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Hume on Women's Curiosity and the Study of History

Plutarch affirms in his *De Curiositate* that curiosity is a sickness darkening the soul and pushing us to learn the troubles of others. To eliminate the detrimental effects of this malady, he proposed redirecting our desire to know towards better objects, like the secrets of nature. However, this cure was not enough in every case. Some people will always capitulate to the deleterious desire to meddle in other people's lives. For those recalcitrant cases, he recommended a lesser substitute: the study of history.

Plutarch's understanding of curiosity was influential during the early modern period. It gave rise to a classification of curiosity as virtuous or vicious according to its objects. Curiosity was appropriate when directed to truth but inadequate when aimed at other people's lives. The first sort of curiosity was commonly associated with men, while the second kind was attributed to women. In this paper, I claim that David Hume is a remarkable exception in this matter. He not only does not follow the tradition and claims that the curiosity that propels us to truth is not the same passion that makes us meddle in other people's lives, but, what is more important, when he recommends the study of history to women he does it not as a means to appease their gossiping curiosity but to vindicate and stimulate their intellectual curiosity or "love of truth," as history is for him a source of "important truths" and an essential element of his science of human nature.