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# REVIEW ARTICLE

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## Investigating Early Modern Curiosity

**Curiosities and Texts: The Culture of Collecting in Early Modern England.** By Marjorie Swann. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001. 280 pages.

**Curiosity: A Cultural History of Early Modern Inquiry**. By Barbara M. Benedict. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001. ix + 321 pages.

If what Hans Blumenberg called curiosity's "rehabilitation" in the early modern age conferred upon the cognitive appetite a moral value Augustine would not have recognized, we do not always recognize what curiosity meant to early moderns. Blumenberg's influential account (published in English as *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* [1991]) focused mainly on curiosity as the impetus for natural science, but *curious* and its cognates carried many other meanings in the early modern period, including meddlesome, gossipy, trifling, finely made, industrious, labor-intensive, skilled, careful, fault-finding, and nitpicky. A curiosity could be something in which great pains or care

(*cura*) had been invested or something which invited such an investment; it could also be a trifle, the product of wasted pains. Many of curiosity's meanings opposed each other: the same writers who dismissed semantic quibbles as "curious"—trivial distractions from investigation—celebrated the cognitive appetite of curiosity as godly. Even when used in this more familiar sense, *curiosity*, like other words in its semantic field (*discover*, for example), embraced both subjective and objective senses. The resulting oscillation of agency between the curious and the curio suffuses their encounter with an ambiguity often lost on modern readers.

Wrestling this unruly word into monograph-friendly shape could not have been easy. In *Curiosities and Texts: The Culture of Collecting in Early Modern England*, Marjorie Swann copes with the challenge by keeping a tight focus on the practice of collecting. Using the collection as a template for understanding all the materials she discusses, such as chorographies and literary collections, Swann exerts only as much pressure on the concept of curiosity as her aims require. In *Curiosity: A Cultural History of Early Modern Inquiry*, Barbara M. Benedict takes the opposite approach. Generously inclusive, dizzying in its rapid shifts of focus, her "broad study of questioning" seeks to cover virtually every dimension of curiosity in the early modern period (which she also defines broadly). Benedict's effort to catch early modern curiosity in action by juxtaposing heterogeneous materials and perspectives lends her study a dissipated splendor. Swann's book offers the satisfactions of a clear and shapely argument; Benedict's less thesis-driven book is more like a curiosity cabinet itself—its best moments replicate the ecstatic relation to discovery she seeks to document.

Both books benefit from recent scholarship by Lorraine Daston, Katherine Park, and Stephen Greenblatt on the conflicted interdependence between curiosity and its much-maligned sibling, wonder. Although early experimentalist natural philosophers or virtuosi attempted to distinguish dumbstruck wonder from a rational investigative desire, identifying what Augustine called the "lust of the eyes" with the former, wonder percolates throughout early modern natural investigations and the practices of collecting and exhibiting curious objects. The recent work on wonder has

put to rest the notion that early empiricists were obsessed with exerting their will on a pliant, instrumentalized, and desacralized nature; in penetrating nature's secrets, they were ravished by nature in return.

Swann is interested in how the power of curiosities to inspire wonder accrued to their owners and handlers. Her provocative study argues that curiosity and conspicuous consumption in seventeenth-century England were so closely identified as to be indistinguishable. Identified with his wondrous curiosities, the collector hoped to approach Castiglione's ideal of the courtier: "all men wonder at him, and hee at no man" (26). Swann's ability to impose a coherent shape on an enormous mass of material is enviable; her lucid, elegant, and witty prose suggests a scholar with enough erudition to wear it lightly. Although I found Swann's approach to her materials, and to the concept of curiosity, somewhat one-sided, I have rarely derived so much pleasure from a book whose tendentious aims did not coincide with my own biases. I expect not only to consult it frequently but to continue to wrestle with its implications.

For Swann, the "curious itch" is inseparable from the acquisitive itch, which in turn cannot be disentangled from social ambition: the pleasures of collecting and owning are the pleasures of belonging. Swann thus begins her account by showing how, under the influence of humanism, the courtly esteem for magnificence gave way to a subtler form of conspicuous consumption, intended to showcase not just the owner's wealth but his discrimination. The identification of objects which were not intrinsically valuable as collectibles prepared the ground for the conquest of elite households by objects which held antiquarian or natural interest—and by the men who could procure them. Some of the most exciting parts of Swann's book trace the careers of members of "the middling sort" who, crowding into what seemed the inconspicuous side path of collecting, ended up transforming it into a major pathway to respectability and status. Swann retraces some of these transformative journeys to reveal how the traffic in teeth, feathers, and the odd root could have become so central to identity in the period.

The curious self around which this revolution in taste turned is a socially anxious, ambitious, and competitive self, more interested in exerting power over other people *through*

things than in exerting power over things themselves. In this connection, Swann's analysis of Francis Bacon's fantasy of a bureaucracy of data-gatherers—a "collection of men" over which he would exercise absolute dominion (55)—offers a provocative account of the relationship between his political aspirations and his plans to reform natural knowledge. Swann's collectors are even more interested in collecting as a means to assert and exhibit their social status, the better "to win friends and influence people" (26). If Swann's emphasis on competitive social striving and "possessive selfhood" is at times relentless, the actual story she tells eludes a formulaic understanding of these forces, as figures on either end of the social ladder snatch objects and attitudes from each other in a frantic race after social and cultural capital. Swann's reconstruction of this vertiginous drama of mimetic desire makes for racy reading. She shows how Tradescant, who started out as "gardener to the rich and famous" (31), enhanced the image of his elite patrons through collecting on their behalf but finally channeled this prestige in his own direction; her reconstruction of Elias Ashmole's hostile takeover of the Tradescant collection is a lurid page-turner.

Occasionally, Swann's methodological commitment to scholarship which acknowledges "the importance of physical *things* in shaping early modern history and culture" (6) is overwhelmed by her interest in revealing their symbolic transformation into markers of elite identity. Her emphasis on the socially mediated character of the relationship between curiosities and their collectors threatens to empty this relationship of affective content; the collector's avidity for the object itself morphs too quickly and completely into a hunger for status, and we lose a sense of the shaping power of physical things on subjectivity (rather than the other way around). At the beginning of her study, Swann quotes Greenblatt's famous passage on the rapt attention that the wonder-inspiring object produces, but such moments of attention sometimes receive short shrift in the study which follows. Swann makes short work of James Petiver's ecstatic religious rhetoric about the wondrous variety of nature and God's creative power, implying that it is pious windowdressing for his social ambition (91). I wondered whether Swann's account could enable us to understand the literature of physico-theology (whose

catalogues of nature's wonders are perhaps the closest discursive analogue to a curiosity cabinet) as anything but an expression of bad faith.

It seems paradoxical that a nation as obsessed as early modern England with extirpating idolatrous worship should have fostered a nearly idolatrous fascination with what virtuosi referred to as "things themselves." But this reverence for the things of creation was an expression of Protestant piety. Jettisoning their scholastic inheritance along with the doctrine of transubstantiation it had supported, virtuosi tried to read God's "other" book without the interference of any other text. This ontological thirst for things themselves was also the product of a socially revolutionary assault on textual knowledge (mostly in Latin) in favor of experiential knowledge and "maker's knowledge." The symbolic overthrow of the book by the thing is dramatically evident in Robert Plot's praise of Ashmole for donating to the University of Oxford "the best History of Nature, Arts, and Antiquities . . . not in print . . . but in a generous donation of the real things themselves" (53). As Swann points out, when the Ashmolean Museum was finally completed, university finances were so exhausted that for years afterwards the Bodleian was unable to purchase any books at all (50). A scholar could hardly hope for a more concise emblem of the shuffling of elite priorities that collecting promoted. It seems reasonable to assume that there was, in addition, a link between the emergence of a consumer culture and the new prestige things enjoyed in empiricist practice. But positing a relationship between investigative and acquisitive desire can provide only the start, rather than the end, of an analysis. A proud susceptibility to the wonders of God's creation is in important respects a perfect inversion of the conspicuous consumption of those eager to *attract* such marveling gazes. Collecting clearly satisfied both of these impulses; exactly how it integrated them is less clear.

Of course such issues are open to interpretation; they require it. We need to be exposed to in-depth readings of contemporary catalogues, as well as contemporary descriptions of and responses to collections, to grasp the new model of selfhood which Swann presents as their product. Unfortunately, Swann sometimes glosses long contemporary descriptions of collections quite summarily. I wanted more

exhaustive readings of relevant materials to help me understand *how* collecting promoted possessive selfhood. The notion that the "virtuoso was what he collected; he was a 'curiosity,' a rare individual who deserved admiration for his very anomalousness" is plausible but requires further explication when set against catalogue excerpts describing "a piece of a BONE voided by Sir *W. Throgmorton* with his Urine. Given by *Thomas Cox* Esq." or "A TOOTH taken out of the Testicle or Ovary of a Woman, and given by Dr. *Edward Tyson*" (77, 85). If the culture of collecting promoted genteel identity, it could not have been through the collector's identification with objects like these. I find it more likely that the collector prided himself on the careful contemplation he lavished, or was thought to lavish, on even apparently inglorious objects, the mundane anomalies produced by human bodies. Collectors exhibited their refinement most impressively by *seeing through* traditional hierarchies of value, discerning the wondrous variety of creation where the rude observer might see only a kidney stone. The *cura* invested in these objects, whether in procuring, tending to, or contemplating them, might have been as important as the brute fact of possession.

Swann suggests as much in her brilliant account of the artisanal identity promoted by collecting, but she does not extend its implications to aristocratic collectors. Swann reveals the force of the etymon *cura* in John Parkinson's praise of Tradescant as a "painfull industrious searcher," one who "wonderfully labored" on behalf of his elite clients: Tradescant's investment of care inspires as much wonder as the curiosities themselves (34). Swann suggests that Tradescant established a specifically "artisanal propriety over the objects" through this labor, and that Parkinson's praise reflects a specifically "non-elite homosociality that is rooted in an expertise" (35, 7). Her commitment to the notion that "virtuoso activities" undertaken by aristocrats were, in contrast, a way to set gentlemen "apart from the hoi polloi" leads to some tendentious interpretation (78). Swann argues that by collecting "curious information"—books of secrets and recipes—aristocrats were attempting "a kind of colonization within their own country, transforming the technological knowledge of vulgar craftsmen and householders into the property of the genteel"; though dealing with "potentially utilitarian subjects," the

aristocratic virtuoso transformed the data he gathered into "signs of his superior social status by draining them of their original usefulness" (78, 80). Yet virtuosi like John Evelyn, whom she quotes here, stress the utility of such information rather insistently. (In passages quoted throughout the book, *curious* and related words are in fact consistently associated with utility and industry; see, for example, 43, 44, 80, 94.) And the collection of curious information by aristocrats was not a case of unilateral appropriation: such information remained the property of the vulgar as well as the genteel. Swann's treatment of the new forms of elite identity promoted by collecting suppresses what was most new about them

The culture of curiosity seems to have enabled a blending of cultural strata and social classes. Swann is clearly fascinated by the contradictory physiognomy of the new social types created by collecting, as evidenced in her discussions of the spurious coats of arms invented by "arrivistes," but she does not treat aristocratic efforts to lay claim to "artisanal propriety" as partaking of the same rich hybridity. Yet it was at this time that Royal Society Fellows bragged of learning from illiterate "mechanicks" and of the willingness of the "*Nobility*, and *Gentry*" among them "to labour here with their hands."[1] Seeing through the Royal Society's "protestations of openness" (82), Swann, in keeping with recent historiographical trends, occasionally seems unwilling to grant them any significance at all. When she remarks that Fellows "ignored the ideas of hirelings like Hooke" (89), she underestimates the extent of Robert Hooke's power in the Society, both as its Curator of Experiments and guardian of its public image. By the end of the seventeenth century, the universities had changed to accommodate fields of knowledge which, as John Wallis put it, before "were scarce looked upon as *Academical Studies*, but rather *Mechanical*; as the business of *Traders, Merchants, Carpenters, Surveyors of Lands*, or the like."[2]

The occasions when Swann provides sustained readings of collections and their representations are consistently

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1. Thomas Sprat, *The History of the Royal Society* (London: J. Martyn and J. Allestry, 1677), 131.

2. Wallis to Reverend Thomas Smith, *Peter Langtoft's Chronicle*, ed. Thomas Hearne (Oxford: Oxford University, 1725), cxlvii.

rewarding. On one such occasion, she notes how the engravings of objects in the *Musaeum Regalis Societatis* "float in groups" in which "A Stone out of a Dogs Bladder" seems as large as a "Greenland Stag's Leg"; she then shows how this violation of scale reinforces the social leveling accomplished by the alphabetical organization of the list of benefactors, in which "Mr. John Malling is no less notable than Sir Thomas Millington" (90). This moment provides us with a graphic sense of how the practice of collecting could flatten accepted hierarchies of importance in the natural and social worlds at once. Swann's reading of William Burton's *The Description of Leicester Shire* (1622) is a small masterpiece of exegesis which reveals how the logic of Burton's organization of information, his transitions, and even his handling of the physical page not only reflect but formally realize the values of possessive individualism, values which Swann argues transformed the English landscape itself into a collection of owned objects (104).

It is in the last chapter, which investigates the literary consequences of the mania for collecting, that Swann finally gives her exegetical powers free rein, and the results are dazzling. Often cultural histories written by literary scholars offer the opportunity for exciting romps through unfamiliar primary materials, but when they lead back to literary works the thrill of discovery gives way to the chill of the thematic "reading," to which most of the text is irrelevant. Swann retains an appreciation of the literary text as a thing saturated with meaning, none of whose features can be identified at the outset as contingent on one hand or constitutive on the other. Thus, instead of producing thematic readings which adhere dutifully to the single theme of collecting or possessive selfhood, Swann uses the figure of the collection to unlock the formal features of Ben Jonson's works and his career as a whole. She shows that the concept of the author as a collector deeply influenced Jonson; when he describes the exemplars of his *Epigrammes*, he depicts them not as people but as physical objects, often statues, which he has collected and inscribed appropriately (174). When Jonson collected his own writings in his *Workes*, however, something interesting happened: the identity of the author as collector became a menace to the actual living author. Jonson's act of authorial self-fashioning rendered his continued existence an

embarrassment, particularly to members of the "Tribe of Ben," eager to lay their wreaths at the foot of a monument. This account powerfully conveys the equivocal identity conferred by collecting. Swann's account of Robert Herrick, despite impressive displays of interpretive brio, is less convincing. She argues that *Hesperides* (1648) is like a collection in its attempt to gather together discrete moments of experience, but it is difficult to see why this is not true of any lyric collection from Petrarch's onwards.

Anyone interested in how empiricism played as social performance in the period needs to read *Curiosities and Texts*. Despite its tendentious moments, Swann's account of the congruence between the identity of the virtuoso and the perfect English gentleman convinced me that literary scholars (always eager to confer the prestige of the margins on their objects of study) have put too much stock in satires which ridiculed the collector/virtuoso as a grotesque "character." Most importantly, Swann's brilliant exploration of how the culture of collecting shaped mainstream literary ambitions has opened up an extremely promising area for future work. Swann has made an important contribution to the field.

Barbara M. Benedict's *Curiosity: A Cultural History of Early Modern Inquiry* spans a much longer period of time, from the seventeenth century through the beginning of the nineteenth, and works with a definition of curiosity so capacious that it threatens to absorb every aspect of culture. If Swann manages the semiotic profusion of the term almost too well, Benedict spreads herself a bit thin trying to comment on every one of its dimensions. Benedict is more interested than Swann in recovering the affective life of curiosity, a far more amorphous topic, and much harder to wrestle into an argumentative or even narrative shape. Curiosity is variously identified as cultural ambition, questioning, the interest in violating boundaries between art and nature—all ubiquitous themes with venerable histories. Because Benedict wants to consider curiosity's links to commodities, sexuality, spectacle, gossip, cultural ambition, and transgressive asking in general, the book is inevitably filled with glances backwards and forwards. Although Benedict produces enough evidence to persuade the reader that, in this period, curiosity "came into its own," we do not always have a clear sense of which brand of curiosity she is

referring to at any given moment. But Benedict is less interested in discriminating between curiosity's various meanings than in doing justice to its range. And the range of materials she deals with is indeed staggering; the book is the product of extraordinarily wide-ranging research.

Benedict seeks substantial payoffs from every unit of interpretive energy she invests in the material she has collected, and readers interested in big claims will appreciate the speed with which she gets to them. Throughout the book, the distance between analysis and conclusion is often short: Benedict's tendency to descend on a small scrap of text and swoop up to the level of vast generalization will exhilarate some readers and unsettle others. The force of many of her generalizations is often softened by statements made elsewhere, which sometimes makes it difficult to ascertain Benedict's final say on the matter. Having just read Swann's book, I was struck by the claim that it was not until the mid-eighteenth century that collecting "began to signal power and learning rather than monstrous perversion" (158), but Benedict's discussion of earlier collections, Tradescant's in particular, and her earlier reference to the "Renaissance ideal of voracious inquiry" (36) seemed to dilute this statement. I occasionally felt that Benedict's interest in collecting materials and showing them off in surprising combinations led her to hasty exegetical work as, docent-like, she rushed the reader along toward the next specimen. It was frustrating to read through long quotations which were glossed with a single summarizing sentence, especially because, when Benedict allows herself to linger for awhile with a single text, she produces provocative, brilliant readings.

Although Benedict imposes a chronological order on her materials, the book's claim to providing an account of curiosity from its emergence to its "maturity" ultimately feels incidental to its undertaking. When one looks closely into the claims she makes at each stage of this development, one discovers a fugal repetition of motifs rather than a clear evolution. For example, Benedict asserts that it is at the end of the eighteenth century that "curiosity becomes aesthetic" despite having explored this theme in the beginning of the century, when poetry was considered "curious for its intricate artistry" and the illustrations of *The Rape of the Lock* "preserve[d] the status of Pope's text as a

work of curious art . . . a dissertation on curiosity and a curiosity itself" (201, 72, 81). Benedict is particularly fascinated by the paradox of the curious subject becoming a curiosity himself; as we proceed through discussions of heterogeneous materials, from broadsides to advertisements to novels, we are confronted by this paradox in countless guises. Another persistent motif is the association of curiosity with "progressive" forces; in general, conservatives are against curiosity and progressives are for it. Benedict's dichotomy between radical and conservative literature clearly helps as a sorting mechanism for the vast amount of material she is working with, but it feels overdrawn. A further unifying thread is the curiosity cabinet as a master template: its capacity to classify, objectify, and display diverse phenomena is compared variously to *Tom Jones*, the novel in general, periodical literature, the discourse of gossip, the Cave of Spleen, and Samuel Johnson's metaphors for interiority. The most profitable way to approach this book is to accept its open-endedness as the inevitable result of Benedict's encyclopedic ambitions. This frees the reader to mull over each local observation and to relish the enormous variety of unfamiliar materials on display.

Although she devotes a separate chapter to it, the theme of female curiosity runs throughout the book, and Benedict has incisive and persuasive things to say about it. Suggesting that female curiosity constitutes "a rival empiricism" (134), she shows that this threat was contained by being insistently sexualized. The curious maid, potentially an emblem of domestic application and legitimate labor, was obsessively lampooned in satirical squibs about women "discovering" their genitals; such representations "condemned as masturbation the hunger to see mystery" (81). Constantly reenacting Eve's discovery, conceived as a fall into carnality, these exemplars of female curiosity reinforce its association with weakness and a corresponding association between male curiosity and control (156) (or, in another and equally apt formulation, "self-distortion" and "self-realization" [72]). Benedict further suggests that anxiety over female curiosity was at the root of the widespread panic generated by novels. Although Ian Watt's *The Rise of the Novel* (1957) and Michael McKeon's *The Origins of the English Novel 1600-1740* (1987) emphasize the novel's connection to empiricism and

individualism, Benedict points out that what most obsessed contemporaries was the novel's preoccupation with the themes of love, courtship, and sex, and the impact of such themes on a curious female readership. I can think of no better way to introduce my students to Eliza Haywood's fiction than through Benedict's canny account of how it exploited these anxieties. The connection between feminine curiosity and the novel emerges later in the book where one least expected it: in an analysis of William Godwin's *Caleb Williams* (1794). Reading the novel as a retelling of Bluebeard, Benedict makes a persuasive case for the feminized nature of Caleb's curiosity; but in the new context of the gothic, such curiosity has the power to reveal and redress past injustice (244). Benedict also explores the objectification of women as curiosities: her treatment of this theme ranges from the famous passage in which Pope's Belinda "surrounds herself with objects acquired 'with curious Toil' to exhibit her body" to exhibitions of female "monsters" (77). I found Benedict's observations on the gendered aspects of curiosity consistently illuminating and persuasive.

Benedict has a fine interpretive feel for contemporary satiric treatments of her topic, particularly how they fed on the empiricism they pretended to deplore. In particular, her exploration of the relationship between *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) examines Swift's disgust with Defoe's "limpid and lying empiricism." At the heart of her reading is a passionate description of the Scriblerian perspective on readers who would see in Crusoe a heroic reflection of their own urge to "go beyond": "defining themselves by curiosity, an intellectual desire always chasing its retreating fulfillment, they annihilate any concrete self. The self becomes a vacuum whose sucking implosiveness is intensified by the novelties poured into it. These readers' consumption of curiosity becomes all-consuming—in the end, in fact, consuming them" (110).

Some scholars will want to take issue with many of Benedict's claims: did literature really become more didactic at the end of the eighteenth century? What does the assertion that the eighteenth century politicizes sexuality while the Restoration sexualizes politics mean? One can imagine a separate monograph dedicated to unpacking and proving the tantalizing assertions made by almost any

substantial sentence in the book. But it is only through the efforts of scholars willing to combine massive research projects with large and suggestive claims like these that fields of study are cleared for what Locke called "underlabourers" to come in and tidy up. Now that intellectual labor has become a favorite object of theory in literature departments, Benedict's attempt to excavate the origins of modern intellectual life should enjoy a wide readership.

Swann's and Benedict's projects provide a good occasion to reflect on the growing role research plays in literary scholarship, since both are research projects in the strongest sense. Turning literary questions into research questions can confer a reassuring sense of solidity on the enterprise of criticism; it can also be a way of giving up on the enterprise. As more and more literary scholars describe themselves as literary historians, it is possible to sense a weariness with the "task of criticism," once discussed so portentously by T. S. Eliot and his followers. However, Swann and Benedict seem anything but disenchanted by the critic's task, even as they assist the ongoing effort to extend its ambit beyond the literary. If critics have something distinctive to contribute to the project of cultural history, it is the willingness to lavish the hermeneutic care traditionally reserved for canonical texts on documentary material and literature alike. At their best, both books offer eloquent testimony to this care.

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