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Sweet Bags as Embodied Artifacts of Olfactory Heritage

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Abstract

Sweet bags were small, embroidered textile pouches used in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to carry fragrant substances, money, books, sewing tools, mirrors, or other personal items. They were often exchanged as gifts, used to preserve clothing in wardrobes, or used to protect against contaminated air. Beyond their material function, both their name and some of their uses suggest an olfactory dimension, as they were typically filled with aromatic herbs—combinations frequently recorded in recipe books, medical, and household manuals, including *Countrey Contentments, or The English Husvvife, Praxis Medicinæ, or The Physitian's Practise,* and *Exenterata*, among others. Through close reading and literary analysis of such primary sources combined with a sensory approach, this article traces the possible ingredients of these pouches in Early Modern recipes and argues that their olfactory content positions them as objects of the "olfactory gaze" (Verbeek), thereby transforming them into elements of olfactory heritage. Ultimately, the article seeks to recreate the olfactory component of sweet bags within recipe-related practices, and broader domestic traditions of Early Modern England.

Keywords: sweet bags; olfaction; odours; history of smell; olfactory gaze; olfactory heritage; materiality; material culture studies

1. Introduction

Sweet bags, being small, embroidered pouches often infused with aromatic substances, offer a material entry point into the study of Early Modern sensory culture. Their very name reflects their versatile nature, where "sweet" entails olfactory, tactile, and partially visual experiences, while "bags" encompass material encounters. Accordingly, this paper lenses sweet bags within the olfactory gaze as material objects that reflect the volatile nature of olfactory heritage by tracing their historical role, the process of their creation, and their sensorial, particularly olfactory, contents, drawing on Early Modern recipes. The application of the olfactory gaze provides a new framework for interpreting such objects not just as accessories but as sensory instruments embedded in historical practices of knowing, feeling, and smelling. The article begins by defining the concept of olfactory heritage and justifying the positioning of smell bags within it. The discussion then unfolds through recipes from Early Modern cookbooks that provide instructions for preparing fillings of herbs and spices, demonstrating bags' connection to olfactory heritage through their aromatic compositions. The analysis further considers whether these described mixtures could have been used to fill the objects known today as sweet bags and whether the "bags" mentioned in household manuals correspond to them. Finally, the discussion extends beyond the contents themselves to address secondary indicators of olfactory heritage—craftsmanship, gift-giving, wrapping practices, and linguistic–historical roots—

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involved in the production and preservation of sweet bags. Often designed, gifted, and used by women, these scented pouches also embodied domestic virtue, female creativity, and sensory knowledge.

2. Sweet Bags in Scholarship

Representing a fusion of historical, material, and cultural experiences, sweet bags are discussed across a range of fields, including sixteenth- to eighteenth-century fashion, particularly Queen Elizabeth's wardrobe, gift-giving culture, and embroidery techniques. While rarely the central subject, this section briefly reviews the main books and articles that mention bags, spanning from their role within Early Modern wardrobes to the technical challenges of recreating their design today. This section will help clarify the cultural and literary positioning of these bags within the context of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as well as in relation to existing scholarship.

Sweet bags are often analysed as clothing items through the historical development of portable accessories. In the field of dress studies, it is worth mentioning Vanda Foster, a specialist in historical clothing with museum experience, who in her book *Bags and Purses* (1982) traces the evolution of various types of bags from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. She notes that in the early 1600s, separate, visible pockets tied to girdles were used by both men and women, but this changed as Queen Elizabeth I's reign brought stiffer, bulkier formal clothing. This made visible pockets attached to belts or carried in plain sight impractical. Consequently, people switched to "large chamois leather pockets" inside the breeches or "long drawstring pouches" hidden under voluminous skirts, thus maintaining the bag's utility without compromising the fashionable silhouette or modesty. By the 17th century, while breech pockets and their narrower sewn variations became more common, they did not entirely replace the small, rectangular bags used for coins. The latter were typically made of leather, knitted wool, or silk, and closed with long, tasselled drawstrings (Foster 1982, pp. 8–9).

Against this backdrop and driven partly by the growth of gaming and petty theft, sweet bags emerged among the elite in the mid-1600s. They may be seen as part of a transitional process between the visible girdle pouches of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and the hidden tie-on pockets of the eighteenth century. Furthermore, it can be suggested that it is precisely the variety of materials from which most body-worn bags were made and the differences in how they were closed that distinguish them from more sophisticated smell bags. Foster describes the latter as small purses containing dried flowers, herbs, or vinegar-soaked sponges, which served to scent the surrounding air or act as a personal perfume to mask body odour. Additionally, sweet bags were used as packaging for gifts (money, jewellery), souvenirs, and symbols of love or friendship. These exquisite sweet items, often made of silk or velvet and embellished with metallic threads or pearls, were personal and sentimental, reflecting shifts in fashion, social structure, and ideas about well-being (Foster 1982, pp. 8–9).

The presence of sweet bags in the clothing of the elite and their importance as elements of attires can be traced in the works of Janet Arnold, British dress historian and the author of *Patterns of Fashion 3*: *The Cut and Construction of Clothes for Men and Women c.1560–1620* (1985) and *Queen Elizabeth's Wardrobe Unlock'd* (2020), among other works. Although not solely focused on sweet bags, Arnold's research demonstrates their significant presence in the elite life of Queen Elizabeth I's court. She cites a 1562 instance where the Queen's skinner, Adam Bland, supplied a "grose" (p. 144) of "crimson Satten swete Bagges." In this quotation, "grose", according to old English, means a commercial unit of twelve dozen, or 144 sweet bags made of crimson satin, and, on top of that, "viij lb of swete powder" (p. 754), which is eight pounds or roughly 3.6 kg of perfumed powder,

intended to scent and refresh the Queen's garments and fabrics. Bland also placed sweet bags among furs to maintain their freshness (pp. 311, 877). Accounts that Arnold refers to show that the use of sweet powder increased over the years, rising from eight pounds in 1564 to twenty-four pounds by 1584. The fragrant powder was likely held in luxury containers, described as "silke bags with a twist of golde and silke lyned with lether" or larger "fustian bags." These bags, "being perfumed with Amber Muske Syvett and stufte with perfumed Cotten and sweete powder all of our greate Guarderobe" (Arnold 2020, p. 167), were also kept in wooden cases to preserve their scent: "one great case to put in swete bages made of white wode covered with crimsin Velvet lyned with crimsin Sarceonet quilted by thimbrawderer and garnished with riben and gilt nayles all of our great warderobe" (Arnold 2020, p. 167). Therefore, drawing on Arnold's work, sweet bags in Elizabethan England belonging to Queen Elizabeth I and the courtly elite can be imagined as luxurious pouches of silk or fustian, sometimes lined with leather and closed with gold and silk cords, and filled with aromatic powders, including the costly ambergris and musk.

Sweet bags also acquired symbolic significance (Foster 1982), resulting from the use of similar small bags in various circumstances (associated with beauty, reputation, and body and environment scents) and with different non-aromatic internal contents. For example, Robb (2015) discusses how the symbolism of Early Modern handbags developed through the use of purses resembling sweet bags in shape and design but differing in content. Although Robb does not discuss sweet bags per se, the purses she examines are small, embroidered bags often adorned with moral or charitable slogans, that bearing a close visual resemblance to sweet bags, served distinctly different purposes. Her case study is based on small purses emerging after the 1601 Poor Laws formalised charity, embellished with moral slogans, "Remember the poor", "I pray God to B(sic) My Guide", "Love Thy Neighbor", "Thy Wages of Sin is Death", and "Pity the Poor." Despite the appeals, this type of bag did not always serve to help the poor, but was also used as a practical accessory for storing and carrying money and not herbs, as well as a status sign of a good household that was expected to be generous and supportive of the needy. Therefore, the article examines such purses as elements of virtue and statues, as well as instruments of poor relief. The attractive appearance of the accessory, due to beads, decorative stitching, and slogans, served as a means of transforming the act of charity from ordinary assistance to the poor into a theatrical performance driven by the 'currency of reputation.' Behind this phenomenon stood the art of needlework and women's craftsmanship, entailing their contribution to the "spiritualisation of the household," stressing ideals of piety and obedience, and supporting "moral and instructive artwork within the home." It also fostered "female bonding" as needlework skills were passed down from generation to generation. The purses, as material witnesses, illuminate the complex interplay between public displays of generosity, moral virtue, and womanhood in the Early Modern period.

Another interesting aspect of the symbolism of handbags and the variety of their shapes has been explored in the article by Edward B.M. Rendall and Isabella Rosner "Plays, Plague, and Pouches: The Role of the Outside in Early Modern English Plague Remedies" focused on sweet bags' connection to drama and plague medicine. This research provides a meticulous case study of the frog-shaped sweet bag, which has a distinct design, suggesting it was used to purify the air around the body, as such a form would have been rather unsuitable for financial purposes (Rendall and Rosner 2021). The authors state that the frog form had cultural roots, as references to this animal are present in Early Modern drama (*Macbeth*, *The Masque of Queens*, *Titus Andronicus*) and political imagery (e.g., Elizabeth I's nickname for the Duke of Anjou), making it a symbol of foreignness, witchcraft, or political rivalry (especially during the Anglo-Dutch Wars) (Rendall and Rosner 2021, p. 3). The exotic herbs inside reinforced its magical and apotropaic aura. Thus,

the frog pouch uniquely merged form, aromatic, and protective functions, and embedded symbolism into a health-related object.

The symbolism of purses for presenting money, their ambiguity in form, and their association with the elite strata of the population influenced their use as gifts or packaging for gifts, souvenirs, and symbols of love or friendship (Foster 1982). The process of gifting is mentioned in *Queen Elizabeth's Wardrobe Unlock'd* (2020) by the already-mentioned Janet Arnold, who analysed for this publication Christmas gift lists, the Queen's Jewellery Inventory, the Diary, and warrants, among other records, to reveal that sweet bags also functioned as prestigious gifts to the Queen (pp. 389).

Sweet bags are also studied from a more technical perspective. Thus, the details of embroidery, composition, and materials used in the creation of handbags are examined. Jacqui Carey, a specialist in early English embroidery and historical textiles, provides extensive scholarship on sweet bags in her books, notably *Sweet Bags*: *An Investigation into 16th & 17th Century Needlework* (2009) and *Elizabethan Stitches* (2012). In *Sweet Bags*, Carey meticulously details the objects' purposes, use as status symbols and gifts, and the specific craftsmanship involved, including stitching, materials, symbolism (Carey 2008). In *Elizabethan Stitches*, Carey addresses a fundamental challenge of connecting the historical term "sweet bag" to surviving material bags in an unambiguous way (Carey 2012, p. 6). This difficulty arises because remaining areifacts rarely retain their original fragrance, their functions overlap with those of other purses (such as alms purses), and documentation is vague. Despite this, Carey defines sweet bags as small, usually embroidered textile pouches, square in shape (average 11.4 cm by 11.8 cm), dating to the late 16th and early 17th centuries, originally intended to hold substances for perfuming clothing and spaces.

Carey's work includes case studies of Elizabethan embroidery from major museums including the Victoria and Albert Museum, the British Library, the Ashmolean Museum, the Embroiderers' Guild, and private collections. Based on analysed items, she provides a glossary, highlights forgotten stitches, and elaborates on surviving textiles from the late sixteenth to the early seventeenth centuries. All the information is accompanied by close-up photographs and step-by-step instructions for reconstructing the mentioned historical clothing items. Beyond Carey's work, more technical overviews of sweet bags or sweet purses also feature in studies of embroidery across different periods, such as *Embroidery*: *A Collection of Articles on Subjects Connected with the Study of Fine Needlework, Including Stitches, Materials, Methods of Work, and Designing* (1909), and *Samplers and Stitches*: *A Handbook of the Embroiderer's Art* (1921).

Melinda Sherbring also provides detailed, technical documentation of Early Modern English sweet bags, focusing on their construction, materials, and design, rather than their social context. Her analysis is based largely on the collection at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and she adopts standardised terminology, referencing Carey's work where necessary. Sherbring's research confirms that most bags were constructed from plain-weave linen and silk taffeta lining, with decorative elements created using silk threads and various metal threads (silver, silver-gilt) for outlines and texture (e.g., purl and bullion). Components included braided silk cords, spangles (sequins), and occasional beads. Crucially, Sherbring provides a systematic list of 13 structural components (lining, mouth, lip, lip edging, lip lines, lacing holes, drawstrings, drawstring pulls, base loops, base tassels, openers, seams, and purse strings or straps). Her meticulous, technical perspective significantly advances the understanding of the sweet bags' materiality, the required needlework skills, and the general popularity of handicrafts in the period (Sherbring 2021, 2022, 2023a, 2023b, 2025).

More recent studies have examined the relationship between design elements and scent, raising questions about the possibility of reconstructing historical aromas. These works address the material culture of smell from a broader historical perspective, though

most discussions focus on perfumed gloves or other small objects rather than sweet bags. One of the most outstanding works is Holly Dugan's *The Ephemeral History of Perfume: Scent and Sense in Early Modern England* (2011), where the author examines how Renaissance scents contributed to individuals' self-representation and, consequently, became a marketable commodity. Parts of her research on bags and gloves draw on Margaret Yelverton's 1621 *Booke of Phisicke Surgery Preserves and Cookery with Sundrie Other Excellent Receites* and Mary Doggett's 1681 recipe book. These describe practices such as fumigating sickrooms, perfuming clothing, making sweet waters and pomanders, and composing aromatic mixtures for sweet bags. However, Dugan prioritises scent's role in identity formation over a detailed discussion of individual objects. Catherine Maxwell's *Scents & Sensibility*: *Perfume in Victorian Literary Culture* (2017) similarly concentrates on literary and decorative olfactory traditions, noting only briefly that "Sachets in the form of little silk bags and ornamental envelopes were widely available for purchase throughout the Victorian period" (p. 34). The book also explores 19th-century scented accessories such as artificial flowers, perfumed buttons, and repandrines or, in other words, ribbons infused with scent to decorate garments. Susan Stewart's *Common and Uncommon Scents*: *A Social History of Perfume* (2022) likewise mentions that scent bags eventually replaced the older practice of simply powdering clothes. Among current scholars, William Tullett stands out for his focus on the historical experience of smell. He, together with his colleagues, elaborated on the concept of "whiffstory" to recreate historical scents and understand the past, an approach exemplified by the remodelling of scented gloves in *Making Whiffstory: A Contemporary Re-creation of an Early Modern Scent for Perfumed Gloves* (2022). Subsequently, despite the rapid development in the field of scent history and olfactory studies, few works have addressed the fragrant component of sweet bags in detail.

This brief overview of key works illustrates how the culture of small sweet bags has evolved from the moment when bags worn in visible places were replaced with smaller ones, usually hidden under voluminous skirts, to the appearance of more intimate purses, and ultimately to sweet bags that served both medical and moral purposes. Vanda views sweet bags as a consequence of broader changes in fashion, reflecting a shift in how personal and bodily objects were managed, particularly by women. Carey agrees with Vanda that sweet bags' early function was to mask unpleasant odours in an era before modern hygiene and sanitation, and later as gifts exchanged in acts of affection or social ritual, which added to the sentimental value of the bags. Furthermore, according to Robb, embroidered pouches adorned with beads illustrate the variety of bag types circulating at the time, some of which slightly resembled sweet bags and may well have served as their inspiration. Although these were not used for herbs but for money, they symbolised a pious and virtuous household committed to helping people experiencing poverty. As emblems of a diligent and exemplary family, such pouches and the process of their creation provided women with opportunities for self-expression through threads rather than words and for building female bonds. The communication among women, through shared work, patterns, and recipes, may in turn have prompted further variations and uses of sweet bags. While a wide range of hypothetical uses of bags has emerged, and historical references confirm their existence, identifying which surviving objects these descriptions refer to remains ambiguous. For this reason, recipe-based research can only hypothetically reconstruct the contents of such bags and the aromatic compounds they might have contained. Moreover, although existing studies illuminate the social, material, and symbolic dimensions of sweet bags, they tend to emphasise visual or textual evidence, and far fewer have asked what they might have smelled like. Turning from sight to scent, the following section addresses this gap by re-examining sweet bags and the sensory worlds they once contained as objects of olfactory heritage and sensory history.

3. Redefining Sweet Bags as Olfactory Heritage

Is our nose capable of sensing the sweet bag as a historical artefact? Can we, today, still grasp its probable aromatic contents and the cultural meanings attached to the scents once enclosed within it? Even without prior knowledge of sweet bags, the floral embroidery of the bag in Figure 1—one of the specimens preserved in the Victoria and Albert Museum—seems to invite the viewer to imagine its fragrance, as its stitched blooms hint at the fragrant botanicals that may once have filled the bags' interior.



Figure 1. *Sweet bag with floral and fruit embroidery in silk and metal threads, featuring stylised pomegranates and roses; detail of the tasselled drawstring and silver-gilt spangles*. England, ca. 1600. Victoria and Albert Museum, London, Museum no. O158605. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London. The elaborate embroidery suggests that the bag was likely used as an ornamental accessory and may have contained fragrant herbs or small personal items. https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O158605/bag-unknown/ (accessed on 21 November 2025).

The process of rethinking starts with the bag's design, featuring floral and fruit motifs, among which pomegranates, roses, carnations, acorns, and scrolling vines become possible to discern, executed in shades of green, blue, gold, red, and cream. The elaborate embroidery and costly threads suggest that such items were not intended for everyday use as purses or money pouches, but rather as demonstrative accessories or elegant gifts entailing a symbolic meaning (Heal 2014, p. 144). These are some of the details that define the characteristics of sweet bags and their functions as expressions of refinement, status, and sensory sophistication in Early Modern culture.

By contrast, in the 16th century, money was typically carried in simple purses securely fastened to the girdle. Considering the substantial crime rates, valuable items, including coins, jewellery, or important letters, were often hidden as close to the body as possible. Given the short length of the ties and the nuanced embroidery on sweet bags (such as the one presented in Figure 1), it is improbable that these items could have been hidden under clothing or attached to a waist belt. In addition, the limited number of preserved examples that are in decent condition emphasises their use primarily for special occasions rather than as everyday, utilitarian items (Baines and Fennetaux 2020; Foster 1982).

Beyond the visual appeal of their floral motifs and delicate craftsmanship, the descriptions of their occasionally enclosed contents reveal sweet bags as integral to olfactory heritage, offering a tangible connection to the sensory practices of the Early Modern period. For instance, a recipe from the eclectic compendium of practical knowledge, home remedies, and domestic arts *Natura Exenterata* (1655) lists ingredients for such accessories: "Oras, Cloves, Storax, Calamint, Calamus, Beniamyn, Cypres, white Sanders, Lavender, Bassill, Marjerome" (p. 467). Although such descriptions are not common, they are not rare either. Reading these recipes alongside the visual evidence allows one to contemplate the complex olfactory and material image of sweet bags. Instructions of this kind suggest that the term "sweet" may have originated from the bags' ability to hold dried flowers and medicinal plants, offering protection against unpleasant odours or disease, or simply imparting a pleasant fragrance to the body or clothing, among other diverse uses. In this way, olfactory heritage provides a framework for linking the materiality of craftsmanship to the elusiveness of perfumed fillings, facilitating this connection through the olfactory gaze.

Olfactory heritage, as a counterpart to traditional visual- and fact-based forms of legacy, acknowledges the value of smells, despite their elusiveness, as mediums of information, meaning, and emotion in evoking cultural memory (Bembibre and Strlič 2022). More broadly, the legacy of scents and smells is part of a sensory dimension of cultural intangible patrimony encompassing "practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills—as well as the instruments, objects, artifacts and cultural spaces associated therewith—that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage," meaning that it refers to the dynamic, lived cultural expressions of communities (UNESCO 2020). The identification of smells worthy of legacy involves the exploration of the olfactory components of traditions, customs, beliefs, historical narratives, material artefacts, and geographical locations. Smell can manifest as textual or visual references to scents, volatile organic compounds (VOCs) emitted by historical objects, spaces, or practices, or fragrant solutions like perfumes, aromatic liquids or historical scent reconstructions, or olfactory art designed to be experienced.

Naturally, not all smells constitute the olfactory heritage. Cecilia Bembibre Jacobo, drawing on the policy of Historic England, an organisation that manages historical objects and environments, and its instructions, outlined in *Conservation Principles, Policies and Guidance* (2008), adjusts the institution's criteria to determine which scents should be granted heritage recognition (Bembibre Jacobo 2020). According to her view, an odour can be qualified as a "heritage smell" and have historical value when it helps establish links among historical communities, their activities, and their locations. Also, a smell can be considered important when it is associated with prominent figures or events. Another criterion is the social value of a scent, arising from collective experience and memory. Sweet bags correspond to all key heritage values: they are tied to historical communities through their presence in royal gift rolls and evoke prominent figures through their associations with Queen Elizabeth I, while their embedding in domestic, medicinal, and gendered traditions of scent, craftsmanship, and sensory expression reflects a collective past. Thus,

olfactory heritage is constituted by smells that have arisen as a result of a selective focus of specific communities on certain aromas; they are not necessarily associated with a specific still-existing location, but instead have associative links with historical practices, events, or personas—as exemplified by the sweet bag that give a whiff into the story of the Early Modern English past.

The practice of the olfactory gaze, a concept coined and brought into active circulation by olfactory art historian and curator Caro Verbeek, can be particularly useful in defining olfactory heritage in a precise and meaningful way. She defines this notion as a mode of looking at images, texts, and objects with smell in mind, disrupting the default "scopic regime"[1] and revealing odour cues that would otherwise remain unseen (Ehrich et al. n.d.). Olfactory hints are the first observations that show that a scent was once significant. These hints prompt us to recognise the smell (or the object carrying it) as a "heritage smell," especially when it is tied to culturally or historically valuable materials. The term parallels other critical frameworks such as the "male gaze" or "female gaze", highlighting that perception is conditioned by different factors, including cultural and sensory hierarchies (Ehrich et al. n.d.). While the olfactory gaze uncovers overlooked scent cues in artworks or artefacts, olfactory heritage designates the process by which these sensory traces are preserved and legitimised as part of cultural memory (Muller 2023, p. 190). Cultivating this gaze fosters recognition of neglected scent histories and contributes to the extension of olfactory heritage legacies. Together, olfactory gaze and olfactory heritage transform "hidden" scent stories into stable and transmissible forms of cultural knowledge. Thus, combining recipe analysis with the olfactory gaze enables a departure from the conventional classification of sweet bags merely as examples of "embroidery" or "needlework," and moves toward recognising their olfactory potency. Through the olfactory gaze, bags are repositioned from aesthetic tokens to sensorial artefacts filled with the aromas of plants such as camomile, rose, coriander, nigella seed, cumin, betony, rosemary, and others. Their exterior embroidered floral patterns do not always correspond to the ingredients within, yet their contents were believed to possess healing powers capable of alleviating everything from melancholy to stomach ailments.

The concept of olfactory heritage can be situated within the broader framework of the smellscape, which encompasses the lived and spatial dimensions of smell. The idea of smellscape was introduced in 1984 by Daniel Wynne Gade, a professor of Geography at the University of Vermont, who, in his article "Redolence and Land Use on Nosy Be, Madagascar" (1984), defined it as a space with distinctive smells resulting from the area's uses and human choices or intentions that shape those uses, which can be enhanced by environmental factors (Gade 1984, pp. 29, 36), though their influence is limited by place boundaries that restrict their spread (Gade 1984, p. 36). Smellscapes are classified based on their nature within a distal array and cause, including industrial waste, garbage accumulation, exhaust fumes, household vapours, local flora, and specialised horticulture (Gade, "Redolence and Land Use," p. 37). Gade also introduced the term "nasal menu" to describe the diversity of aromas in a given environment (Gade, "Redolence and Land Use," p. 36). Although Gade's comprehensive definition established the concept of a smellscape, Douglas Porteous introduced it to the broader public in his 1985 article "Smellscape", defining it by comparison to the landscape, but representing spatially ordered or place-related smells that, unlike a visual scene, cannot be captured like a photograph (Porteous 1985, p. 360). According to Porteous's views, odours are dispersed throughout space, and their intensity depends on time, weather, and movement (Porteous, "Smellscape," p. 367). Porteous also emphasised the psychological component of smellscapes as well as hedonic reactions to smells, emotional or motivational arousal, individual and age-related responses, smells' tolerance, preferences, and adaptations, all of which matter for the smellscape's definition and experience (Porteous, "Smellscape," p. 359). A key difference

between Gade's and Porteous' theories lies in their approaches to conducting research. Gade studied the concept directly on site on the island of Nosy Be, while Porteous conducted a critical analysis of literary works (Trygg Engen, Edward Relph, Francis B. Colavita, Susan S. Schiffman, Rudyard Kipling, John Atkins, and Robert Ruark). It is also noteworthy that Porteous does not cite or otherwise acknowledge Gade in his work. Despite these differences, their views can be summarised as understanding the smellscape as the unity of a smell's location, individual interpretation, and interactions with surrounding smells. These two central definitions of the smellscape enable us to envisage this concept as having a dynamic and multidimensional nature, which also allows us to describe it through the idea of a palimpsest,[2] meaning that each scent layer, whether related to culture, society, or nature, shapes and influences the next, making them mutually dependent.

While the smellscape describes the immediate sensory environment shaped by odours, olfactory heritage designates the historically and culturally significant elements of that environment, including the scents that persist in collective memory, become symbolically meaningful, and are transmitted across generations. Through the olfactory gaze, it becomes possible to discern how the sensory environment of the past, represented by the Early Modern smellscape, gave rise to specific forms of olfactory heritage embodied in objects such as sweet bags. Consequently, in what follows, the article positions sweet bags both through recipes that directly refer to these pouches as part of olfactory heritage, and through less explicit evidence, namely the presence of other small bags in culinary and medical instructions that may have served as their prototypes or inspiration, the social background of their production, and the brief linguistic genealogy of the term itself. The analysis also includes a comparison between the plant elements described in recipes and those represented in the embroidery of surviving bags. Taken together, these perspectives reveal sweet bags as inherently multisensory objects, whose study through recipes opens an additional interpretive dimension, one that brings smell back into dialogue with the surviving visual and material traces.

4. Sweet Bags as Olfactory Heritage Practices Reflected in Literary Recipes

The bag shown above in Figure 1 is one of a number of similar embroidered bags used to hold herbs to give the body a pleasant scent, mask unpleasant odours, or serve symbolic purposes. Therefore, considering the definition of olfactory heritage—based on culturally significant smells rooted in a group's communal life, recalling specific people, places, rituals, customs, and shared experiences that have shaped their sensory understanding—bags are examples of aromatic objects entailing certain traditions and routines meaningful in the Early Modern period. This section will examine the material traditions and domestic routines associated with sweet bags by tracing their preparation as documented in Early Modern cookbooks, medical compendiums, and household manuals, where detailed ingredient lists for fillings offer invaluable insights into how tangible heritage and sensory perception were interwoven and the impact of this connection on daily life and the physical conditions of Early Modern people. A systematic and chronological analysis of recipes for decorative aromatic bags, aiming to delve into the complex sensory inputs such accessories provided and the range of their potential applications will be described. The analysis of literary sources is vital because the scents themselves cannot be physically preserved over centuries. By studying how sweet bags are mentioned in these texts, researchers can further connect them to aspects of olfactory heritage such as the material reconstruction of scent content, the ways scent characteristics were created, and

how a community described and categorised particular aromas. At the end, a general definition of sweet bags will be drawn.

One of the earliest sweet bag recipes is found in Markham's *Countrey Contentments, or The English Husvvife* (1623), a book that, in its extended title, already emphasises the importance of "skill in […] perfumes." The method for creating such bags appears in a homonymous section titled "Skill in Perfumes." Additionally, the sweet bag instructions are found among such entries as "An Excellent Water for Perfume," "To Perfume Gloves," "To Perfume a Jerkin," "To Make Washing Balls," "To Make a Musk Ball," "A Perfume to Burn," and "To Make Pomander." This peculiarity of the book's organisational approach, with the distinction of the olfactory component, will be seen in later publications by various authors. One of the recipes in Markham's collection[3] provides a lengthy instruction, beginning with taking numerous botanicals and aromatics, such as "Arras, Gallaminis, Ciris", dried rose leaves, marjoram, and sandalwood, and subsequently beating them "into a grosse pouder" (Markham 1623, p. 140). This powder is then enriched with costly animal musk, civet, and ambergris before being sealed into a taffeta bag (Markham 1623, p. 140).

The only technical element that visually describes the bag is taffeta, a common type of fabric in the Early Modern period. For example, according to Richard Hakluyt's collection of travelogues and voyage literature, *Principal Navigations*, in 1589, English privateers seized goods such as taffeta, silk, and Madeira wine from Iberian ships, often by force and under the cover of deception. One of these episodes is described in "The Voiage of the Right Honorable George Erie of Cumberland to the Azores, &c.," written by the mathematician and engineer Edward Wright and edited by Richard Hakluyt as a chapter in his *Navigations*. During an attack on one of the easternmost Azorean islands, called São Miguel, the English fleet raised a Spanish flag to disguise their identity. At night, Englishmen attacked ships anchored at the port, cut their ropes, and captured the Spaniards. When they towed away three ships, many people from the Spanish crew panicked and leapt into the sea, raising the alarm. The city's response was cannon fire, which was unsuccessful due to the darkness. Interestingly, Scots aboard one ship pretended to shoot at the English but later deserted and offered their services. One of the captured ships contained 30 barrels of Madeira wine, wool, silk, and taffeta. This episode illustrates how materials used for sweet bags—including fine fabrics like taffeta and silk, among others—were acquired during England's expansionist maritime ventures (Hakluyt 1903, pp. 3–4).

There is also a variation on the preparation of a sweet bag in another medical treatise on diagnosing, understanding, and treating internal diseases, *Praxis Medicinæ, or The Physitian's Practise*: *Wherein Are Contained All Inward Diseases from the Head to the Foot* (1632) by Gualtherus Bruele. It is important to note that a second, corrected edition was published in 1639, but for the purposes of this discussion, which aims to identify the moment when smell bags first appeared in print, all quotations are taken from the 1632 edition. The following excerpt provides another example of a sweet bag recipe:

> ℞ of Betony leaues, flowers of Camomile, Roses, ana M i. of the seeds of Nigella, ana ʒ ss, of prepared Coriander, ana ʒ iij. being dried, let them be beaten a little, and let them be sewed in a linnen cloth like a pillow. (Bruele 1632, p. 49)

What is interesting here is that the visual and physical component of the sweet bag is explicitly mentioned through its shape, "like a pillow", and material, "a linnen cloth." In addition, the recipe specifies that the herbs should be dried, ground, and then sewn into a small linen bag. This detail adds to the ideas of bags' appearance and filling's arrangement, ranging from floral scents of roses, through herbaceous notes of camomile and betony, to pungent and savoury coriander and nigella.

The same resource also notes that "a bag of Maioram, Betony, Rosemary, Conserue of Rosemary Flowers, Aorus…" (Bruele 1632, p. 5) was used for the treatment of headache, specifically *cephalea* (general headache) and *hemicranea* (one-sided headache, i.e., migraine). Bruele also states that the aromatic components "shall be applied to those veines which swell about the part affected: or to the end of the nose" (Bruele 1632, p. 7). In this way, the tip of the nose becomes a sensitive and therapeutic site, and because the perception of fragrances was understood as a form of healing, the use of such decorative accessories within reach of the nose became a reasonable practice. Following the sniffing pattern, Bruele recommended another method of treating headaches, where aroma compounds, including "flowers of Staechas, of Rosemary, Sage, Betony, Maioram, Origan, dried Worme-wood…Nutmegs, Mace," should be "sewed into a red cloth, whereof make a bagge in the forme of a cap,"[4] (Bruele 1632, p. 11). Although this recipe refers to a non-square-shaped object, the very practice of mixing herbs and enclosing them in fabric suggests the prevalence of small aromatic or medicinal sachets (Bruele 1632, p. 11). Additionally, the recipe states that the composition can be used for several months, indicating its durability and lasting fragrance. In *Praxis Medicinæ, or The Physitian's Practise* (1632), there are also recommendations for heart ailments, which, as in the case of the headache recipe, require adding the same ingredients and placing them in a bag or pomander[5] (Bruele 1632, p. 211). The appearance of the pomander highlights the interrelation between practices of smelling aromatic substances enclosed in fabric bags and the subsequent habit of using a solid vessel for personal scent-carrying. Although *Praxis Medicinæ* does not contain a separate section or chapter on scented objects, it includes numerous examples of such bags being used as compresses or worn on the body.

A later and more detailed reference can be found in the seventeenth-century broad-scope therapeutic and practical encyclopaedia of medicine and household management, *Natura Exenterata* (1655), of a collaborative, possibly anonymous or pseudonymous authorship. This work equally offers remedies for wounds, sores, scabs, itch, worms, kidney and stones, as well as instructions for the artistry of crafting and filling sweet bags with lavender. Guidelines on how to fill pouches with aromatic ingredients appear in the section titled "Certain very good perfumes" (p. 460). Although this rubric suggests a focus on scents, related perfume recipes are scattered throughout the whole compendium. "Certain very good perfumes" opens with royal perfumes' recipes, namely "King Henry's," "King Edward's," and "the French Queen's," perfumes. These are followed by entries titled "Another Fine Perfume" (p. 461) and "Another Other Perfume" (p. 461), as well as a list of herbs suitable for perfuming. The section then transitions to recipes for aromatic gloves and subsequently to pomanders. It is only after these instructions that three distinct recipes for sweet bags appear, followed by several formulas for preparing aromatic powders specifically for these pouches. The contextual placement of sweet bags within other olfactory objects and practices shows a continuum of aromatic traditions aimed at maintaining health, cleanliness, ideas of beauty, and, often, emotional regulation through scent. This positioning suggests that readers were expected to know where to look for such items and how they were used in everyday life, while the absence of sewing instructions or other technical details in sweet bag-filling recipes further implies a pre-existing familiarity among Early Modern readers with the craft of these or similar pouches. Moreover, putting scent bags in a relatively separate section makes this book similar to Markham's *Countrey Contentments, or The English Husvvife.* Their appearance following instructions for pomanders aligns with humoral theory, as both items were employed to prevent foul air, uplift the spirits, and find the balance between emotions and cognition.

The next two recipes from *Natura Exenterata* offer illustrative examples:

To make a sweet Bagge.

Orras Gallia Muscata

Calamus Aromaticus

Cipres roots

Fussis

...

Storax, Calamint

Beniamin

Fine Marjorme gently dryed

Eares of Lavender dryed

Five or six grains of Musk, Civet or Amber

Put in your eares of Lavender, and Marjerom whole: (Philiatros 1655, pp. 467–68).

This precise list of sweet bag ingredients is preceded by a block of three options for creating aromatic powder to be sewn into silk bags:

A sweet pouder to be sown in silk bagges.

Take Roses, yeallow Sanders, Belzonum, Spick, Cypres of each a like, beat them in a Morter.

Another.

Take Belzonum, Storax, Calamint, Cloves of each two oun|ces, fine Yreos six ounces, yeallow Sanders three ounces, fine Musk twenty graines.

Another.

Take Roles, Orras, Spick, sweet Marjerom dryed, Fossis, Cy|pres, Belzonum of each a like quantity.

(Philiatros 1655, p. 466).

These recipes, even though they specify the material used—silk—do not indicate the size of the bags. Occasionally, quantities of herbs are given in ounces, yet further measurements are generally absent.

In addition to the above-mentioned, less specified uses of the bags, Early Modern medical recipe books, which often incorporate elements of a miscellany and household manuals, contain other examples of herbal pouches created for more precise purposes (at least according to the instructions present). For instance, small bags designed to perfume linen can be clearly identified in *Delightes for Ladies to Adorne Their Persons, Tables, Closets, and Distillatories with Beauties, Banquets, Perfumes and Waters,* appearing in editions of 1602 and 1611. As with *Praxis Medicinæ*, it is important to note the existence of a later edition, however, to trace the earliest printed references to smell bags; this discussion cites the 1602 edition. One of the recipes is called *"Sweet bags to lie among linnen*", which recommends filling the bags with "Rhodium finely beaten" (Plat 1602. Lignum rhodium is a general name for several types of plants that are united by a rose-like fragrance that comes from their essential oils.

Another source, whose very title already conveys a talent for fragrance, *Polygraphice, or the arts of drawing, engraving, etching, limning, painting, washing, varnishing, gilding, colouring, dying, beautifying and perfuming* (1675), provides additional evidence of the use of scented sachets in everyday life for perfuming linen. It recommends placing aromatic powders made from damask rose leaves, musk, and violet in sachets among clothing (Salmon et al. 1675, p. 318),[6] confirming the practical household function of sweet bags and sachets as textile perfumes. This recipe is also quite simple, containing only three

ingredients, namely damask rose leaves, violet leaves, and musk. In this case, the ingredients' measurements ("one pound," "half a drachm," "three ounces") are also indicated, in contrast to some guidelines mentioned earlier. As in the previous recipes, the process of preparing the herbs is also specified ("mix them").

Of particular interest is the instruction that follows immediately, whose title, "V. Another for the same or to wear about on,"[7] already indicates its purpose. The recipe recommends creating a powder to be carried and applied directly to the body, albeit without specifications for amounts or proportions. To prepare it, in addition to the usual rose and musk, ingredients such as cloves, spikenard, storax, and cinnamon should be mixed together and placed in small bags (Salmon et al. 1675, pp. 318–19). The absence of detailed instructions for use may indicate that such mixtures and pouches were familiar to people and did not have clearly defined use rules.

After a brief examination of the aforementioned titles "IV. A Sweet Powder to lay among cloaths" and "V. Another for the same or to wear about one," as well as the ingredients of the recipes, one might gain the impression that the two entries are identical. However, they possess notable differences. Both recipes were indeed meant to scent clothing, but the second one is extended to a dual purpose "for the same or to wear about one," where the second distinctive part implies personal use, possibly sewn into a sweet bag or worn on the body. The fact that the second recipe is also for bags that can be carried on the body confirms its more complex composition. Thus, each recipe contains dried rose leaves as a base (the first specifying damask rose, a more fragrant variety), and both include musk, while the second also incorporates cloves, spikenard, storax, and cinnamon. From this, it can be concluded that the first is more minimalistic, reflecting its household use. The second has a richer, more ceremonial tone, suggesting bodily proximity and perhaps higher social or ritual value. These two recipes show how sweet bags moved between home, wardrobe, and the body.

In the same edition of *Polygraphice* (1675), the following recipe is again devoted to domestic use of scented bags, namely for placing them among linen, rather than for personal use.[8] Interestingly, Salmon, Clark, and Crumpe offer three different powder options for linen and other household needs. Thus, the third option differs in terms of ingredients and the duration of the fragrance's persistence—up to twenty years (Salmon et al. 1675, 319).[9]

Polygraphice, like some other books, is divided into sections. Sweet bags are mentioned in the section entitled "Of Perfuming Powdres" (p. 425), followed by "Of Perfuming Balsams" (p. 425). Thus, this position once again shows that the creation of fragrant objects was part of everyday life, rooting them in the history of culture. Many of the ingredients (e.g., rosemary, orris root, chamomile, thyme) had humoral and medical associations, suggesting that sweet bags were valued not merely for their fragrance but also for their protective, therapeutic qualities against foul air (miasma), disease, and melancholy.

Another confirmation of the use of sweet bags for perfuming linen, as well as their filling with powders, appears in *The Ladies Dictionary*: *Being a General Entertainment of the Fair-Sex, a Work Never Attempted Before in English* (1694).[10] The recipe "Powders for the Hair, Linen and Sweet Bags" includes detailed instructions for aromatic mixtures promising "Great Efficacy for Ladyes" (N. H. 1694). What distinguishes this recipe is its explicit reference to the seductive function of scent, marking a departure from the more common medicinal or hygienic applications. The mixture in question is composed of florentine iris, iris roots, red rose leaves, violets, marjoram, and the frequently mentioned benjamin, cloves, and styrax, ingredients that not only imparted a pleasant fragrance to linen and hair but were also believed to influence those nearby and even "bewitch" a stubborn man: "if nevertheless you meet with any that defies your Charms, and is obstinate, do you not despair; for we will teach you how you shall tickle his Nose with a Powder, and cartously

fetch him about with is" (N. H. 1694). This instance treats powders for hair, linen, and sweet bags as variations on a single formula, showing that Early Modern scent practices involved beauty and domestic domains. The partially identical base—iris root, cloves, storax, benjamin, and musk—and the similarity in preparation suggest that the same aromatic blend could be useful for multiple textile and body surfaces. Such migration from linens (cleanliness) to hairstyles (grooming) emphasises the interconnections between household management and personal care. Notably, in this example, fragrance is also shown as an instrument of flirtation, as the phrase "tickle his nose with a powder, and cautiously fetch him about with it" implies. As the same sachet could be sewn by women, stored in a wardrobe, perfumed a coiffure, and wafted toward a suitor, a new smellscape dominated by female practices emerged. The recipe thus affirms that sweet bags were more than handcrafted utilitarian objects, and they participated in a female-controlled sensory economy that blended domestic order, bodily display, and even sexual agency.

An interesting variation among objects designed to preserve aromas is the "sweet ball," a small, portable scent object akin to a pomander, intended to perfume clothing, bedding, or the hands when carried or gently heated. Such objects are mentioned in the recipe for Oleum Imperiale, an aromatic and luxurious oil based on ambergris, styrax, rose oil, cinnamon, and clove oils.[11] A special feature is that the sediment formed after twenty days of infusion was used to create multifunctional sweet balls (Salmon et al. 1675), solid aromatic objects made from the fragrant residues—amber and storax—left after distilling Oleum Imperiale, which could serve as sachets for clothing, beads for the hands, or incense for burning. Inasmuch as this recipe is for Oleum Imperiale, the remaining sediment after oil preparation can be reused to make other aromatic objects, which would guarantee extensive use of such ingredients as ambergris, musk, storax, and civet.

When examining the contents of sweet bags, some aromatic herbs appear more frequently than others. Ingredients such as rosemary, orris root, chamomile, and thyme carried humoral and medical associations, reinforcing the notion that these bags functioned not merely as sources of pleasure but as therapeutic protectors against foul air (miasma), disease, and melancholy. Yet, beyond familiar materials like musk, civet, and amber, the recipes also feature less common and sometimes surprising ingredients. For example, *orras* or, as it appears in *Natura Exenterata* (Philiatros 1655, p. 466), "Yreos and Orras spick, "refers to orris, the root of the iris plant, especially *Iris germanica* or *Iris florentina*, valued for its violet-like fragrance (Miller 1807, p. 784). Later in the text, examples of bags containing depictions of the iris will be presented. In *A New Medical Dictionary; Or, General Repository of Physic* (1791), iris is described in a way that suggests that it was familiar to the public: "but in the dried state in which we commonly have it in our shops, he [Dr. Cullen] considers it as an insignificant expectorant," and later, "As a medicine it is an useful expectorant; it attenuates viscid phlegm, and promotes its discharge" (Motherby and Wallis 1791, p. 454).

The reference to phlegm and to the cold and moist qualities of the human organism shows that this plant may have been used to restore the body's internal equilibrium, preventing the physical and mental sluggishness associated with a phlegmatic imbalance. Orris was also used to powder wigs and hair. It is worth noting that cough remedies, toothpastes, tooth powders and liqueurs had orris root in their formulas to add flavour (Van Wyk and Wink 2017, p. 194). This broad use of the plant, based on its sensory profile, makes it a fitting ingredient for sweet bags.

Calamus aromaticus is an old Latin name (now treated as a synonym) for *Acorus calamus* L., the "sweet flag," a plant with aromatic rhizomes used in perfumery and medicine. The plant was likely imported from the Levant or India. Once dried, it preserves its fixed aroma for many years, losing the leek-like scent of the fresh root. Traditionally, *Acorus calamus* has been used as a carminative and digestive treatment. It can help release spasms,

relieve stomach cramps, stimulate appetite, and even ease asthma. In an unhygienic environment, a digestive aroma would have been a logical addition (Motherby and Wallis 1791, pp. 177–78).

Storax is a resin obtained from the storax tree (*Styrax officinalis*), used in incense and perfumery. The tree and its bloom slightly resemble some floral motifs often embroidered on sweet bags. A substance called "calamita" is sometimes interpreted as a dry form of storax, as opposed to the liquid version. There are different types of storax, but this recipe likely refers to the regular kind, a fragrant, brownish resin prepared with added sawdust and valued in medicine and perfumery for its stimulating and strengthening effects. This resin was typically obtained from the bark of *Styrax officinale* trees in Syria and the Levant (Motherby and Wallis 1791, p. 682).

Calamint, an aromatic herb of the *Calamintha* genus (related to mint), was included for its fresh, minty scent. Benzoin, also known as benjamin, is a balsamic resin derived from the bark of various *Styrax* species. It has a sweet, balsamic odour, and an acrid, bittersweet taste. The inclusion of these ingredients means that they were often found in Early Modern households (Henderson 1890).

In *Natura Exenterata*, at the ingredient level, *Belzonum*, which is likely benzoin, a sweet-smelling oleo-resin obtained from *Styrax benzoin* and *S. tonkinense*, both trees native to Java, Thailand, and other tropical parts of Asia, appears quite often. Known among Arab sources as "the frankincense of Java," benzoin was a key ingredient in pomanders, incenses, and soaps, and was used to give "body" to perfumes. Today, it functions as a fixative and is commonly added to sachets and potpourri. With its vanilla-like aroma, benzoin was also used medicinally to soothe irritated skin, relieve respiratory issues (such as coughs, bronchitis, and sore throats), and expel phlegm in humoral terms. It was additionally applied in cosmetics to promote clear skin. *Storax* and *calamint* also appear in these recipes. *Spick* likely refers to spikenard, a perfumery material derived from plants growing in the high mountain regions of the Himalayas. Spikenard has a strong scent reminiscent of patchouli and valerian, with a faint musk-like undertone. *Yeallow Sanders* stands for yellow sandalwood (*Santalum album*), a tall evergreen tree native to southern India, later cultivated in the Royal Botanical Gardens at Kew in the nineteenth century (Henderson 1890).

Sandalwood acts as a diuretic, promoting the flow of urine and supporting the genitourinary system. Its antiseptic properties enhance its efficacy in treating urinary tract infections such as gleet, gonorrhoea, bladder infections, and chronic cystitis. As an expectorant, it loosens phlegm and congestion in the respiratory system, easing chronic bronchitis, a dry cough, a sore throat, and inflammation of mucous tissues. Traditionally, this aromatic, bittersweet herb has also been used to treat digestive disorders, relieving indigestion, stomachache, and vomiting (Van Wyk and Wink 2017, p. 324). Being an analgesic that soothes pain, it relieves headaches, abdominal pain, and spasms. Applied externally, sandalwood benefits bacterial skin conditions such as dermatitis, acne, and psoriasis, and has been used in deodorants and mouthwashes for its antibacterial and cleansing effects. Multifunctional and purifying, sandalwood acts upon both the body's surface and its interior—from the skin to the stomach (McHugh 2012). This duality parallels the use of sweet bags, whose external application served to soothe internal symptoms through aromatic and therapeutic means. Summing up the brief review, it is impossible not to notice how the filling of the recipes has been refined and the thematic separation of such bags from other recipes has emerged.

Thus, after the analysis conducted in the previous paragraphs, sweet bags can be defined as small, embroidered fabric pouches essential to Early Modern olfactory heritage. These aromatic objects served multiple roles; namely, they provided a pleasant personal scent, masked unpleasant odours (especially in the context of miasma theory), and were

widely used for therapeutic and medicinal purposes (e.g., treating headaches). Furthermore, they played a significant part in domestic management by perfuming linen and were later integrated into personal care and social display, even being noted as instruments of flirtation. Analysis of Early Modern sources, including medical compendiums and household manuals, reveals the complex fillings of these bags, among which were rose leaves, marjoram, calamus aromaticus, and orris root, to name but a few. These botanicals were often combined with valuable resins and fixatives like benzoin, storax, and high-cost animal products such as musk, civet, and ambergris to ensure the longevity of the fragrance.

5. Additional Dimensions of Olfactory Heritage: Medicine, Food Practices, Gift-Giving, Social and Cultural Contexts, and Language

5.1. Types and Uses of Bags in Culinary and Medical Recipes

Having examined the primary recipes that foreground the aromatic component of sweet bags, the article next turns to secondary indicators of olfactory heritage, namely broader domestic and medical traditions that, in this context, intersect with the making of bags that may have served as precursors or inspirations for sweet bags. Accordingly, the following discussion draws on a wider range of examples, focusing on various types of bags—not necessarily sweet—that nonetheless played an important role in the development of the sweet bag tradition. These references, drawn from recipe books, medical treatises, and household manuals, correspond to the secondary indicators of olfactory heritage by extending the scope beyond explicitly scented objects. A brief classification of these different types of bags will also be provided.

It should be mentioned that recipe books often combined culinary and medical instructions, highlighting noble connections through dedications, "celebrity" recipes, and scented remedies. As a result, these sources reveal how smells and materials were intertwined with wealth and elite identity, much as costly perfumes and embroidered fabrics were in sweet bags. At the same time, they reference a variety of bag-shaped containers, suggesting that both domestic and therapeutic practices contributed to the emergence of recipes specifically for scented pouches.

Beyond the category of sweet bags, Early Modern texts mention a number of other bags that can be broadly classified into four groups based on their intended use: bags for internal or external application, and whether they serve medical or culinary purposes. It is also possible to make a further division within the medical category, where some bags were used to add flavour by being placed in different liquids, while others served as compresses for therapeutic use. It should be noted at the outset that the internal, external, medical, and culinary uses of these bags suggest that they were not elaborately decorated with embroidery or made from precious threads. Rather, these more utilitarian examples help systematise the types of bags usually mentioned in recipes, offering a basis for distinguishing sweet bags or pouches from other forms of domestic bags.

As a starting point, bags designed for internal use in various liquids and substances, primarily those described in recipes as purgative, will be at the centre of discussion. An instance of this bag emerges in *Mikrokosmographa. A Description of the Little-World, or, Body of Man* (1651), an Early Modern medical compendium authored by Robert Turner and dedicated to human anatomy, common diseases, and prescribed treatments. This medical text presents several recipes that utilise bags for liquid purification, one of which is "A Bag for Purging Ale," recommending to "Take of Egrimony, Speedwell, Liverwort, Scurvy-grasse, Watercresses, each a good handfull … and put them all into a bag made of Bolter" (Turner 1654, p. 79). In this case, the bag serves as a filter through which the

medicinal properties of the herbs infuse the liquid.[12] It is also an example of a functional, domestically medicinal bag.

The recipe "A Bag for Purging Ale" mentions a cloth bag made out of bolter—a term which, in Early Modern usage, can refer to "an instrument or machine for separating bran from flour, or the coarser part of meal from the finer; a sieve."**Error! Reference source not found.** By extension, bolter may also refer to a coarse, loosely woven cloth or filter fabric.[14] It is therefore possible to conclude that the recipe calls for a bag made of a porous material, suitable for steeping purgative herbs and spices by immersion in ale during fermentation, to produce a medicinal or cleansing drink. As a result of the infusion, the ale becomes imbued with laxative, diuretic, and restorative properties, making it a remedy intended to "cleanse" the body of humoral imbalances. This kind of bag likely resembled a simple fabric sack, which, being sturdy, is permeable enough to allow the herbal compounds to diffuse into the liquid while retaining the solids.

Bags are quite often mentioned in purging recipes, which simultaneously demonstrates how liquids were given specific properties and how important the purging process was.[15] The need for restoring balance and cleansing is associated with humoral imbalance, resulting from the humoral perception that formed the foundation of medieval and Early Modern medicine. The humoral theory treats the human body as a system of fluids in constant exchange with the natural world. From this perspective, the process of purging was not only a form of medical treatment but also a spiritual and, at times, even legal cleansing. The humoral theory claimed that the body was composed of four humours, namely blood, phlegm, yellow bile (choler), and black bile (melancholy), each corresponding to the four elements, earth, air, fire, and water, and the four qualities—hot, cold, wet, and dry. Each humour, in turn, was associated with a particular temperament. Specifically, blood is related to the qualities of hot and wet and is characteristic of the sanguine temperament. Phlegm is associated with cold and wet conditions and is characteristic of those with a phlegmatic temperament. Yellow bile is linked to hot and dry elements and is prominent in those with a choleric temperament. Finally, black bile is connected to the qualities of cold and dry and is a feature of a melancholic temperament (Connaughton 2023, p. 7; Bourne and Caddick Bourne 2019, p. 428).

The natural elements within the body emphasised a relationship between the individual, the body, and the environment. Furthermore, any manifestation of emotions and thoughts within humoral theory depends on and takes the shape of substances or fluids. Bodily processes such as sweating, urination, defecation, and bleeding, among others, were seen as mechanisms for expelling internal fluids into the external world, just as air, food, and water entered the body from outside (Bourne and Caddick Bourne 2019, p. 428).

The humoral theory considered all inner processes to be dependent on the circular passage of fluids through the body and the environment. Consequently, physical and mental health depended on the proper proportion and mixture of the humours, while imbalances such as excess, deficiency, or disharmony caused illnesses and disorders. For instance, on a physical level, a person with an excess of phlegm might smell differently than someone dominated by blood. To balance all fluids, treatments such as bloodletting, dietary regulation, and purgation were applied. Beyond these interventions, it was recommended to avoid pathogenic outside vapours that could cause an imbalance of liquids in the body and lead to disease (Hall 1679, pp. 187, 189, 192, 196). In such cases, when it was necessary to minimise the impact of noxious air, mask unpleasant odours, or protect people against foul-smelling air around them, embroidered sweet bags were used, hence being attributed with a protective medical power.

The relationship between humoral theory and the material practice of using bags becomes particularly evident in recipes such as "An excellent sirrup against melancholly"[16] from Kent's *Manual of Directions for the Sick* (1659). The recipe instructs the maker to

prepare a syrup from pearmains, borage, saffron, kermes, and sugar, and then to "sew the same slenderly in a linnen bag, that you may put the same easily into the bottle of Sirrup, and so let it hang with a thread out at the mouth of the bottle" (Kent 1659, p. 8). Here, the bag serves as a small, permeable container that allows the medicinal mixture—the species of Diamber and Diamargariton frigidum—to infuse the syrup while keeping the solids enclosed, effectively functioning as a filter and aromatic carrier within the liquid remedy.

In the Early Modern thought, melancholia was associated with black bile, a humour perceived as cold and dry, darkening and impairing clear judgments and wise actions. The "slenderly" sewn linen bag is used to infuse the syrup with the aromatic and potentially medicinal properties of the powdered *Diamber* spices and *Diamargariton frigidum*, without leaving any solid residue in the syrup. It was recommended to use a bag in a way that it "hang[s] with a thread out at the mouth of the bottle," showing how controlled infusion was achieved through textile mediation. One of the ingredients is *diamber*, an archaic term meaning ambergris, a substance formed in the intestines of sperm whales that possesses a warm, sensual aroma, often likened to the scents of damp wood, tobacco, and musk (Oxford English Dictionary 2023).**Error! Reference source not found.** Given that this syrup is intended to treat melancholy, the inclusion of diamber and saffron would help to "warm" the cold and dry humours in the body, restoring internal balance and satisfying humoral principles. The recipe also includes borage, a blue flower that bears some resemblance to a flower on a sweet bag preserved in the Victoria and Albert Museum.

The next subtype of bags mentioned in recipes is those used as heating pads, thus serving an external medical purpose. One such use has been mentioned in the recipe from the compendium of domestic knowledge by Gervase Markham under the verbose title *Countrey Contentments, or The English Husvvife Containing the Inward and Outward Vertues which Ought to be in a Compleate Woman: As Her Skill in Physicke, Surgery, Cookery, Extraction of Oyles, Banqueting-Stuffe, Ordering of Great Feasts, Preseruing of All Sorts of Wines, Conceited Secrets, Distillations, Perfumes, Ordering of Wooll, Hempe, Flax, Making Cloth, and Dying, the Knowledge of Dayries, Office of Malting, of Oates, Their Excellent Vses in a Family, of Brewing, Baking, and All Other Things Belonging to an Houshold. A Worke Generally Approued, and Now the Fourth Time Much Augmented, Purged and Made Most Profitable and Necessary for All Men, and the Generall Good of This Kingdome* (Markham 1623). Markham, in the recipe "For the Rhum"[18] (Markham 1623, p. 14), describes the therapeutic use of a small textile pouch as a heated compress to cure rheum, a catarrhal discharge from the mucous membranes of the nose or throat. For treatment, a bag was to be filled with herbal powdered substances (sage, bay salt, and nutmeg) that were to be sewn inside "a long linnen bag" (Markham 1623, p. 14), probably to prevent irritation or scratching the skin and to make the process of heating it on a stone easier. This process would have facilitated the release of warm, therapeutic aromas and enhanced the absorption of medicinal qualities through the skin. However, such bags or compresses were not always filled with fragrant and pleasant ingredients, but they could also contain less appealing substances, such as doves' dung:

> A playster for a stitch.
>
> To help a stitch in the side or else where, take Doues dung, red Rose leaues and put them into a bag, and quilt it: then throughly heat it vpon a Chaffingdish of coales with vinegar in a platter: then lay it vnto the pained place as hot as may be suffered, and when it cooleth heat it againe. (Markham 1623, p. 25)

The presented recipe addresses pain relief for a "pained place" or the "stitch", where the bag holds ingredients such as "Doues dung, red Rose leaues." As in the previous example, the bag is used as a heating pad, which should also be warmed over a "Chaffingdish of coales with vinegar in a platter," allowing the entire mixture to be evenly warm, and afterwards be applied to the body as a poultice. The fabric[19] of the bag absorbs and

retains the heat, and when pressed against the affected area, it releases medicinal vapours intended to soothe and heal. The bag can also be used several times. Therefore, using bags as poultices or compresses was a common therapeutic practice in Early Modern domestic medicine. These cases also reaffirm that storing herbs in bags was a common practice at that time.

The bags were used not only for medical purposes but also in culinary contexts, and could be made not only of fabric but also from animal stomachs, which served as natural containers for boiling mixtures. The use of insides as culinary casings or natural containers is described in another of Markham's recipes for a sweet pudding called "Puddings of a Calues Mugget."[20] He instructs shredding the calf's mugget (innards), mixing it with numerous ingredients, including herbs ("Endiue, Spinage, Succory"), spices ("Pepper, Cloues, Mace, Cynamon, Ginger, Sugar, Currants, Dates and Salt"), eggs, cream, and butter. The final pudding mixture is then instructed to be 'put it vp into the "Calues bagge, Sheepes bagge, or Hogs bagge," boiled well, and then served. This instruction contains references to bags made from animal intestines, specifically those of calves, sheep, and hogs, and used as natural containers to hold the pudding mixture during boiling, giving form and cohesion to otherwise shapeless ingredients. The result of this cooking was a sliceable pudding, as the enclosing membrane saved its structure. "Puddings of a Calues Mugget" demonstrates the use of an animal organ (the "bagge") as a functional cooking tool for everyday dishes.

The following example further illustrates that the animal "bags" employed in cooking were also known as jelly bags. Philiatros, in "A cooling drink" (Philiatros 1655, p. 65), calls filtration pouches jelly bags: "boil the formost together until it come unto a pottle, straine it through a jelly bag; being strained, season it with Sugar candy..."[21] The primary purpose of the jelly bag here is filtration. This type of bag resembles a Hippocratic sleeve, being a conical or funnel-shaped bag made of fine cloth, used in the kitchen for straining liquids to remove solid particles and create clear beverages, juices, broths, and many other liquids. In the above recipe for a refreshing drink, it is recommended that after boiling the whey with sorrel and borage, the substance be strained through a jelly bag. It was believed that this action would help remove small particles of herbs, pieces of leaves, stems, and flower residue.[22] This action could also contribute to the drink's more aesthetically pleasing appearance.

To sum up, medical and culinary realms mainly used bags to strain liquids or to give them certain qualities or flavours. In the medical field, bags were also used as premodern hot water bottles.

5.2. Gifting Culture

Having discussed recipes specifically for making sweet bags, as well as those that may have inspired their emergence and the practice of filling them, the next section discusses the development of their gift-related function, illustrated through examples from the court of Queen Elizabeth I. The practice of present exchange during that time is described in the lists of gifts to Queen Elizabeth I (1561–1679), where early mentions of sweet bags are found. For instance, *The progresses and public processions of Queen Elizabeth.: Among which are interspersed other solemnities, public expenditures, and remarkable events during the reign of that illustrious princess. Collected from original manuscripts, scarce pamphlets, corporation records, parochial registers, &c., &c. Illustrated, with historical notes* (vol. I–III) bears documented evidence of sweet bags across various years, hinting at their commonplace role in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Moreover, the historical chronicle sheds light on the gifting process in greater detail, as well as on the financial benefits that sweet bags could offer. Thus, the description of the gift exchange between Henry Hastings, the fifth

Earl of Huntingdon, and King James I on New Year's Day, 1604–1605 (Nichols 1823, p. xl),[23] exemplifies the nature of such historical practices, making it possible to recreate one of the gift-giving scenarios.

To begin with, gifting instructions dictated to buy a new purse costing about five shillings—"You must buy a new purse of about vs. price" (Nichols 1823, p. xl)—and place twenty new gold coins, each worth twenty shillings ("xxs. apiece"), inside it, meaning that the total monetary gift was EUR 20. Then, on New Year's Day, those wishing to pay homage to the ruler had to send a messenger to a particular location associated with the seat of royal power. The messenger would have to hand over a purse with the required amount of gold to the authorised person at 8 o'clock in the morning—"where the Court is, upon New-yere's day, in the morninge abut 8 a clocke" (Nichols 1823, p. xl)—after which messengers would have to get a ticket to receive a gift from the crown. In this particular case, the presenter had to travel to the Presence Chamber at court and "deliver the purse and the gold unto my Lord Chamberlin" (Nichols 1823, p. xl). For the work done, the messenger was also paid, in this case it was 18 shillings and a half-penny ("xviiis. \d.") as a "gift to your pains." Next, the messenger chose a piece of gilt plate weighing 30 ounces—"make choice of a peece of plate of xxx ounces waight, and marke it" (Nichols 1823, p. xl). Later in the afternoon, the marked piece of a plate could be collected. Thus, this passage vividly illustrates the highly formalised nature of gift-giving in the Jacobean court. The exchange of a monetary gift for gold is a symbolic act, rather than a purely financial one, despite its pronounced financial implications. The gold could symbolise a gift to the royal treasury, and the plate could stand for royal patronage or favour. The lines where the characteristics of pouches are described, from "purse" to "put therinto xx peeces of new gold of xxs apeice" (Nichols 1823, p. xl), suggest a bag suitable for holding 20 gold coins, implying its size, perhaps 3–4 inches square or 7.62–10.16 cm, which simultaneously indicates the possible size of the bag and its correspondence to the available material examples of sweet bags.

The first volume of *The Progressions and Public Processions of Queen Elizabeth* contains barely one mention of sweet bags (apart from the gift-giving rules), while the second volume provides more comprehensive information about these accessories through numerous gift lists. One such example illustrates the sweet bag's appearance among the utilitarian items. The list of gifts first details two ornate standishes, a velvet-covered desk, and a handmade carpet, after which the focus shifts to personal aromatic objects, specifically "a round mount of gold to contain a pomander in it" (Nichols 1823, p. xxxvi) and finally "a box with four swete bags" (Nichols 1823, p. xxxvi). The subsequent mention of "sugarloaf, a box of ginger, a box of nutmegs," (Nichols 1823, p. xxxvi) can also be seen as a further hint at the bags' filling. The textual references to gift-giving also confirm that presenting sweet bags in boxes was a common practice. The second volume also briefly mentions materials used for their sewing, "crymsen satten" in particular (vol. II, p. 71). In volume III, the following specifying details are provided: "white satten," with more elaborate variations, such as "a greate swete bag of tapphata, with a gg. s. d. zypher, and a border of roses and spheres embroidered with Venice gold and pearls" or "ymbrodered all over with Venis gold, silver, and silke of sundry cullors" (vol. III, p. 13). The probable high value of such gifts, together with their dedication to the Queen, implies their intimate and personal significance. Finally, the gifting practices underscore the prevalence of these scented items. For example, William Huggans gifted "sixteen smale swete bagges" in 1578–1579 and Mrs. Huggens gifted "24 small sweete baggs of sarsenett of sundry cullors" in 1588–1589 (vol. III, p. 18), indicating bags' widespread appeal and use as presents (or that it was a tradition of the Huggans family, as they were most likely married despite the two different spellings).

It is also worth noting that aromatic gifts were a symbol of wealth. Another example of valuable aromatic items are gloves (Willett and Cunnington 1972, pp. 76, 121). The importance of this piece of garment has been confirmed by Queen Elizabeth I's fondness for scented leather gloves. The production of the gloves was a complex international business, with Spain supplying the leather, France handling the cutting, and England taking care of the sewing. Since leather carried an unpleasant smell, it had to be treated with perfume. In fact, one of the glove-making centres in Paris eventually expanded its guild specification to include the manufacture of both gloves and perfumes. The gloves were infused with various scents, oils, and animal ingredients, including musk, ambergris, and civet. These aromatic substances could be applied externally or internally, mixed with grease to soften the hands (Dugan 2011, pp. 127–32). Perfumed gloves served many functions; namely, they protected against miasmas and street germs, masked personal odours, softened the skin, could even serve as a method of poisoning, and were exchanged as costly diplomatic gifts—sometimes with unique scents such as Acqua della Regina (Water of the Queen). Their use also marked social distinction, as wearing gloves was a signal of freedom from manual labour. For men, especially, gloves were almost obligatory to be considered gentlemen, and wealthy bourgeois families used them to display status (Annerfeldt 2025, p. 55).

This passion for fragrant objects was part of a wider culture of perfumery, fuelled by transatlantic and transpacific trade. The wealthy scented themselves to avoid the stigma of unpleasant body odours or dirty hair (Herbert 2014, p. 65). Gloves were not the only perfumed objects: textiles, shoes, rosary beads, earrings, necklaces, bracelets, buttons, belts, and fans could all be scented (Annerfeldt 2025, p. 55). These objects reflected both an appreciation of agreeable smells and a social hierarchy of scent. Perfumes and perfumed gifts were markers of high society, while labouring men and women remained associated with the smells of their trades (Herbert 2014, p. 66). Therefore, perfumes and perfumed gifts functioned not only as luxuries of daily life but also as markers of wealth, refinement, and belonging to high society.

5.3. The Social and Gendered Dimensions of Early Modern Sweet Bags

This section frames sweet bags—products of women's needlework—as versatile artefacts that shaped Early Modern households across five fronts: literacy, narrative voice, companionship, family prestige, and the circulation of knowledge through manuals. Along with numerous less celebrated examples, Princess Elizabeth's embroidered book covers for Katherine Parr (1544–1545) exemplify the fusion of textual knowledge and embroidery characteristic of women's material authorship. In this light, sweet bags functioned as tools of social memory and cultural cohesion, embodying women's agency, sentiment, and authorship in gifted forms.

Between 1580 and 1650, when metal pomanders still remained popular accessories worn on girdles, sweet bags began to emerge not only as versatile alternatives but also as original material novelties. As discussed above, references in published texts indicate that these items came into use during the late 1500s and early 1600s. The sweet bag's evolution drew on the forms of earlier pouches, reflecting its inherent versatility and the influence of both changing material culture and shifting personal needs. Evidence points to beaded bags, whose shape and cut resemble sweet bags and may have inspired them, often bearing mottos or expressions related to charity, friendship, or luck (as discussed in Hannah Robb's study). Likewise, primary sources document bags used for practical purposes, including cooking and medical preparation. Over time, these evolved into early examples resembling sweet bags, filled with scented powders or dried flowers and herbs. The aromatic composition allowed them to disguise body odour (Maxwell 2017, p. 13), refresh

clothes, and repel moths. Secondly, the practical design of these bags made them useful for carrying small personal items, such as mirrors, or for serving as portable sewing kits containing needles, thread, and tiny scissors, even though their original purpose was aromatic. Bags' versatility extended to gift-giving, serving as gift wrappers for small presents, such as books, perfume, jewellery, or money, which demonstrated their adaptability to different levels of financial status. As has been observed, sweet bags were gifted to a monarch on New Year's Eve. The status of these bags depended not only on their contents and shape but also on their materials. While some were made of stiffened paper or linen, the finest examples used silk, lined interiors, and silken drawstrings with tassels. Embroidery inspired by gardens, including birds, roses, grapes, and grape leaves, often appeared on their surfaces, sometimes embellished with tiny glass beads. These elaborate designs transformed a simple scent sachet into a miniature work of wearable art imbued with fragrance and social meaning. Such a multifaceted history situates the sweet bag across various social and cultural strata, from the court elite to those with practical, everyday needs, transforming a utilitarian scent sachet into a miniature work of wearable art that carried both fragrance and social meaning.

Even such a brief overview already shows the versatility of this accessory, but its multi-layered nature is not limited to this. Therefore, it is worth noting that bag making was a predominantly female activity that also underwent cultural and social changes during that time. This dynamic may stem from the fact that for some women, it was not just a craft or part of their daily routine, but it became a way of expressing themselves and gaining a voice. The communicative power of embroidery can be found in Shakespeare's play *Titus Andronicus* (1594), where the character Lavinia becomes a victim of violence and consequently loses her hands and tongue. Lavinia, rendered voiceless and mutilated, is compared to Philomela, who in myth embroidered her trauma when she could not speak it. Yet, Lavinia herself is unable to tell her story, whether through speech or thread.

The following lines convey this poignant contrast:

Fair Philomela, why she but lost her tongue,

And in a tedious sampler sewed her mind; (Shakespeare 2018, 2.4.38–39).

This excerpt features the phrase "sewed her mind", which means expressing her thoughts or story through needlework, specifically through a sampler (derived from the Latin word meaning "example"), a piece of any kind of embroidery often used by women to record and reference different designs, stitches, and patterns (making it a personal reference work for craft), but also to demonstrate or prove skills and, symbolically, to encode meaning, narrative, or emotion through various figures, motifs, and inscriptions (Carey 2008 2012; Frye 2010; Victoria and Albert Museum, accessed 5 November 2025). Lavinia's situation confirms the idea that textiles and needlework functioned as a narrative medium, giving women an opportunity to express themselves.

The fact that needlework was considered a way of self-expression is also further supported by its use as a path to abecedarian literacy. Embroidery patterns often included "alphabets, proverbs, and short verses, samples," which aided in learning to read and write (Frye 2010, p. 131). Women were able to develop textual and visual literacy through this practice because the patterns reproduced were not merely copied, but had changes and variations on both the verbal and pictorial levels, entailing active engagement with spelling and form. The educational component is also evident in the fact that men sometimes read to women while they worked on embroidery and needlework. For example, Clifford's diary includes a mention of situations like that: "I wrought stitch work and my Lord sat and read by me" (Pembroke and Clifford 1990, p. 40). This combination of embroidery sessions with reading practices elevated the erudition of female makers and gentlewomen.

The mastery of handiwork and embroidery, apart from becoming a tool for women to express themselves and develop literacy skills, also helped enhance the household's status. In an era of scarcity and high cost of manufactured and household goods, women skilled in crafts, especially those who could transform humble linen and a few silk threads into precious, aesthetically pleasing items or, in other words, make something out of nothing, were exceptionally valued. Middling-class households relied on women's needlework skills for producing domestic essentials (e.g., children's clothes, sheets, cushions, smocks, underclothing) and coveted luxuries (e.g., embroidered gloves, book covers, wall hangings). The desire to own such objects shows the importance of textiles in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in demonstrating the family's wealth and status (Frye 2010, pp. 127–29). As a result, handicraft skills not only enabled upward mobility but also significantly enhanced the family's public image.

Another benefit of embroidery practices was the cultivation of female bonds and their role in women's socialisation. The collective component is mentioned by Susan Frye, who studied the writings and diaries of Margaret Hoby, Elizabeth Isham, and Anne Clifford. One such moment of shared needlework is described in the lines below:

> Upon the 12th I made an end of my cushion of Irish stitch which my Coz. C. Neville began when she went with me to the Bath, it being my chief help to pass away the time at work. (Pembroke and Clifford 1990, p. 41)

The quoted passage shows that Clifford's cousin, Cecily Neville, was the one to start work on a cushion. This subtle detail hints at the collaborative nature of embroidery projects among women (Pembroke and Clifford 1990, pp. 40–41). Furthermore, Clifford mentions that having people around "help[s] to pass away the time at work," indicating that the shared process of stitching offered comfort, distraction, and a sense of purpose. Accordingly, it is possible to suggest that collective handicraft extended beyond mere decorative or practical functions, serving as a way to strengthen social bonds.

Craftwork's role in reinforcing the connections between women is also briefly mentioned at the beginning of this article, referring to Hannah Robb, who writes that women, having little privacy and limited property rights, found compensation in the process of "communal needlework" and in the personalization of such small things that they created with their own hands (Robb 2015, p. 394). In addition, sewing became a social event where skills, techniques, and ideas were exchanged. Work on creative projects became a "communal rite," forging networks of intellectual and practical exchange that allowed women to share knowledge and techniques within domestic settings (Robb 2015, p. 394).

Another connection between women and their involvement in home economics is the realities of Early Modern English culture, where the kitchen and culinary arts were considered women's domain, and it was common for them to provide basic health care for themselves and their families or, in the case of a noble household, to the estate's employees and tenants. Due to this caregiving role, women often shared, copied, and exchanged culinary and medical recipes, thereby forming new social ties (Leong 2018, pp. 6–11). Consequently, a ready female readership soon contributed to the appearance of household manuals explicitly addressing goodwives, which is evidenced in such works as Thomas Dawson's *Good Huswifes Jewell* (1585) and Gervase Markham's *The English Huswife* (1615, 1623), among others. Recipe books enabled women to access and preserve forms of knowledge that had previously been transmitted orally, such as skills in needlework (Leong and Rankin 2016, p. 43). As women exchanged different medical formulas and ideas about handicrafts, the sweet bags and pouches themselves became markers of female expertise in household health. By the later sixteenth century, scholars noted that such "cosmeceuticals" (perfumes, face washes, hair tonics) were increasingly coded as

feminine accomplishments, distinct from the male-dominated sphere of learned physique (Leong and Rankin 2016).

An outstanding illustration of the link between education, literacy, and needlework is the figure of Elizabeth I and her talent for crafts. At the age of eleven, Princess Elizabeth gifted her English prose translation of the French poem *Miroir de l'âme pécheresse* (1531) by Marguerite de Navarre to her stepmother, Katherine Parr, in celebration of the New Year in 1544–1545. The translated work, *The Miroir or Glasse of the Synnefull Soul* (1544), was presented in a book measuring approximately seven by five inches (180 by 125 mm). The book's cover was sewn by Princess Elizabeth herself and decorated using the strapwork technique, where silver and gold threads were intertwined on a blue silk background. Elizabeth also embroidered the letters "KP" in the centre, emphasising the special dedication of the gift, and added pansies in each corner.

Princess Elizabeth also embroidered a second book cover for *Prayers of Queen Katherine Parr* (1545), a work of the queen's original English prayers and meditations that Princess Elizabeth herself translated into French, Latin, and Italian. Despite being a gift to the queen in December 1545, the book was dedicated to Elizabeth's father, Henry VIII. Its cover is smaller than the first, measuring 5¾ by 4 inches (145 by 100 mm), yet it is also framed in canvas. The embroidery method was similar to the previous one, namely interlacing strapwork with a monogram made with blue silk and silver thread, containing the letters "K," "A," "F," "H," and "R." The "K" stands for Catherine, and the other letters are probably Latin initials of the rulers (actual or claimed) of England, France, and Ireland. As in the first book, the corners are decorated with pansy flowers.

All things considered, women's needlework shaped the Early Modern household on five fronts, including fostering literacy, providing women with a narrative voice and companionship, enhancing family status, and promoting household manuals creation. Behind all of these aspects stands the figure of women who, through handicrafts, shaped their agency and authorship. As a result, the materiality of these fabric objects, realised in their making, gifting, and handling and connected to their embodied sentimental values, transformed small purses into vessels of social memory and cultural cohesion.

5.4. Vocabulary Definitions

The consideration of the sensory and material characteristics of sweet bags logically proceeds to an examination of their lexical origins. This section examines the vocabulary and earliest lexical records associated with sweet bags to trace how the term entered and circulated in Early Modern English usage. By analysing dictionary entries and printed sources, it demonstrates how the object was linguistically defined and categorised among perfumed goods, revealing its integration into both domestic and commercial spheres of material culture.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the first recorded use of the compound noun "sweet bag" dates to 1615, with no prior lexical entries for such objects.[24] The next reference appears in the mid-seventeenth century, when sweet bags were mentioned in passing in *Generall Accommodations by Addresse* (1650), a treatise by Mr. Adolphus Speed, who in April 1650 set up an early form of an accommodation agency called The Office of General Accommodations by Addresse, located on King Street. The Office was created "for the good of the publick" with a comprehensive purpose of a centralised clearinghouse or brokerage service for a wide array of human needs and economic activities in 17th-century England and Ireland (Speed 1650, pp. 1–7). In other words, this institution aimed to facilitate the exchange of practical knowledge, where Londoners could advertise their skills and inventions, as well as ask for help with specific issues, thereby coordinating access to knowledge and serving as a public-access network for economic and social

growth. Accordingly, the Office's promotional treatise included a wide range of rubrics, such as financial dealings (loans, investments), real estate (buying/selling land and houses, rentals), employment (chaplains, tutors, servants, apprentices), legal aid, debt recovery, business opportunities, lost and found, personal care (cosmetics, perfumes), and large-scale industrial processes (mining, saltpetre production). Within this scope of "accommodations", sweet bags are mentioned as one of several perfumed or fragrant items. The passage where they are listed is dedicated to remedies, cosmetic treatments, culinary delights, and luxury items, as well as to perfumed goods, namely "rich sanative perfumes", "sweet-waters," "sweet washing-balls," and "sweet-powders" (Speed 1650, p. 9). This inclusion implies that these small material objects were recognised for their fragrance or cleanliness. It could also mean that accessories like that were already recognised and established, not necessarily one of the latest discoveries that required immense effort to acquire or develop.

The next relevant mention is present in the 1699 edition of *The Royal Dictionary in Two Parts. First, French and English. Second, English and French,* where linguistic evidence for this object is found. The term "sweet bag" is found in the first volume of the dictionary with French-to-English translations, with the entry reading "Couffinet de fenteur, a sweet Bag" (Boyer 1699, p. 179). Interestingly, this word is absent in the English-to-French translation.

Despite the rarity of the phrase uses, it is still possible to establish that "sweet bag" first appeared in the Oxford English Dictionary in 1615, with a later reference in Adolphus Speed's 1650 treatise *Generall Accommodations by Addresse*, where it is listed among perfumed goods like powders and washing-balls, positioning it among goods for personal care and luxury objects. The next mention dates back to 1699, when the term was included in Boyer's *Royal Dictionary* as a translation of the French "Couffinet de fenteur," though it appeared only in the French-to-English section, probably suggesting it was known but not widely translated or standardised across languages.

6. Recipes vs. Objects

The previous sections of the analysis looked at recipes and their components. The next step will be to analyse whether there are any matches between the ingredients listed in the recipe descriptions and the images on the bags.

To explore possible overlaps between the recipes and the embroidered vegetation on sweet bags, pieces from the Victoria and Albert Museum's online collection were examined. Working with the online catalogue and its descriptions revealed recurring floral motifs, particularly the rose, which not only appears frequently among the listed ingredients but also dominates the decorative patterns of most surviving bags. The first image at the beginning of this article shows a bag decorated with floral representations resembling a rose in shades of red, cream, and pink, as well as plants similar to irises, or possibly violets. Among these, carnations can also be identified, though they are rarely mentioned in recipes. For clarity, an example of a carnation is shown in Figure 2 in its embroidered form and in Figure 3 as it appears in real life. On the other hand, the blue and rust-red variants may symbolically echo common Early Modern motifs such as the Tudor rose.



Figure 2. *Sweet bag with fruit and floral embroidery,* ca. *1600–1625. The embroidery features a densely patterned arrangement of stylised botanicals, dominated by small rosette-like flowers that resemble roses or pinks or carnations. The reddish-golden bloom recalls the damask or wild rose. The blue blossom may evoke the forget-me-not or borage forget-me-not or borage.* Unknown maker. Silk and metal thread on canvas, 17 × 18 cm. Victoria and Albert Museum, London, Museum no. T.42-1935. Source: Victoria and Albert Museum, https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O158605/bag-unknown/ (accessed on 5 August 2025).

Figure 3 depicts a carnation, a versatile floral type, whose densely layered, overlapping petals could inspire a range of embroidery motifs. Additionally, the relative simplicity of its form made it particularly adaptable for embroidered representation.



Figure 3. *Dianthus caryophyllus* (carnation), showing its characteristic ruffled petals with fringed magenta margins and a soft white centre. This species is widely cultivated for its fragrance and ornamental value. *Source*: North Carolina Extension Gardener Plant Toolbox, North Carolina State University, https://plants.ces.ncsu.edu/plants/dianthus-caryophyllus (accessed on 21 November 2025).

The next recognisable element is the iris, as depicted in Figure 4, positioned in the upper right corner, whose elongated leaves and veined petals also appear on some surviving bags.

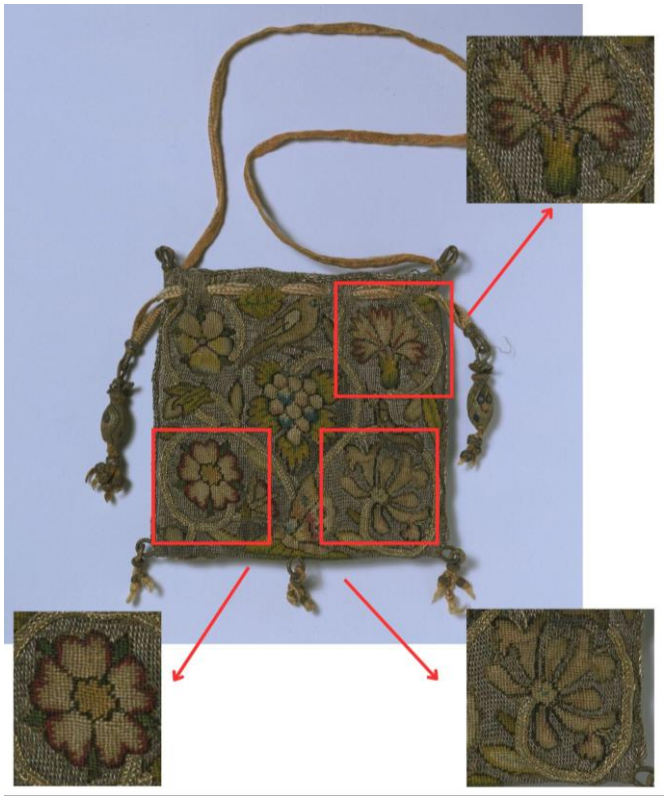


Figure 4. *Sweet bag embroidered with stylised floral and fruit motifs, including, irises, roses, grapes, and pomegranates, worked in silk and metal threads on canvas. The design features symmetrical plant forms framed by metallic cord and finished with tasselled drawstrings*. England, ca. 1600–1625. Unknown maker. Victoria and Albert Museum, London, Museum no. T.114 to B-1934. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London. *Source:* Victoria and Albert Museum, https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O15342/bag-unknown/ (accessed on 5 August 2025).

In the embroidery of the bag shown in Figure 4, and less distinctly in Figure 2, alongside irises and roses, it is possible to identify a betony plant in the bottom right corner, distinguished by its spiked, clustered flower form, which might be reflected in the upright flowering spikes embroidered on some bags. For comparison, below in Figure 5, two species of betony (*Stachys officinalis* and *Betonica grandiflora*) are shown alongside with the aforementioned iris (*Iris sibirica*) from Figure 4. Looking at these flowers, one can imagine how their spiked, clustered forms might have inspired the upright flowering motifs embroidered on some bags.



Figure 5. Two species of betony (*Stachys officinalis*, **left**, and *Betonica grandiflora*, **centre**) and *Iris sibirica* (**right**). *Sources*: North Carolina Extension Gardener Plant Toolbox, Betonica officinalis (Common Betony), North Carolina State University, 2025, https://plants.ces.ncsu.edu/plants/betonica-officinalis/ (accessed on 21 November 2025); North Carolina Extension Gardener Plant Toolbox, Iris (Bearded Iris, Crested Iris, Dwarf Iris, Iris, Louisiana Iris, Siberian Iris), North Carolina State University, 2025, https://plants.ces.ncsu.edu/plants/iris/ (accessed on 21 November 2025).

Furthermore, other flowers, such as violets, make a more prominent appearance in the next two examples. Figures 6 and 7 probably have heart-shaped leaves and blossoms in shades of purple and blue.



Figure 6. *Sweet bag embroidered with stylised floral motifs, including roses, violets, or carnations, and cornflowers, arranged in symmetrical sprays with scrolling stems and gilt-thread accents. Worked in coloured silks on a linen canvas ground. England,* ca. *1600–1625*. Unknown maker. Victoria and Albert Museum, London, Museum no. T.349-1920. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London. *Source*: Victoria and Albert Museum, https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O75024/bag-unknown/ (accessed on 5 August 2025).

The flowers in Figures 6 and 7 bear a distant resemblance to violets due to the distinctly pointed form of their petals, although this plant is not mentioned in the recipes. The inclusion of such a form, or one recalling it, may be explained by the flower's relative simplicity. As with the carnation (Figure 2 and Figure 3), the radial arrangement of petals made it suited for embroidered representation. The resemblance of many embroidered

plants to violets may also be explained by the flower's popularity in cultivation. Violets and related species were widely grown in borders, cottage gardens, and naturalistic plantings due to their resilience and long flowering season from late spring through autumn. The embroidered version of the violets in Figure 7 can be compared with their real-life appearance, shown in Figure 8.



Figure 7. *Sweet bag embroidered with gold and silver threads forming stylised floral motifs, including carnations, roses, and daisy-like blossoms arranged in balanced sprays. Worked in coloured silks and metal threads on a linen canvas ground, finished with tasselled drawstrings. England,* ca. *1600–1625*. Unknown maker. Victoria and Albert Museum, London, Museum no. T.118 to B-1934. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London. *Source*: Victoria and Albert Museum, https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O158661/bag-unknown/ (accessed on 5 August 2025).



Figure 8. *Browallia speciosa* (amethyst flower) shown in its natural form. The star-shaped, violet–blue corolla, and slightly pointed petals may have inspired similarly shaped motifs in Early Modern embroidery. *Source*: North Carolina Extension Gardener Plant Toolbox, North Carolina State University, https://plants.ces.ncsu.edu/plants/browallia-speciosa/ (accessed on 8 November 2025).

The next recurring plant is marjoram in Figure 9. Often rendered as small, clustered florets or sprigs, though not individually identifiable, these recur as part of the filler foliage.



Figure 9. *Sweet bag embroidered with floral motifs in coloured silks and metal threads, featuring stylised roses, carnations, and foliage, and finished with elaborate metal tassels. Worked on a linen canvas ground. England,* ca. *1600–1625*. Unknown maker. Victoria and Albert Museum, London, Museum no. T.83 to B-1938. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London. *Source*: Victoria and Albert Museum, https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O158626/bag-unknown/ (accessed on 5 August 2025).

Having considered the embroidered motifs on the bag shown in Figure 9, a comparison with the actual plant proves instructive, as Figure 10 shows how marjoram (*Origanum majorana*) appears in nature. *Origanum majorana* exhibits a compact growth pattern and paired leaves.



Figure 10. *Origanum majorana* (sweet marjoram). *Source*: North Carolina Extension Gardener Plant Toolbox, North Carolina State University, https://plants.ces.ncsu.edu/plants/origanum-majorana/ (accessed on 8 November 2025).

In the recipe mentioned above, "Powders for the Hair, Linen and Sweet Bags" (N. H. 1694), which not only perfumes the body and garments but is also said to charm men, florentine iris, iris roots, and marjoram are mentioned together. Marjoram is also present

in recipes from *Polygraphice, or the Arts of Drawing, Engraving, Etching, Limning, Painting, Washing, Varnishing, Gilding, Colouring, Dying, Beautifying and Perfuming*, which include instructions to "put them into bags to lay amongst linen," and in another recipe for sweet bags that describes mixtures capable of retaining their aroma for up to twenty years.

It is important to note that small circular seed-like motifs resembling coriander, nigella, and various other seeds are less explicitly illustrated in floral form but still noticeable. These details appear in decorative backgrounds or among vines, possibly referencing spice seeds abstractly.

Thus, only a few clear correspondences are immediately noticeable. A potentially more effective approach might be to first examine how plants such as coriander, camomile, sage, or saffron were typically represented in embroidery on other objects. These comparative examples could then serve as reference points for analysing their possible appearance on sweet bags. However, even this method does not guarantee a reliable identification of specific plants. It is also possible that the craftswomen were not always familiar with the actual appearance of the herbs and instead embroidered stylised or imagined botanical forms for decorative purposes.

7. Conclusions

After the analysis presented in this article, it is possible to define sweet bags as multisensory objects deeply embedded in Early Modern domestic, medical, and cultural practices. After studying cookbooks, household manuals, and medical reference books, the probable composition of the aromatic mixtures contained in the sweet bag is identified, and their therapeutic, aesthetic, and symbolic functions are discussed. Positioned at the intersection of textile art, humoral theory, and scent culture, sweet bags emerge not only as embroidered accessories but as carriers of olfactory heritage. Applying the framework of the olfactory gaze enabled a reclassification of these items—from decorative curiosities to embodied artefacts of gendered knowledge and sensory agency. The study draws attention to the role of smell in shaping life experiences during the Early Modern era. It proposes the olfactory heritage concept as a framework for further studying historical objects through their ephemeral yet significant olfactory traces.

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Notes

1. The scopic regime is a theoretical framework for understanding how visuality is constructed, encompassing the interaction of images, the viewer's gaze, and the technological or institutional structures that make vision possible and meaningful. The conceptual basis comes from film theory (Christian Metz) and visual culture studies (Martin Jay), who use it to analyse how vision is constructed and regulated. See (Cometa 2024).
2. See also (Morenets 2025). The diversity in the study of smellscape concepts is illustrated in Olena Morenets, "Reconsidering the Origins of Smellscapes: Insights from Late Medieval and Early Modern Travel Narratives (Mandeville, Moryson, and Hakluyt)," *European Journal of Geography* 16, no. 1 (2025): s111–s113, https://doi.org/10.48088/ejg.si.spat.hum.o.mor.101.113. The article summarises Gade's approach as empirical and historical, showing how smellscapes fluctuate over time in response to vegetation, crops and harvest cycles, land use, industrial activity, climate, season, rainfall, humidity, and evaporation. Porteous, by contrast, defines smellscape as the olfactory analogue of landscape and emphasises its psychological, emotional, and motivational dimensions. Taken together, their models frame smellscapes as dynamic olfactory palimpsests, a notion

introduced in that article that can be applied to late Middle English and early modern texts to read descriptions of fields, cities, and seas as layered, evolving sensory environments rather than static backdrops

3. "To make sweet bags.
Take of Arras foure ounces, of Gallaminis one ounce, of Ciris halfe an ounce, of Rose leaues dried two handfuls, of dryed Marierum one handfull, of Spike one handfull, Cloues one ounce, of Beniamin and Storax of each two ounces, of white Saunders and yellow of each one ounce: beate all these into a grosse pouder, then put to it Muske a dramme, of Ciuet halfe a dramme, and of Ambergreece halfe a dramme; then put them into a Taffata bagge and vse it." (Markham 1623, p. 140).

4. ℞ "the flowers of Staechas, of Rosemary, Sage, Betony, Maioram, Origan, dried Worme-wood, ana M ss, of Nutmegs, Mace, ʒ 1. Let them bee beaten together and sewed into a red cloth, whereof make a bagge in the forme of a cap. Let the patient weare it for the space of 2 or 3 moneths, which must sometime be sprinkled with distilled Wine." (Bruele 1632, p. 11).

5. "The following recipe was suggested for headaches:
℞ the flowers of Staechas, of Rosemary, Sage, Betony, Maioram, Origan, dried Worme-wood, ana M ss, of Nutmegs, Mace, ʒ 1. Let them bee beaten together and sewed into a red cloth, whereof make a bagge in the forme of a cap. Let the patient weare it for the space of 2 or 3 moneths, which must sometime be sprinkled with distilled Wine." (Bruele 1632, p. 11).

6. "IV. A sweet Powder to lay among cloaths.
Take Damask-rose leaves dryed one pound, Musk half a drachm, Violet leaves three ounces, mix them and put them in a bag." (Salmon et al. 1675, p. 318).

7. "V. Another for the same or to wear about one.
Take Rose leaves dryed one pound, Cloves in powder half an ounce, Spicknard two drachms, Storax, Cinnamon of each three drachms, Musk half a drachm, mix them and put them into bags for use." (Salmon et al. 1675, pp. 318–19).

8. "VII. Powder of Florentine Orrice, the Second Way.
Take of Orrice root six ounces, Rose leaves in powder four ounces, Majoram, Cloves, Storax in powder of each one ounce, Benjamin, yellow Sanders of each half an ounce, Violets four ounces, Musk one drachm, Cyperus half a drachm, mix them: being grosly powdred, put them into bags to lay amongst linnen: but being fine they will serve for other uses, as we shall shew." (Salmon et al. 1675, p. 319).

9. "VIII. Powder of Orrice roots, the third way, excellent for linnen, in bags.
Take roots of Iris one pound, sweet Majoram twelve ounces, flowers of Rosemary and Roman Camomil, leaves of Time, Geranium Moschatum, Savory of each four ounces, Cyperus roots, Benjamin, yellow Sanders, Lignum Rhodium, Citron peel, Storax, Labdanum, Cloves, Cinnamon of each one ounce, Musk two drachms, Civet one drachm and a half, Ambergriese one drachm, powder and mix them for bags. This composition will retain its strength near twenty years." (Salmon et al. 1675, p. 319).

10. "Powders for the Hair, Linen and Sweet Bags.—Powders of this Kind are made several ways; and are of Great Efficacy for Ladyes. After you have made use of many things, if nevertheless you meet with any that defies your Charms, and is obstinate, do you not despair; for we will teach you how you shall tickle his Nose with a Powder, and cartously fetch him about with is, which will give you so rich a Scent, that the Roses and Violets in your Cheeks shall not make you hath so sweet.—Powder of a curious Scent, is made of Florentine Iris [illegible], timely powder'd one pound, Benjamin four ounces, Cloves the like quantity, Starax two ounces; powder them all very line, use them, and well mix them together. This you may [illegible] to sent your Hair Powder we had, adding about 3 ounces of it, to a pound of Starch or Rice Grounds, well find and [illegible]. Again, take Iris Roots fix ounces, Red Rose leaves powdered four ounces, Cyprus half a drachm, Marjorum, Storax and Cloves of each an ounce; Yellow Saunders and Benjamine of each half an ounce, Violets 3 drachms, Musk a dicham; powder these, isior Sweet Bags, or to lay among Linen, very grosly; him if let the hair, very fine.— Powder to give the Hands, or any part of the body an Excellent, odour, make in this manner. Take the pressings of sweet and bitter Almonds after the oyle is drawn off, of either sort four Ounces, the flower of French Barly, and Luptu, of each two Ounces, the Roots of Ins an Ounce, white Roses, dryed Benjamine, fix drachms, Salt of white Tartar, white Chalk, powdered sperma [illegible] of each half an Ounce, Oyle of [illegible], one Scrupie, of cloves, and I avender, each half of Scrapie mix, and make them into a pouder, well dryed, and if you would have your hands seemed, and of a curious white, or any other part of the body, rub on this pouder and it will effect your desire, you may with Rose water, make it into a Past let your face, and it will beautify it." (N. H. 1694).

11. "Take Ambergriese four drachms, Storax Calamita, eight ounces, Rose-water, Oleum Rosatum of each two pound, Oil of Cinnamon and Cloves of each half a drachm, put all into a glass, and digest in horse dung twenty days [...] Where note the Amber and Storax at bottom will serve to make sweet balls of, to lay among cloaths; or beads to carry in ones hands; or for a perfume to burn." (N. H. 1694).

12. "A Bag for purging Ale.
Take of Egrimony, Speedwell, Liverwort, Scurvy-grasse, Watercresses, each a good handfull, of Monke, Rhabarb, and red Madder, each halfe an handfull, of Horse Rhadish roots ʒ iij. Licoras ʒ ij. Sassafrace ʒ iiij. Sena ʒ vij. sweet Fen-nell-seeds two drams, four Nutmegs, pick and wash your Hearbs and roots, bruise them all in a morter, and put them all into a bag made of Bolter." (Turner 1654, p. 79).
13. Oxford English Dictionary Online (2023a), s.v. "bolter | boulter (n.1), Etymology," last modified September 2023, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1063556087.
14. "It is possible to trace certain similarities between different variants of spelling the word "bolter," standing for an object used for sieving (an instrument or coarse fabric for separating finer from coarser particles, such as bran from flour). In other recipes, the similarly spelled word "bolster" appears. This variant may have also encompassed a synonymous meaning of a filtering cloth or a bag used for infusions, suggesting different spellings of the same concept in older usage. This interpretation is further supported by the etymological meaning of *bolster* in Old English as "cushion, something stuffed so that it swells up," especially "a long, stuffed pillow" (Etymonline, s.v. "bolster")." Thus, in the recipe *A Dyet drink for many imperfection*s, a "bolster bagg" is mentioned. The imperfection treatment requires herbs such as "Sassefrage wood, Chena roots, Gallingall roots, Turmentile roots, Angellica roots…Harts Horn or Ivory, Bittony, Scabious, Egremony, Marsh-mallows, and Colts-foot" to be first dried in a separate bag in an oven. Then, these dried ingredients are mixed with spices like cinnamon and mace and "tied" in "fast upon a Bolster bagg with a stone in it, make it sinck below the yeast, being put into two gallons of Ale." The stone acts as a weight, ensuring the bolster bag remains submerged beneath the active yeast during the ale's fermentation, allowing proper infusion (Philiatros 1655, pp. 295–96). Probably, a "bolster bagg" was indeed understood to be a bag made of a "bolter" (sieving/filtering) type of fabric, shaped like a "bolster."
15. There are many similar recipes. For instance, there is *A purging dyet Ale for the Dropsie, Scurvy, and to open the Liver and Spleen*, where the bag is used to contain all the solid ingredients (roots, herbs, seeds, spices, etc.) and to infuse into the four gallons of new ale. The "two adds of steele" might be to add iron to the mixture or simply as weights to keep the bag submerged." (Turner 1654).
16. "An excellent sirrup against melancholly.
Take four quarts of the juyce of Pearmains, and twice as much of the juyce of Bu-glosse, and Borrage, if they be to begotten, a drachm of the best English Saffron, bruise it, and put it into the juyce, then take two drachms of Kermes small beaten to powder, mix it also with the juyce, so being mixt, put them into an earthen vessell, covered or stopt forty eight houres, then strain it, and allow a pound of Sugar to every quart of juyce, and so boyle it to the ordinary height of a sirrup; after it is boyled, take one drachm of the Species of Diamber, and two drachms of teh Species of Diamargariton frigidum, and so few the same slenderly in a linnen bag, that you may put the same easily into the bottle of Sirrup, and so let it hang with a thread out at the mouth of the bottle; the Species must be put into the Sirrup in the bag, so soon as the Sirrup is off the fire, whilst it is hot, then afterwards put it into the bot | tle, and there let it hang: put but a spoon | full or two of Honey amongst it whilst." (Kent 1659, p. 8).
17. Oxford English Dictionary Online (2023b), s.v. "diamber (n.)," last modified July 2023, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/9559130067.
18. "For the Rhum. To stay the flux of the Rhume, take Sage and dry it before the fire, and rub it to powder: Then take bay salt and dry it and beare it to powder, and take a Nutmeg and grate it, and mixe them all together, and put them in a long linnen bag, then heate it vpon a tile stone, and lay it to the nape of the necke." (Markham 1623, p. 14).
19. It is also worth mentioning the importance of fabric in Early Modern England, particularly in the context of disease prevention. In the wake of repeated plague epidemics, wool or linen clothing was thought to retain illness, requiring cleansing by fire or water. Fabrics were believed to absorb the body's fumes, and the sale of garments or bed linen from the sick was associated with near-certain death. Herbs and pleasant scents were therefore applied not only to fabrics but also to the body to counteract infection. So, it is not surprising that heating bags with herbs has become popular. For a detailed discussion of the connections between textiles, hygiene, and disease, see (North 2020).
20. "Puddings of a Calues Mugget. Take a Calues Mugget, cleane and sweete drest, and boyle it well; then shred it as small as is possible, then take of Strawberry leaues, of Endiue, Spinage, Succory, and Sanell of each a pretty quantity, and chop them as small as is possible, and then mixe them with the Mugget; then take the Yolkes of halfe a dozen Egges, and three Whites, and beate them into also; and if you find it is too stiffe, then make it thiner with a little Creame warmed on the fire, then put in a little Pepper, Cloues, Mace, Cynamon, Ginger, Sugar, Currants, Dates and Salt, and worke all together, with casting in little peyres of sweet Butter one after another, till it haue receiued good store of Butter, then put it vp into the Calues bagge, Sheepes bagge, or Hogs bagge, and then boyle it well, and so serue it vp." (Markham 1623, p. 76).
21. "A cooling drink.

Take a Gallon of whey, and boil it until it cometh unto a pottle, with a handful of Sorrel, Borage blossomes or Borage leaves a handful, boil the formost together until it come unto a pottle, straine it through a jelly bag; being strained, season it with Sugar candy, and juice of Lemmons until it be to your liking." (Philiatros 1655, p. 65).

22. The use of various types of bags for filtering substances is extensively mentioned, for instance, in the recipe "*To make spoca.* Take a gallon of Claret or White-wine, and put therein foure ounces of Ginger, an ounce and a halfe of Nutmegs, of Cloues one quarter, of Sugar foure pound; [...] then take it, and put it into a cleane bagge made for the purpose, so that the wine may come with good leasure from the spices." This bag is used after the infusion/steeping process is complete. Its purpose is to separate the solid particulate matter (the spent spices) from the already flavoured liquid. This bag is used as a final step before consumption, to refine the product. The liquid has already absorbed the desired flavours and properties from the solids.

23. This process is described in detail in the following quote: "On New-year's day, 1604–1605, Henry the fifth Earl of Huntingdon presented to King James £20 in gold; and received in return 18 ounces of gilt plate; and the ceremony on this occasion is thus recorded in his own words: 'The manner of presentinge a New-yere's guifte to his Matie from the Earle of Huntingdon. You must buy a new purse of about vs. price, and put therinto xx peeces of new gold of xxs. apeice, and go to the Presence-Chambeer, where the Court is, upon New-yere's day, in the morninge abut 8 a clocke, and deliver the purse and the gold unto my Lord Chamberlin, then you must go downe to the Jewell House for a ticket to receive xviiis. \d. as a gift to your paines, and give \ul. there to the box for your ticket; then go to Sr Wm Veall's office, and shew your ticket, and receive your xviiis. \id. Then go to the Jewell Howse again, and make choice of a peece of plate of xxx ounces waight, and marke it, and then in the afternoone you may go and fetch it away, and then give the gentleman that delivers it \ou xls. in gold, and give to the box iis. and to the porter vid." (Nichols 1823, p. xl).

24. Oxford English Dictionary Online (2025), s.v. "sweet bag," accessed 19 July 2025, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/sweet-bag_n?tl=true.

However, it should be added that the *Dictionary of Old English* lists seventeen bag-related lemmas, though not all of them are relevant for understanding the origins of sweet bags. Nonetheless, few old English words and their interpretations resemble what would later be known as the jelly bag or sweet bag. One such example is the lemma *fǣtels* (or *fǣtel*), among whose definitions is "vessel or container, mainly for fluids" (*Dictionary of Old English*, s.v. "*fǣtels*," accessed 29 July 2025). The dictionary provides an example of this word used in a medical context:

to eahsealfe, nim aluwan & sidewaran ... læt standan nygon niht,
wende man ælce dæge, mylte siþþan on ðæm arfæte sylfan,
aseoh þurh clað, do syþþan on swylc fætels swylce ðu wille.
(*DOE*, s.v. "*fǣtels*")

This passage suggests that to prepare an eye ointment, one should take aloe and zedoary, leave the mixture to rest for nine nights, stir it daily, then strain it through a clean cloth in the same vessel, and afterwards store it in any jar or bowl. These lines are of interest as they represent, first of all, a medical prescription; secondly, they involve the process of straining a substance through cloth; and thirdly, the word *fǣtels* may have referred to containers used for herbal substances. This example does not describe a sweet bag, but it mentions a certain item to store herbal ointment or liquid. The conceptual connections between the word *fǣtels* and smell bags can be traced through the use of cloth bags for straining herbal infusions and storing herbal mixtures to treat skin diseases, indicating that such bags were in contact with the body similarly to sweet bags used to improve or mask body odours or support emotional well-being. Thus, this utilitarian straining bag provides an ancestral conceptual and material model for the seventeenth-century sweet bag. Another conceptual predecessor to the sweet bag is the Old English word *codd*, which can mean "bag," "satchel," or even "bag of tricks" (*DOE*, s.v. "codd"). Etymologically, *codd* referred to the botanical world and denoted "pod," "shell," "husk," or "skin," meaning a protective layer of seeds, beans, or similar plants, as, for example, the skin of fruit, as in the "codd" of grapes. This botanical association is evident in several historical usages, including *sæd on grenum coddum* ("seeds in green pods") and the Latin gloss *folliculus codd* ("little pouch"), both of which reinforce the connection to natural, organic containers. Beyond the literal pod, *codd* also acquired a figurative meaning as "bag of tricks" that possibly alludes to deception or cleverness. Although the word itself does not explicitly reference sweet bags, it suggests a long-standing conceptual link between protective containers and storage of natural materials. A notable subtype of *codd* is *leþer-codd*, which specifically denotes a leather bag, reinforcing the term's association with enclosing or protective vessels (*DOE*, s.v. "leþer-codd"). A further smell bag prototype is *hyrde-belg*, meaning "shepherd's pouch or bag or scrip", standing for a small bag carried by shepherds and used for small items (*DOE*, s.v. "hyrde-belg"). Although there is no direct textual evidence connecting this type of bags to herbs, fragrances, or aromatic substances, its intimate, body-adjacent, and personal nature renders it plausible linguistic or cultural ancestor to the later practice of carrying herbs or scented substances in similar small bags kept within

immediate reach. One additional example of a small handbag is *gehopp*, which can denote a pouch or, in certain contexts, a seed box (*DOE*, s.v. "gehopp"). All other words among the seventeen listed are more homogeneous in meaning, suggesting variants for speaking about wallets and money pouches. For instance, waist pouches were already known in the Middle Ages, as evidenced by terms such as *big-gyrdel*, *bisacc*, *bisæcc*, *herþ-belg*, and *herþ-bylg* (*DOE*, s.v. "big-gyrdel"; *DOE*, s.v. "bisacc"; *DOE*, s.v. "bisæcc"; *DOE*, s.v. "herþ-belg"; *DOE*, s.v. "herþ-bylg").

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