

## CURIOSITY, WOMEN, AND THE SOCIAL ORDERS

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Like other passions, virtues, and vices – such as avarice<sup>1</sup> -- curiosity was often judged in the early modern period less in absolute terms than in relation to social variables, whether explicit or implicit. Of these, perhaps the most prominent four were: rank; occupation; sex; age. Other variables that fed into judgments about curiosity included a person's state (in the sense of clerical–religious–lay or unmarried–married–widowed), location (urban or provincial), their being 'learned' or 'unlearned', and so on.

Beyond the question of curiosity, scholarship on the general relation between such variables in the period has long emphasized that, to varying extents, they cut across each other.<sup>2</sup> While occupation and sex were plotted onto each other most closely of all, occupation and rank were also closely entwined. On the other hand, there was obviously more latitude in the relation between sex on the one hand and rank or age on the other.

The interconnectedness, strong or weak, of such social variables was expressed by terms that cut across some of them. One's 'vocation' was an amalgam of rank, occupation, sex, and even of the right course of action in a given situation, according to the Calvinist moral theologian Jean de L'Espine: in a work published in 1587, he understood 'curiosité' as being a failure to follow one's vocation.<sup>3</sup> A person's 'quality' could be a combination of rank and state (in one of the senses just listed). Or rank and occupation could be informally bundled together in what Keith Wrightson has called the language of 'sorts' -- 'the richer sort', 'the middle sort', and so on.<sup>4</sup>

Starting out from the fact that the more curiosity was female and/or feminized in the early modern period, the more it was likely to be judged reprehensible,<sup>5</sup> I will take soundings to see what happens to this picture when it includes other social variables too. The soundings are taken mainly from mid-seventeenth- to early eighteenth-century northern Europe (before the more recognisably modern terminology of 'class' became dominant), mainly from France, but occasionally from the Germanic territories and England. My examples are too limited to produce firm conclusions, but might at least point to the question's complexity. By 'curiosity' I mean the recognisable family of terms (*curieux*, *Kuriosität*, and so on) which prominently designated in this period not just a passion, virtue, or vice but also certain kinds of objects ('curiosities'), as well as the relation *between* those objects and the

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<sup>1</sup> See Jonathan Patterson, *Representing Avarice in Late Renaissance France* (Oxford: forthcoming), chaps 1, 4.

<sup>2</sup> E.g. M. L. Bush (ed.), *Social Orders and Social Classes in Europe since 1500: Studies in Social Stratification* (London and New York: 1992), including the essay by Peter Burke, 'The Language of Orders in Early Modern Europe' (1–12); J. Michael Hayden, "States, Estates and Orders: The *qualité* of Female Clergy in Early Modern France", *French History* 8.1 (1994) 51–76; Carolyn C. Lougee, *Le Paradis des femmes': Women, Salons, and Social Stratification in Seventeenth-Century France* (Princeton: 1976), chaps 3–4.

<sup>3</sup> See Neil Kenny, *The Uses of Curiosity in Early Modern France and Germany* (Oxford: 2004) 120–23.

<sup>4</sup> Keith Wrightson, "Estates, Degrees, and Sorts: Changing Perceptions of Society in Tudor and Stuart England", in P. J. Corfield (ed.), *Language, History and Class* (Oxford: 1991) 30–52.

<sup>5</sup> See Kenny, *The Uses of Curiosity*, chap. 5. For scattered remarks on curiosity and social stratification (not relating to women for the most part), see *ibid.* 170–71, 173–74, 179–81, 184, 193, 199, 200–02, 207–08, 227, 233–34, 241, 249, 251, 252, 269–73, 277–78, 287.

‘curious’ desire for them. This approach to women and curiosity, which is obviously not the only possible one, is *not* therefore aimed primarily at investigating the question, that has been so revealingly studied in recent decades,<sup>6</sup> of the extent of women’s participation in early modern learning or science. The approach I adopt is much more limited in scope but might at least begin to suggest some ways in which the profound gendering of this key early modern category of knowledge interacted at a microtextual level with other social variables.

As I have tried to show elsewhere, the notion that the legitimacy of curiosity needs to be judged according to decorum – that is, by the appropriateness of curiosity to a particular person in a particular situation – was spelled out in detail in some of the many German university dissertations that were devoted to the theme. Some of their authors emphasized this relativizing principle of decorum by presenting *curiositas* as synonymous with the Greek terms *polypragmosyne* and *periergia*, meaning roughly ‘desire to do or discover things that go beyond one’s allotted role in life’.<sup>7</sup> A related pejorative understanding of curiosity that figured in such dissertations and in other treatises associated the passion with the vice of *voluptas*.<sup>8</sup> These two negative understandings of curiosity were certainly applied to a wide range of people of different ranks and sexes, including for example male dilettantes whose pleasure-seeking makes them flit superficially across a wide range of disciplines instead of focusing on one (to cite one German swipe at the French courtly culture of *honnêteté*).<sup>9</sup> But the quintessential, or perhaps the intensively typical, illustration provided was often female: Queen Christina of Sweden in the text just mentioned;<sup>10</sup> elsewhere, St Paul’s lascivious young widows wandering around houses and garrulously saying inappropriate things (1 Timothy 5.13).<sup>11</sup> Or sometimes this intense typicality was attributed to the lower social orders: according to one Lutheran leader, the curious, voluptuous love of novelty is found in all social orders but especially in the lower ones.<sup>12</sup>

Good curiosity, on the other hand, was not only much more likely to be male or masculine, but also somewhat more likely to be associated with an aristocratic and/or a courtly or urban milieu than with lower social orders. The association could take the form of attributing curiosity more to those who funded research than to those who undertook it: the curiosity of naturalists and others was sometimes represented as deriving ultimately from their patrons:

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<sup>6</sup> E.g. Lougee, ‘*Le Paradis des femmes*’; Colette Nativel (ed.), *Femmes savantes, savoirs de femmes: du crépuscule de la Renaissance à l’aube des Lumières: actes du colloque de Chantilly (22–24 septembre 1995)* (Geneva: 1999); Linda Timmermans, *L’Accès des femmes à la culture sous l’ancien régime* (Paris: 1993); Londa Schiebinger, ‘Gender in Early Modern Science’, in *History and the Disciplines: The Reclassification of Knowledge in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Donald R. Kelley (Rochester, NY: 1997) 319–34.

<sup>7</sup> See Kenny, *The Uses of Curiosity* 26, 37, 48, 53–53, 57–58, 62, 64–65, 67, 70, 83, 84–85.

<sup>8</sup> See *ibid.* 45, 62, 93.

<sup>9</sup> [Johann Brunnemann (*præses*)] and Christian Henel (*respondens*), *Dissertationum juridicarum de πολυπραγμοσύνη*, germ: *Einmischung in mancherley Haendel, et de partu ancillæ furtivæ [...]* editio *tertia*, Law Faculty, University of Frankfurt-Oder, held [and first printed] 1670 (Frankfurt-Oder: 1691), 21.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* 20.

<sup>11</sup> Joachim Westphal, *De vitanda curiositate oratio [...] in consessu ministrorum ecclesiae recitata* (Hamburg: Joachim Löwe, 1573) sigs. [A6<sup>v</sup>]–[A7<sup>r</sup>]. For other writers citing this *locus*, see Kenny, *The Uses of Curiosity* 397, n. 36.

<sup>12</sup> Joachim Christian Westphal (*præses*) and Heinrich Pipping (*respondens*), *De curioso novitatis studio*, Philosophy Faculty, Univ. of Leipzig, held [and first printed] in 1687, in Heinrich Pipping, *Exercitationes academicae juveniles* (Leipzig: heirs of Johann Gross, 1708), chap. 2, para. XIII.

Likewise, this curiosity of ours shows itself to be excellent, since it is not cultivated by superficial and feeble men, by obdurate and rustic wits, by the low and squalid dregs of humanity. It requires fiery spirit and acute intelligence, fit for such subtleties. So, those people with the greatest power in the world have for the most part delighted in this curiosity of ours.<sup>13</sup>

The author of this inaugural lecture at the Danzig *Gymnasium academicum* then goes onto to sketch a history of princely curiosity that takes in Alexander the Great and others before culminating in Charles II, patron of the Royal Society. Not going quite so far, a more famous *Gymnasium* professor, the Jesuit Kaspar Schott, informed the dedicatee of his *Technica curiosa* (1664), the Elector of Mainz, that the ‘rare, ingenious, and curious things’ it contained were ‘worthy of a Prince, a great Prince’ (‘Quae cum sint rara ingeniosa, curiosa, Principe digna, & Principe Maximo’).<sup>14</sup> Or again, the theological *Octo quaestiones* allegedly put to the celebrated Benedictine abbot Johannes Trithemius by Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I were posthumously reissued by his order in 1621 as *Curiositas regia*, ‘A Ruler’s Curiosity’.<sup>15</sup>

By contrast, when specifically attributed to the lowest social orders, curiosity of any kind was almost invariably condemned.<sup>16</sup> To take an English example of curiosity directed not at the natural world but at human behaviour: in George Lillo’s *Fatal Curiosity: A True Tragedy of Three Acts* (London: John Gray, 1737) a young man ends up being killed by his poverty-stricken parents because, upon returning from making his fortune in the Indies, he cannot resist the temptation to disguise himself as a wealthy visiting stranger so he can view their surprise when he reveals his identity and ends their financial woes, the problem being that in their desperation they kill him to rob him of his wealth before he has time to reveal he is their son. The implication is that curiosity has no place in a social context of hand-to-mouth survival, in which it is a grotesquely inappropriate, dangerous luxury.

Curiosity was sometimes represented as particularly ill-befitting not only the poor but also provincials -- even the provincial nobility, in contrast to Paris-based *connoisseurs*, in the case of a one-act 1702 play by le sieur Petit, *Les Curieux de province*. It satirizes the naïve enthusiasm that visiting provincial nobles express for the capital’s fashionable curiosities (‘curiosités à la mode’), including a second-rate opera, which fails on the other hand to fool Damis, the visitors’ sophisticated host, who knows them because his country estate is near their home but who mainly resides in Paris himself. It is made clear that ‘either a man or a woman’ can be stupidly

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<sup>13</sup> ‘Caeterum haec Curiositatis nostrae excellentia vel exinde quoque patescit, quandoquidem non leves & tenuiores homines, non saxea & rustica ingenia, non abjectae & sordidae hominum quisquillae eam colunt. Igneus hic requiritur spiritus, sagaxque ingenium, huiusmodi subtilitatum capax. Unde contigit, ut qui summam in Mundo potestatem habuerunt, Curiositatem quoque nostram ut plurimum in deliciis ha[b]uerunt.’ Georg Seger, *Oratio inauguralis, de curiositate physica*, Medical Faculty, *Gymnasium Academicum*, Danzig, held 1675 (Danzig: David-Fridericus Rhetius, 1676), section XIII.

<sup>14</sup> Kaspar Schott, *Technica curiosa, sive Mirabilia artis* (Würzburg: printed for Johann Andreas Endter and the heirs of Wolfgang Endter the Younger, by Johann Jobst Hertz, 1664), dedication (to the Elector of Mainz).

<sup>15</sup> On another aspect of this renaming, see Kenny, *The Uses of Curiosity* 141–42.

<sup>16</sup> For a German example from 1673, see *ibid.* 413–14.

curious about fashion ('soit homme ou femme'), and indeed the visitors are of both sexes, a Baronne and a Marquis.<sup>17</sup>

The representation of bad curiosity as provincial stuck: a century later, another one-act play (by Planard), set in what seems to be a part-noble, part-bourgeois milieu, shows a sophisticated Parisian mother describing in these terms the near-disastrous curiosity of Forlange, a visitor who is staying in her household: 'if he has the fault of his small town, Paris and my advice will be able to correct it in him' ('s'il a le défaut de sa petite ville / Paris et mes conseils sauront l'en corriger').<sup>18</sup> Although this curiosity is mainly of the busybody type, it is shown to coexist in Forlange with naïve bedazzlement at what Forlange emphasizes to be the instant gratification offered, in a 'boutique' and elsewhere, by the capital's commercialized culture of curiosities, in the form of itemized, fragmented sights and artefacts. In this case, provincial curiosity is more heavily gendered: two sensible characters discuss Forlange:

LISE. [...] So people are right to spread the word everywhere that a more curious man was never seen. GERMAIN, *to himself*. Quite. Indeed, deep down I think that when she forged him, Nature meant to make a woman.<sup>19</sup>

The play thus makes a strong connection between the social variables of sex (or rather gender, in this effeminate man) and geography.

So does a *comédie-vaudeville*, *Les Curieux de Compiègne* by Dancourt (1698), in which attractive nobles, here of the warrior kind, are again defined in opposition to curiosity, but now at the expense of the urban bourgeoisie rather than the minor provincial nobility, and now with Paris's association with a tacky culture of curiosities coming to the fore, instead of its role as taste arbiter. The play shows a group of *curieux* from the Parisian bourgeoisie visiting an army encampment at Compiègne, to the north of the capital. Their curiosity too gets gendered, with the aristocratic Dancourt suggesting, via the innkeeper Guillaume, that the curiosity of the bourgeois women is worse than that of their husbands, because still more indecorous, and also worse than it would be if they were aristocratic women whose rank properly freed them from domestic chores:

GUILLAUME [...] I can just about forgive men for it, but what are them bourgeois women doin' here?  
 Me PINUIN. Curiosity is more forgivable in women than in men, and ...  
 GUILLAUME. What? Are you taking the mick? Curiosity is allowed in some women, but in tradeswomen, alehouse-keepers, proctors' wives? Is it their business to leave their home and go off to the army?  
 Me PINUIN. It's true you may have a point there.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Le sieur Petit, *Les Curieux de province, ou L'Oncle dupé* (The Hague: Pierre Husson, 1702) 3–24 at 8.

<sup>18</sup> François Antoine Eugène de Planard, *Le Curieux, comédie* (Paris: Delavigne fils, 1807), 4. On this play, see Kenny, *The Uses of Curiosity* 364–66.

<sup>19</sup> 'LISE. [...] On a donc bien raison de répandre en tous lieux / Que l'on ne vit jamais d'homme si curieux. / GERMAIN, *en confidence*. Assurément; aussi je crois au fond de l'âme / Qu'en le formant Nature a cru faire une femme.' Planard, *Le Curieux* 6.

<sup>20</sup> 'GUILLAUME [...] pour les hommes encore passe, n'an leur pardonne: mais ces Bourgeoises que venont-elles faire ici?

Me PINUIN. La curiosité est plus pardonnable aux femmes qu'aux hommes, et ...

GUILLAUME. Hé fy morgué, c'est se moquer, la curiosité est permise à de certaines femmes: mais à des Marchandes, à des Cabaretieres, à des Procureuses: est-ce que c'est leur besogne de quitter leur

So while in the preceding examples (Petit and Planard) rank itself was not a major factor in making provincials *curieux* in a pejorative sense, here it is, and in a way that combines rank with gender. If, in the case of men, the higher their rank then the greater the likelihood that curiosity is positive, that correlation does not seem to have existed strongly for women, despite some association (to which I will return) between good curiosity and high-ranking women in the period. (It is hinted at here by Dancourt.) Indeed, much male attribution of bad curiosity to women focused less on the alleged qualities of busybodiness and garrulousness that were deemed to characterize women of all ranks than on what the men presented as a bundle of worldly pursuits – a culture of curiosities – that was characteristic especially of women who had leisure and disposable finance. For many clerics and others, what made this, if anything, even worse than less wealthy kinds of female curiosity was the sense of superiority that it engendered and the ostentation that money made possible: in short, *vanité*. Here is a 1739 prospectus, *La Curiosité fructueuse*, that attempted to raise funds for experimental demonstrations:

Yet it has to be agreed that some women rise above their sex and become distinguished by applying themselves to the liberal arts, such as literature, poetry, music, and painting, in all of which several women have even been seen to excel, indeed so much that, since these arts seem to have been designed for sensual pleasure, polite manners, and intellectual cultivation, it might be assumed that the glory acquired by the illustrious ladies who have studied them was first the object and then the fruit of their desire for knowledge. But on closer inspection it turns out that the prime factor was education, and that vanity alone was responsible for the rest. As for lower-order women, if curiosity causes them to read, usually it's stories, fables, poetry, and novels; and if they try to inform themselves, it's only about what's going on at the neighbours' or, at most, about what's new in the world of fashion. There's no salt flavouring in all that and so no fruit to harvest; so that's what makes their curiosity the more reprehensible and dangerous for being more bland.

Men's is much more noble and elevated.<sup>21</sup>

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ménage, et de s'en venir à l'armée?

Me PINUIN. Il y a quelque chose à dire à cela, vous avez raison.' Florent Carton Dancourt, *Les Curieux de Compiègne*, in Dancourt, *Les Œuvres. Troisième édition*, 9 vols (Rouen and Paris: widow of Pierre Ribou, 1729), vol. 4, [259]–314 at 273–74.

<sup>21</sup> 'On doit pourtant demeurer d'accord qu'il y en a quelques unes qui s'élevans au dessus de leur sexe, se distinguent par leur application aux Arts Libéraux, tels que sont les Belles Lettres, la Poésie, la Musique & la Peinture, dans tous lesquels on en a même vû plusieurs qui ont excellé, de sorte que ces Arts ne paroissans être faits que pour le plaisir des sens, la politesse des mœurs & la nourriture de l'esprit, on pourroit penser à l'égard des Dames illustres qui en ont fait leur étude, que la gloire qu'elles y ont aquis, a donc été l'objet & ensuite le fruit du désir qu'elles ont eû de savoir: mais si l'on veut examiner les choses de plus près, on trouvera que l'éducation y a eu la première part, & que la vanité seule a achevé le reste. Quant aux femmes d'un ordre inférieur, si la Curiosité les porte à la lecture, c'est ordinairement celle des Contes, des Fables, des Poésies & des Romans; & si elles cherchent à s'instruire, c'est seulement de ce qui se passe chez leurs voisins, ou tout au plus de la nouv[e]auté des modes & des ajustemens. Or il n'y a dans tout cela nul sel, & par conséquent nul fruit à recueillir: voila donc ce qui rend leur Curiosité d'autant plus blamable & d'autant plus dangereuse qu'elle est plus insipide.

The anonymous author carefully distinguishes between the pursuits of wealthy, probably mainly aristocratic and upper-bourgeois women on the one hand, and those of literate but less wealthy women on the other. Both amount to equally dangerous curiosity, but the first has the added factor of 'vanité'. By then attaching the epithet 'noble' to male curiosity, the prospectus makes sex trump rank: if only what these high-ranking women spend on their fruitless curiosity could be redirected at the fruitful kind of curiosity practised by the financially needy, implicitly lower-rank author ...

A similar suggestion was made by Fénelon, who was Archbishop of Cambrai from 1695. In the following passage he limits the scope of bad female curiosity to learned women. He also widens the scope of female vanity to include all women, but specifies that the kind of vanity found in curious women is the worst:

Other, coarser kinds of vanity can be corrected more easily, since they can be seen with the eyes and mutually reprimanded, and since they reveal a frivolous temperament. But a curious woman, who takes in pride in knowing a great deal, flatters herself that she is superior genius within her sex, and thanks herself for disdaining the entertainments and vanity of other women.<sup>22</sup>

Vanity is more insidious in the case of the curious woman because less immediately visible and more laced with pride. This evocation of the patristic notion of *vana curiositas* seems to envisage an aristocratic woman: Fénelon is addressing advice to an unnamed 'dame de qualité' concerning her daughter's education.

The topos about the vanity specific to certain kinds of curious women also appears in the treatise on education written by a friend of Fénelon's, another cleric who also tutored children from great noble families, the abbé Fleury:

It is true that they do not need most of the knowledge that is counted nowadays as study; neither the Latin, the Greek, the rhetoric, nor the philosophy that is taught in colleges are of any use to them. And if some, more curious than the rest, have sought to learn them, most have derived from that only vanity, which has made them odious to other women and disdained by

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Celle des homes est bien plus noble & bien plus relevée.' *La Curiosité fructueuse* (Paris: Bauche père and Christophe David, 1739), 10–11. On this work, see Kenny, *The Uses of Curiosity* 203–06, 394.

<sup>22</sup> 'D'autres vanités plus grossières se corrigent plus facilement, parce qu'on les aperçoit, qu'on se les reproche, et qu'elle marquent un caractère frivole. Mais une femme curieuse, et qui se pique de savoir beaucoup, se flatte d'être un génie supérieur dans son sexe, elle se sait bon gré de mépriser les amusements et les vanités des autres femmes.' *Avis de Monsieur de Fénelon, archevêque de Cambrai, à une dame de qualité, sur l'éducation de Mademoiselle sa fille*, in François de Salignac de la Mothe Fénelon, *Œuvres*, ed. Jacques Le Brun, 2 vols (Paris: 1983–97), vol. 2, [1125]–1134 at 1130. See also Fénelon's 'Discours sur les principaux devoirs et les avantages de la vie religieuse', in *Œuvres*, ed. Le Brun, vol. 1, 894–919 at 918: 'Mais fuyez comme un poison toutes les curiosités, tous les amusements d'esprit, car les femmes n'ont pas moins de penchant à être vaines par leur esprit que dans leur corps. Souvent les lectures qu'elles font avec tant d'empressement se tournent en parures vaines et en ajustements immodestes de leur esprit; souvent elles lisent par vanité, comme elles se coiffent. Il faut faire de l'esprit comme du corps; tout superflu doit être retranché; [...]. Ô quel amusement pernicieux dans ce qu'on appelle lectures les plus solides! On veut tout savoir, juger de tout, parler de tout, se faire valoir sur tout; rien ne ramène tant le monde vain et faux dans les solitudes que cette vaine curiosité des livres.'

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In this case the attack on women who have access to college-like learning probably targets a wider range of relatively wealthy women than just aristocrats. Although this treatise originated in a commission relating to an aristocratic boy, this eventual printed version extends not only to girls but also to other social orders above the peasantry. The curious girls and young women accused of vanity here seem to be the participants in, and identifiers with, the great wave of women-led salon culture that fanned out from the aristocracy into the upper bourgeoisie in seventeenth-century France.

However, this attack is more nuanced than that of the 1739 prospectus quoted earlier. Fleury means the phrase ‘la plûpart’ to be taken seriously, as becomes clear when the topos re-emerges at the very end of this chapter on female education:

They can do without the remaining subjects – Latin and the other languages, history, mathematics, poetry, and all the other curiosities. They are not destined for roles that make the study of these necessary or useful, and such study would make many women vain. Nonetheless, their leisure hours would be better spent on it than on reading novels, playing, or talking about their skirts and ribbons.<sup>24</sup>

Within Fleury’s terminology, ‘curious studies’ (‘études curieuses’) are one of four kinds of study, the other three being ‘necessary’, ‘useful’, and ‘useless’ studies. The disciplines listed here are a combination of ‘useful’ and ‘curious studies’. This passage establishes a similar distinction to the one given in the 1739 prospectus between higher-brow pursuits and lower-brow female pursuits. But unlike that prospectus, Fleury does not map that distinction onto a rank-based one between higher and lower social orders. And whereas the 1739 prospectus defines both kinds as bad curiosity, Fleury only defines some of the higher-brow kind as curiosity, although the lower-brow kind (reading romances, talking fashion) *was* often called curiosity by others. Instead, ‘useful’ and ‘curious studies’ are morally neutral in themselves,<sup>25</sup> but bad for virtually all girls, and for many or even most boys, for reasons of decorum: they will not help them in their role in life. Unusual for a critic of salon culture is Fleury’s passing but repeated acknowledgement that not all girls will be made vain by ‘curious studies’ (‘*plusieurs en tiroient de la vanité*’), and his consequent concession – echoing the traditional ‘keeping out of mischief’ approach to

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<sup>23</sup> ‘Il est vray qu’elles n’ont pas besoin de la plûpart des connoissances, que l’on comprend aujourd’huy sous le nom d’études, ny le latin, ny le grec, ny la r[h]étorique, ou la philosophie des collèges ne sont point à leur usage; & si quelques-unes, plus curieuses que les autres, ont voulu les apprendre, la plûpart n’en ont tiré que de la vanité, qui les a renduës odieuses aux autres femmes, & méprisables aux hommes.’ Claude Fleury, *Traité du choix et de la méthode des études* (Paris: Pierre Aubouin, Pierre Emery, and Charles Clousier, 1686) 264–65. The present discussion expands upon, and develops in a different direction (that of social stratification), the remarks on Fleury and Fénelon in Kenny, *The Uses of Curiosity* 212–16, 391–93. On these thinkers’ views about social reform, see François Cuhe, *Une pensée sociale catholique: Fleury, La Bruyère et Fénelon* (Paris: 1991).

<sup>24</sup> ‘Elles se peuvent passer de tout le reste des études: du latin, & des autres langues, de l’histoire, des mathématiques, de la poésie, & de toutes les autres curiosités. Elles ne sont point destinées aux emplois qui rendent ces études nécessaires ou utiles, & plusieurs en tiroient de la vanité. Il vaudroit mieux toutefois qu’elles y employassent les heures de leur loisir, qu’à lire des romans, à jouer, ou parler de leurs juppes, & de leurs rubans.’ Fleury, *Traité* 270.

<sup>25</sup> Studies that are bad in themselves – alchemy, divination, and so on – are given a fourth label, ‘useless studies’. So ‘curiosity’ is not the automatically negative label that it usually is for Fénelon.

female education – that ‘curious studies’ are at least better than more trivial pursuits for the few non-vain women.

Rank and state intersect with gender in Fleury’s prescriptions about female education: his pushing girls away from ‘curious’ and ‘useful’ studies towards ‘necessary’ ones is part of his agrarian agenda of social reform, which would see for example the female nobility acquire more systematically a knowledge-base that included elements of ‘grammar’ (correct writing), arithmetic, economics (estate management), and jurisprudence, to enable women to take a larger role in managing family assets, which is particularly important in France, says Fleury, because its widows inherit.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, ‘useful studies’, such as Latin and history, are not for women of any rank (except for nuns who need some Latin), nor for boys of the middling sort (‘de condition médiocre’), but only for boys of the higher social orders (‘d’une condition honête’), since they are likely to have a role in public affairs. ‘Curious studies’ such as poetics, antiquarianism, ancient languages other than Latin, are only good when appropriate to very specialist needs, for example of high-ranking clerics. So ‘curious studies’ produce vanity not only in most women but also in some of the men who undertake them and are proud to know what others do not.<sup>27</sup>

Like many of his contemporaries (such as Fénelon), Fleury also wishes women not to be knowledgeable (‘savantes’) about theology: the religious component of his ‘necessary studies’ for women is limited to ethics and basic dogma. He does not expand this point in relation to rank, but others did: another reason why female curiosity was sometimes thought particularly pernicious among the high-ranking was that it was more likely corrupt lower-ranking women. In the case of religion, this was thought by some to have happened with Marguerite de Navarre, sister of François I<sup>er</sup> and Catholic promoter of Luther-inspired evangelical reform:

But it must be acknowledged that, among so many fine qualities, she had that dangerous fault to which the most spiritual and intelligent ladies are usually most prone, unless they take great care to protect themselves from it – I mean: great curiosity to know the secrets of new doctrines, especially as regards religion. From that comes presumptuousness (from wanting to judge those doctrines) and then error and stubbornness (from adhering to the doctrines). The Protestants, who easily spotted this weak point, did not fail to take advantage of it by trying to recruit such a great Princess to their cause.<sup>28</sup>

Her curiosity was all the more damaging because of the influence her rank gave her.

This particular danger posed by high-ranking female curiosity was not confined to religion. In a play performed after the period I mainly consider, *La Curieuse* by Madame de Genlis (full version 1781), the eponymous child-heroine -- the aristocratic Pauline -- almost causes her brother’s death through her prying curiosity, which she is responsible for passing down the social hierarchy to her

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<sup>26</sup> Fleury, *Traité* 269–70.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. 89, 92.

<sup>28</sup> ‘Mais il faut avoüer que parmi tant de belles qualitez, elle eût ce dangereux défaut, auquel les Dames les plus spirituelles sont ordinairement le plus sujettes, si elles ne prennent grand soin de s’en garantir, je veux dire, une grande curiosité pour sçavoir les secrets des nouvelles Doctrines, sur tout en matiere de Religion, d’où vient insensiblement la présomption, pour en vouloir juger, & ensuite l’erreur & l’opiniastreté, pour s’y attacher.

Les Protestans, qui découvrirent aisément ce foible, ne manquerent pas de s’en prévaloir, pour tascher d’engager une si grande Princesse dans leur parti.’ Louis Maimbourg, *Histoire du calvinisme* (Paris: Sebastien Mabre Cramoisy) 16.



accomplice Rose, the gardener's daughter. Rose says 'Oh! She's the one who's curious. And she made me the same.' ('Oh! C'est celle-là qui est curieuse; elle me l'a rendue aussi, moi.'). As if to emphasize that Rose has a point, the playwright has Pauline regret that she's given the peasant girl these 'bad examples' ('mauvais exemples') and Pauline's mother makes her ashamed at having done so.<sup>29</sup>

When, on the other hand, the main focus in a play shifted onto the curiosity of a low-ranking woman, then *her* curiosity could be more excusable, even though it was of the busybody kind widely condemned in the early modern period and by Plutarch (in his influential treatise on *polypragmosyne*, known in translation as *De la curiosité*). As I have tried to show elsewhere, this happened in French plays (and one comic opera) stretching from the figure of the nurse in Pierre Corneille's *Mélite* (first published 1633) right up to the *femme de chambre* in an obscure comedy *Les Heureux Mensonges, ou La Curiosité excusable* by Mademoiselle Carreau (1813).<sup>30</sup> What these low-ranking *curieuses* have in common is that their prying and indiscretion, while reprehensible in itself, results in knowledge-circulation that makes the happy ending possible. Their reputation seems to rely less on rigorous moral purity than does that of the higher-ranking female protagonists, so their morality can more easily be sacrificed for the general good. Their lot can be contrasted with the devastating reputation-loss of the high-ranking heroines of Joan de Luce's 1822 novel *Curiosity* and of Eliza Haywood's 1724 novella *The Masqueraders; or Fatal Curiosity*, which ends with these words:

Philecta is sufficiently convinc'd how infinitely to blame she was, in indulging a Curiosity which proved so fatal to her Virtue, her Reputation, and her Peace of Mind; and which, 'tis highly probable, will in a short time be found so to her Life.<sup>31</sup>

However, if curiosity of various kinds was often deemed particularly reprehensible and dangerous among high-born women, on the other hand did not the above-mentioned *mondain* current defend and promote female learning – and even sometimes curiosity -- especially in the higher social orders, both within upper-aristocracy salons and among their imitators in the lower nobility and the wealthy bourgeoisie?<sup>32</sup> Let me investigate two influential texts in this current, separated by a century.

*L'Honneste Femme* (1632) by the sometime Franciscan Jacques Du Bosc, a manual for the *mondaine*, salon-oriented woman, is exactly the kind of work against which Fleury will later argue. Du Bosc urges 'dames' – both aristocrats and those within the urban bourgeoisie who had servants and access to salon-like polite conversation – to acquire a considerable amount of knowledge through reading and conversation (systematic education is not mentioned), for the sake not of any professional purposes but of broadening their mind and of enabling them to contribute actively to conversation. The household management praised by Fleury is here

<sup>29</sup> [Stéphanie Félicité Ducrest de Saint Aubin Genlis], *La Curieuse* [2-act version 1779; 5-act version 1781], in *Théâtre de société* (2 vols.; Dublin: G. Wilson, R. Moncrieffe, P. Byrne, & R. Burton, 1783) 249, 250. I quote from the 5-act version. On this play, see Kenny, *The Uses of Curiosity* 402–05.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. 418–23.

<sup>31</sup> [Eliza Haywood], *The Masqueraders; or Fatal Curiosity: being the Secret History of a Late Amour* (London: J. Roberts, 1724) 47.

<sup>32</sup> See Lougee, 'Le Paradis des femmes'; Ian Maclean, *Woman Triumphant: Feminism in French Literature, 1610–1652* (Oxford: 1977).

denigrated – as consisting in giving orders to servants and in combing children’s hair – in favour of music, history, philosophy.<sup>33</sup> But in the chapter in question, ‘On learned ladies’, Du Bosc does not in fact mainly present himself as defending female *curiosity*.<sup>34</sup> Why not? He equates female curiosity almost entirely (in another chapter) with pointless pursuits such as malicious gossip, away from which he feels women need to be directed.<sup>35</sup> One explanation for his reluctance to call women’s good desire for good knowledge ‘curiosity’ is that his treatise was composed at a time when, irrespective of sex, the existence of a good kind of curiosity was generally not as self-evident as it would be 50 years later. That explanation is partly true, but the following passage nuances it:

I do not condemn that divine curiosity of philosophers and of fine minds, which has revealed to us the secrets of nature and has given us the meant to regulate the soul’s passions. I condemn only that curiosity which leads us to know things that are useless or beset by vice.<sup>36</sup>

The fact that Du Bosc *does*, at this single point, label as ‘curiosity’ what seems to be gendered here as a male pursuit of good knowledge suggests that he feels that the common association of female curiosity with vice is so strong that defending female learning as curiosity would simply undermine his defence of female learning in the eyes of some readers. By 1673, Poulain de la Barre published his bold feminist treatise, that situation seems to have changed a little.<sup>37</sup> But it is still striking that the period’s new badges of female cultural agency – *dame savante*, *femme forte*, *précieuse* – did not include *curieuse* or *curiosae*, whereas *curieux* and *curiosi* became badges of honour for men in many contexts.

A century later, however, curiosity could be attributed more squarely to a noblewoman interested (in this case) in naturalist knowledge, and in a way that seems to have been directed at literate women among the bourgeoisie too. But even this female curiosity is represented as more circumscribed than its male noble equivalent. The noblewoman, ‘Madame la Comtesse de Jonval’, is one of the small group of interlocutors in *Le Spectacle de la nature* (1732–42) by the abbé Pluche. This compendium of naturalist knowledge, directed at least in part at children, was one of the most widely read works in eighteenth-century France. The Countess’s husband, assisted by a cleric (‘Le Prieur’), is teaching a noble boy, ‘Monsieur le Chevalier du Breuil’, about nature during the college holidays. The Countess soon joins in the conversations. The whole enterprise is saturated in a positive language of curiosity.<sup>38</sup> The Countess is represented not just as curious herself but, even more, as possessing and transmitting considerable knowledge that will satisfy a boy’s curiosity about some aspects of nature. She determines some of the topics and chairs the discussion

<sup>33</sup> Jacques Du Bosc, *L’Honneste Femme* (Lyon: Jean Gregoire, 1665) 266.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., “Des dames scavantes” (258–78). There is one minor exception (276).

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. 132–37.

<sup>36</sup> ‘Je ne blâme pas cette divine curiosité des Philosophes, & des bons esprit[s] qui nous a découvert les secrets de la nature, & qui nous a donné les moyens de regler les passions de l’ame. Je condamne seulement cette curiosité, qui nous porte à sçavoir ce qui est inutile ou vitieux, [...]’ Ibid. 133.

<sup>37</sup> In contrast with Du Bosc, Poulain de la Barre associates female (as well as male) curiosity with a quest for deep knowledge, rather than with the gossip and other practices regularly conceived by others as a more superficial culture of curiosities. François Poulain de la Barre, *De l’égalité des deux sexes* (Paris: Fayard, 1984) 103–04.

<sup>38</sup> On other aspects of this work’s treatment of curiosity, see Kenny, *The Uses of Curiosity* 216–19. The Countess figures only in volume 1, and the discussions are eventually replaced by letters.

while her husband is away travelling. This epistemological authority flows partly from the authority she possesses by virtue of her rank: she orders a servant to bring them her box of carefully preserved butterfly specimens.<sup>39</sup> However, she herself points out, perhaps in an elusively ironic tone, the decorum-based limitations on her role and her knowledge (derived from observation and collecting rather than from books<sup>40</sup>), as does the original version of the author's Preface:

She is a lady of sound character, who likes to be occupied, but who also knows how to reconcile the extreme passion that she has to adorn her mind with useful knowledge with, on the other hand, what she owes to worldly decorum and to her state.<sup>41</sup>

She has a liminal role within the knowledge economy, as is evident when they discuss a bobbin-winder, of which Le Prieur recalls:

It was purely to satisfy the curiosity of Madame the Countess herself, and to know exactly how long a silkworm's thread could be, that I had a little bobbin-winder made, [...].<sup>42</sup>

So, when curiosity is thus explicitly attributed to her, she is put partly in the same position as the boy, as someone learning from men, and yet also partly in the more active position of someone instigating an experiment.

These two examples suggest the complexity of the relation of high-ranking women to the culture of curiosities. Du Bosc advocates unsystematic but extensive knowledge-acquisition by such women; he thus promotes the kind of epistemological model that would soon often be understood in the period as the collecting of curiosities (material or discursive), except that he cautiously refrains from that terminology. Pluche, on the other hand, operates within a modified culture of curiosities in which the model of collecting 'particulars' ('particularités') is now limited to 'natural curiosities' ('curiosités naturelles') and is more compatible with systematic knowledge, but is more restricted by decorum for the noblewoman on her Picardy estate than for Du Bosc's 'honneste femme'. Pluche's Countess claims 'garden, vegetables, fruit, pets' ('jardin, légumes, fruit, animaux domestiques') as her special subjects. Even Fleury would probably have approved of this knowledge in her, although he would not have called it 'curiosity'.

If we turn to the Germanic territories, can we find more emphatic promotion of curiosity specifically among women of the nobility and bourgeoisie? Yes, but that curiosity was not necessarily learning, and was sometimes even distinguished from it. Many German books and periodicals marketed a wide range of knowledge-fragments as 'curious', using the Germanicized version of the French term to promote a courtly

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<sup>39</sup> [Noël Antoine Pluche], *Le Spectacle de la nature*, vol. 1 (The Hague: Jean Neaulme, 1743) 48, 59.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. 66.

<sup>41</sup> 'C'est une Dame d'un caractere solide, & qui s'occupe volontiers, mais qui sait en même tems concilier l'extrême passion qu'elle a de s'orner l'esprit par des connoissances utiles, avec ce qu'elle doit aux bienséances du monde & à son état.' [Noël Antoine Pluche], *Le Spectacle de la nature*, vol. 1 (Paris: widow of Estienne, and Jean Desaint, 1732) xiiij. This passage was excised from the Preface in the later, 1743 edition to which I otherwise refer.

<sup>42</sup> 'C'est uniquement pour contenter la curiosité de Madame la Comtesse elle-même, & pour savoir au juste quelle pouvoit être la longueur du fil d'un Ver à soye, que j'ai fait construire un petit dévidoir, [...].' Pluche, *Le Spectacle de la nature*, vol. 1 (The Hague: Jean Neaulme, 1743) 85.

sophistication redolent of France. The author of one such volume, the *Useful, Gallant, and Curious Lexicon for Women* (1715), outlined in a preface the three categories of women for whom he was catering. The ‘learned’ (‘gelehrte’) kind is *not* associated by him with curiosity. Nor, more predictably, is the ‘domestic and conscientious’ kind (‘haushältige und sorgfältige’). Rather, curiosity is the province of the ‘curious and gallant’ kind (‘curiöse und galante’), to whom is directed information about foreign fashion, oils and silks, games, fancy turns of phrase, or goddesses who might crop up in a poem at a wedding.<sup>43</sup> The culture of curiosities seems to have been at its most unhesitant in appealing specifically to noble and bourgeois women when the knowledge-fragments on offer related to material or discursive adornments that were learning-lite.

There were however in France and the Germanic territories other publications within the culture of curiosities that did appeal to what they presented as the good curiosity of noble and bourgeois women for all kinds of knowledge-fragments, not just ones that were to serve as worldly adornments. These tended to be publications directed not only at these women, but at men too, and sometimes even at women and men of any rank. One book of secrets -- detailing remedies, tricks, cosmetics, crafts, chemical techniques, and more -- was presented as a *Cabinet of New and Rare Curosities* with the author insisting that ‘no-one of any rank, sex, or age can fail to derive some use from this [...]’.<sup>44</sup> The postulation of a good curiosity that traversed a wide range of social groups was not confined to books of secrets. In France, the Jesuit René de Ceriziers, one of a small band in the period to have tried to get the notion of good curiosity about religious matters catch on, is explicit about the range of rank, geography, and sex in which he claimed to detect the good curiosity that he aims to satisfy in the work he is prefacing:

Curiosity is so great that you can barely attend a gathering, especially a cleric like me,<sup>45</sup> as has often happened to me – whether among the grand or the humble, in the city or in the country – without people immediately putting on the table an infinite number of Curious Questions: why this and why that? Even ladies are not exempt from this itch that is so natural to their sex and that makes them have their mind on their tongue more often than their spindle on their fingers.<sup>46</sup>

Ceriziers attributes good curiosity either to greater and lesser members of the noble, courtly milieu that is his own (if one interprets ‘nostre condition’ as referring to his rank) or else to the nobility and also lesser people (if one interprets ‘nostre condition’

<sup>43</sup> [Gottlieb Sigmund Corvinus], *Nutzbares, galantes und curiöses Frauenzimmer-Lexicon* (Leipzig: Johann Friedrich Gleditsch und Sohn, 1715) sigs : (3<sup>r</sup>–): (6<sup>r</sup>).

<sup>44</sup> ‘es ist niemand, wes Standes, Geschlechts oder Alters er sey, der hierauß nicht seinen Nutz ziehen könnte [...]’. *Schatzkammer rare und neuer Curiositäten, in den aller-wunderbahresten Würckungen der Natur und der Kunst* (Hamburg: Gottfried Schultzen, 1686). First edition 1684.

<sup>45</sup> An alternative reading would be ‘especially among people of our rank’.

<sup>46</sup> ‘la Curiosité est si grande, qu’a peine pouvez-vous vous trouver en quelque compagnie, particulièrement ceux de nostre condition, comme il m’est arrivé maintefois, soit parmy les grands, soit entre les petits, à la ville et aux champs, qu’incontinent on ne mette sur le tapis une infinité de Questions Curieuses; pourquoy cecy et pourquoy cela? Les Dames mesmes ne sont pas exemptes de cette demangeaison si naturelle à leur sexe, qui leur fait avoir plus souvent le cerveau sur la langue, que le fuseau sur les doigts.’ René de Ceriziers, *La Sainte Curiosité, ou Questions curieuses, sur les principaux articles de la foy, mysteres de la religion et ceremonies de l’Eglise* (Paris: Estienne Danguy, 1643), sig. e[i]<sup>r</sup>. On other aspects of this work’s treatment of curiosity, see Kenny, *The Uses of Curiosity* 144–50.

as referring to his occupation as a cleric). In either case, women are emphatically included, if with an echo of the old, usually pejorative topos about their incorrigibly curious nature.

These limited soundings provisionally suggest that, although curiosity was often shaped predominantly by sex and gender, in some cases sex and gender did not constitute the sole, or even the most, prominent social variable. But even in those cases, with their predominantly rank-based stratification of curiosity, in which, say, bad curiosity was attributed to the bourgeoisie or the provincial nobility, curiosity was usually still visibly gendered, usually at the expense of women. Although good curiosity was sometimes attributed to relatively wealthy women, rank-based judgements on curiosity often seem to have been inflected along gender lines particularly strongly when it came to the upper social orders, whose men were increasingly allowed to be curious; for it was often emphasized that the curiosity of high-ranking women could be even more damaging than that of women from lower social orders.

On the other hand, what such bald generalizations omit are the signs in many texts – from Fleury's fleeting concession that 'curious studies' are alright for some women to Du Bosc's reluctance to call learned salon women 'curious' – that writers of different ideological persuasions had trouble in pinning down definitively the nexus of curiosity, women, and the social orders.

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