This passage in Aristotle’s treatise *On Dreams* was for a considerable time regarded as too indecent for the English reader, and thus languished in the decent obscurity of a dead language: both Beare in the Oxford translation and Hett in the original Loeb edition preferred a Latin version. It may be for this reason that somewhat scant attention has been paid to Aristotle’s disquisition on menstruating women and their effect upon mirrors.¹

In offering some comments on the passage, I bypass the question of Aristotle’s credulity and focus on a different question: what interested Aristotle in the supposed “fact” that the gaze of a menstruating woman has the power to redden the mirror into which she looks?

The passage occurs in the context of Aristotle’s explanation of the phenomenon of dreams, an explanation that relies chiefly on the notion of residual sense impressions. Although sense perception as normally understood is not operative in dreams 458b8, it is not true that the sense organ is unaffected 459a6, 10. Dreams belong, he says, to the sensitive faculty, but qua imaginative 459a21. The images involved “persist in the sense organs not only while the sensations are active but also after they have gone” 459a27-28.²

After enunciating this general principle, Aristotle proceeds to illustration. He begins with the case of projectiles: they continue to move even after they have broken contact with the moving agent 459a28-30. This illustration from the category of place is by way of introduction to illustrations from the category of quality, qualitative change or change of state being the type of change most relevant to sensation. Again he emphasizes the factor of persistence, adding that change of state may persist “deep down” (bathu 459b7) as well as on the surface. Examples are drawn from smell and hearing 459b21, but mainly from vision. The act of looking at a green object for a considerable time may, for instance, produce such a strong effect upon the eye that “any object to which we shift our gaze appears to be that colour” 459b12-14.³

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¹ The most recent treatment seems to be Anthony Preus, “On Dreams 2, 459b24-460a33, and Aristotle’s optis”, *Phronesis* 13, 1968, 175-182.
² I have used Hett’s translation in the Loeb edition unless otherwise noted.
³ This passage cannot present a parallel to the red mirror, however, since the green effect does not become a characteristic of any external object.
Our passage comes next. The opening sentence appears something of a non sequitur. It begins: “that the sensory organs are acutely sensitive to even a slight qualitative difference is shown by what happens in the case of mirrors” (Barnes). But Aristotle has been concerned, not with slight differences, but with persistence. We do not discover the link with his previous discussion until 459b31-2, when we learn that, in the case of a new mirror, the red stain is not easy to remove; in other words, it persists.

It will be immediately noticed, however, that the persistence is taking place not in the sense organ (as is required for Aristotle’s explanation of the physiology of dreams), but in the mirror. Such being the case, I would like to try out the hypothesis that, in Aristotle’s illustration, the mirror really stands for the eye, and the eye for the object perceived. Aristotle even, I think, prepares the way for such an interpretation when he says “the organ of sight is itself a bright object possessing colour” 460a3. The eye is also a smooth surface capable of receiving images (the word “pupil” [kore] comes from recognition of this fact) could have helped to make the shift an easy one.

This shift in perspective has an immediate bonus. We can now make sense of Aristotle’s remark that his mirror example illustrates the ability of the sense organ to perceive slight differences. The slight differences in this case are not in the mirror, but in the eye. During the menstrual periods the eyes are in the same condition as the rest of the body: this means that the blood-vessels in the eye are redder than usual, even though this condition is invisible to us 460a8. The difference is small but is perceived by the mirror.

A second bonus arising from the suggested shift is that an interpretation of the mirror as standing for the eye fits well with Aristotle’s general theory of sense perception. So, for instance, the mirror may be regarded as being “potentially what the object is actually” de Anima II, 5 418a4. In other words, it becomes red by “looking” at a red object, the abnormally bloodshot eye.

On the other hand, I am not suggesting that the shift is anything more than temporary, or that it has any radical implications for Aristotle’s theory of vision. Aristotle rebukes Democritus in the de Sensu for supposing vision “to be mere mirroring” 438a7, and goes on to say “it is strange that it never occurred to him to wonder why only the eye sees, and none of the other things in which images appear do so” 438a10-13. Aristotle’s own view is of course the one expressed in de Anima II, 12: a sense organ is that which is capable of receiving the form of sensible objects without the matter 424a18ff. In our passage it is notable that the mirror receives the colour without receiving the shape (“the surface of the mirror becomes a sort of bloodshot cloud” 459b29: Barnes) just like the mirrors mentioned by Aristotle in Meteorology III, 2 372a30ff., in his discussion of rainbows.

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4 It is of interest that Drossaart Luluofs, although separating Chapters II and III from Chapter I (for chronological reasons), does not regard our passage as being out of place in Chapter II (Philosophia Antiqua vol. 2, pt. 1 (Leiden, 1947), pp. xxi, xxx). Neither does he regard the passage as an Aristotelian, noting that Aristotle did not reject the illustration of psychological phenomena by occurrences in dead things such as mirrors (xxx). (Possibly he is thinking of the axe in de Anima II, 1 412b12ff.)

5 I assume that the translation in Jonathan Barnes’ edition of the Oxford Aristotle (vol. 1, Princeton, 1984) must be his own replacement of the Latin version of Beare. Barnes differs from Hett in translating tachē as “acutely”, thus omitting a reference to speed. (Hett is presumably anticipating tachē aisthēsis at 460a25.)