H-France Review Vol. 5 (March 2005), No. 32

Neil Kenny, *The Uses of Curiosity in Early Modern France and Germany.* Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004. xv + 484 pp. Tables, figures, notes, bibliography, and index. $125.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0199271364.

Review by Darrin M. McMahon, Florida State University.

If curiosity killed the cat, there are no such massacres here. Neil Kenny, a Senior Lecturer in French and Early Modern Thought at Churchill College, Cambridge, does not explain the origins of that curious phrase. Nor is he much interested in explaining action motivated by curiosity at all. As he asks toward the end of his introduction, "Did the uses of curiosity extend into non-verbal dimensions of, say, physical or social reality?" "If they did," he answers, "then that reality is even less accessible to us now than the words which were designed to affect it" (p. 24). Simultaneously eschewing any approach "that would see language as a mere epiphenomenon of underlying social, cultural, or intellectual contexts" and the attempt to measure what language may or may not have wrought in the world beyond words, Kenny chooses instead to focus on language itself--the ordinary language of curiosity (p. 24). The "uses" referred to in his title are thus the uses-the speech acts and language games--made by authors and utterers of this curious word.

Those uses were many, and they multiplied in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries when "curiosity," long construed overwhelmingly as a vice, was embraced in certain quarters as a potentially healthy passion, the source of a commendable desire to know the unknown. It was also in this period that curiosity and its cognates began to be applied to objects, which were deemed "curious" or described as "curiosities" themselves. Accompanying these two "seismic semantic shifts" (p. 4) was an explosive growth in what Kenny calls the "culture of curiosities"--networks of travelers, collectors, antiquarians, and savants who sought to cultivate curiosity, and who presented their work, accordingly, as curious collectors or collections of curiosities, interesting bits of knowledge worthy of remark. Drawing attention to themselves, they also drew the anxiety and scrutiny of those with an interest in regulating the boundaries of knowledge. The subject (and objects) of curiosity thus became an important arena--a battleground--in which contemporaries debated the extent and limits of knowledge in early modern Europe and the extent and limits of good and bad desire.

Kenny is a meticulous researcher and he is well aware that curiosity has already received extensive treatment in the works of such scholars as Hans Blumenberg, Gérard Defaux, Krzysztof Pomian, Barbara Benedict, Lorraine Daston, and Katherine Park, to name only the most prominent of the many whom he cites. He is respectful of their efforts, and draws freely upon them. Yet he also believes that these works tend to obscure the complexity and nuance of early modern curiosity by distancing themselves from the ordinary language of the time. Rather than attending to what Kenny describes as the "mess" of ordinary language with its manifold and oft-contested meanings, these works set up a "concept" of curiosity that has the effect of eclipsing "unwanted meanings or occurrences" in favor of some privileged definition (pp. 6-7). Suspicious of this practice, and informed by the theoretical work of Wittgenstein, Kenny sets out not only to complicate the early modern meaning of curiosity, but also to provide an "empirical case-study in whether 'concepts' exist" (p. 8). As well as writing a history of curiosity, he intends his work as a contribution to debates about historiography.

Kenny tests this proposition in a number of realms in seventeenth and early eighteenth century France and the German territories, focusing on the discourse of curiosity as it was employed in Lutheran

universities, in churches of various confessions, and in the many institutions and communities of the "culture of the curiosities" such as academies and learned societies. He also extends his study to narrative or discursive practices that made use of the curiosity family of term, paying explicit attention in two long chapters to the way in which curiosity was gendered and sexed male and female.

The range of his investigations is truly impressive, as is his general command of the intellectual contexts of early modern authors working in a great variety of fields. With skill and analytical flare, Kenny teases out the multiple meanings of curiosity and the many uses to which it was put in university dissertations, plays and ballets, sermons and orations, theological tracts and lexicons, travel literature and periodicals. He shows how professors of medicine sought to regulate the boundaries of their profession by "wielding the axe of curiosity" to demarcate proper areas of inquiry, establishing what was worthy of (good) curiosity, while closing off other realms of speculation as the domain of errant or bad curiosity. He shows how German jurists and law professors attempted to establish curiosity as a legal category on the back of Roman law, laying out the limits of when it was and was not appropriate to be interested (curious) in the otherwise private affairs of other. And he discusses at length the ways in which male anxiety about female sexuality and the female mind revealed itself in multiple narratives about the unhappy fate of curious women.

No simple summary can do justice to the scope of Kenny's interests and the extent of his inquiries. Tracking curiosity across disciplines and genres, he turns up the word and its manifold uses in surprising places, showing how it was repeatedly recycled, reinvented, reconfigured, and reshaped. Without question, such painstaking inquiry bears fruit, allowing Kenny to complicate or call into question the broader "concepts" of curiosity employed in the generalizing narratives of other scholars. Thus, whereas Hans Blumenberg tends to situate curiosity in a larger narrative of the emergence of disinterested inquiry as a critical aspect of secular modernity--the rational mind emerging from the fetters of religion--Kenny shows that "church discourse on curiosity was far more pervasive, complex, and heterogeneous than that account implies" (p. 157). Not all churchmen were inclined, reflexively, to write off curiosity as a bad thing, and at the same time "a wide range of other genres--from novellas to plays, from ballets for elite boys to fair-shows for anyone--used curiosity in order to prod their audiences *away* from many kinds of knowledge and activity…." (p. 380). Similarly, by drawing careful distinctions between male and female curiosity, and demonstrating how the latter was most frequently depicted as bad in the discourse of seventeenth and eighteenth century writers, Kenny is able to problematize "any grand narrative of the early modern liberation of human curiosity from previous constraints" (p. 22). If certain venues for male curiosity were opened up in this period, for many women they were closed off.

All this is instructive. But if Kenny's subtle investigations are able to qualify and add complexity to the concepts of curiosity as uncovered by other scholars, what of his larger goal of testing, empirically, whether such concepts exist at all? Kenny is unambiguous in his conclusion, judging that "If the case of early modern curiosity is anything to go by, then 'concepts,' in the usual senses of the term, do not exist within the flow of history (p. 432).

What one is left with is the "inventiveness, dynamism, and irreducible particularism" of individual efforts to contest and shape the meaning of words. Cat-killing has been supplanted by slaughter of another kind. Here we are treated to a great concept massacre.

Kenny's conclusion is not entirely surprising given his theoretical point of departure. Beginning with Wittgenstein, he notes that the most one can say for the thread-bare notion of concept is that it is, as the Austrian philosopher himself observed, like a rope "composed of numerous interwoven fibres that are neither identical nor unrelated to each other, with no single fibre--that is, no ineliminable core--

running through the whole rope" (p. 10). In another metaphor, Kenny likens curiosity to a "discursive glue," which binds together many discrete meanings in a common space.

Pushed to its limit, this may well be true. And yet what this reader found surprising was how often contemporaries themselves seemed to agree on what curiosity was. A judicious scholar, Kenny himself points this out, observing, for example, in the context of a discussion of German dissertations dealing with curiosity that "the majority consensus was that it is indeed a passion" (*passio*)--a passion, or desire, to know. Some thought this passion was good, others that it was bad, and still others--many others--believed that there were cases in which curiosity was appropriate and other cases when it was not. What applied to the desire itself, moreover, also applied to the objects of desire, to those many curious things that might tempt the eye or the mind.

But if contemporaries debated the *uses* of curiosity in great volume, it does not follow that they shared no underlying sense--no concept, or concepts--of what curiosity was. On Kenny's own evidence, I would argue the opposite case, and again on his own evidence, I would argue that these concepts are recoverable by historians. Arguably, his great concept massacre rests less on empirical data than it does on its theoretical underpinnings--the Wittgensteinian assertion that meaning and use are one and the same. "What did curiosity mean?," Kenny asks. "Its meaning lay in its uses" (p. 14). The danger for historians who are tempted to follow Kenny too closely down this Wittgensteinian path is that their works will come to resemble curiosity shops themselves (or worse, the "mess" of ordinary language)--with items, even pleasing items, strewn and scattered about in the spirit of play, but with little thought given to their common connections.

It is to Kenny's credit that he fully recognizes this danger--his "massacre" is not programmatic. "Concept-based approaches can heuristically reveal much about the past," he acknowledges, and he cites much of the previous scholarship on curiosity as evidence. Concepts are not only useful, they are, Kenny admits "indispensable," albeit as "fictions" to the study of the past (p. 432). Not the least of their uses, it would seem, is to have prompted Kenny's own playful, probing, and deeply learned study.

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