

Introduction

Line Cottagegnies and Sandrine Parageau

In his *Contemplations on the Old Testament* (1612), Joseph Hall, who would become Bishop of Exeter in 1627, comments on the story of one of the most curious women in the Bible, Dinah, the daughter of Leah and Jacob (*Genesis* 34). Dinah had the irrepressible itch to see what was happening outside her home because, Hall says: ‘she [had] a fault in her eyes, which was Curiosity’.¹ Unable to repress her desire to see the world, Dinah went out to gaze and, as she stepped out, she was seen by Shechem, who raped her. Joseph Hall explains that if Dinah had stayed at home and had not yielded to a curious impulse, she would not have been raped. He adds that woman’s curiosity causes disorder and even chaos as Dinah’s brothers then revenge their sister’s dishonour by killing all the men in the city. Hall describes the escalating violence that ensues from Dinah’s curiosity: ‘Ravishment follows upon her wandering, upon her ravishment murder, upon the murder spoyle’ (209). Female curiosity is represented here as a transgression, in its etymological sense of ‘crossing’: Dinah’s stepping across is quite literally a liminal act as she walks over the threshold of her home. But above all, this chapter from Hall’s *Contemplations* shows how curious women are essentially seen as temptresses: at the very moment when women are gazing, they are seen and turned into objects of curiosity themselves. Thus, Bishop Hall’s commentary on this passage from the Old Testament shows women’s curiosity as a natural consequence of their being curious and desirable objects: ‘She [Dinah] will needs see, and be seene; and while she doth vainely see, she is seene lustfully’ (200). Woman’s vanity, which entices her to see, simultaneously turns her into a temptress. Woman’s curiosity and her being seen as a curious object are therefore concomitant; but Hall’s chapter also implies that they are logically linked: it is *because* woman is

1 This book has greatly benefited from the advice and encouragement of the larger scholarly community. Line Cottagegnies and Sandrine Parageau would most particularly like to thank Sarah Hutton and Stephen Clucas for opportunities to present early sections of this work respectively at the *Centre for Women’s Writing and Literary Culture* (Aberystwyth University) and *Emphasis Seminar* (Institute of English Studies, London).

Hall Joseph, *Contemplations upon the Principall Passages of the Holy Storie. The First Volume* (London, M. Bradwood: 1612) 199–209 (200). Hall interprets Dinah’s story as a warning against the consequences of curiosity. Yet, in the Bible, there is no mention or condemnation of Dinah’s inquisitiveness.

being curious that she is turned into an object of curiosity and it is *because* she is tempted that she becomes a temptress. This passage gives us some insight into the complexity of the double relation of women to curiosity, while revealing common early modern attitudes to women and curiosity. For in the period women were commonly seen as both curious subjects *and* objects of curiosity. Biblical and mythological figures such as Eve, Pandora or Lamia illustrated and, to a certain extent, accounted for women's inherent proneness to curiosity. Women were also the objects of men's curiosity, as shown by the great number of writings on 'women's secrets' – an expression that referred to the mysteries of the reproductive system –, the scientific interest in the dissection of female bodies and the abundant literature on witches, mermaids and other kinds of female monsters.² The first aim of this book is to shed light on the articulation of both the subjective and the objective relations of women to curiosity, the relation between women as curiosities and women as inquirers in early modern England and France.

The second line of thought that guided the general reflection presented by the essays in this book deals with the assumed rehabilitation of curiosity in the early modern period and its impact on women's desire for knowledge. While curiosity had long been considered as an intellectual vice, associated with hubris and the original sin, it allegedly became a virtue in the seventeenth century.³ In his seminal article on curiosity and forbidden knowledge in early modern England,⁴ historian and philosopher Peter Harrison argues that one of the main reasons for the rehabilitation of curiosity was the continued efforts of natural philosophers to demonstrate that curiosity was morally acceptable in order to legitimize their scientific endeavour and the new science. As a consequence, curiosity came to be encouraged in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1690), for instance, John Locke praised children's curiosity, which he felt needed to be answered seriously:

2 See for example Daston L. – Park K. (eds.), *Wonders and the Order of Nature 1550–1750* (New York: 1998); Park K. "Dissecting the Female Body: From Women's Secrets to the Secrets of Nature", in Donawerth J. – Seeff A. (eds.), *Crossing Boundaries. Attending to Early Modern Women* (Cranbury, N.J.: 2000) 29–47; Park K., *Secrets of Women: Gender, Generation and the Origin of Human Dissection* (New York: 2006).

3 The idea that curiosity became a virtue in the early modern period was the main thesis of Hans Blumenberg in *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. R.M. Wallace (Cambridge, Mass.: 1986).

4 Harrison P. "Curiosity, Forbidden Knowledge, and the Reformation of Natural Philosophy in Early Modern England", *Isis* 92 (2001) 265–290.

Curiosity in children [...] is but an appetite after Knowledge, and therefore ought to be encouraged in them, not only as a good sign, but as the great Instrument Nature has provided, to remove that ignorance they brought into the world with them, and which without this busy *Inquisitiveness* would make them dull and useless Creatures.⁵

In the eighteenth century, David Hume also defined curiosity in laudatory terms as 'that love of truth, which is the first source of all our enquiries'.⁶ Yet it has been convincingly suggested that the new status of curiosity in the early modern period led instead to an even stronger distrust of women's curiosity, in particular by Neil Kenny and by Barbara Benedict.⁷ As Katherine Park and Lorraine Daston have reminded us, one should be suspicious of any grand narrative that claims to map out 'the transformation of curiosity from grave vice to outright peccadillo'.⁸ The same is true of the neat, linear narrative which claims to sketch the history of a straightforward rehabilitation of curiosity, whether male or female.⁹ Neil Kenny in particular has shown how curiosity is always the product of at least two kinds of historical time scales, a 'histoire événementielle', which sometimes involves relatively swift changes, and 'longue durée' history, which implies series of paradigmatic shifts often undecipherable for the naked eye.¹⁰ Taking as its premises recent research on the gendered aspect of the history of curiosity, this book aims at examining anew how women's curiosity was represented and defined in England and in France in the early modern period, and it tries to do so from an interdisciplinary perspective. Taken together, the essays in this volume also study how women confronted the stigma attached to curiosity as *libido sciendi*, and how they joined in the culture of curiosity that led both to the rise of scientific enquiry and to

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- 5 Locke John, *Some Thoughts concerning Education* (London, A. and J. Churchill: 1693) 134 (Locke's emphasis). Locke adds that curiosity should be encouraged in boys and girls alike.
 - 6 Hume David, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (London, John Noon: 1739) vol. 2, book II, part III, section 10 "Of Curiosity, or the Love of Truth" 308.
 - 7 Kenny N., *The Uses of Curiosity in Early Modern France and Germany* (Oxford: 2004) 22: 'Although in the seventeenth century curiosity often became more positive than it had been previously, mostly it was male curiosity that was transformed in this way [...]. An even larger proportion of bad curiosity was now female'. See also Benedict B.M., *Curiosity: A Cultural History of Early Modern Inquiry* (Chicago: 2001), in particular 118–154.
 - 8 Daston L. – Park K., *Wonders and the Order of Nature* 306.
 - 9 Evans R.J.W. – Marr A. (eds.), *Curiosity and Wonder from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment* (London: 2006) 7.
 - 10 Kenny N., *Curiosity in Early Modern Europe. Word Histories* (Wiesbaden: 1998) 15.

the collecting impetus. They focus on a central moment, between the sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries, of the fraught history of how women gained access to an intellectual and cultural world from which they had been mostly excluded until then. That this was not a linear history is perfectly symbolized in the ambivalent representation (designed by Clavaro and engraved by Duflos) of Fontenelle's Marquise which serves as a frontispiece for an eighteenth-century edition of *Entretiens sur la Pluralité des mondes* (here our frontcover illustration). The *Entretiens* (discussed by Christophe Martin in chapter 10 of this volume) is probably the most emblematic of pre-Enlightenment texts, and stages a series of philosophical conversations between a philosopher and an inquisitive Marquise, who is taught to reason about the cosmos in the process. The frontispiece shows the Marquise presumably thinking about the courses of planets, perhaps even calculating their trajectories using a pair of compasses and a celestial globe, but she is in her *boudoir*, sitting at her dressing table on which rests a temporarily-abandoned mirror, powder boxes and bottles of perfume. A couple of grimacing *putti* in the foreground highlight the presence of a discarded fan on the floor. Underneath the engraving, a caption underlines the emblematic oxymoron, the opposition (or alliance?) between intellect and female vanity which is inherent, it seems, in the representation of a woman philosophizing: 'De l'esprit et des appas. / L'éventail et le compas' ('Wit and charm. / The fan and the compasses', or 'Of wit and charm. / The fan and the compasses'). In a subtle reworking of a commonplace of *vanitas* painting, the conventional representation of a woman with her mirror or at her toilet,¹¹ this illustration reflects, it seems to us, the difficulty of thinking about the complex relationship between femininity and knowledge, often reconfigured as a straightforward opposition between sensuality and intellect, in the early modern period. As Martin shows below, however, Fontenelle subtly overturns this commonplace, by recuperating, even glorifying the Marquise's sensual curiosity as the very condition of philosophy.

This is the first collection of essays that sets out to deal in a representative way with the various aspects of female curiosity in the early modern period from representations to epistemology and theology, and from cultural history and the history of collections to literary history. By comparing France and England it situates women's relations to curiosity in two very different intellectual traditions – England's empiricist approach to science and knowledge on the one hand, and French Cartesianism on the other, although, as will be

11 Several examples of paintings using this motif could be given here from Titian to Velàquez. See for instance Diego Velàquez, *The Rokeby Venus*, 1647–1651, 122 × 177 cm, National Gallery, London.

apparent, this opposition must be qualified. Because it focusses on England and France, this book also confronts two histories of scholarship which shed light on each other. Finally, it brings together a set of international scholars working on very different fields (history of philosophy, history of representations, history of collections and of material culture, French and English literatures).

A Short History of Curiosity

In the patristic tradition, curiosity was associated with the original sin and therefore considered as a vice. In the fifth century, borrowing from the First Letter of Saint John, Augustine famously distinguished between three kinds of temptation, three interrelated forms of desire or concupiscence, *libido domnandi* (desire for power), *libido sentiendi* (sensual desire), and *libido sciendi* (*the desire to know*), also called *curiositas*, emphasizing the need to curb each of them to remain within the bounds of true faith.¹² *Curiositas*, or 'concupiscence of the gaze' (*concupiscentia oculorum*, *Confessions* x. 35, also sometimes translated as 'the lust of the gaze') as he defined it, was associated with vanity (*vanitas*), an echo of *Ecclesiastes* ('Vanity of vanities, all is vanity'). As evidence of the dangers of curiosity, Augustine mentions how the desire to see and to know leads to an unhealthy attraction for novelty and sensation, and even for spectacles of horror, such as public executions or theatrical illusions:

[...] for pleasure seeketh objects beautiful, melodious, fragrant, savoury, soft; but curiosity, for trial's sake, the contrary as well, not for the sake of suffering annoyance, but out of the lust of making trial and knowing them. For what pleasure hath it, to see in a mangled carcase what will make you shudder? and yet if it be lying near, they flock thither, to be made sad, and to turn pale. Even in sleep they are afraid to see it. As if when awake, any one forced them to see it, or any report of its beauty drew them thither! Thus also in the other senses, which it were long to go through. From this disease of curiosity are all those strange sights exhibited in the theatre...¹³

Augustine made of curiosity a passion that needed to be strictly controlled, the negativity of which was eventually and spectacularly developed for his own

12 Augustine, *De vera religione*, in *Œuvres de saint Augustin*, t. 8, Bibliothèque augustinienne, XXXVIII, 70, 127.

13 Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. E. Bouverie Pusey (Chicago: 2007) 286.

purposes by the emblemist Cesare Ripa, who, with his book *Iconologia* (originally published in 1593, but in 1603 with illustrations), offered a kind of guide to the symbolism of the early modern period with a collection of allegories, and described curiosity as having (here in the words of an eighteenth-century translator):

[...] abundance of Ears and Frogs on her Robe; her Hair stands up on end; Wings on her Shoulders; her Arms lifted up: she thrusts out her Head in a prying Posture. The Ears denote the Itch of knowing more than concern her. The Frogs are Emblems of Inquisitiveness, by reason of their goggle-Eyes. The other things denote her running up and down, to hear, and to see, as some do after News.¹⁴

Curiosity is thus associated with an irrepressible and unruly desire to hear and to see; a female allegory here, it is clearly associated in this eighteenth-century translation specifically with gossip and news.

From the Fathers of the Church right through at least as far as the early years of the seventeenth century, curiosity about intellectual and spiritual matters was considered suspicious because of its potentially transgressive nature. Curiosity had yet to be redefined as a noble and licit form of investigation in the philosophical discourses of the period. Francis Bacon played an important part in setting up the conditions for the development of a positive form of curiosity by stressing that the pursuit of knowledge must be made morally acceptable by usefulness. This was the condition for it to be redeemed from the stigma of negative curiosity, understood as excessive curiosity for things that should not be looked into, especially things theological. It is clear that, in order to be legitimized, the pursuit of knowledge had to dissociate itself from accusations of vanity, and from the opprobrium of a guilty and concupiscent desire.¹⁵ In *The Great Instauration* (1620), Bacon makes this particularly clear, asking of his readers, in conclusion:

14 Ripa Cesare, *Iconologia, or Moral Emblems*, trans. P. Tempest (London, Benjamin Motte: 1709) 20. This translation is in fact quite free.

15 The *memento mori* or genre of the *vanitas* painting testifies both to the desire to moralize this new curiosity for objects and to a fascination for the objects themselves. On curiosity and vanity, see Cottegnies L. – Parageau S. – Venet G. (eds.), *Curiosité(s) et vanité(s) dans les îles Britanniques et en Europe (XVI^e–XVII^e siècles)*, *Études Épistémè* 27 (2015).

[...] that they consider what are the true ends of knowledge, and that they seek it not either for pleasure of the mind, or for contention, or for superiority to others, or for profit, or fame, or power, or any of these inferior things; but for the benefit and use of life; and that they perfect and govern it in charity.¹⁶

Here, Bacon dissociates worthy curiosity from pride and from the quest for power (focussing on the ethics of the philosopher), and he submits philosophical enquiry to the notion of usefulness in the service of the common good. By doing so, Bacon contributed to liberating scientific curiosity from a damning theological stigma. This, in turn, laid the foundation for what has been described as the ‘culture of curiosity’, which emerged in the context of experimentalism and blossomed under the influence of the Royal Society.¹⁷ Similarly, Descartes encouraged intellectual curiosity, understood as the pursuit of knowledge, as long as it remained under the control of reason and was directed at objects that could lead to truth. He insisted in his *Rules for the Direction of the Mind* (1701) that curiosity should be satisfied, but within the limits of a strict method.¹⁸ Again, in the dialogue of *The Search for Truth by means of the Natural Light* (1701), he opposed insatiable curiosity to the curiosity of ‘orderly souls’ or methodical minds.¹⁹ It comes as no surprise then that the fellows of the Royal Society should have called on him, both as ‘the father of English empiricism’ and ‘the father of French rationalism’, to legitimize their scientific endeavours. Meanwhile, the impulse to see and to collect also led to the constitution of cabinets of curiosities, and to a commercial culture of collecting, in the context of the development of exploration, colonization and commerce.

16 Preface to Bacon’s *Instauratio Magna*, in Bacon Francis, *The Philosophical Works*, ed. J.M. Robertson (Abingdon – New York: 1905) 247.

17 On the ‘culture of curiosity’, see Whitaker K., “The Culture of Curiosity”, in Jardine N. – Secord J.A. – Spary E.C. (eds.), *Cultures of Natural History* (Cambridge: 1996) 75–90; Pomian K., *Collectionneurs, amateurs et curieux. Paris, Venise: XVI^e–XVIII^e siècle* (Paris: 1987) 61–80; Findlen P., *Possessing Nature: Museums, Collecting and Scientific Culture in Early Modern Italy* (Berkeley – Los Angeles: 1994), and Kenny, *The Uses of Curiosity*.

18 Descartes René, *Rules for the Direction of the Mind* [*Règles pour la direction de l’esprit*, first published 1701], in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* (Cambridge: 1985), ed. and trans. J. Cottingham – R. Stoothoff – D. Murdoch, vol. 1, rule VIII, 28–33.

19 Descartes René, *The Search for Truth by means of the Natural Light* [*La Recherche de la vérité par la lumière naturelle*, first published 1701], in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, ed. and trans. J. Cottingham – R. Stoothoff – D. Murdoch, vol. 2, 402.

Yet this partial rehabilitation of curiosity between Bacon and Hume was largely confined to male curiosity. As male curiosity was rehabilitated, women were increasingly described as prone to a negative form of curiosity, and, for those who were stubborn enough to transgress the interdict, turned into curiosities themselves, as a strategy of shaming and of marginalization. For Barbara M. Benedict, 'as women began to encroach on the masculine arenas of politics, literature, and consumption, curiosity without method and without justification became female'.²⁰ Accusing women of a bad form of curiosity became *de facto* a means of controlling them and of re-assigning more conventional gender roles in an increasingly volatile and socially-mobile society.²¹ This can perhaps explain Fénelon's peremptory (and damning) statement in his 1687 treatise on the education of young girls, otherwise considered as fairly progressive: 'It is true that one should be wary of creating ridiculous learned women. Women generally have a more feeble mind and are more curious than men'.²² Fénelon used this characterization of women as necessarily curious to restrict girls' reading and to curb their inquisitiveness. Similarly, in the seventeenth century, the French moralist La Fontaine wrote that curiosity was the main 'fault of the fair sex'.²³

In the early modern period, women's bad curiosity was mostly apparent in the itch to talk and hear about others' lives that was deemed to characterize the 'fair sex'. Following St Paul's description of young widows as 'idle, [...] tattlers also and busybodies, speaking things which they ought not' (1 *Timothy* 5, King James Version), it was commonly held in early modern Europe that women could not help gossiping.²⁴ It was assumed that they exchanged gossips at Church, or while they were knitting by the fireside, or spinning on their

20 Benedict, *Curiosity: A Cultural History* 118.

21 'Curiosity', Kenny argues, was 'used in attempts to control women', in *The Uses of Curiosity* 14.

22 Fénelon François de Salignac de La Mothe-, *Traité de l'éducation des filles* [1689], ed. B. Jolibert (Paris: 1994) 37. (Our translation)

23 La Fontaine Jean de, "Psyché", in *Oeuvres de Monsieur de la Fontaine, nouvelle édition* (n. l., Jacob and Henry Sauvage: 1726) t. 3, 93. Cf. Kenny, *The Uses of Curiosity* 386 ff., and Coudreuse A., "Justine ou les bonheurs de la curiosité", in Jacques-Chaquin N. – Houdard S. (eds.), *Curiosité et Libido Sciendi de la Renaissance aux Lumières* (Fontenay-aux-Roses: 1998) vol. 2, 393–421.

24 'Gossip' originally meant a godparent of either sex but it progressively took negative and female connotations. See for instance Capp B., *When Gossips Meet: Women, Family, and Neighbourhood in Early Modern England* (Oxford: 2003) 7. Gossip came to denote any close female friend (51).

doorsteps,, thus creating a ‘female social space’²⁵ that men disapproved of. Although defamation cases tend to show that men used to tattle as often as women, a number of books were published in which (male) authors imagined what women talked about when they gathered together. Thus, in the early seventeenth century, Samuel Rowlands devoted several books to gossips’ conversations, such as *Tis Merry When Gossips Meete* (1602), in which a wife, a widow and a maid, happen to meet in the street in London and have a drink in a tavern. They talk mainly about their own marital status rather than about other people’s lives. It seems that male authors imagined that when married women met, they talked about their husbands: in Rowlands’s *A Whole Crew of Kind Gossips, All Met to Be Merry* (1609), six wives complain about their husbands. The book – like many other books on women’s gossip published at the time – reveals men’s anxiety about the content of women’s conversations. In the pamphlet, the fourth wife, who complains about her husband being a gambler, says: ‘He is a gamester, though no Cocke of game, / For I do find he doth his business lame, / In things (you know my meaning) leant worth praise.’²⁶ The quotation makes clear that men especially feared women’s public comments on their husbands’ sexual performance.

Figures of Female Curiosity

It could be said that the association between women and a negative form of curiosity was always part of popular wisdom. Many folk tales and fairy tales (a good number of which were actually transcribed or written up in the seventeenth century) are about female curiosity – with a strong moralistic bias, since such a feature is clearly presented as a sin that is eventually punished. Numerous examples could be given of this, like the famous story of ‘Bluebeard’, which belongs to folklore, but was written up by Charles Perrault at the end of the seventeenth century. Several tales belonging to folklore focus on a woman’s transgression because of her curiosity. In one popular Welsh tale, a woman is hired to look after the children of mysterious rich people in a beautiful mansion. One of her tasks involves rubbing the children’s eyes with some ointment every morning, but she is specifically told not to touch her own eyes with it. Naturally, one day, she applies the ointment to her own (left) eye, and discovers

25 Hindle S., “The Shaming of Margaret Knowsley: gossip, gender and the experience of authority in Early Modern England”, *Continuity and Change* 9 (1994) 391–419 (392).

26 Rowlands Samuel, *Tis Merry When Gossips Meete* (London, W. W[hite]: 1602) and *A Whole Crew of Kind Gossips, All Met to Be Merry* (London, W. Iaggard for John Deane: 1609).

that she is in the presence of ugly fairies, and that the children she is looking after are repulsive gnomes.²⁷ One day, going to the fair, she recognises her former master stealing something from a stall, and goes up to him. Because he is supposed to be invisible, this is as much as telling the fairy that she has been lying to him all along. The fairy's revenge is appropriate: the woman becomes blind in her left eye and thus loses her insight into fairy world. In these folk tales, female curiosity is generally about the irrepressible desire to see what is beyond one's reach, about transgressing an interdiction, with dire consequences for the culprit's disobedience. This reminds us of similar tropes in both ancient mythology and the Bible, and among these Pandora, Eve and Dinah naturally come to mind as exemplary types of curious transgressive women.

But in many other stories involving women and curiosity, women were not actually punished for being overly curious. Instead, curiosity was the punishment they received for a transgression or for allegedly trespassing traditional gender boundaries. A good example is Plutarch's treatise "Of Curiosity",²⁸ which was translated into English by Queen Elizabeth I in 1598 (from Erasmus's Latin version) and widely read in the seventeenth century. It tells the story of Lamia, the queen of Libya, who was Zeus' mistress. In one of the numerous versions of the story, which seems to be the one Plutarch used, Lamia was persecuted by Hera, who punished her with the inability to close her eyes and therefore to sleep, so that she was reduced to wandering day and night. In order to alleviate Lamia's pain, Zeus gave her the ability to remove her eyes at night, so she could sleep, but as soon as she put her eyes back on during the day, she would start wandering again and pry into other people's secrets. Curiosity is here defined as the desire to poke one's nose into other people's secrets, and more precisely as an interest in people's woes, a desire to know the faults and imperfections in other men. Plutarch's lesson from this story is that the eye is an instrument of indiscretion and malevolence. He insists therefore on the necessity to guide one's passions: men and women should turn their curiosity to their souls or the secrets of nature, and not other people's lives.

But what is remarkable in Plutarch's "On Curiosity" is that Lamia is not inherently curious, curiosity being the punishment for her being Zeus' mistress (and for being a temptress), not the cause of her misery. She is the unfortunate victim of Hera's overwhelming jealousy. Yet, in the early modern period, the word 'lamia' came to be synonymous with 'monster', 'witch', or 'she-demon'.

27 Thiselton-Dyer T.F. (ed.), *Folk-Lore of Women* [1906] (Los Angeles: 2010) 130–134.

28 In Greek: *polypragmosyne*, i.e. busyness, meddling. See Plutarch, *On Curiosity*, trans. M. Wheeler, ed. W.W. Goodwin (Boston: 1878).

This tends to show that stereotypes of woman as the very embodiment of bad curiosity are often later ideological constructions, based on former narratives that stigmatize curiosity, but bent along gender lines. Indeed, when one looks at the sources, one realizes that the female types are not wholly identified with a negative form of curiosity, or rather (which is slightly different) that bad curiosity is not specifically designated as necessarily female. A telling example is that of Pandora, who was first described in Hesiod's *Works and Days* (written in the eighth century BC). She is the first woman (like Eve), but created by Zeus specifically to punish mankind, as a revenge on Prometheus, who stole fire from him. On Zeus' command, Pandora is endowed by various gods with attributes likely to make her bewitching to Prometheus' not-so-clever brother, Epimetheus. Epimetheus, who has been told by his brother to refuse any gift from Jupiter, falls into the trap, disobeys his brother, and falls for Pandora. Among Pandora's attributes (the name Pandora means either the 'all-gifted' or the 'all-giving'), she is given by Hermes, 'The crafty spy, and messenger of Godheads', 'a dogged (sometimes shameless) Minde, / And theevisish Manners' (i.e. craft), in the words of the poet and playwright George Chapman who translated the text in 1618.²⁹ As the story goes, Pandora is given a box by Zeus – in fact a large urn in the original, and the change is to be attributed to Erasmus, who translated the Greek text into Latin –, in which Zeus puts all the evils of the world. When Pandora opens the box, all the evils spread into the world, while only hope remains in the jar after Epimetheus manages to shut it. It is interesting to notice, though, that in sources of the ancient myth (here in an early seventeenth-century translation), Pandora is not explicitly characterized as curious. In fact, in Hesiod's text, she is not given any clear motive for taking off 'the unwieldy lid'. The reader is left to interpret her motivation, which could be an act of sheer malice, the result of imprudence, or an inevitable consequence of the insatiable libido of one described as having her breast full of 'wild Desires, incapable of Rest'. It was the argument of the insatiable libido that became the standard version, when it was read in conjunction with *Genesis*: woman was enduringly interpreted as the temptress who drove man to infringe the interdict. Significantly, Chapman includes a footnote at this point, which, in order to moralize this myth into a Christian teaching, looks for typological parallels between ancient myth and the Bible. In this footnote, Chapman sees Pandora allegorically as:

29 Hesiod, *The Georgicks of Hesiod*, by George Chapman; translated elaborately out of the Greek, trans. G. Chapman (London, Miles Partrick: 1618) 4.

Appetite, or effeminate affection; and customarie, or fashionable Indulgence to the blood; not onely in womanish affectations; but in the generall fashions of Mens Iudgements and action [...] Intending illu-sively; by this same *docta ignorantia*; of which, many learned leaders of the Minde, are guilty [...]. The common source or sinke of the vulgar; prevailing past the Nobility, and pietie, of humanity and Religion. By which, All sincere discipline, is dissolv'd, or corrupted[.]³⁰

The myth is thus taken as a warning against giving way to appetite: the desire to know (Pandora's *libido sciendi*) is explicitly linked with carnal desire – Epimetheus' desire for Pandora. If both characters are described as intemperate, Epimetheus is clearly the focus of the story, but Pandora is the passive and active cause of his transgression. By yielding to his appetite, man has lost the 'learned ignorance' (*docta ignorantia*) that both Augustine and Nicolas of Cusa had defined as the innate knowledge which cannot be acquired, and was given by God to Adam and Eve before the Fall – before it was lost because of their pride. This is a warning against prying into matters of faith beyond the limited pale of human understanding and spiritual imperfection. God being infinite and perfect, He cannot be known by finite and imperfect beings; accepting the 'learned ignorance' means recognizing that one's knowledge must stop short of God's immensity, and that one should not aim too high in mystical matters.

The myth of Pandora, however, was later reappropriated and interpreted as typically emblematic of female curiosity (and, incidentally, of the nefarious influence of women on men). In a seventeenth-century painting by Nicolas Régnier,³¹ for example, Pandora is clearly described as an allegory of vanity – vanity of knowledge, but more fundamentally the embodiment of sensual seduction; and Dante Gabriel Rossetti's 1878 iconic portrait of Pandora presents her as a *femme fatale*.³² But the myth is not, in fact, specifically about female curiosity in its original version. By yielding to his desire for Pandora, Epimetheus is guilty of accepting the poisoned gift, and allowing the disaster to happen. As in the story of Lamia told by Plutarch, the focus of the myth seems to be more on (male) sensual desires, of which Pandora and Lamia are both an embodiment and a cause.

As in Chapman's moralistic footnote, Pandora has often been described as a type for Eve. Such is the case with an emblematic mannerist painting by Jean Cousin, which makes the parallel explicit in a motto which gives the picture

30 Hesiod, *The Georgicks of Hesiod* 5 (n. 30).

31 Régnier Nicolas, *Allegory of Vanity-Pandora*, c. 1626, 173 × 140 cm, Staatsgalerie Stuttgart.

32 Rossetti Dante Gabriel, *Pandora*, coloured chalks on paper, dated 1878, 100.8 × 66.7 cm, National Museums Liverpool (Lady Lever Art Gallery, Port Sunlight).

its title: *Eva Prima Pandora*.³³ Although a main difference is that Eve was not created by God to punish man, both women were seen as dangerous temptresses, responsible for the Fall of man. As is the case with evil Pandora, Eve's yielding to the serpent and her responsibility in the original Fall created an enduring stigma for the 'weaker vessel', in St Paul's words. In his chapter on genesitic curiosity and gynocracy below, Yan Brailowsky shows how the power of sixteenth-century women rulers was linked to the original sin and often deemed dangerous, leading to new interpretations of *Genesis*. But in the narrative of the Fall, *Genesis* does not distinguish between what would be good and bad curiosity: it is intellectual curiosity (for the knowledge of good and evil) in general that is condemned, because it is intrinsically linked with sensuality. *Genesis* thus describes Eve as yielding to two forms of desire, both caused by visual perception: the sensual desire ('saw', 'good', 'pleasant to the eyes'), and the desire to become wise: 'When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat' (*Genesis* 3.6). These two forms of desire are both facets of the same irrepressible incontinence. The text of *Genesis* does not specifically designate Eve as the sole culprit for the original Fall. If her curiosity and sensuality are clearly at the origin of the transgression, the responsibility for the Fall is shared between Adam and Eve. As Milton remarks in *Paradise Lost* (1667),³⁴ Adam was not tempted by the serpent, and must have chosen

33 Cousin Jean, *Eva Prima Pandora*, c. 1550, 97 × 150 cm, Musée du Louvre, Paris.

34 Eve has sometimes been interpreted as a budding intellectual, reasoning, arguing, debating (and sometimes even as a sophist, taking her cue from Satan), in Book IX of *Paradise Lost*. On the one hand, Milton's Eve is obviously attracted to the idea of knowledge and is outraged at being kept back from it when the serpent proves to her that God has been envious by not allowing: 'What forbids He but to know, / Forbids us good, forbids us to be wise? [...] to us deni'd / This intellectual food, for beasts reserv'd?' (IX.756–68). But on the other, what drives her to eating the fruit is pride, her desire to become as a god, since the serpent is 'as Man' (710). Again, and as in the Bible, Milton's Eve is clearly not described as guilty alone; Adam is famously made to choose her over his immortality out of conjugal love:

However I with thee have fixed my lot,
 Certain to undergo like doom, if death
 Consort with thee, death is to me as life;
 So forcible within my heart I feel
 The bond of nature draw me to my own,
 My own in thee, for what thou art is mine;
 Our state cannot be severed, we are one,
 One flesh; to lose thee were to lose myself. (IX.952–9).

Milton John, *Paradise Lost*, ed. J. Leonard (London: 2000) 210.

to follow Eve into sin – to what extent his choice was a free one had led to an intense polemic between Luther, Calvin and Erasmus among others. To conclude on this difficult point, one can suggest that curiosity (or the desire for knowledge) is not so much at stake in the narrative of the original Fall as disobedience and pride. It is to become ‘as gods’ that Eve eats of the fruit and encourages Adam to do likewise: ‘God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil’ (*Genesis* 3.5).

When Plutarch, Augustine, or Aquinas wrote about the dangers of excessive curiosity, they did not mention women as being more prone to it than men. When the Puritan divine William Perkins analyzed the causes of the Fall in the late sixteenth century, he attributed it to both Adam and Eve’s ‘discontentment [...] in the mind [...] that is curiositie, when a man resteth not satisfied with the measure of inward gifts received, aspires to search out such things as God would have kept secret’.³⁵ As far as the uses of mythology were concerned, if Pandora, Psyche or Lamia were used in the early modern period as common archetypes of curiosity, so were Acteon and Orpheus (to name but a few), who featured high in the literary and philosophical discourse of early modernity to emblemize the dangers of curiosity. And it was a woman, Queen Elizabeth I, who was encouraged to translate Plutarch’s essay on curiosity into English as an intellectual exercise.

Women and Curiosity as *libido sciendi*

It is clear that, in spite of the Judeo-Christian stigma of the original Fall, the philosophical and moral discourse of the early modern period did not systematically associate curiosity specifically with the female gender, contrary to popular wisdom. In fact, curiosity, and most especially intellectual curiosity, was not primarily attached to women, perhaps simply because women were usually kept away from intellectual pursuits and did not feature as such in philosophical discourse. In his chapter on curiosity in *Diversitez* (1610), the French Bishop Jean-Pierre Camus does not mention women, and neither does Francis Bacon in *The Wisdom of the Ancients* (1619) when he discusses the topic.³⁶

35 Quoted in Harrison, “Curiosity, Forbidden Knowledge, and the Reformation of Natural Philosophy” 13.

36 Camus Jean-Pierre, *Les Diversitez de Messire Jean-Pierre Camus* (Lyon, Jean Pillehotte: 1610) 565; Bacon Francis, *The Wisdom of the Ancients* (London, John Bill: 1619) 51–54 (Bacon’s emphasis).

In the latter work, Bacon warns men against the excess of curiosity, using Acteon and Pentheus as exempla, without even mentioning a single female exemplum, and he does not concern himself with female curiosity either:

The curiosity of Men, in prying into secrets, and coveting with an inde-screet desire to attein the knowledge of things forbidden, is set forth by the Ancients in two examples: the one of *Actæon*, the other of *Pentheus*.

Actæon having unawares, and as it were by chance beheld *Diana* naked, was turned into a Stag and devoured by his own Dogges.

And Pentheus climbing up into a tree, with a desire to bee a spectator of the hidden sacrifices of *Bacchus*, was stricken with such a kind of frensie, as that whatsoever he look't upon, he thought it alwaies double [...]

The first of the Fables pertains to the secrets of *Princes*: the second to divine mysteries.³⁷

Curiosity as the desire for knowledge (or *libido sciendi*) was implicitly considered as necessarily male, and was alone of interest to philosophers. It is when we turn to the moral literature of the period that we begin to see, perhaps, the contours of a misogynistic strategy, to demonize female intellectual curiosity, the better to valorize male intellectual pursuits. In her chapter in this volume, Armel Dubois-Nayt shows how the Tudor 'Querelles des femmes', a series of lively polemics across the Channel in the sixteenth century, paradoxically helped popularize issues of women's intellectual and spiritual agency in the period, while they were based on the explosion of a misogynistic tradition which turned women into monsters and curia. This is also an aspect touched on by Susan Wiseman in her chapter on the mermaid as an embodiment of female monstrosity in male discourse – at a time when mermaids were also paradoxically becoming objects of pre-scientific interest. Laura Levine, in her chapter on Shakespeare, shows how *Troilus and Cressida*, with its peculiar focus on an epistemological crux, can be read as an illustration of the dangers inherent in the titillation of curiosity (here male curiosity about women), and eventually as an allegorical representation of the dangers of theatrical illusion – largely in answer to the antitheatrical polemic raging at the time Shakespeare was writing.

The misogynistic tradition that condemns female curiosity is taken up in the moral literature of the period, and most obviously in conduct books designed for women. In a popular conduct book, *The English Gentlewoman* (1631), Richard Brathwaite thus defined female curiosity first as nosiness (the desire to

37 Bacon, *The Wisdom of the Ancients* 51–52.

peep), mentioned in the same breath as gossip: the virtuous lady should be 'no pryer into others actions, nor too censorious a reproover of others Directions';³⁸ and secondly, curiosity is also defined as excessive vanity in beautiful clothes:

[T]ell me, ye curious Dames, who hold it a derogation to your honour, to entertaine ought that is vulgar: whereto were Cloathes first ordained, but to cover that nakednesse which sinne brought, and to skreene that shame which the effect of sinne first wrought? The use of Apparell is not to dignifie the wearer, or adde more beauty to the Creature.³⁹

Similarly, in his attempt to explain why the first woman came to be deceived, John Brinsley laments women's taste for novelties, and in particular 'New Fashions in apparell'. In *A Looking-Glasse for Good Women* (1645), he argues that this manifestation of woman's corrupt nature is the consequence of Eve's curiosity, defined as 'affecting of Novelties'.⁴⁰

Women who had an interest in science and literature in the seventeenth century, or were bold enough to encroach upon the male sphere were therefore often treated themselves as objects of curiosity, as monsters exposed to ridicule and irony. Lady Mary Wroth, for instance, Sir Philip Sidney and Mary Sidney's niece, was famously accused of being a 'hermaphrodite in show, in deed a monster' by Edward Denny, for publishing a romance in her lifetime and under her own name.⁴¹ Laetitia Coussement-Boillot shows in her chapter that Wroth fought hard to assert her legitimacy as an author, and that part of her strategy was to stage a rehabilitation of female curiosity in her romance. As Line Cottegnies shows in her chapter, Denny's attempt at shaming Wroth publicly served as a lesson for Margaret Cavendish, who remembered the anecdote in the 1660s,⁴² and chose to provoke and gall her readers with engraved

38 Brathwaite Richard, *The English Gentlewoman* (London, B. Alsop and T. Fawcett: 1631) 7.

39 Brathwaite, *The English Gentlewoman* 27.

40 Brinsley John, *A Looking-Glasse for Good Women* (London, John Field: 1645) 12–14. The German word for curiosity, 'Neugier' (literally, the desire for what is new), underlines the inherent association between curiosity and novelty.

41 Denny Edward, "To Pamphilia from the Father-in-law of Seralius" (1621), quoted in Hannay M.P., *Mary Sidney, Lady Wroth* (Burlington: 2010) 235. Denny thought that he, his daughter and his son-in-law had been defamed in Wroth's *Urania* (London, John Marriott and John Grismand: 1621).

42 Cavendish Margaret, *Sociable Letters* (London, William Wilson: 1664) 50: 'It may be said to me, as one said to a Lady, *Work, Lady, Work, let writing Books alone, For surely Wiser Women ne'r writ one* [...]' ("To His Excellency the Lord Marquess of Newcastle" – Cavendish's emphasis).

frontispieces of herself, but also with an endless series of defiant prefaces in each of her volumes, rather than adopting the modest, low profile that was expected from a woman. In her first book, *Poems, and Fancies* (1653), Cavendish explained that her interest in natural philosophy was precisely a way to avoid gossip and to direct women's curiosity towards a more acceptable and decent object: 'I thought this was the *harmelessest Pastime*: for sure this *Worke* is better than to sit still, and censure my *Neighbours actions* [...], or to busie my selfe out of the *Sphear* of our *Sex*, as in *Politicks of State*, or to preach *false Doctrine* in a Tub'.⁴³ Cavendish argues that natural philosophy suits women because their enquiry into the workings of nature is more noble than tattling or eavesdropping, and it is more legitimate than their encroaching upon men's political sphere. Yet, in return, Cavendish was treated as a mad woman by her contemporaries. Samuel Pepys, for instance, thought her 'conceited, mad', yet was always eager to watch each of her public appearances from a distance.⁴⁴ In fact, as Cottagnies shows, Cavendish paradoxically responded to her contemporaries' taste for scandal by literally fashioning herself into an object of curiosity. Other women intellectuals of her time were embarrassed by Cavendish's garrulous assertiveness, such as Dorothy Osborne or Mary Evelyn, who were both extremely critical of Cavendish.⁴⁵ Contrary to Cavendish, Sarah Hutton shows in her chapter that her contemporary Anne Conway, a philosopher in her own rights, was held in high esteem by philosophers of her time, probably because she was as modest as Cavendish was ostentatious. Conway helps us understand how some form of philosophical enquiry or intellectual curiosity could be seen as valid for women who behaved as inquisitive pupils in what has been described as the 'age of curiosity'.⁴⁶ It might be argued as a consequence of Cavendish's obvious idiosyncracies that she is not *representative* of the relations between women and curiosity in the seventeenth century. However, as a woman philosopher and avant-gardist, and perhaps like Anne Conway in this respect, the Duchess of Newcastle expresses women's *libido sciendi* in the context of the emergence of empiricism in England.

As Laetitia Coussement-Boillot and Marie-Gabrielle Lallemand convincingly show in their chapters, Mary Wroth and Madeleine de Scudéry are two

43 Cavendish Margaret, *Poems, and Fancies* (London, J. Martin and J. Allestrye: 1653) sig. A5^r (Cavendish's emphasis).

44 Pepys Samuel, *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, ed. R. Latham – W. Matthews (London: 1974) 11 vols., vol. 9, 123; vol. 8, 196.

45 Whitaker K., *Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle. Royalist, Writer & Romantic* (London: 2004) 159–160.

46 Evans – Marr, *Curiosity and Wonder from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment* 9.

eloquent examples (across the Channel) of the representation and uses of curiosity by early modern women writers in their literary works. They show in particular how the genres of the novel and the novella were used to enhance the protagonists' as well as the readers' curiosity. In Wroth's case, the aim was to promote a positive form of female curiosity, while condemning women's bad curiosity, in particular their craze for novelties, including romances. Lallemant contends in particular that Scudéry's interest in the subject of curiosity is linked with her creative shift from long novel to novella.

Finally, this book deals with another category of curious women, that of collectors who owned a cabinet of curiosities, represented here by two eighteenth-century figures, the Duchess of Portland and Mme Thiroux d'Arconville. Beth Tobin's and Adeline Gargam's chapters show that not only did these women own their own cabinets in respectively England and France, but they had organized collections and were not mere amateurs. Three categories of curious women emerge, therefore, from the chapters presented in this book: women philosophers, women authors (in genres that would have been described as literary), and women collectors may be recognized as the main expressions of women's relations to curiosity in the intellectual sphere from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries.

Although some women found a way to act on their desire for knowledge by writing books or collecting curiosities, women were still denied a proper academic education all along the early modern period. At the turn of the eighteenth century, the philosopher Mary Astell still deplored the reputation associated with female education and learned women, treated as monsters, and repressed. Comparing the education of boys and girls, she comments:

[Girls] are restrain'd, frown'd upon, and beat, not *for*, but *from* the Muses; Laughter and Ridicule that never-failing Scare-Crow is set up to drive them from the Tree of Knowledge. But if, in spite of all Difficulties Nature prevails, and they can't be kept so ignorant as their Masters wou'd have them, they are star'd upon as Monsters, Censur'd, Envy'd, and every way Discouraged [...]⁴⁷

Perhaps an echo of Descartes' image of knowledge as a tree,⁴⁸ it also conjures up the emblem of the metaphysical curse of women, and represents a departure from its traditional association with the sinful nature of woman. Here the

47 Astell Mary, *Political Writings*, ed. P. Springborg (Cambridge: 1996) 28.

48 Descartes' tree of knowledge is presented in the 'letter-preface' to the French edition of the *Principles of Philosophy*.

tree of knowledge represents education, intellectual pursuit, and knowledge which should be shared equally by men and women, but has been 'so long unjustly monopolized' by the former – a striking reversal of the theological curse. Mary Astell, a philosopher who published a project for a female college,⁴⁹ was deeply influenced by Descartes and Locke, who had described reason as universal. As Marie-Frédérique Pellegrin and Christophe Martin both show in their essays in this volume, cartesianism was key in opening up alleys for female intellectuals. Pellegrin's article highlights the difference between the moralists and the followers of Descartes: moralists condemned women's excessive curiosity because it was applied to unfit objects, or objects that were deemed unfit for women. But for Cartesian philosophers, it was the method, or lack of it, that made it possible to distinguish between good and bad curiosity. For Malebranche, for instance, curiosity is not bad in itself, but must be guided by reason, especially given how dangerous female imagination is. For Poulain de la Barre, curiosity must also be guided by reason, but women are somehow less prone to bad curiosity because they have been preserved by the ignorance in which they have been kept. Martin shows how two other paradigms appeared towards the late seventeenth century: one that rehabilitates female curiosity by a radical disqualifying of the so-called 'natural' curiosity of women, or, as with Fontenelle, the idea that one should rely on the intrinsic energy of women's curious drive, as an instrument for their emancipation, but also, perhaps, for the emancipation of philosophy itself.

At the turn of the eighteenth century, Judith Drake, who was strongly influenced by Astell, reclaimed for women a noble form of female curiosity, which was for her the legitimate pursuit of all kinds of knowledge, without exception:

The numberless Treatises of Antiquities, Philosophy, Mathematicks Natural, and other History (in which I can't pass silently by, that learned One of Sir *Walter Raleigh*, which the World he writ of can't match) written originally in, or translated to our Tongue are sufficient to lead us a great way into any Science our Curiosity shall prompt us to.⁵⁰

So by the end of the seventeenth century, more and more voices were heard to call for a proper female education and for legitimizing intellectual curiosity for women. This was in the face of male oppositional discourse, such as Fénelon's patronizing scepticism about girls' abilities, and their propensity to

49 [Astell Mary], *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, for the Advancement of their True and Greatest Interest by a Lover of her Sex* (London, R. Wilkin: 1694).

50 [Drake Judith], *An Essay in Defence of the Female Sex* (London, for A. Roper: 1696) 54.

bad curiosity, or Thomas Wright's devastatingly satirical bouts against learned women in the comedy, *The Female Virtuoso's*, an adaptation of Molière's *Femmes savantes* published in 1693.

The Ambivalence of Women's Relation to Curiosity

The comparison between France and England, two countries with strong intellectual ties but different political and religious traditions, ensures that no 'grand narrative' about the history of female curiosity can be built from the chapters that follow. A first apparent contradiction emerges when one confronts Neil Kenny's assertion, reiterated in his chapter here, that women were increasingly associated with bad curiosity, on the one hand, and the relatively large number of women who owned cabinets of curiosities in eighteenth-century France, on the other. Or does this apparent contradiction reveal national differences? Were women accepted as legitimate actors of the culture of curiosity in France, while remaining associated with bad curiosity in England? No such conclusion can be drawn, however. First, it should not be too hastily deduced from examples of women collectors in the eighteenth century that there was an evolution towards a legitimization of women's curiosity: what women's cabinets show is merely the extraordinary boom of curiosity as a cultural practice in a European context. It might even be argued that cabinets of curiosities had always been considered a female practice: particularly relevant in this regard is Margaret Cavendish's statement that cabinets of curiosities are an 'effeminate practice': describing the ideal commonwealth, she explains that its ruler should 'have none of those they call their cabinets, which is a room filled with all useless curiosities, which seems Effeminate, and is so expensive [...] almost to the impoverishing of a Kingdome'. She adds that books, on the contrary, are 'more famous curiosities'.⁵¹ Cavendish may here have been expressing a common view of the time, which probably found its origin in the belief that women's craze for fashion and clothes was in itself some kind of collection. In this case, it is not surprising that women should be allowed to have their own cabinets, and that women's cabinets of curiosities should not be interpreted as evidence of a rehabilitation of female curiosity. The second reason why the national opposition does not stand is that, in the seventeenth century, English natural philosophers such as Robert Boyle encouraged women to carry out experiments by themselves, thus illustrating the principle of the

51 Cavendish Margaret, *The World's Olio* (London, John Martin and James Allestrye: 1655) 207. See Cottagnies, below, for Cavendish's desire not to be associated with curiosities.

openness of English empiricism.⁵² English experimentalism encouraged collective work, as opposed to the secrecy of alchemical practices. A new category of natural philosophers thus appeared: amateurs who had never been taught at university and who dabbled in science at a time when the new experimental approach gave natural philosophy a ludic dimension. Natural philosophy also became a fashionable activity.⁵³ As a consequence of gentlemen amateurs entering the scientific world, new rules were applied: knowledge and results of experiments had to be shared, using complex scientific terms was frowned upon, and modesty was praised. These principles were part of a gentleman's code appropriated by seventeenth-century natural philosophers in England.⁵⁴ To a certain extent, the new 'openness of manners'⁵⁵ in science, imposed by gentlemen's civility, was beneficial to women, although they were not explicitly encouraged to join this new category of natural philosophers. This may be why English women philosophers were not mere 'salonnières'. Their desire for knowledge was prompted by Cartesianism, as was that of French women philosophers, but in England Descartes' strong influence was superimposed onto the openness of experimentalism.

Even though no linear evolution of women's relation to curiosity in England and France can be established, a few conclusions can be drawn from the chapters in this book. First, there is no denying the persistence, in both countries, of a distinction in people's minds between a good and a bad curiosity, and the common association of women with bad curiosity, as a persistent legacy of

52 In his preface to *Experiments and Considerations touching Colours* (London, Henry Herringman: 1664), Robert Boyle wrote about experiments on colours: '[...] the wonder, some of these Trifles have been wont to produce in all sorts of Beholders, and the access they have sometimes gain'd ev'n to the Closets of Ladies, seem to promise that since the subject is so pleasing, that the Speculation appears as Delightful as Difficult, such easie and recreative Experiments, which require but little time, or charge, or trouble in the making, and when made are sensible and surprizing enough, may contribute more than others [...] to recommend those parts of Learning (Chemistry and Corpuscular Philosophy) by which they have been produc'd' (sig. A4^r). Boyle was looking for supporters of the experimental philosophy, and it appears that women's support was most welcome.

53 For example, in 1655, William Cavendish wrote: 'it is *A-la-mode* to Write of Natural Philosophy' in a preface to Margaret Cavendish's *The Philosophical and Physical Opinions* (London, John Martin & James Allestrye: 1655).

54 Shapin S., *A Social History of Truth. Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England* (Chicago – London: 1994) xvii.

55 Johns A., "History, Science, and the History of the Book: The Making of Natural Philosophy in Early Modern England", *Publishing History* 30 (1991) 5–30 (9).

Eve's fatal inquisitiveness. Christophe Martin shows in his chapter how explicit this opposition was in late seventeenth-century France. Bad, female curiosity was obvious in women's natural tendency to gossip and in their fascination for novelties. However, the relations between women and curiosity were complex and ambivalent at any given time between the sixteenth and the eighteenth century as conflicting representations and perceptions cohabited. One reason for the ambivalence of the judgement on curiosity was the fact that curiosity was always gauged in relation to other variables, such as age, sex, rank and occupation, as Neil Kenny contends in his final chapter on curiosity and the social orders. Kenny shows the 'interconnectedness' of these variables, and therefore the complexity of the judgement on curiosity. He both takes as a premise and reassesses the idea, which he first put forward in his book *The Uses of Curiosity*, that the more female-oriented curiosity became, the more likely it was to be judged negatively, and he confronts this idea to a new evaluation of curiosity in which the other variables are also taken into account. Another reason is that curiosity was judged differently depending on the object of a woman's inquisitiveness. As Marie-Frédérique Pellegrin argues in her chapter, the object of curiosity as well as the mental faculty that a curious woman resorted to – whether it be imagination or reason – also determined the judgment on a woman's curiosity. The necessary combination of curiosity with other variables accounts for the contradictory statements on the relation of women to curiosity in early modern France and England. Thus women's interest in intellectual pursuits might be judged favourably in the case of the modest Anne Conway, while being strongly condemned in the case of the ostentatious Duchess of Newcastle – as Neil Kenny puts it in his chapter below, curiosity was judged according to 'decorum'. What emerges from these case studies and more general statements is that, in England and in France, the history of the relations between women and curiosity is primarily the history of a largely subjective and often gendered *judgement* on curiosity.

Armel Dubois-Nayt's, Laura Levine's, and Susan Wiseman's chapters show that women were also the objects of *men's* curiosity: female sexuality and generation, monsters, and undefinable beings – women who did not act as was expected from them –, all aroused men's curiosity, which reveals that a study of women and curiosity is mainly a study of men's curiosity about women, and of men's frustration at not being able to fathom women. Many 'books of curiosities', encyclopedic treatises that were widely read in the period and often republished across the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, testify to men's obsession with getting an exhaustive understanding of pregnancy and generation. These texts also focus on the consequences of women's behaviour during

their pregnancy on the child to be born.⁵⁶ The idea that women's imaginations could lead to the birth of monstrous children prevailed in the period, and well into the eighteenth century. To all these enquiries about women's reproductive functions, a similar answer is given, which draws upon Galenic medicine: women's humoural composition, their being cold and moist, is what accounts for all their idiosyncracies.⁵⁷ Male curiosity about generation and women's sexual functions was stimulated from the late Middle Ages by the belief that women possessed a hidden secret, that is knowledge concerning sexuality and generation that men longed for. This idea was inherited from a late thirteenth-early fourteenth-century treatise attributed to Albertus Magnus, *De Secretis Mulierum*.⁵⁸ Katharine Park has shown that understanding 'women's secrets' became one of the main objects of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century medical writers, hence the numerous dissections of female bodies that aimed at unveiling the secret of the uterus.⁵⁹ More interestingly perhaps, women themselves proved interested in curiosity, in the observation of curiosity in others and in themselves, as appears from Marie-Gabrielle Lallemand's, Laetitia Coussement-Boillot's and Line Cottagnies's chapters on Scudéry, Wroth and Cavendish, three women who were curious about curiosity, whose manifestations they acutely observed and transcribed in their literary works. Women could thus also become the objects of their own curiosity.⁶⁰

56 See for example Basset Robert, *Curiosities; or the Cabinet of Nature* (London, N. and I. Oakes: 1637) 18, 19, 24; Lupton Thomas, *A Thousand Notable Things, Containing Modern Curiosities* (London, G. Conyers: 1706) 12, 14. See also the periodical *The British Apollo* (London, T. Sanders: 1711) 225.

57 See for example Basset, *Curiosities* 12.

58 See Lemay H.R., *Women's Secrets. A Translation of Pseudo-Albertus Magnus' De Secretis Mulierum with Commentaries* (Albany: 1992).

59 Park, *Secrets of Women* 25.

60 In particular, women's curiosity for their own bodies became a common theme in the eighteenth century. Women's self exploration is thus reflected in Gillray's portrait of female curiosity, which shows a woman staring at her buttocks in a mirror (1778), while a similar image is described in *A Court Lady's Curiosity; or, the Virgin undress'd* (1741). See Benedict, *Curiosity* 152, 154.

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