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WHAT'S INSIDE: HOW SWEET PURSES SUPPORTED THE EARLY MODERN INTEREST IN POST-REFORMATION MODESTY, EARLY MODERN NEUROSCIENCE, AND HUMORAL THEORY

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Abstract

The cultural object known as “sweet purses” was fabricated and rose in popularity in England during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries for its ability to supersede extravagance restrictions in a Post-Reformation court culture and support ideas within early modern neuroscience. This paper explores the cultural shifts and interest in early modern neuroscience and the influence of the soul that are truly responsible for the nature and being of sweet purses, despite often being examined in current collections purely for their visual appeal. Discussing the interest and consequent belief in ideologies such as imagination and humoral theory better explicates the impact and importance that sweet purses had within English court life and often why these objects were able to circumvent the regulations of sumptuary laws. This paper examines the construction and use of sweet purses to best understand the inner workings of early modern English court culture in the aspect of theocratic court functions, the intersection between religious values and developments within scientific spaces, and how the conversation between these territories can be reflected within physical objects.

Sweet purses are heavily under-researched and largely overlooked objects when studying demonstrations of ideas in early modern neuroscience, humoral theory, and court culture in early modern England. Sweet purses were used in England's late sixteenth century and early seventeenth century. They were small bags of linen or silk cloth ornately decorated with embroidered motifs, most commonly flowers, animals, and other nature symbols. These motifs were usually made of silver and gold gilded thread along with colored cloth and dyed thread. In addition, some purses were adorned with glass beads or small loops of gold or silver Metalwork. These purses were filled with herbs and spices from around the world that would be secured by a drawstring and worn around the waist or neck of their owner. Sweet purses' contents accounted for their names as they were meant to be understood as sweet in every facet of the definition, creating a pleasant or "sweet" experience for those who owned them. While currently held within public collections like the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, the Metropolitan Museum in New York, or various private collections, they are usually only discussed in the context of their appearance and a brief description of their practical use— to make their wearer smell pleasant.

However, sweet purses are rarely talked about in their context of being a cultural movement that demonstrated the personal beliefs of early modern English people. Sweet purses are an excellent way to understand the early modern concepts surrounding religion and the weight placed upon the moral fabrication of the soul. Within the religious perspective on moral dilemma in early modern England was a deep desire to understand the power of influence within the brain and body. Sweet purses guide a discussion about the early modern understanding of neuroscience and the general understanding of health and wellness. Additionally, they reflect the bridge that comprised early modern beliefs straddling the fields of science and religion and answering the question of how one can influence the soul in order to become closer to the divine. When considering the external influence early modern English people believed sweet purses had, it is also unavoidable to discuss the implication of sumptuary laws and how they related to the construction of sweet purses. Sweet purses can be seen as an aid used to understand the beliefs early modern English people had when it came to how their faith was comprised, as sumptuary laws were enacted to encourage the models of behavior for early modern Protestant England when considering the use and intentions of sumptuary laws and the careful way that the creation of sweet purses was used to respect these laws while also following the influence of beliefs of imagination and humoral theory. This paper argues that sweet purses can be used to understand how the beliefs of early modern English people surrounding the topics of how influence was viewed and how religion and scientific processes intersect as they are reflected within a historical, cultural object. In this way, sweet purses will be discussed as they fit into and reflect the narratives of imagination theory, early modern neuroscience, and humoral theory as they were understood by the early modern English perspective and related to religious pedagogy.

Brief History of the Reformation and Introduction of Sumptuary Laws:

The connection between science and religion with the Post-Reformation teachings of the

Protestant church was important to those involved in Elizabethan-era court life. Additionally, the early modern interest in science came from the religious perspective of wanting to understand how the body can strive to become closer to the divine in the most invasive ways possible. Early modern English people were highly concerned with how one guarded against temptation and evil while influencing their soul towards a more divine nature. In this respect, they were highly interested in understanding what could affect the soul and, therefore, the piety of a person and to control it best. It was broadly accepted that the body could be influenced by what one consumes. This led to a profound curiosity to understand how the body received influence and the introduction to studying the brain and how it could impact the soul.

A significant facet of culture in early modern England was the introduction of Post-Reformation thought, which was characterized by the consequences of the Reformation, which took place at the beginning of the sixteenth century when Henry VIII broke away from the pope and the Catholic Church, starting the Church of England.⁷ The Church of England subscribed to the Protestant denominational family, which valued modesty and charity, meditative prayers, and a loose proclivity towards iconoclasm. The reason for these inclinations was a rejection of trends rising in Catholicism that believed in a superfluous lifestyle with the idea that the more extravagant one was, the more holy. The Church of England then reflected a leaning towards modesty and humility within Protestantism. Oppugnant to the progression of beliefs within Catholicism, there was a return to believing that if one set the intentions of thoughts and the influence of the soul to be constantly centered around the divine, then one became more holy by that measure. It was rare that extravagance was encouraged, and the use of images was carefully addressed to say that if images were to be used, they were for the contemplation of the mind to bring one closer to the divine.⁸ The actual state of these beliefs was a little convoluted amongst the general population and even more so within the royal court. After Henry VIII passed, religious upheaval ensued in England until well into the reign of his daughter, Elizabeth I. Under Elizabeth I, a more cohesive standard of religion and religious values aligned with Post-Reformation Protestantism was formed as England's political and global standing stabilized. With this solidifying rule, Elizabeth introduced laws that encouraged modesty in one's appearance and stipulations on the symbols that could be worn and influence the imagination.

These new laws were known as sumptuary laws, which defined the appropriate styles, materials, and cost of clothing. However, the stipulations varied significantly depending on an individual's social class.² While sumptuary laws and laws regarding the regulation of fashion and materials predate Elizabeth's enactment, Elizabeth's laws were mediated more specifically on Post-Reformation theological arguments. They can trace the invention and rise to popularity that sweet purses had.² Laws were mostly blanket over the general population of England that not only encouraged modesty but explicitly limited access to luxurious materials, clothing, and other goods. However, within Elizabethan courts, the laws were meticulous in their definitions, often creating restrictive regulations in what could be bought, worn, and used within early modern fashions.

In the records of a book bound and collected by Humphrey Dyson in 1618 was a copy of some of these sumptuary laws applied to early modern court members.⁸ This book was written as a collection of proclamations made by Elizabeth I and, within its pages, contained the sumptuary laws introduced as a removal of the excess of extravagance from the country and her courts. Some laws banned the use of a specific type of fabric below a particular social class; other laws became increasingly detailed in the form of clothing that a material could make or even as particular as the color or texture of the fabric. For example, Elizabeth stipulated that cloth of gold or silver or cloth embroidered with gold or silver thread would only be allowed to be worn by members of the court with social rankings higher than viscount and viscountess.⁸ As for the ways that fabrics could be worn, velvet was not allowed to be worn in the form of gowns and coats at court unless ranked above the status of baron or baroness.⁷ While the use of velvet was strictly written, sumptuary laws could become even more specific; for example, crimson or carnation-colored velvet was reserved for maidens of honor and those who ranked above baronesses.⁸ Additionally, even the color of any fabric could be regulated as the color purple was reserved for only those in the monarch's immediate family.⁸ While the masculine and feminine fashions break up these laws, the differences as to how these laws impacted one gender over another were minimal as it was meant to cast a broad statement of encouraging modesty and a particular way of using the accepted forms of extravagance to influence the soul in a positive moral leaning.

As seen, these laws were increasingly specific in their implications on how extravagance should not be used by limiting the use of materials, styles, and clothing. However, this opened the door for early modern court members to become increasingly creative in expanding on extravagance within the constraints of the sumptuary laws. This led to the birth and popularity of sweet purses. Those who ranked within certain social classes had to be strategic in how they wore expensive fabrics or materials. In many cases, the use of silk in large quantities was reserved for court members that ranked above dukes or duchesses.⁸ Hence, a way to subvert this law and use silk was to create a product that was small enough not to draw questioning to their use of the material while still being able to make note that the person who owned the purse was able to purchase such an expensive fabric if they pleased, which often manifested as sweet purses.

It is a rather precarious dance between the Post-Reformation ideas on the use of extravagance being viewed as having negative consequences on the moral leanings of the soul and piety of a person. Additionally, the juxtaposition of the early modern beliefs understood how the body and brain experienced influence and needed beautiful images and sweet scents to overwhelm the body with information to make good decisions and become closer to the divine.

This paper demystifies the understanding of early modern neuroscience and the beliefs that influence had on the body and soul as early modern English people navigated them through the use of sweet purses to better abide by the teachings of the Post-Reformation in a

theocratic monarchy. The following sections discuss the implications of the early modern concept of imagination theory as it can be deconstructed through its complements of beliefs in early modern neuroscience and humoral theory and how those concepts come to the aid and explanation of why sweet purses were so crucial to the moral understanding of how early modern English people attempted to protect their bodies and faith.

Early Modern Neuroscience and Humoral Theory:

When discussing imagination theory, knowing that it does not stand alone is important. Imagination theory heavily relies on understanding how the brain functioned by early modern knowledge and the belief in the humoral theory. This section focuses on the introduction to the general understanding of early modern neuroscience and how the body's use of images and processing of the senses was believed to be handled by the body.

Additionally, a statement must be made to use particular language to discuss early modern understandings of the brain. There is much controversy over the use of the term "neuroscience" and whether it is the appropriate language that can be used to discuss the early modern understanding of studying the brain as it was not an anachronistic term. An argument can be made that because "neuroscience" was not used for studying the brain in sixteenth and seventeenth-century England, it is disingenuous to include it in the modern research context because it creates space from the primary historical information. However, during the early modern period, there was as much unification on a term to describe researching the brain as there was unification on their understanding of the brain; that is to say, there was very little agreement. In this context, "neuroscience" will denote a study of the brain in its various forms within the early modern period in a unifying understanding that can be understood from a modern perspective. There are no anachronistic terms that can speak on behalf of the subjects discussed that would have provided an elevated point of accuracy and authenticity to early modern research of the brain, "neuroscience" is just as valid.

Early modern neuroscience was challenging to understand and an often disagreed upon concept. However, visual arts historian and professor Dr. Christina Faraday can provide some clarifying insight into the subject of early modern brain sciences. Faraday describes that early modern neuroscience had most of its roots from the antiquitous period. Greek philosopher, Aristotle, was widely trusted as a source of information and understanding of how the brain worked and understood thought.³

Early modern neuroscientists did not always agree on the brain's function and process. However, general knowledge was that the brain was divided into six sections consisting of five separate ventricles and a connector.³ The first ventricle is known as the "common sense ventricle" and is held at the front of the brain. This is where the brain receives impressions and information from the body's senses. However, this part of the brain was believed to be extraordinarily watery and unable to hold onto the information it received for very long, so it passed through to the second ventricle.³

The second ventricle was known as the “imagination ventricle.” The imagination ventricle is where the brain forms an image based on the information received and starts to extract and recombine details of the data to create new images. Faraday cites that this is how early modern neuroscientists explain how we could make mental images of things we have never seen before.³ It was also believed that this imagination ventricle is the only one to stay active when people sleep– hence dreams.³ After configuring and reconfiguring these elements in the imagination ventricle, the information passes to the third ventricle or the “estimation.”

The estimation ventricle is responsible for comparing this information with images stored in the memory. It creates similar images to create references, help provide possible outcomes for situations, and judge what could be understood from the new information. Its purpose is to draw out the intention and meaning of the information. However, the estimation ventricle can not make any decisions; it could simply provide information and possibilities of what the new data could be interpreted as.³

The fourth ventricle is called the “cogitation.” All the information received and gathered is fleshed out in the cogitation ventricle to make decisions and form beliefs. Because this is where the brain was believed to make decisions, the idea of needing to consume “pleasant” images or stimulation to influence the cogitation to make good decisions was encouraged. This is also where the soul was believed to be kept, so there was a great worry as to what a person consumed could influence the soul. The cogitation was not always understood to be a rational decider. It could be affected by the “appetites” (hunger or desire), as well as the “humors” (blood, phlegm, and black and yellow bile), which will be discussed later. The appetites and humors could influence the soul to make decisions it would not usually.³

Between the fourth and fifth ventricles was an organism called the “worm.” The worm controls access to the fifth and final ventricle, the “memory ventricle.” Its purpose was to decide which information should continue and be stored in the memory ventricle or if the data should be let go and destroyed by the rest of the body via the blood.³ It was understood that the worm and the memory ventricle were in the back of the head, as early modern neuroscientists understood those who often suffered injuries to the back of the head had memory issues.³ Another detail of the worm was understood that if one leaned their head forward, it would allow images and information to flow more easily from the memory ventricle to the front of the brain and cause remembering information, allowing the body to reintroduce images. While leaning the head back would encourage memorization of the data as it encouraged an increased flow of information from the cogitation to the memory.³

The fifth and final ventricle – the “memory” – was responsible for storing information given to it by the worm. It was available for recall and supporting information for the estimation and cogitation ventricles.²¹ The function of these ventricles was vital as it was understood that at

any point before the worm, images could be dropped out of the brain, attaching to the humor of blood, and make their way to other parts of the body, causing an imbalance that could lead to an illness. So it was highly encouraged that people consumed "sweet" experiences to influence the cogitation to make good decisions or allow pleasant images to attach to blood if released by the brain.

Now, branching from the brain and looking towards how the body was understood from a larger perspective, it is important to understand the workings of the humoral theory. The humoral theory was an explanation as to how the body processed all external stimuli given to it. When looking towards understanding imagination theory in early modern culture and how imagination theory relates to sweet purses, understanding humoral theory as it relates to how the body understands the particular senses of smell and sight is imperative. Especially when the humoral theory was also the understanding of how the body could become ill and how sweet purses were used to create aids and preventative measures against these illnesses.

When considering the influence of the brain and body, it is essential to consider the impact the four humors were believed to have. The concept of "humoral theory" was introduced by Hippocrates but later explored and is more commonly credited in practice to a second-century CE Greek physician known as Galen.⁹ The word "humor" was initially derived from the Greek word for "fluids" and related to how the humors were understood to be the four fundamental bodily fluids.

The four humors comprised black bile, yellow bile, blood, and phlegm.⁹ These humors were believed to be in perfect harmony, each representing different characteristics that complemented the other. They existed on the intersecting axes of cold to hot and dry to wet.

Black bile was characterized as cold and dry; in opposition, blood was hot and moist. Yellow bile was identified as hot and dry, while phlegm was cold and wet.⁶ Galen also stipulated that a certain amount of each humor in their body should be present to be perfectly calibrated. He believed that someone was perfectly balanced when they had a fourth as much phlegm as blood, a sixteenth as much yellow bile as blood, and a sixty-fourth as much black bile as blood.⁶ The idea of disease being an outside force or that bacteria could cause illness was not understood or practiced in early modern England. Instead, when one had too much or too little of one humor, it could create an imbalance, causing disease or infection or possibly influencing the imagination and soul within the cogitation of a person.⁹ For example, an excess of black bile made one melancholic. Too much yellow bile resulted in choleric. Additionally, a surplus of blood meant you were sanguine, and if someone had an abundance of phlegm would be phlegmatic.

The terms "melancholy," "choleric," "sanguine," and "phlegmatic" were used as diagnoses when one presented with an excess or deficiency of one's humor. ⁶ The humoral balance of a person was vital to the people of early modern England as they believed their

humors were connected to and under the influence of other aspects of their lives. This included the idea that the geographical location, sex, diet, and anything people came into contact with via their senses could influence their humors.⁹ These influences were understood to be the difference between maintaining health versus becoming ill. Depending on what humor one needed to influence determined what treatment or “regime” one followed.

The scents of the sweet purses could also be prescribed to influence one humor over another to create the desired effect, or they could be combined with the smells that would have impacted all four of the humors creating a centering effect. In this case, each of the humors was designated with a flavor or scent profile. To balance their black bile, they would include sweet scents such as rose, sage, and nutmeg to create a cold and dry effect. To balance blood, dried citrus and cinnamon are examples of what would be included to create a tart scent as it was believed to make the body hotter and moist. Spices such as clove, mint, and rosemary could be used to create a bitter and spicy palette that would aid phlegmatic imbalances and make the body hotter and drier. While dried chamomile and lavender were believed to have calming agents with neutral scented notes and could ease an excess of yellow bile and make the body colder and moister. The ability of an ingredient like a rose to make the body dry and cold by smelling it was not based on the inherent properties of the rose but rather what the rose was believed to offer the olfactory consumption of the scent that could then pervade the humors.

Humoral theory was used to understand and sort how the body processed different external stimuli and how the body would have handled them. Without an understanding of germs, one could become sick from outside sources from the images one saw and the scents one inhaled. This idea was important for looking at how early modern people treated ideas of medicine and how sweet purses were used as preventative measures and remedies inside regimens to maintain health.

Imagination Theory and its Answer to Post-Reformation Questions about the Soul:

Imagination theory was a belief in the early modern period that had to do with how the body and soul were influenced to make decisions and form the moral leanings of a person. It explained how influence was made on the soul and body and was a significant part of theological understandings of how someone could become closer to the divine depending on the influences taken in by the body and brain. More specifically, it expands on how images were taken by the imagination and influenced the cogitation’s moral fabrication and takes a deeper look into how the humor of blood was essential for carrying information and images around the body.

The term “imagination” has been used in several contexts throughout this paper. Still, it is important to know that when dealing with early modern neuroscience, the term “imagination” refers to a physical part of the brain that acted as a ventricle through which images were

dissected and sorted for information.³ However, in relation to the imagination theory, it is a metaphysical space that explains the influence of the body and brain. The most common belief among early modern neuroscientists was that while the soul will make decisions for the body and represent the person, it is passive in its judgments.⁴ That is to say that the soul can only make decisions and form beliefs on worldly matters based solely on the information and images it comes into contact with. In this way, if the body and the cogitation only take in images of harmful and displeasing images, the soul has no option but to make harmful decisions.

Similarly, if the body and cogitation are flooded with good images and sweet experiences, the soul will only be capable of producing pure and well-intentioned decisions.¹ Imagination theory reflected what Post-Reformation Protestants were seeking to understand about how the brain and body made decisions. It was this belief that helped illuminate what made them closer or separated from the divine. It was then understood in the early modern period that if one consumed pleasant images of divine creations and sweet-smelling scents that flooded the cogitation and influenced the soul to make divine decisions.⁴ Alternatively, those who were known to make wicked decisions that separated themselves from the divine could be assumed to consume and come into contact with displeasing and wicked images and experiences. These people were not believed to be inherently wicked but those who had souls with nothing outside of the wicked information they had experienced to make decisions with.

Additionally, it was understood that at any point, images entered the mind before they were solidified in the memory; they could be dropped by the brain and attached to the humor of blood.⁵ Blood regulated the other three humors and had the ability to filter through the entire body. The ability for images to attach to the blood cemented the idea that what was contained in the blood could cause influence to the other humors and, in turn, create a cycle of influence on the brain's ventricles. Consequently, it was believed that an image would attach to the humor of blood and be passed around the body with the ability to passively influence the other humors of black bile, yellow bile, and phlegm.⁵ Similar to the consequences of the cogitation's influence on the soul, wicked images and experiences filtered through the blood on their way out of the body could influence any of the other three humors, causing an imbalance. This imbalance could then return to the cogitation without the original image or experience and still influence the rest of the brain and soul to make decisions that separate one from the divine or become wicked by influence.

This understanding of how images were flushed through the body with blood, causing imbalances that could then return and cause wickedness in the soul, became a binate reason for using sweet purses within early modern English court. Sweet purses acted as a fail-safe that provided access to sweet images that could be embroidered onto its facade and consumed by the wearer to place good, divine images in the mind. This was a way for the person to gain control over the passive forces working within their body and create a way to intentionally influence their soul and body to become closer to the divine.¹ Which would influence the

cogitation and passively force the soul to lean towards making decisions that bring one closer to the divine. However, if one consumed wicked images that unbalanced the humors or for another reason, the humors became unbalanced through diet, sex, or location, the dried herbs and spices contained within the sweet purse could offer to rebalance. As the body was believed to be constantly taking in new experiences and images that could influence the brain, soul, and body, it was understood that several waves of the imagination were hitting against the soul and humors of the body.¹ In this way, these influences overlapped and created a constant stream of influence on the body and soul. The passive ability to bring one closer or further to the divine by the standards of early modern religious beliefs created a need to make lifestyle practices that could keep up with the constant influence of the soul. As demonstrated, sweet purses were used in the daily life of Elizabethan court members to vie for the world's influence on the soul and create constant access to sweet influence.

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