In miasma theory, diseases were caused by the presence in the air of a miasma, a poisonous vapour in which were suspended particles of decaying matter that was characterised by its foul smell. The theory originated in the Middle Ages and endured for several centuries. In 19th-century England the miasma theory made sense to the sanitary reformers. Rapid industrialisation and urbanisation had created many poor, filthy and foul-smelling city neighbourhoods that tended to be the focal points of disease and epidemics. By improving the housing, sanitation and general cleanliness of these existing areas, levels of disease were seen to fall, an observation that lent weight to the theory.

The miasma theory was a commonly held medical contagion theory from ancient times until the last half of the nineteenth century. The theory claimed that bad odors on the wind or from decaying organic matter could transmit disease or infection to a person. This thesis argues that the miasma theory was far more than a contagion theory, it was also a social construct in the early modern period which allowed sixteenth and seventeenth England society to adapt the idea far beyond actual smells. In fact, this thesis shows that the theory was adopted metaphorically in social, political, and religious circumstances. The ephemeral nature of scents and thus the miasma theory allowed it to become a social construct for actual, perceived, and metaphorical smells in early modern England.

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