‘Too Curious a Secrecy’: Curiosity in Lady Mary Wroth’s *Urania*

Laetitia Coussement-Boillot

‘Too curious a secrecy’, is a quote from the prose romance *Urania*, describing one of the heroines’ attitude to concealment. Restless and melancholy because she secretly loves her cousin, Pamphilia is depicted as: ‘[…] walking up and downe a pretty space, blaming her fortune, but more accusing her love, who had the heart to grieve her, while shee might more justly have chid herselfe, whose feare had forc’d her to too curious a secrecie’.1 The adjective ‘curious’ here can be understood as ‘careful’, ‘meticulous’, ‘scrupulous’, not as ‘inquisitive’ which would contradict the idea of ‘secrecy’ that immediately follows. The choice of the term ‘curious’ in relation to secrecy may appear surprising at first. It highlights Pamphilia’s submission to the injunction of secrecy, along with modesty, chastity and silence, notions which commonly defined the early modern woman. In the above quote, Wroth also hints at a tension between disclosure and concealment, since the secrecy is ‘forc’d’ in other words self-inflicted, as Pamphilia is afraid to disclose her feelings.

As shown by Neil Kenny in his book *Curiosity in Early Modern Europe. Word Histories*,2 in the early modern period, curiosity was a particularly elusive, ambiguous notion. The term was not only highly polysemous, it could also be connoted positively or negatively: curiosity could apply to a person and refer to carefulness, scrupulousness, accuracy, skill, cleverness, or ingenuity. Pushed to extremes, it could mean fastidiousness, over-elaborateness. It could also refer to the subject’s legitimate desire to know. However, even that sort of curiosity could become synonymous with nosiness or over-inquisitiveness. From a different perspective, curiosity could apply to an object that aroused interest because it was novel or rare. Hence the distinctions delineated by Neil Kenny between ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ curiosity, and between good and bad curiosity. As he pointed out in his book, curiosity enjoyed an ‘extraordinary moral

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1 All subsequent references to Lady Mary Wroth’s *The First Part of the Countess of Montgomery’s Urania* come from the edition by Josephine A. Roberts, Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies (Tempe, Arizona: 2005), first printing 1995, Book 1, 91.

reversibility’.³ In the light of Kenny’s comments, another quote from Urania may help us gauge in a preliminary way how Wroth capitalised on the complexity of contemporary notions of curiosity in her writing. Thus, in the third book, the two heroines of the romance, Urania and Pamphilia, have been shipwrecked on an island where they discover a mysterious building:

They found a round building like a Theater, carved curiously, and in mighty pillars; light they might in many places discerne betweene the pillars of the upper row, but what was within, they could not discover, nor find the gate to enter it. With this they returnd, the Ladyes proceeded, and arriving there, found it just as the servants had described; but more curiously beholding it, they found in one of the pillars, a letter ingraven, and on an other, another letter. They understood not the meaning, while Pamphilia (more desirous of knowledge then the rest) went as far behind that pillar as she could, and there perceived a space, as if halfe of the pillar and then a plaine place, and so halfe of the other behind it had left a passage through them.⁴

In this quotation, the adverb ‘curiously’ occurs twice, with multiple meanings: in the first phrase, ‘carved curiously’ refers to the strangeness of the monument, as well as to its elaborateness and elegance. It may therefore allude both to the building as a curious object and to the artist’s skillfulness. The second adverb in ‘more curiously beholding’, is explicitly linked with sight and refers to the onlookers’ desire to know what the building is, and even more, what it may be hiding. As the author suggests, the building’s curiousness is connected with its mysteriousness: ‘what was within, they could not discover, nor find the gate to enter it’. The building seems to have been elaborately designed so as to conceal a secret. Its curious outside stimulates the onlookers’ wish to go inside, to know what is hidden. Here Pamphilia embodies the curious viewer, as Wroth reminds us in the parenthetical clause: she is ‘more desirous of knowledge then the rest’. The subject’s curiosity falls on curious objects and those curious objects in turn reinforce the subject’s curiosity.

The passage quoted above testifies to the intertwining of the subjective and objective meanings of curiosity, as well as to the author’s familiarity with the different meanings of the word. In the 661 pages of the standard modern edition of Urania, for example, there are more than sixty occurrences of the word ‘curiosity’ and its cognates, ‘curiousness’, the adjective ‘curious’ and the adverb

³ Kenny, Curiosity 14.
⁴ Wroth, Urania Book 3, 373.