the perfume may have predated the discovery of the plant; “I suspect then that no perfume is derived from these flowers: the real Frangipani being derived from other flowers” (Piesse 1867: 98).

Piesse’s fourth edition of the *Art of Perfumery*, which included the Mercutio tale, was released in 1879. This book-form advertising scheme for Frangipanni and other synthetic perfumes included within the appendix the poetry of William Brough or his brother John Cargill Brough, polymath writers of nineteenth-century London (both men are attributed at different places in the text of the 1879 London edition of *The Art of Perfumery*). Brough elegiacaally summarized the concocted Mercutio for the luxury perfume markets Piesse wished to exploit; “Morning breaks in golden splendour,/And the Heavens seem to smile/Lovingly upon the beauties/Of Antigua’s purple isle./ From that island gentle breezes/Waft a fragrance o’er the deep … On the vessel’s deck, the sailors/Gaze upon the fruitful slopes;/And in fancy shape the future/To their selfish dreams and hopes.” The Spanish sailors’ cupidity ruined any noble or adventurous aspects of their unique travels: “‘See yon island,’ cries the first one, ‘It shall bring us wealth untold; We will spoil it of its treasures; We will rob it of its gold.’” Prior to Frangipani entering triumphantly touting his legendary nasal canals, the Spanish sailors were the sinful characters of Las Casas narratives which fashioned the Black Legend of Iberian iniquities. However:

Young Mercutio Frangipanni/Joins not in these worldly dreams;/And as they speak, a shade of sadness/O’er his thoughtful forehead gleams;/ “What is gold?” he cries with passion;/“Can it buy you joy or health;/Will ye never cease to
The synthetic perfume “Frangipanni,” which was popular in the 1850s and 1860s throughout the UK, the USA, and within Europe, was advertised as the “most fragrant and lasting scent made.” Piesse’s Bond Street fragrances moved quickly across the Atlantic to affect numerous early modern perfume markets including the luxury shops of New York City in the late 1850s. The advertising of Piesse and his American distributors introducing the perfume with flowery tempest into the American market predated and offered a paradigm to the London advertising schemes Piesse and Lubin applied within the later editions of the Art of Perfumery that included Mercutio. Both Inger and Company and Eugene Dupuy took the Frangipanni product to the New York market with a concentrated advertising campaign aimed at presenting the product as luxurious, worldly, and specifically American.14

Plumier decided that he would like to travel the world and get rich. In order for this to happen, a fortune teller told him, he had to find a tree with blossoms of the colour of the new moon that grows near churches and graveyards … Plumier travelled to the West Indies where he was told by an old wise woman that such a tree indeed existed and that shaking its branches would bring him riches beyond imagining…his soul was overpowered by the lovely smell and sight of the cascade of flowers, glistening like golden coins, and he realized that the real wealth in this life was beauty, not riches … The genus of the tree he found came to be named Plumeria. (Hollsten 2012: 32)

Such similarities between the tales highlight the cyclical relationship between the myth of Mercutio and the history of Plumier; wrapped together with comparable motives and analogous appreciation for nature’s wealth.

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Plumier decided that he would like to travel the world and get rich. In order for this to happen, a fortune teller told him, he had to find a tree with blossoms of the colour of the new moon that grows near churches and graveyards … Plumier travelled to the West Indies where he was told by an old wise woman that such a tree indeed existed and that shaking its branches would bring him riches beyond imagining…his soul was overpowered by the lovely smell and sight of the cascade of flowers, glistening like golden coins, and he realized that the real wealth in this life was beauty, not riches … The genus of the tree he found came to be named Plumeria. (Hollsten 2012: 32)

Such similarities between the tales highlight the cyclical relationship between the myth of Mercutio and the history of Plumier; wrapped together with comparable motives and analogous appreciation for nature’s wealth.

The synthetic perfume “Frangipanni,” which was popular in the 1850s and 1860s throughout the UK, the USA, and within Europe, was advertised as the “most fragrant and lasting scent made.” Piesse’s Bond Street fragrances moved quickly across the Atlantic to affect numerous early modern perfume markets including the luxury shops of New York City in the late 1850s. The advertising of Piesse and his American distributors introducing the perfume with flowery tempest into the American market predated and offered a paradigm to the London advertising schemes Piesse and Lubin applied within the later editions of the Art of Perfumery that included Mercutio. Both Inger and Company and Eugene Dupuy took the Frangipanni product to the New York market with a concentrated advertising campaign aimed at presenting the product as luxurious, worldly, and specifically American.14
The tale of Mercutio continued to burgeon in English language literature quickly thereafter. Later to be picked up by Millen, Thompson, and Genders, the history of Mercutio entered into the popular memory through perfumers who meant to tie their synthetic products to both the aromatic achievements associated to the Frangipani surname and enigmatic multisensory encounters with the New World.

**Conclusion: Frangipani, Bourgeois Myth, and the Human Senses**

Beverly Seaton argued that:

> there is a strong tradition of using flowers in figurative ways. However, there is no consistent pattern of meanings attached to specific flowers beyond general connotations. Each culture uses flowers to express its own perspectives on life … writers concerned with social issues saw that flowers could express aspects of human behavior. (Seaton 1995: 60)

For example, in the nineteenth century the violet became a symbol of the bourgeoisie trait of modesty in the context of romantic love. Piesse and Lubin attempted a similar concoction with their perfume; to take the bourgeoisie tropes of adventure and the aesthetic and apply those traits to a flower nominally through a perfume; a flower’s factual history of European detection they corrupted. Englishpersons combined *Plumeria alba* the plant and *frangipane* the French perfume due to the promethean myth concocted by Piesse. In the French tradition *frangipanier* and *plumeria* both represented the flower; *frangipane* represented the perfume which lent its name to the flower years after its initial discovery by Plumier, an attribution most likely based on scent provided by Tournefort.¹⁵

Piesse and Lubin concocted the myth of Mercutio for many reasons. Profit drove them all, but underneath the profit motive tying their perfume to the New World elaborated a bourgeoisie desire to link itself to the *adventure* of encountering an innocence of the New World that could no longer be encountered. The true story of the scent frangipane and the flora *frangipanier*, that of Plumier and the *Jardin du Roi*, offered too little of an adventure tale, with the unwanted sign of French profiteering, a signifier which the Victorian bourgeoisie would find defective. Opposing, by offering *adventure* and *art* (the glory of the perfume in an aesthetic sense within the myth superior to the money which could be earned from gold) elaborated two cultural totems of the petite bourgeoisie; aimed at both separating itself from the lower classes who could not appreciate art, and the Victorian nobility, gentry, and haute bourgeoisie who could not appreciate adventure (as it implied the usefulness of working).¹⁶

Karl Marx understood the history of mankind as a history of the senses whereby private property in capitalism, or the “sense of
having,” replaced the natural physical and emotional senses of the premodern (Jütte 2005: 9–10). Piesse and Lubin attempted to place the olfactory within this “sense of having,” articulating odor to construct a proboscine desiring machine outside of the repression of the lower senses implicit in mid-nineteenth-century Western cultures. Piesse and Lubin wanted the bourgeoisie to admit that it desired, through this capitalist driven “sense of having,” an olfactory world. Part of that desire was the creation of an olfactory hero who applied the bourgeoisie totems of adventure and art to the sense of smelling in an attempt to overcome bourgeoisie repression of the olfactory.

Notes
2. For sensation and myth-making, see Cunliffe and Coupland (2012: 63–88), Merleau-Ponty (1964: 3–5 and 50–1), and Strenski (1987: 30–1).
3. James Lee’s Introduction to Botany (1788[1760]: 22), which collected and translated much of Carolus Linnaeus’ later work for English scientists, ordered scholars to disregard smells as they could not be used for replicable science.
6. For the most recent acknowledgment of this mythical nasal hero, see Shields (2011: 130–46).
7. The earliest reference to the frangipani or Plumeria alba, as a flower rather than a perfume or surname, was most likely pictured within the Badianus Manuscript (1552), also known as the Aztec Codex. The manuscript, collected by the Catholic priest Francisco de Mendoza, did not reference the plant by either Plumeria alba or frangipani, and offered no references to the discovery of land through the nose as related to any plant on Columbus’ voyages, only referencing an image of the flower later attributed as the Plumeria alba (Emmart 1940: 95; Fox 2010: 275–7).
8. For Frangipani in Renaissance era Roman politics, see Hays (1807: 38), Mavor (1804: 48), Platina and Rycaut (1685: 228–30), Robinson (1990: 9–11), and Thomas and Berthelet (1549: 53).
9. During the era of Columbus most references to “Frangipani” cited discussed Count Christopher Frangipani who assisted Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian in an attack on Venetian territory in the early sixteenth century. Frangipani was captured by Venetian
forces and held hostage for nearly a decade (Desfontaines 1736: 279–96; Gilhofer & Ranschburg 1920: 65).

10. Moréri published his first edition of the *Dictionaire* in 1674. The work expanded thereafter from one to ten volumes; references to the surname Frangipani, as related to perfume products, appeared in an alphabetical volume initially in 1707.

11. Connection between *frangipani* and *Plumeria alba* represented in Valmont de Bomare (1791: 619), Titford (1812: 170), Rees (1819), alphabetical under Plumier and Plumeria. Laura Hollsten (2012) argued that Plumier initiated the binomial taxonomic systems of later botanists which have generally been attributed to Linnaeus.

12. The mixture to create the almond-smelling perfume involved fashioning a powder of: “six pounds of orange-flowers ... as many of moss powder of oak ... heat the bottom of a little mortar, and the end of the pestle pretty hot ... pour in it an ounce of essence of amber, and at the same time a handful of the said powder ... put in the mortar half a gross of civet, and a bit of sugar as big as a walnut, beat your civet with the sugar very small, put to it by degrees some powder, stirring it with the pestle, then turn it in a sieve, sift it gently, then put into the mortar again the lumps made by the civet, beat them once more, throwing over some powder as before, and you must continue to do so till the whole be very fine, then mix it all together, and your powder will be excellent” (Barbe 1696: 29–31).

13. For the use of aromatic symbols as metaphors in perfume advertisements, see Velasco-Sacristán and Fuertes-Olivera (2006). For the value of naming, packaging, and narrative construction of the visual for modern perfume marketing, see Moeran (2007).

14. With such tropes Inger and Company, Piessse’s American distributors, attributed Frangipanni as the most sophisticated of perfumes with numerous multi-ethnic traits in advertisement (*New York Daily Times*, September 27, 1856: 8). The Brough poem must have existed prior to Piessse’s writing the myth of Mercutio as American advertisements for Frangipani from the 1850s include parts of the poem, but no references to its existence, in full form, have been discovered prior to the 1879 edition of Piessse’s *Art of Perfumery*. It could be possible that the poem of either Brough used the line which the American advertisers, or Piessse, had created in the 1850s American advertising campaign, or possibly one of the brothers constructed the line for the campaign in its infancy. Because no documentation found for the verse in question exists prior to this advertisement the hypothesis here is that the advertisement came first with the two verses, which were then adopted in Piessse’s later 1879 *Art of Perfumery*. For a brief summary of the Brough family, see Booth (1976: 165–8 and 289–91). For American advertisements
with parts of the poem, see New York Daily Times June 8, 1858: 5; June 15, 1858: 5; June 23, 1857: 5; July 5, 1858: 5; July 6, 1858: 5.

15. In the German historiographical tradition the English stories of Mercutio’s famous discovery never found their way into the literature surrounding the creation of the perfume leaving the documentary substance of the German histories relatively untainted by Piesse’s synthetic tale. Henrich Hirzel’s Die Toiletten-Chemie (1892) noted correctly that the Frangipani “olfactory powder consists of … famous spices, with one percent of musk and civet, and with so much finely powdered orris root mixed, as the weight of all spices … applied together,” rather than containing essentially only the flower. Both Hirzel and the more recent German historian of scent Georg Schwedt offered the figure of Mercutio as the grandson of the inventor of the perfume (Mauritius Frangipani), rather than a nasal applying voyager on Columbus’ westward journeys, while therefore implying that the recipe for Piesse’s Frangipanni perfume, or the frangipane perfume of the Marquis, did therefore not contain Plumeria alba or frangipanier (Hirzel 1892: 4–5; Schwedt 2008: 49–51). This lack of Mercutio’s influence in the German tradition therefore allowed Patrick Süskind to write with relatively uncorrupted history to enliven the murder mystery plotline within his widely popular Perfume; The Story of a Murderer (1986). Süskind emphatically summarized the discovery of; “that genius Mauritius Frangipani-an Italian, let it be noted! – that odors are soluble in rectified spirit. By mixing his aromatic powder with alcohol and so transferring its odor to a volatile liquid, Frangipani had liberated scent from matter, had etherealized scent, had discovered scent as pure scent; in short, he had created perfume. What a feat! What an epoch-making achievement! … A truly Promethean act!” (Süskind 1986: 54–5).

16. For the bourgeoisie of the nineteenth century “work has become the new principle of legitimization of social power” (Moretti 2013: 30, 33–9).

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