

GEORGES VIGARELLO, *Concepts of cleanliness: changing attitudes in France since the Middle Ages*, trans. Jean Birrell, Past and Present Publications, Cambridge University Press, and Paris, Éditions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 1988, 8vo, pp. ix, 239, £25.00/\$39.50.

In 1914, Sir Edward Grey saw the lights going out all over Europe. Rather similarly, George Vigarello's latest book opens, at the end of the Middle Ages, with the bath-houses being closed down all over Europe. Therein lies, of course, a studied evocation of *déjà vu* for the AIDS-obsessed present.

But Vigarello's image also encapsulates one of the key ironies of the history of cleanliness, which his rich and subtle book is so successful in exploring. A Whiggish history of hygiene might anticipate finding a "filthy" Middle Ages being superseded by a somewhat less grubby early modern epoch, prior to the triumph of our enlightened, hygienic present. Yet, *prima facie*, Vigarello's vignette seems to be presenting us with the exact reverse: a medieval era in which public bathing was commonplace, giving way to a Renaissance and a Baroque in which baths, public and private, became a great rarity. Was the waning of the Middle Ages, then, a hygienic disaster?

But this would be a *question mal posée*, as Vigarello convincingly demonstrates. Every age, he insists, gives radically different meanings of its own to such culture-dependent categories as clean and dirty, and invents special technologies of its own for securing its desiderata of hygiene. The medieval bath-houses were closed, not because people became indifferent to cleanliness, but because these institutions came to be perceived—in the age when syphilis was raging uncontrolled throughout Europe—not as loci of cleanliness but as sinks of filth, medical and moral alike.

Thereafter, in the succeeding centuries, the pursuit of hygiene was to be carried on less through public works than by private endeavours: personal grooming, the individual cultivation of good manners (use of handkerchiefs, etc.), and so forth. And—another shock to any remaining Whiggish preconceptions we might entertain—it was to be achieved through *minimizing* recourse to water, which early modern cosmology, drawing especially upon the new science of microscopy, saw as an animalcule-riddled pollutant which all too readily seeped into the body through the gaping pores of the skin. Associated with odalisques and exoticism, the water of the bath became conflated with sensuality and hence filth. For this reason, it was the achievement of the seventeenth century to perfect "dry cleaning": brushing, friction, combing, applying essential oils and powders. The age of Louis XIV was to identify the "clean" person with the man who was neat and tidy (*propre*) and sported fresh linen: it was the linen that washed, Vigarello wittily puns. To such a fashionable courtier, today's automatic equation of cleanliness with regular contact with plenty of water would have seemed almost a paradox.

Vigarello offers us a more cursory glance at the last couple of centuries, where the story is more familiar: the gradual emergence of domestic plumbing, the invention of the bathroom, the advent of public sanitation, the impact of Pasteurian bacteriology. His point is that we see not a path, onwards and upwards, towards hygienic perfection, but rather a succession of paradigms of dirt and danger, in which the fight against micro-organisms was always being waged as part of a wider campaign whose goal was immunization against immorality and anarchy. The contemporary panic over AIDS amply validates Vigarello's historiographical viewpoint.

This is an illuminating survey, effectively incorporating other French research, for instance that of Alain Corbin. Regrettably, however, Vigarello does not draw upon the work of recent Dutch, German, and British historians in this field, in order to examine the comparative dimensions of hygiene history, and ask whether the French story he tells is in certain respects unique. His account is at its strongest and most illuminating when investigating changing perceptions of sanitation and safety at the interface between body and environment. Rather too little is said, by contrast, about the ambivalent impact of specifically Christian concepts of bodily purity (the odour of sanctity, and so forth) and their vestigial fate in a secularizing society: one would especially have liked to see more on the question of "physical puritanism", which Virginia Smith has fruitfully explored in the British context. Jean Birrell is to be congratulated upon her lucid and stylish translation.

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