



## Imagining Otherness: The Pleasure of Curiosity in the Middle Ages La imaginación de la alteridad: el placer de la curiosidad en la Edad Media

### A imaginação da alteridade: o prazer da curiosidade na Idade Média

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**Abstract:** The main aim of this paper is to take a closer look at both the philosophical and religious presumptions upon which the medieval concept of curiosity was premised. Such an enterprise needs to go back to Aristotle in order to fully comprehend the limitations for curiosity introduced by St. Augustine in his *City of God* and developed by such medieval thinkers as Isidore of Seville and Thomas of Aquinas. These conceptions will be analysed in reference to Foucauldian archeology of knowledge. Much attention should be paid to the ideas of *curiositas*, *admiratio* and *studiositas*.

**Resumo:** o foco principal deste artigo é o de olhar mais atentamente as presunções filosóficas e religiosas nas quais o conceito medieval de curiosidade era gestado. Tal intento deve recuar a Aristóteles de maneira a compreender completamente as limitações acerca da curiosidade como introduzida por Santo Agostinho e desenvolvida por pensadores medievais, como Isidoro de Sevilha e Tomas de Aquino. Estas concepções serão analisadas tendo como referencia a Arqueologia do Saber Foucaultiana. Muita atenção deve ser prestada para as ideias de *curiositas*, *admiratio* e *studiositas*.

**Keywords:** Curiosity – Pleasure – Imagination – Order of things – Otherness – Augustine of Hippo.

**Palavras-chave:** Curiosidade – Prazer – Imaginação – Ordem das coisas – Alteridade – Agostinho de Hipona.

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WOODS, Ian, *et alii* (org.). *Mirabilia 18* (2014/1)  
2013 Leeds Congress  
Congreso de Leeds 2013  
Congresso de Leeds 2013

Jan-Jun 2014/ISSN 1676-5818

ENVIADO: 17.11.2013

ACEITO: 13.12.2013

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## Introduction

The cultural history of curiosity in globally perceived European culture still has not been written and it may be considered a significant *lacuna* in the field of intellectual history. It is reflected in the fact that *New Dictionary of the History of Ideas* does not even include an individual entry for curiosity.<sup>2</sup> The importance of this idea, however, was taken into account in several works which address the notion of curiosity in the early modern period, for instance with regard to the scientific revolution or early modern European cabinet collections.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, there is a lack of influential studies in the long history of this multifaceted idea from antiquity to the modern period. In the face of an increased interest in studies in representations of otherness and monstrosity in European culture, this article aims to rethink the question of curiosity in medieval thought with reference to the proclaimed vision of reality and Foucault's concept of the order of things.

I will leave aside the notion of curiosity as understood in terms of scientific inquisitiveness and a pursuit for knowledge believed to be objective. Instead, I will focus on the sense of attraction to the various obscurities of human experience, which do not need to be involved in rational examination, but – on the contrary – tend to employ the power of the imagination and remain closer to the anthropology of experience.

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<sup>2</sup> WIENER, Philip P. (ed.). *Dictionary of the History of Ideas: Studies of Selected Pivotal Ideas*. (1973-1974). HOROWITZ, Maryanne Cline (ed.). *New Dictionary of the History of Ideas*. New York: Charles Scribners & Sons 2004. Neither edition lists curiosity.

<sup>3</sup> See the works on curiosity in early modern (and modern) science: BALL, Philip. *Curiosity. How Science Became Interested in Everything?* Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2013. See also BENEDICT, Barbara B. *Curiosity. A Cultural History of Early Modern Inquiry*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2002; KENNY, Neil. *Curiosity in Early Modern Europe. Word Histories*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1998; POMIAN, Krzysztof. *Collectors and Curiosities. Paris and Venice 1500–1800*, WILES-PORTER, E. (trans.). Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990; EVANS, R. J. W and MARR, A. (eds.). *Curiosity and Wonders from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006.



WOODS, Ian, *et alii* (org.). *Mirabilia 18* (2014/1)  
2013 Leeds Congress  
Congresso de Leeds 2013  
Congresso de Leeds 2013

Jan-Jun 2014/ISSN 1676-5818

## Curiosity – a Virtue or a Vice?

Let us begin with the unhesitating evaluation of curiosity that Michel de Montaigne included in his celebrated essay *Apology for Raymond Sebond*:

Christians have special knowledge of the extent to which curiosity is a natural and evil in man. The desire to increase in wisdom and in knowledge: that was the first ruin of mankind. That is the path by which it hurled itself into eternal damnation.<sup>4</sup>

Although we may trace some gnostic influences on the sceptical notion in the assertion that knowledge is the ruin of mankind, which would remain vivid in the European non-dogmatic thought into the twentieth century, to name Lev Shestov as one example among others, Michel de Montaigne pointed out the crucial threat that had been well recognised in the medieval Christian tradition of philosophy. That is, that on one hand curiosity is defined as natural, but on the other is perceived as evil, though it may be believed that nature shall make no mistakes.

This tricky ambivalence had been encountered by many thinkers before him and consists in the question, how does one legitimately condemn something that seems so anthropologically natural for the human imagination, and for cognition itself? Ultimately it led medieval philosophers to the discursive challenge of conceptualising curiosity as a vice in regard to the sensual pleasure.

Let us go back for a brief moment to ancient thought, which preconditioned the Christian epistemological horizon to the greatest extent. Among several substantial statements we may consider the adage attributed to Socrates: “*quae supra nos, nihil ad nos*,” which bonded mankind to their epistemological horizon and gained strongly in importance with the onset of the Reformation. As Carlo Ginzburg noted in reference to Erasmus:

It is true that the theological disputes between Catholic and Protestant following the onset of the Reformation elicited from Erasmus, more and more often, the quotation of an old dictum: “*Quae supra nos, ea nihil ad nos* (we have not to care about things which are above us)”. He was not returning, of course, to the tradition of monastic intellectual humility. The dictum itself, ascribed to

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<sup>4</sup> MONTAIGNE, Michel de. *Apology for Raymond Sebond*, ARIEW, R. and GRENE, M. (trans.). Indianapolis: Hackett, 2003, p. 59.



Socrates, expressed a different feeling. With true Socratic irony, Erasmus ambiguously referred to the limits of human knowledge [...].<sup>5</sup>

Prometheus and Icarus are often thought to be the two mythological archetypes who were punished for their curiosity and for overstepping the borders of human condition in discordance with the dictum “*quae supra nos, nihil ad nos.*” Probably the most renowned literary work that deals with not only magic and the forbidden sphere, but also with what is sacred and inaccessible is Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses* or *The Golden Ass* (second century AD).

These works had great an influence on Augustine of Hippo, who as the author of *Confessions*, made a significant attempt to link curiosity, as a sort of longing in the soul, with sins of the flesh in accordance with the First Epistle of John, which reads:

For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world.<sup>6</sup>

Let us take a closer look at the whole of Augustine’s passage on this:

Besides this there is yet another form of temptation still more complex in its peril. For in addition to the fleshly appetite which strives for the gratification of all senses and pleasures--in which its slaves perish because they separate themselves from thee--there is also a certain vain and curious longing in the soul, rooted in the same bodily senses, which is cloaked under the name of knowledge and learning; not having pleasure in the flesh, but striving for new experiences through the flesh. This longing--since its origin is our appetite for learning, and since the sight is the chief of our senses in the acquisition of knowledge--is called in the divine language “the lust of the eyes.”<sup>7</sup>

*Curiositas* is defined as rooted in human *anima*, but is pursued through the senses, as there is no legitimate possibility of the transcendental pursuit for this kind of knowledge without any connection to the flesh, namely to the sense of sight. Whereas the search for the eternal truth of God and nature is believed not to be mediated by sensual experience and curiosity, therefore, is doomed to fail the prerogatives of pure reason, as it needs to be proven by the

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<sup>5</sup> GINZBURG, Carlo. ‘High and Low: The Theme of Forbidden Knowledge in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries’. In: *Past & Present*, 73, 1976, pp. 28-41 (p. 33).

<sup>6</sup> 1 John 2. 16.

<sup>7</sup> ST. AUGUSTINE. *Confessions*, OUTLER, A. C. (trans.). New York: Barnes & Noble 2007, X. 35, 54.



eye. But thereafter, the connection between curious sight and sinful pleasure does not remain obvious from Augustine's point of view. In another passage he declares:

[...] one can the more clearly distinguish whether it is pleasure or curiosity that is being pursued by the senses. For pleasure pursues objects that are beautiful, melodious, fragrant, savory, soft. But curiosity, seeking new experiences, will even seek out the contrary of these, not with the purpose of experiencing the discomfort that often accompanies them, but out of a passion for experimenting and knowledge. For what pleasure is there in the sight of a lacerated corpse, which makes you shudder? And yet if there is one lying close by we flock to it, as if to be made sad and pale. People fear lest they should see such a thing even in sleep, just as they would if, when awake, someone compelled them to go and see it or if some rumor of its beauty had attracted them.<sup>8</sup>

In this instance, both pleasure and curiosity are pursued by the senses. However, Augustine takes into account the ability to distinguish one from another insofar as experiences gained by curiosity do not bring the sense of comfort, which is considered the major target of pleasure.

From the modern perspective it may be assumed that the philosopher only intuitively detects the convergence between pleasure resulting from sensual contemplation of beauty and sensual attraction to rareness, uncanniness and obscurity, whereas the latter have nothing in common with the traditional canon of measure and proportion believed to underlie the perception of beauty. Rational reflection, however, does not allow Augustine to consider the feeling of shuddering, caused by the 'sight of a lacerated corpse', pleasant.

Contemporary psychoanalytical tools give an answer to Augustine's doubts by pointing out the concept of the abject, i.e. 'the twisted braid of affects and thoughts' with no 'definable *object*', which is – generally speaking – at the same time both appealing and disgusting.<sup>9</sup> At this point, having followed an axiological distinction between purity of reason and impurity of senses, Augustine faces the same challenge upon which Plato's idealism was premised. As Julia Kristeva claims:

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, X, 35, 55.

<sup>9</sup> KRISTEVA, Julia. *Powers of Horror. An Essay on Abjection*, ROUDIEZ, L. S. (trans.). New York: Columbia University Press, 1982, p. 1.



The analyst is thus and forever sent back to the question that already haunted Plato when he wanted to take over where Apollonian or Dionysiac religion left off. Purification is something only the *Logos* is capable of. But is that to be done in the manner of the *Phaedo*, stoically separating oneself from a body whose substance and passions are sources of impurity? Or rather, as in the *Sophist*, after having sorted out the worst from the best; or after the fashion of the *Philebus* by leaving the doors wide open to impurity, provided the eyes of the mind remain focused on truth? In such a case, pleasure, having become pure and true through the harmony of color and form as in the case of accurate and beautiful geometric form, has nothing in common, as the philosopher says, with ‘the pleasures of scratching.’<sup>10</sup>

In *Philebus* Socrates argued that ‘true’ pleasures, elicited from the beauty of figures, straightness, roundness, smoothness, and clearness of sounds, are to be understood in objective terms:

Things like that, I maintain, are beautiful not, as most things, in a relative sense; they are always beautiful in their own nature, and they carry pleasures peculiar to themselves, which are quite unlike the pleasures of scratching.<sup>11</sup>

Augustine clearly adopted Plato’s assertion of beautiful things being beautiful *in themselves*, making his hesitant assessment of ‘shuddering’ comparable to Socrates’ ‘pleasures of scratching’. Even if modern theory was to be set aside, Augustine’s arguments would still appear not to be congruent. As long as curiosity does not bring pleasure comparable to that caused by beauty, its definition switches to a kind of passion for experimenting and gaining knowledge. Already Socrates in the same passage of *Philebus* discussed ‘the pleasures of learning’:

Now let us proceed to add to them the pleasures of learning, if we in fact think that they involve no hunger, that no initial distress is felt owing to a hunger for learning.<sup>12</sup>

Both Augustine’s and Plato’s understanding of the passion to learn seem rather to contribute to the meaning of the later term *studiositas*, or intellectual inquisitiveness, which was explicitly opposed to evil curiosity in a similar fashion by Thomas Aquinas. According to Aquinas, studiosness can be

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27. The reference to Plato can be found in *Philebus* 51.

<sup>11</sup> PLATO. *Philebus*, HACKWORTH, R. (trans.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1972, 51 C.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.



regarded as virtuous, provided that it is employed for the sake of knowledge of intelligible truths. As it is claimed in his *Summa Theologica*:

[...] if one be ordinally intent on the knowledge of sensible things by reason of the necessity of sustaining nature, or for the sake of the study of intelligible truth, this studiousness about the knowledge of sensible things is virtuous.<sup>13</sup>

By virtue of Aquinas' positive evaluation of virtuous inquisitiveness, the pleasure of sight could be replaced by the pleasure of cognition despite the discomfort caused by the experience. However, Augustine does not easily follow this reasoning. By arguing "Yet if there is one lying close by we flock to it, as if to be made sad and pale" the author clearly refers to the everyday experience and does not treat it as the pursuit for knowledge, but as a sort of appealing attraction, which – as we can nowadays be certain of – does not consist in seeking for measure and proportion. Augustine's observation can be considered the first step in conceptualising interest in *performing* uncanniness and monstrosity, which in the later Middle Ages and most notably in the sixteenth century drew crowds at local fairs. The spectacle of sight is intuitively meant to bring pleasure *despite* or even *because of* the breaking of the rules of canonical beauty, which hitherto had been perceived as natural, by performing the liminal space between the human and the non-human.

Out of a number of sixteenth and seventeenth century literary witnesses to these social practices, one can point out two examples by such great minds as Michel de Montaigne and William Shakespeare, who refer to the peculiar pleasure that sprang from experiencing the spectacle of monstrosity or ethnic otherness. In the essay *Of a Monstrous Child*, the French philosopher describes interest in the physical deformation of the body, which offers the opportunity to earn some money owing to human non-rational curiosity. As Montaigne recounts it:

Two days ago I saw a child that two men and a nurse, who said they were the father, the uncle, and the aunt of it, carried about to get money by showing it, by reason it was so strange a creature.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> AQUINAS. *Summa Theologica*, FATHERS OF THE ENGLISH DOMINICAN PROVINCE (trans.). New York, Benziger Bros. 1947, II-II, Q. 167, Art. 2.

<sup>14</sup> MONTAIGNE, Michel de. *The Complete Essays*, FRAME, D. M. (trans.). Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958, p. 538.



In *The Tempest*, Shakespeare included a highly noteworthy observation directly referring to the spectacle of viewing a dead, non-European body:

Any strange beast there makes a man. When they will not give a doit to relieve a lame beggar, they will lay out ten to see a dead Indian.<sup>15</sup>

It was this sort of curiosity, which has nothing in common with virtuous studiousness, but can be understood as attraction to strange sights, that Augustine detected. Having embraced the broader context by going beyond the boundaries of human nature and cognition, Augustine's recapitulation of the question brings to mind the moral of *The Golden Ass*.<sup>16</sup>

This malady of curiosity is the reason for all those strange sights exhibited in the theater. It is also the reason why we proceed to search out the secret powers of nature--those which have nothing to do with our destiny—which do not profit us to know about, and concerning which men desire to know only for the sake of knowing. And it is with this same motive of perverted curiosity for knowledge that we consult the magical arts.<sup>17</sup>

### Curiosity in Daily Experience and 'The Order of Things'

Much has already been written on various understandings of the idea of curiosity in Augustinian thought, however, there is still plenty to be said on the passages that deal with the quotidian experience of curiosity and how that is reconciled with anthropological notions. For example, the last quotation from *Confessions* poses an intriguing question:

How is it that when I am sitting at home a lizard catching flies, or a spider entangling them as they fly into her webs, oftentimes arrests me? Is the feeling of curiosity not the same just because these are such tiny creatures? From them I proceed to praise thee, the wonderful Creator and Disposer of all things; but it is not this that first attracts my attention.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> SHAKESPEARE, William. *The Tempest*. London: Penguin Books, 2001, II. 2. 31–33.

<sup>16</sup> In *Confessions*, Augustine tends to repeat the phrase *sacrilega curiositas*, extracted from Apuleius, and claims it to for himself, confessing that after the arrival in Carthage he followed '*sacrilega curiositas*', which may be understood as self-identification with fictional Lucius. See WALSH, P. G. 'The Rights and Wrongs of Curiosity'. *Greece & Rome*. Second Series, 35, 1988, pp. 73-85 (p. 82).

<sup>17</sup> ST. AUGUSTINE. *Confessions*, OUTLER, A. C. (trans.). New York: Barnes & Noble 2007, X. 35, 55.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, X. 35, 37.



While reflecting on his own experience, Augustine points out that curiosity – somehow naturally – precedes the reflection upon divine creation. He honestly confesses that it is not the idea of God that draws his attention to numerous obscurities encountered in daily life in the first place. Having recognised this, Augustine, still attempts to embrace any such observation as part of religious praise. As a consequence, one can feel encouraged to ask about the order of things, which prompts this speculative movement from the real object to the supernatural meaning.

In this turning point from pagan philosophy to medieval Christian thought, Augustine suggests the direction which medieval allegorisation would follow. Curiosities observed by the sight should be deprived of their sensual appearances in order to link earthly reality with divine meanings. It is obvious that Augustine in his treatises, most notably in *De civitate Dei*, put great effort into translating various phenomena into the language of religious allegory, such as in the case of his etymology of monsters, which he defined as *portenta* and *ostenta*.

But from the perspective of the anthropology of experience it is very interesting how the author seems to indicate the same relation, while ‘sitting at home’ and getting attracted to some intriguing sight, such as ‘a lizard catching flies’.

Some scholars have argued that the examination of *curiositas* by Augustine was primarily concerned with epistemology, while the moral implications of his analysis of curiosity were of secondary importance. However, reflecting on the order of things allows us to assume that these two dimensions were actually inseparable components in his broad-based vision of reality. To elaborate this one needs to revisit Aristotle, who appreciated curiosity within the semantics of *admiratio*. In his *Metaphysics* Aristotle claimed:

For it is owing to their wonder [το θαυμάζειν] that men both now begin and at first began to philosophize; they wondered originally at the obvious difficulties, then advanced little by little and stated difficulties about the greater matters.<sup>19</sup>

το θαυμάζειν is linked to Greek words ‘theorein’ (θεορειν) and ‘theatron’ (θέατρον), both derived from the verb *theasthai* (θέασθαι), which means ‘to

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<sup>19</sup> ARISTOTLE. *Metaphysics*. In: *The Works of Aristotle*, ROSS, W. D. (trans.). Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1991, I, I. 2.



see' or 'to look'. This etymology is also reflected in the Latin words '*mirare*' and '*admiratio*'.

Still it remains open to doubt whether Aristotle's viewpoint was praising wonderment for its own sake. *Thauma* resulted from the lack of understanding and it may be claimed that the significance of wonderment consists in preceding the progress of knowledge only. The attainment of knowledge is regarded as one-way movement from *obscuritas* to *claritas*, whereas it is rather the rational explanation of difficulties that brings true pleasure of understanding.

Thus *thauma* could be semantically referring to 'puzzlement' indicating a sort of confusion. There is neither anything wonderful nor admirable in Aristotle's wonderment. Once rational causes have been explained, there remains no room for curiosity, which is replaced by purely intellectual contemplation of the order of things. *Thauma* only prompts the search for reasons, which are embraced in philosophy within the major concept of Nature. In his *Exhortation to Philosophy* Aristotle claimed:

But everyone would agree that intelligence comes from learning or from searching, the capacities for which are comprehended within philosophy. Hence surely we have to do philosophy unreservedly.<sup>20</sup>

In this passage Aristotle considers the act of searching as the starting point for philosophy, which leads to a conviction that the initiating *thauma* ought to be reserved for elaborating on rational knowledge and putting effort into understanding, not wondering, whereas philosophy ought to be 'done unreservedly'. Such a vision is only possible by virtue of the holistic concept of Nature. In another passage there is a claim that it is only philosophy itself which offers full accordance with the rules of Nature:

If, then, only that kind of knowledge which does have correctness of judgment, and does use reason, and observes the good as a whole -- that is to say, philosophy -- is capable of using everything and issuing orders in accordance with nature, by all means one ought to do philosophy, since

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<sup>20</sup> ARISTOTLE. *Protrepticus* or *Exhortation to Philosophy*, HUTCHINSON, D. S. and JOHNSON, Monte Ransom (eds. and trans.). San Diego: Cambridge University Press, 2013, p. 17.



only philosophy includes within itself this correct judgment and this intelligence to issue orders without errors.<sup>21</sup>

Once wonderment has been restrained, the realm of philosophy is being opened and embraced in the holistic structure of Nature both within the epistemological and moral dimension. Let us recall Foucault's unhesitant claim at the beginning of his renowned chapter on 'the four similitudes', which had been shaping 'the prose of the world':

Up to the end of the sixteenth century, resemblance played a constructive role in the knowledge of Western culture. It was resemblance that largely guided exegesis and the interpretation of texts; it was resemblance that organized the play of the symbols, made possible knowledge of things visible and invisible, and controlled the art of representing them.<sup>22</sup>

With reference to this Foucauldian concept, one can argue that the above-mentioned holistic structure of Nature is premised upon the major resemblance, superordinate to the four similitudes, namely the resemblance between human reason and Nature itself. Early Christian thinkers succeeded in reconciling the ancient vision of the universe with the concept of divine creation. Although Tertullian may be called – according to Arthur Lovejoy at least – an epistemological primitivist, and 'anti-intellectualist' who explicitly tried to divide Jerusalem from Athens, his concept of nature as the norm was founded, to a great extent, upon the Greek one.<sup>23</sup>

From Tertullian's point of view Nature means 'universality, primevality and simplicity', whereas human *anima* is the faculty responsible for apprehending transcendental meanings and making man 'a rational animal in the highest degree capable of thought and knowledge.'<sup>24</sup> Lovejoy justly points out that despite Tertullian's anti-intellectualism and hostility towards Greek philosophy Tertullian 'appears less an Early Father of the Latin Church than an Early Father of the deism'. For Tertullian, natural truths, including the idea of God as Creator, do not demand any kind of revelation, but are attainable due to the

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>22</sup> FOUCAULT, Michel. *The Order of Things. An Archaeology of Human Sciences*, SHERIDAN, A. (trans.). New York: Vintage Books, 1994, p. 17.

<sup>23</sup> LOVEJOY, Arthur Oncken. "Nature' as Norm in Tertullian'. In: *Essays in the History of Ideas*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1960, pp. 308-38 (p. 315).

<sup>24</sup> TERTULLIAN. *De Testimonio animae* 1. See also LOVEJOY, pp. 308-09.



universal *anima*, a concept in early modern times known as *la lumière naturelle*.<sup>25</sup> Tertullian elaborated upon the philosophical prerogative of reason as the faculty most closely resembling that of divine Nature, which then preconditioned and preceded a further play on words and things by virtue of the figures of similitude.

Allegorical ways of reading the textual world were already conspicuously noticeable in Augustine's interpretation of the monstrous, whether defined as 'miraculum', 'portentum', or 'ostentus'. While Pliny the Elder's writings on monstrous races featured curiosity at least to some extent, Augustine, however, does not see otherness as contrary to nature but rather as contrary to our *understanding* of nature:

We commonly say, of course, that all portents are contrary to nature, but in fact they are not... For how can anything done by the will of God be contrary to nature, when the will of so great a creator constitutes the nature of each created thing?<sup>26</sup>

Insofar as natural creation is regarded as good, coherent, repetitive, and accepting no exceptions or hazards, each kind of otherness preserves its position in the rational order of things. Although it may seem to be uncanny, extraordinary, or obscure to human reason, it still takes part in divine creation and demands no further, curious inquiry.

Isidore of Seville, who created the major medieval work encouraging so many curious questions, and having relied upon the power of imagination in his search for the accordance between words and things, nonetheless severely condemned curiosity on the same grounds:

Have no curiosity for those things which lie hidden. Abstain from seeking out those which are far and distant from human senses. Leave to one side, like a secret, anything which the Holy Scriptures has not caused you to learn. Seek not beyond that which is written, question not the holy teachings. Do not desire to know that which is forbidden to know. Curiosity is a dangerous

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<sup>25</sup> LOVEJOY. "Nature' as Norm in Tertullian', p. 315.

<sup>26</sup> ST. AUGUSTINE. *The City of God*, GREEN, W. M. (trans.). London: Heinemann, 1965, 21.6, 8. See also FRIEDMAN, John Block. *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought*. New York: Syracuse University Press, 2000, p. 120.



presumption. Curiosity is a harmful science. It leads to heresy. It embroils the mind in sacrilegious fables.<sup>27</sup>

The phrase ‘sacrilegious fables’ is clearly derived from the Augustinian phrase ‘sacrilega curiositas’, which Augustine was so attracted to in his reading of Apuleius. Isidore was able to condemn curiosity insofar as it recreates objects of cognition outside the order of things. In the passage on the *portents*, he actually repeats Augustine’s rational explanation of the otherness:

*De portentis.* Varro defines portents as beings that seem to have been born contrary to nature – but they are not contrary to nature, because they are created by divine will, since the nature of everything is the will of the Creator. Whence even the pagans address God sometimes as ‘Nature’, sometimes as ‘God’. A portent is therefore not created contrary to nature, but contrary to what is known nature. Portents are also called signs, omens, and prodigies, because they are seen to portend and display, indicate and predict.<sup>28</sup>... [*Etymologiae* XI. iii 1-2]

Isidore sets up the perception and discovery of the etymological accordance between words and things as a Christian goal, which in turn contributes to the universal, consistent meaning of the reality. The latest successors to this thought – or at least one of the greatest – was again Michel de Montaigne:

Those that we call monsters are not so to God, who sees in the immensity of His work the infinite forms that He has comprehended therein; and it is to be believed that this figure which astonishes us has relation to some other figure of the same kind unknown to man. From His all wisdom nothing but good, common; and regular proceeds; but we do not discern the disposition and relation [...]. Whatever falls out contrary to custom we say is contrary to nature, but nothing, whatever it be, is contrary to her. Let, therefore, this universal and natural reason expel the error and astonishment that novelty brings along with it.<sup>29</sup>

Although Montaigne’s philosophy was, in so many ways novel to Renaissance Europe, his rational vision of the world went together with medieval stifling

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<sup>27</sup> See MARTIN, David L. *Curious visions of modernity. Enchantment, Magic, and the Sacred.* Cambridge: MIT Press 2011, p. 35.

<sup>28</sup> ISIDORE OF SEVILLE. *The Etymologies*, BARNEY, S. A. et al (trans.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, XI. 3. 1-2.

<sup>29</sup> MONTAIGNE, Michel de. *The Complete Essays*, FRAME, D. M. (trans.). Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958, p. 539.



WOODS, Ian, *et alii* (org.). *Mirabilia* 18 (2014/1)  
2013 Leeds Congress  
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Jan-Jun 2014/ISSN 1676-5818

of curiosity towards the monstrous and imaginary otherness. Montaigne's astonishment resembles the Aristotelian *thauma*, which still needs to be expelled on the grounds of universal and natural reason. For as long as one is capable of explaining rationally the position of things in the universal order, there is no justified reason for astonishment.

### **Summary**

In this essay an attempt has been made to argue that curiosity in pre-modern Europe should be rethought in terms of a Foucauldian archaeology of knowledge, which allows a much deeper insight into intellectual history and reinforces the extent to which the evaluation of curiosity resulted from the universal notion of Nature. Therefore, what used to be understood as an enhancement of curiosity's value in early modern science as well as in mannerist and baroque poetics, ought to be considered instead as being premised upon the novel concept of reality and knowledge, namely the novel order of things, which Foucault dates back to the late sixteenth century.