

Windows of Curiosity: Eyes and Vision in Plutarch's *De Curiositate* (*Mor.* 515B–523B)

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media eorum cornua fenestravit pupilla...

Plin. *HN* 11.55

*dicere porro oculos nullam rem cernere posse
sed per eos animum ut foribus spectare reclusis
difficile est.*

Lucr. 3.360–362

ATHEMATIC PREOCCUPATION in Plutarch's *De curiositate*, along with curiosity itself, is sight and seeing. I will attempt to show here that the treatise outlines a very intimate relationship between *polypragmosynē* and vision: seeing and looking play a prominent role in meddlesome behavior. My aim, however, is to map out further the cultural discourse underpinning the visual imagery that shapes the portrayal of the meddlesome character in this text. Particular attention will be devoted to the metaphor of the eyes as windows of the soul, extensively exploited by Plutarch in his treatise. This metaphor, as the two passages from Lucretius and Pliny quoted above show, was not unknown in antiquity, but in Plutarch it has been creatively developed and used as an ethical symbol.

Sight and seeing are not the first among the senses which come to mind when one thinks of curiosity or meddlesomeness. These otherwise familiar phenomena are nowadays more frequently than not associated with the auditory domain: gossip and eavesdropping are the primary means by which the curious and the meddlesome are thought to cater to their urges.¹ Peeping on the

¹ Plutarch, however, in his parallel treatise devoted to garrulity links this feature with meddlesomeness: “And to garrulousness is attached also a vice no less serious than itself, curiosity. For babblers wish to hear many things so that they may have many things to tell. And they go about tracking down and

other hand is assigned to an entirely different register: not that of character-traits or vices, but perversities. Indulging in it has become a feature not of simple curiosity, but voyeurism.² Such sexual overtones of the curious gaze are of course by no means absent from the ancient texts, Plutarch's *De curiositate* among them (see below).³ The peeping Tom emerging from them, however, is not so much a deviant, but simply someone who seeks to see what ought to remain hidden, and thus violates some

searching out especially those stories that have been kept hidden and are not to be revealed, storing up for their foolish gossip, as it were, a second-hand stock of hucksters' wares; then, like children with a piece of ice, they are neither able to hold it nor willing to let it go. Or rather, the secrets are like reptiles which they catch and place in their bosoms, yet cannot confine them there, but are devoured by them; for pipefish and vipers, they say, burst in giving birth, and secrets, when they escape, destroy and ruin those who cannot keep them" (*De Garrulitate* 12; transl. W. C. Hembold, slightly modified). On *De Garr.* see W. A. Beardslee, "De garrulitate (*Moralia* 502B–515A)," in H. D. Betz (ed.), *Plutarch's Ethical Writings and Early Christian Literature* (Leiden 1978) 264–288; on *De Cur.* and *De Garr.* see A. G. Nikolaidis, "Plutarch's Minor Ethics: Some Remarks on *De garrulitate*, *De curiositate*, and *De vitioso pudore*," in G. Roskam et al. (eds.), *Virtues for the People: Aspects of Plutarchan Ethics* (Leuven 2011) 205–222.

² Which is featured in some Greek myths of transgressive behavior on the part of mortals, such as Actaeon. See V. Platt, "Sight and the Gods: On the Desire to See Naked Nymphs," in M. Squire (ed.), *Sight and the Ancient Senses* (London 2016) 161–179; on Actaeon see L. R. Lacy, "Aktaion and a Lost 'Bath of Artemis'," *JHS* 110 (1990) 26–42; V. Platt, "Viewing, Desiring, Believing: Confronting the Divine in a Pompeian House," *Art History* 25 (2002) 87–112; M. Squire, *The Art of the Body. Antiquity and Its Legacy* (Oxford 2011) 102–114; M. Leigh, *From Polypragmon to Curiosus. Ancient Concepts of Curious and Meddlesome Behaviour* (Oxford 2013) 136–137, who quotes literary examples and images where Actaeon's gaze is far from innocent.

³ For an early instance of such overtones see the story of Candaules and Gyges in Hdt 1.8; the voyeuristic urges which the former (Candaulism!) tries to impose upon the latter are here explicitly opposed to "minding one's own business" (σκοπέειν τὰ ἑωυτοῦ). Cf. Leigh, *From Polypragmon* 18, 95–96; D. Asheri, A. B. Lloyd, and A. Corcella, *Commentary on Herodotus, Books I–IV* (Oxford 2007) 82. In Plutarch curiosity has also an appetitive character which is to be satisfied only by feeding on scandals and misfortunes of others (Leigh 14–15).

sort of prohibition.⁴

Yet the sense of hearing also plays a role in meddlesome behavior in Plutarch—albeit a much less prominent one. While the treatise abounds with references to the eye and seeing, the ear and hearing appear in only a handful of instances.⁵ It may reflect a belief common in antiquity that sight was the most powerful among the senses, occupying “an unparalleled position in the range of human capabilities,”⁶ and therefore must have engendered a much deeper reflection. It is a frequent motif in mythic stories where it often appears in peculiar forms, such as the Cyclops’ eye, the eye of the Graeae, those of Argus, Lamia, or Gorgon. It would prove difficult to find ears and hearing as a motif in mythology in such abundance, though it does appear e.g. in the Sirens episode in the *Odyssey*, or the donkey ears of Midas, or in the figure of Fama, the personification of fame and

⁴ On the idea of curiosity and *polypragmosynē* see generally, V. Ehrenberg, “Polypragmosyne: A Study in Greek Politics,” *JHS* 67 (1947) 46–67; A. W. H. Adkins, “Polupragmosune and ‘Minding One’s Own Business’: A Study in Greek Social and Political Values,” *CP* 71 (1976) 301–327; Leigh, *From Polypragmon*; J. Brown, “Just a Busybody? A Look at the Greco-Roman Topos of Meddling for Defining Hebrew in 1 Peter 4:15,” *JBL* 125 (2006) 549–568; P. G. Walsh, “The Rights and Wrongs of Curiosity,” *G&R* 35 (1988) 73–85; and G. Bös, *Curiositas: Die Rezeption eines antiken Begriffes durch christliche Autoren bis Thomas von Aquin* (Paderborn 1995). It must also be mentioned that curiosity (*curiositas*), likewise closely related to seeing, is a key concept in a work contemporary with that of Plutarch, Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses*; see e.g. Leigh 136–149; C. C. Schlam, *The Metamorphoses of Apuleius: On Making an Ass of Oneself* (London 1992) 48–57, and “The Curiosity of the Golden Ass,” *CJ* 64 (1968) 120–125; G. Sandy, “Knowledge and Curiosity in Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses*,” *Latomus* 31 (1972) 179–183. On curiosity in other ancient novels in the context of Plutarch’s treatise see R. Hunter, “The Curious Incident...: *polypragmosyne* and the Ancient Novel,” in M. Paschalis et al. (eds.), *Readers and Writers in the Ancient Novel* (Groningen 2009) 51–63.

⁵ As in 518A–C, 519C, 519F, 523B.

⁶ J.-P. Vernant, “Introduction,” in *The Greeks* (Chicago 1995) 1–21, at 12. Needless to say the close connection between ‘to see’ (ἰδεῖν) and ‘to know’ (εἰδέναι) in Greek, unified in ἵστωρ (hence ἱστορία), which denotes one who acquires knowledge by seeing (Chantraine, *Dictionnaire étym. s.v. οἶδα*) or both ‘expert’ and ‘witness’ (Beekes, *Etymological Dictionary s.v. ἵστωρ*).

renown, described by Virgil as having multiple tongues, eyes, and ears.⁷ Both the Greeks and the Romans may therefore be considered primarily as cultures of the eye and of visualizers.⁸ Indeed one is frequently reminded (and rightly so) that ancient Greece was a culture of *mousikē*, but even this term, in fact, denotes an untranslatable combination of poetic word, music, and dance:⁹ there was no *mousikē* without spectacle. And in Rome this spectacle gained even more prominence: on the one hand with the advent of new forms of artistic expression such as pantomime,¹⁰ and with the gradual passage from oral to written culture on the other.¹¹ Perhaps the absolute primacy of sight in antiquity, suggested for instance in Segal's proclamation that "[t]he Greeks are a race of spectators,"¹² is a case of rhetorical

⁷ *Aen.* 4.182–183; cf. *Stat. Theb.* 9.35; *Ov. Met.* 12.39 ff. on Fama's house; cf. n.29 below.

⁸ See e.g. Herodotus' statement (voiced by Candaules): "ears are more untrustworthy than eyes" (1.8); cf. Heraclitus 22 B 101a D.-K. (= Polyb. 12.27).

⁹ See e.g. E. Rocconi, "Music and Dance in Ancient Greece and Rome," in P. Destrée et al. (eds.), *A Companion to Ancient Aesthetics* (Malden 2015) 81–93, at 82–83; B. Kowalzig, "Changing Choral Worlds: Song-Dance and Society in Athens and Beyond," in P. Murray et al. (eds.), *Music and the Muses: The Culture of 'Mousikē' in the Classical Athenian City* (Oxford 2004) 39–65.

¹⁰ Although pantomime was accompanied by music and words read from a libretto, at its core lay "the notion that a story can be told through a dancer's silent, rhythmical movements, poses and gestures"; E. Hall, "Pantomime: Visualizing Myth in the Roman Empire," in G. W. M. Harrison et al. (eds.), *Performance in Greek and Roman Theatre* (Leiden 2013) 451–473, at 453.

¹¹ In particular with the 'invention' of silent reading, the earliest attestations of which date to the late fifth century B.C. Of the extensive scholarship on this subject the most relevant are B. M. W. Knox, "Silent Reading in Antiquity," *GRBS* 9 (1968) 421–435, and more recently A. Ford, "From Letters to Literature: Reading the 'Song Culture' of Classical Greece," in H. Yunis (ed.), *Written Texts and the Rise of Literate Culture in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge 2003) 15–37. On literacy and orality in the Hellenistic age see e.g. W. V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge [Mass.] 1989) 115–146 (esp. 125–126); on the close (and exclusive) association of silent reading with sight see J. Svenbro, *Phrasikleia: An Anthropology of Reading in Ancient Greece* (Ithaca 1993) 160–181.

¹² Ch. Segal, "Spectator and Listener," in *The Greeks* 184–271, at 184.

hyperbole. But the privileged position of vision and the visual vis-à-vis other modes of perception can hardly be denied.¹³

The meddling gaze

Much has been written about Plutarch's interest in vision, notably in relation to the concept of the Evil Eye, as it constitutes an important topic in his *Table Talk*.¹⁴ And yet its significance in

¹³ On the role of sight in Greek and Roman culture see A. Kampakoglou and A. Novokhatko, *Gaze, Vision, and Visuality in Ancient Greek Literature* (Berlin 2018); Squire (ed.), *Sight and the Ancient Senses*; J. Toner (ed.), *A Cultural History of the Senses in Antiquity* (London 2014); D. Fredrick (ed.), *The Roman Gaze. Vision, Power and the Body* (Baltimore 2002); F. Frontisi-Ducroux and J.-P. Vernant, *Dans l'oeil du miroir* (Paris 1997); C. A. Barton, *The Sorrows of the Ancient Romans: the Gladiator and the Monster* (Princeton 1993); R. Garland, *The Eye of the Beholder: Deformity and Disability in the Graeco-Roman World* (Ithaca 1995); W. Deonna, *Le symbolisme de l'oeil* (Paris 1965). However, as A. Caravero, *For More than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression* (Stanford 2005) 95–116, argues, in its beginnings, from Homer onward, the history of hearing/listening and seeing was intertwined and embodied in the figure of the Muse (who sings to the poet who then by his singing communicates the story and makes the events and things visible to others), until Plato rejected poetry because of its enchanting properties and constructed his “videocentric” model of knowledge.

¹⁴ *Mor.* 680C–F; see e.g. J. H. Elliott, *Beware the Evil Eye. The Evil Eye in the Bible and the Ancient World II Greece and Rome* (Eugene 2016), esp. 86–93; M. W. Dickie, “Heliodorus and Plutarch on the Evil Eye,” *CP* 86 (1991) 17–29, and “The Fathers of the Church and the Evil Eye,” in H. Maguire (ed.), *Byzantine Magic* (Washington 1995) 9–34; S. Bartsch, *The Mirror of the Self: Sexuality, Self-Knowledge, and the Gaze in the Early Roman Empire* (Chicago 2006) 145. But the significance of vision in Plutarch is manifest also in the metaphor of the mirror, present throughout both the *Lives* and the *Moralia*. In the former, mirroring is a programmatic strategy of using biographical studies of other individuals like mirrors reflecting one's own character against great figures of the past; cf. A. Zadorojnyi, “ὡσπερ ἐν ἐσόπτρῳ: The Rhetoric and Philosophy of Plutarch's Mirrors,” in N. Humble (ed.), *Plutarch's Lives: Parallelism and Purpose* (Swansea 2010) 169–195, at 170; furthermore, the *Parallel Lives* are arranged in pairs which enhances the mirror metaphor even more (Zadorojnyi 183). Cf. numerous instances of the mirror simile in the *Mor.*: 85A–B, 139F, 141D, 456A–B, 672E, 718E, 736A–B, 765A–B, 1002A, etc. On Plutarch's mirrors see also T. Duff, *Plutarch's Lives. Exploring Virtues and Vice* (Oxford 1999) 32–33; P. A. Stadter, “The Rhetoric of Virtue in Plutarch's Lives,” in L. Van der Stockt (ed.), *Rhetorical Theory and Praxis in Plutarch* (Leuven

On Curiosity has gone largely unnoticed. The issue is particularly intriguing, since Plutarch is the only ancient author who devoted to curiosity a separate study which closely relates this phenomenon to seeing and seems to reflect both philosophical conceptions and popular beliefs on the functioning of the human eye.

The treatise provides a complex cluster of vocabulary and phraseology concerning visual perception; apart from many terms denoting it explicitly (such as the verbs *theasthai*, *blepein*, *horan*,¹⁵ and their cognates) which recur in almost every paragraph, one also finds many references to the eyes (*ophthalmoi*) and sight (*opsis*), both literal and figurative.¹⁶ The object of the busybody's interest is a *thema*; he seeks to show it (*deiknynai*), uncover (*anakalyptein*) that which is being hidden or concealed (*kryptesthai*, *lanthanein*) by those from whom the busybody wishes to pry it. As a consequence, the busybody becomes a 'spectator' (*theatēs*)¹⁷ who, however, exceeds his rights, since he does not content himself with watching that which is put on display in the public sphere, but endeavors to overstep the boundaries of other people's private space and look into that which should remain hidden. Given that he is depicted with an exaggeration which brings to mind characters from the comic stage,¹⁸ describing him

2000) 493–510, and "Mirroring Virtue in Plutarch's Lives," *Ploutarchos* 1 (2003/4) 89–96. On vision in Plutarch see also the famous link between the eyes and character at *Alex.*1.3.

¹⁵ θέασθαι 518A, 521B, 522A; βλέπειν 516A, 521A; ὀρᾶν 519D, 521B, 521F, 522A, F.

¹⁶ ὄψις 516A, 520E, 521A, B, C, D, 522A; ὀφθαλμός 515F, 516A, 521A.

¹⁷ θεατής 516F, 522F; θέαμα 516C, 519F, 520C, 521A, B, F; δείκνυται 516A; ἀνακαλύπτειν 516F; κρύπτειν 516D, 518D, etc. Perhaps it is a distorted echo of Plato's φιλοθεάμων in *Resp.* 476A–B.

¹⁸ On Plutarch's busybody as a comic character see L. van Hoof, "Genres and their Implications: Meddlesomeness in *On Curiosity* versus the *Lives*," in A. G. Nikolaidis (ed.), *The Unity of Plutarch's Work. 'Moralia' Themes in the 'Lives', Features of the 'Lives' in the 'Moralia'* (Berlin/New York 2008) 297–313, at 303–305. In many plays of Menander one finds such curious characters (mostly

as a ‘spectator’ places him in a kind of perverse symmetry: the curious spectator becomes a spectacle himself. Meddlesomeness itself is finally compared to the eye in a revealing mythological example (516A):

νῦν δ’ ὡσπερ ἐν τῷ μύθῳ τὴν Λάμιαν λέγουσιν οἴκοι μὲν εὔδειν τυφλήν, ἐν ἀγγεῖῳ τινὶ τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς ἔχουσιν ἀποκειμένους, ἕξω δὲ προϊούσαν ἐπιτίθεσθαι καὶ βλέπειν· οὕτως ἡμῶν ἕκαστος ἕξω καὶ πρὸς ἑτέρους τῇ κακονοίᾳ τὴν περιεργίαν ὡσπερ ὀφθαλμὸν ἐντίθησι: τοῖς δ’ ἑαυτῶν ἀμαρτήμασι καὶ κακοῖς πολλάκις περιπταίμεν ὑπ’ ἀγνοίας, ὅσιν ἐπ’ αὐτὰ καὶ φῶς οὐ πορίζομεν.

But as it is, like the Lamia in the fable, who, they say, when at home sleeps in blindness with her eyes stored away in a jar, but when she goes abroad puts in her eyes and can see, so each one of us, in our dealings with others abroad, puts his meddlesomeness (*periergia*), like an eye (*ophthalmon*), into his maliciousness (*kakonoia*); but we are often tripped up by our own faults and vices by reason of our ignorance of them, since we provide ourselves with no sight (*opsin*) or light (*phōs*) by which to inspect them. (transl. W. C. Helmbold)

Curiosity emerges from this elaborate simile as a kind of Evil Eye which is intentionally used for a bad purpose. As Lamia¹⁹

slaves), e.g. Karion in the *Epitrepontes* or Parmenon in the *Samia*; some comedies were even titled *The Busybody* (Πολυπράγμων): Diphilus (fr.67–68 K.-A.), Heniochus (F 3), and Timocles (fr.29). See L. Inglese, “Plutarco, *De curiositate* 517a,” in I. Gallo (ed.), *Seconda miscellanea filologica* (Naples 1995) 159–166; cf. Leigh, *From Polypragmon* 60–65; H. J. Mette, “Curiositas,” in *Festschrift Bruno Snell* (Munich 1956) 227–235. Furthermore, the comic underpinning is what links *On Curiosity* with Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses* which in turn, as R. May (*Apuleius and Drama: The Ass on the Stage* [Oxford 2006]) brilliantly argues, was largely influenced by (especially Roman) comedy.

¹⁹ Perhaps this simile functions on a deeper level: as a mythical figure, Lamia is loaded with strongly negative connotations which, when implicitly transposed to meddlesomeness, put the vice in an even worse light. On Lamia’s cultural significance see e.g. I. M. Resnick and K. F. Kitchel, “‘The Sweepings of Lamia’: Transformations of the Myths of Lilith and Lamia,” in A. Cuffel et al. (eds.), *Religion, Gender, and Culture in the Pre-Modern World* (New York 2007) 77–104; S. I. Johnston, *Restless Dead. Encounters between the Living and Dead in Ancient Greece* (Berkeley 1999) 162–163.

has a choice whether to enable or disable seeing, so does one have a choice whether or not to ‘activate’ curiosity, which sharpens the sense of sight in regard to other people’s vices, but at the same time makes one blind towards one’s own. As a result, meddlesomeness and curiosity are organically related to malice (*kakonoia*, *kakoētheia*). This close association—along with a third element, envy (*phthonos*)²⁰—is again underscored in *On Curiosity* in a discussion of a fragment quoted from an unknown, lost comedy (which once again underlines the comic provenance of the busybody himself):²¹

οἷον εὐθὺς ἢ πολυπραγμοσύνη φιλομάθειά τις ἐστὶν ἀλλοτρίων
κακῶν, οὔτε φθόνου δοκοῦσα καθαρεύειν νόσος οὔτε κακοηθεί-
ας. “τί τὰλλότριον, ἄνθρωπε βασκανώτατε, / κακὸν ὄξυδορκεῖς
τὸ δ’ ἴδιον παραβλέπεις;”

Such a malady of the mind, to take the first instance, is curiosity (*polypragmosynē*), which is a desire to learn the troubles of others, a disease which is thought to be free from neither envy (*phthonou*) nor malice (*kakoētheias*): “Why do you look so sharp on others’ ills, Malignant man, yet overlook your own?”

As this last passage reveals, the entire infamous triad of meddlesomeness, malice, and envy is connected by Plutarch to the sense of sight. More importantly, however, it clearly shows that the main activity of the curious man is to “look keenly” (*oxydorkeis*) on others’ ill deeds, which in turn presupposes an active engagement on his part. He does not simply happen to stumble upon a curious ‘spectacle’: he diligently seeks it out.²² Elsewhere he is said to “look into” (*emlepousi* 518F), “uncover” (*anakalyptōn* 516F, *anakalyptontes* 518E), gather that which is hidden (*ta kryptomena kai lanthanonta eklegousi* 516E), “lay bare that which is secret” (*apogymnōsis tōn aporrētōn* 519C), and even put (*tithenai*) his eyes (*ophthalmous*) into another’s house (521A). In another revealing

²⁰ A point given prominence by Plutarch in *Table Talk* (*Mor.* 680c–683b).

²¹ *Mor.* 515D = F 725 K.-A. (*adespoton*); on the figure of the busybody in Greek and Roman comedy see recently Leigh, *From Polypragmon* 30–33, 60–68.

²² Cf. *θηρέειν καὶ κατακόπτειν* (519B), *ἐξετάζων* (517A).

simile the busybodies are compared to people who look directly at the sun, trying to “forcefully” (*biazomenoi*) rend its light apart (*diastellein*).²³ As a consequence, sight itself, of which the curious man makes his nefarious use, is also endowed with an active quality: it is said to clutch onto (*epidrattesthai*) the object of his curiosity;²⁴ and in yet another colorful simile it is likened to an ill-bred servant girl “roaming about” instead of dutifully and quickly fulfilling her tasks (521B–C):

τοὺς δὲ πολυπράγμονας ἴδοις ἂν ὑπὸ παντὸς ὁμοίως θεάματος τραχηλιζομένους καὶ περιαγομένους ὅταν ἔθος καὶ μελέτη γένηται τῆς ὄψεως αὐτοῖς πανταχοῦ διαφορουμένης. δεῖ δ' ὡς οἶμαι, μὴ καθάπερ θεράπαιναν ἀνάγωγον ἔξω ρέμβεσθαι τὴν αἴσθησιν, ἀλλὰ ἀποπεμπομένην ὑπὸ τῆς ψυχῆς ἐπὶ τὰ πράγματα συντυγχάνειν αὐτοῖς ταχὺ καὶ διαγγέλλειν.

And you may observe how every kind of spectacle alike gets a strangle-hold on busybodies and twists their necks round when they once acquire a habit and practice of scattering their glances in all directions. But, as I think, the faculty of vision should not be spinning about outside of us like an ill-trained servant girl, but when it is sent on an errand by the soul it should quickly reach its destination and deliver its message.

This last simile presupposes that the soul is the mistress of the household who sends (*apopempomenēn*) the sight, which is her servant, to run her errands.²⁵ This image is echoed elsewhere in the treatise, where eyes are said to bring tumult and confusion (*thorybos*) to the intellect (*dianoia*), summoning it frequently “outside” (*exō*), instead of allowing it to dwell within and focus on reasoning (521D):

²³ ἀναιδῶς καταβλέπειν καὶ διαστέλλειν τὸ φῶς εἴσω βιαζόμενοι καὶ τολμῶντε ἀποτυφλοῦνται (517B).

²⁴ τῶν ἐντὸς ἐπιδράττεσθαι τῇ ὄψει (521A); ὄψει was rejected by some editors (Reiske, Pohlenz, Dumortier-Defradas), but L. Inglese, “Note critiche a Plutarco *Moralia*,” *RCCM* 36 (1994) 218, defends it, pointing out that the term required by the comparison is precisely *opsis* and not the generic *periergia*, which is proved by the argumentative structure of the chapter, entirely focused on the relationship between *opsis* and *polypragmosynē*.

²⁵ This analogy was noticed already by L. Inglese, *Plutarco, La Curiosità* (Naples 1996) 164.

ὄθεν ἐκεῖνο μὲν ψευδὸς ἐστὶ, τὸ Δημόκριτον ἐκουσίως σβέσαι τὰς ὄψεις ἀπερεισάμενον εἰς ἔσοπτρον πυρωθὲν καὶ τὴν ἀπ' αὐτοῦ ἀνάκλασιν δεξάμενον, ὅπως μὴ παρέχῃσι θόρυβον τὴν διάνοιαν ἔξω καλοῦσαι πολλάκις, ἀλλ' ἐῶσιν ἔνδον οἰκουρεῖν καὶ διατρίβειν πρὸς τοῖς νοητοῖς ὡς περ παρόδιοι θυρίδες ἐμφοραγεῖσαι...

Consequently, though that story about Democritus is false, that he deliberately destroyed his sight by fixing his eyes on a red-hot mirror and allowing its heat to be reflected on his sight, in order that his eyes might not repeatedly summon his intellect outside and disturb it, but might allow his mind to remain inside at home and occupy itself with pure thinking, blocking up as it were windows which open on the street...

Finally, in another metaphor, the soul of the busybody itself is said to leap outside of the house (*thyraze*), wander around (*planaŋtai*), and gorge its malice (*kakoēthes*) on other peoples' business (516D):

ἡ ψυχὴ γέμουσα κακῶν παντοδαπῶν καὶ φρίττουσα καὶ φοβούμενη τὰ ἔνδον ἐκπηδᾷ θύραζε καὶ πλαναῖται περὶ τὰλλότρια, βόσκουσα καὶ πιαίνουσα τὸ κακὴθες.

their souls, being full of all manner of vices, shuddering and frightened at what is within, leap outwards and prowl about other people's concerns and there batten and make fat their own malice.

While this may seem quite far from the image of the soul as mistress of the house, it clearly rests on the same presupposition: sight and seeing is an active phenomenon, roaming about and seeking out the means to satisfy the busybody's vice, troubling his intellect—and in the end causing the soul itself to leap “outside” and wander.

The windows of curiosity

The last three similes and metaphors are of particular importance in another respect as well, as they tap into an entire nexus of both literal and metaphorical associations between the image of the house and household and the activity of the busybody—associations, it should be stressed, focused in particular on doors and windows, i.e. passageways to and fro, leading in both directions, outside from inside, and inside from outside.

The image of the house is found already in the very first words of the treatise, deployed at first somewhat puzzlingly, and only subsequently exposed as a metaphor for the soul (515B–C):²⁶

ἄνουν ἢ σκοτεινὴν ἢ δυσχεῖμερον οἰκίαν ἢ νοσώδη φυγεῖν μὲν ἴσως ἄριστον· ἂν δὲ φιλοχωρῆ τις ὑπὸ συνηθείας, ἔστι καὶ φῶτα μεταθέντα καὶ κλίμακα μεταβαλόντα καὶ θύρας τινὰς ἀνοίξαντα τὰς δὲ κλείσαντα, λαμπροτέραν εὐπνουστέραν ὑγιεινότεραν ἐργάσασθαι ... ἐπεὶ τοίνυν ἔστι τινὰ πάθη νοσώδη καὶ βλαβερὰ καὶ χειμῶνα παρέχοντα τῇ ψυχῇ καὶ σκότος, ἄριστον μὲν ἐξωθεῖν ταῦτα καὶ καταλύειν εἰς ἔδαφος αἰθρίαν καὶ φῶς καὶ πνεῦμα καθαρὸν διδόντας ἑαυτοῖς.

It is perhaps best to avoid a house which has no ventilation, or is gloomy, or cold in winter, or unhealthy; yet if familiarity has made you fond of the place, it is possible to make it brighter, better ventilated, and healthier by altering the lights, shifting the stairs, and opening some doors and closing others ... Since, then, there are certain unhealthy and injurious states of mind which allow winter and darkness to enter the soul, it is better to thrust these out and to make a clean sweep to the foundations, thus giving to ourselves a clear sky and light and pure air.

Just as the real house requires proper airing, light, and general tidiness, so does its figurative counterpart, the human soul. Enter the busybody with his eponymous vice which quite predictably is easily accommodated into this figure of speech (515E):

τὰς εἰς γειτόνων θυρίδας καὶ τὰς παρόδους τῆς πολυπραγμοσύνης ἔμφραξον, ἑτέρας δ' ἀνοίξον εἰς τὴν ἀνδρωνίτιν τὴν σεαυτοῦ φερούσας, εἰς τὴν γυναικωνίτιν, εἰς τὰς τῶν θεραπόντων διαίτας· ἐνταῦθ' ἔχει διατριβὰς οὐκ ἀχρήστους οὐδὲ κακοῦθεις ἀλλ' ὠφελίμους καὶ σωτηρίους τὸ φιλοπευθεῖς τοῦτο καὶ φιλόπραγμον.

²⁶ As suggested by L. Van Hoof, *Plutarch's Practical Ethics. The Social Dynamics of Philosophy* (Oxford 2010) 177, this may be a device to arouse the reader's curiosity who after "almost twenty lines still does not know what the text will be about." Plutarch begins here with an analogy between the therapy for the soul and the activity of an architect or an urbanist (which recurs in another treatise, *Vit. Pud.* 529C–D). Such a beginning *per analogiam* is one of the favorite devices used by Plutarch (Inglese, *Plutarco, La Curiosità* 134). On the healing program of the soul in Plutarch see H. G. Ingenkamp, *Plutarchs Schriften über die Heilung der Seele* (Bonn 1972).

Block up the windows and the side-doors of your curiosity that open on your neighbours' property, and open up others leading to your own—to the men's quarters, to the women's quarters, to the living-rooms of your servants! Here this curiosity and meddlesomeness of yours will have an occupation not unhelpful or malicious, but useful and salutary.

The windows (*thyrides*) of curiosity are a metaphor we have already encountered in the anecdote of Democritus' self-blinding (deployed much later on in the treatise): these are the eyes. Eyes are windows, Plutarch tells us, and the curious eyes are windows wide open on the street; hence they are focused on the external world, desiring to peep at the neighbors and learn their secrets, especially the dark ones.

This metaphor, although familiar in Greek and Roman culture from earlier times, has been creatively developed and employed as an ethical symbol only in Plutarch's *On Curiosity*.²⁷ Though nowadays almost a cliché, the idea of assimilating eyes to windows need not have been so obvious in classical antiquity. Greek houses in particular were rarely equipped with external windows opening out onto the street, or onto public space in general, as most rooms were illuminated by light from the interior courtyard. And in the infrequent exceptions, these were either small openings high off the ground, or larger windows, but in the semipublic space of the *andrōn*, which was often placed

²⁷ However, in *Table Talk* he calls both the eyes and the nose secondary doors to the soul, κατὰ τὰ ὄμματα καὶ τὰς ῥίνας, ὡσπερ καθ' ἑτέρας θύρας, ἐπεισάγων τῇ ψυχῇ (645E), which seems to go back to Plato's *Phaedrus*, where they are also spoken of as "natural inlets to the soul," τὸ τοῦ κάλλους ῥεῦμα πάλιν εἰς τὸν καλὸν διὰ τῶν ὀμμάτων ἰόν, ἧ πέφυκεν ἐπὶ τὴν ψυχὴν ἰέναι, (255C). Elsewhere in *Table Talk* he quotes Aesop's fable mentioning windows in every man's breast through which one could examine his thoughts, an anecdote taken up earlier by Vitruvius, who assigns it to Socrates (*De arch.* 3 praef.). Lucretius (3.359–369) discusses the idea that it is the soul that is responsible for visual perception, the eyes being like its "opened doors" (*foribus reclusis*); if they were just doorways, he argues, we would see refulgent things, but we do not, because light hampers our sight. Pliny (*HN* 11.148) thinks that nature made the pupil to be a window in the midst of the cornea in the eye.

adjacent to an outside wall and at the corner of house.²⁸ The reason behind these arrangements was most likely privacy: the desire to keep prying eyes out.²⁹ The soul of the busybody therefore, with its numerous windows opening out into the public, is, according to Plutarch, like a poorly organized house. This in turn marks it with a peculiar vulnerability, one inherent in the metaphor itself—and also, as we shall see, in ancient ideas of visual perception.

For both doors and windows, as we are told in *On Curiosity*, can also be penetrated in the opposite direction, from the outside to the inside. This time, however, they appear in their literal and not figurative meaning, as the actual windows and doors of an actual house, which provide the meddlesome with his spectacle to behold.³⁰ People not affected with the vice, Plutarch argues, are not in the habit of looking inside (*blepein eisō*), through the door (*thyran*) they pass by, since “it makes no difference whether it is the feet or the eyes that we set within another’s house.”³¹ Elsewhere the busybody is compared to the wind, as he flings (*anapetannysi*) the door (*thyran*) open, looking for hidden revels and dances (517A). He is also said to “slip in” (*paradyetai*) through the door, instead of knocking or being announced by the doorkeeper (516E). Busybodies (or simply voyeurs) are seen to “cast their eyes” (*ophthalmous hypoballontes*) into women’s litters, and hang around their windows (*thyridōn*)—yet again with the same purpose (522A).

²⁸ N. Cahill, *Household and City Organization at Olynthus* (London 2002) 80.

²⁹ Cahill, *Household* 76, 78; L. Nevett, *House and Society in the Ancient Greek World* (Cambridge 1999) 71; cf. Apul. *Met.* 9.42, the narrator-ass peers through a window (*per quamdam fenestulam*) out of curiosity to learn the cause of a noise he has heard. See also May, *Apuleius and Drama* 156–161, on the use of windows and doors on stage in the Roman theatre and in the house of Milo in Apuleius *Met.*, which is identifiable as a comic house. In this context, Ovid’s description of Fama’s house as having neither gates nor closed entrances and being open all day is even more significant (*Met.* 12.43–52).

³⁰ Cf. again Kandaules and Gyges in Hdt. 1.9, when the former urges the latter to peer from behind the open door at his naked wife.

³¹ μηδὲν διαφέρειν ἢ τοὺς πόδας ἢ τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς εἰς ἀλλοτρίαν οἰκίαν τιθέναι (521A).

Though quite straightforward in their immediate meaning (as the door stands for an actual door, and a window for a window), when seen in the larger context of the entire treatise these passages reveal a curious dynamic with their figurative counterparts, where the eyes are windows and the house is the soul. Given the frequency and the prominence of both in the treatise, it is not unreasonable to detect here a case of continuous slippage between the figurative (with which the treatise opens, and which recurs repeatedly in metaphors and similes) and the literal (which provides the more down-to-earth examples of meddling behavior) senses.

Even more importantly, perhaps, as a result of this slippage doors and windows ultimately appear as two-way passageways. Used figuratively, they are directed outwards, from within the house (which symbolizes the soul) and therefore need to be either shut, or opened in the right direction. In their literal meaning, however, the orientation changes, as now they provide the means for the busybody to look inside from the outside.

What emerges from this slippage therefore is the ambiguous, active-passive status of both doors and windows: as liminal spaces,³² they provide one with the power to look (or gaze) outside, but also are vulnerable to the meddling gaze of others. This specific dichotomy, however, the dualistic nature combined of power and weakness, activity and passivity, an outward and inward orientation, which characterizes doors and windows in

³² See Ch. Briganti and K. Mezei, *The Domestic Space Reader* (Toronto 2012) 247–255, esp. 249–251; A. Cowan, “Seeing is Believing: Urban Gossip and the Balcony in Early Modern Venice,” in L. Foxhall et al. (eds.), *Gender and the City before Modernity* (Malden/Oxford 2013) 231–248, at 231–232. In many cultures liminal spaces are believed to be especially dangerous because of the presence of demons who, as liminal beings themselves, gravitate towards them: see J. Doroszevska, “The Liminal Space: Suburbs as a Demonic Domain in Classical Antiquity,” *Preternature* 6 (2017) 1–30; D. Endsjø, “To Lock up Eleusis: A Question of Liminal Space,” *Numen* 47 (2000) 351–386; S. I. Johnston, “Crossroads,” *ZPE* 88 (1991) 217–224; on the cultural significance of the door specifically see M. B. Ogle, “The House-Door in Greek and Roman Religion and Folklore,” *AJP* 32 (1911) 251–271.

their literal meaning and as figurative signifiers, will also necessarily reflect on their figurative signified: the eyes and the human gaze themselves.

The stranglehold of the spectacle

Thus we return to the problem only hinted at above: the inherent weakness of the busybody's soul, a weakness originating in its poor 'arrangement', is closely tied to ancient ideas of visual perception. For sight and even the meddlesome gaze also reveals upon closer inspection its passive, vulnerable, bidirectional quality, like the windows and doors to which it is consistently assimilated. The most revealing illustration here is the story of the athlete Dioxiippus (521B):

ὁ μὲν γὰρ Διογένης θεασάμενος εἰσελαύνοντα τὸν ὀλυμπιονίκην Διῶξιππον ἐφ' ἄρματος, καὶ γυναικὸς εὐμόρφου θεωμένης τὴν πομπὴν ἀποσπᾶσαι τὰς ὄψεις μὴ δυνάμενον ἀλλ' ὑποβλέποντα καὶ παρεπιστρεφόμενον, “ὄρατ’,” εἶπε “τὸν ἀθλητὴν ὑπὸ παιδισκαρίου τραχηλιζόμενον;” τοὺς δὲ πολυπράγμονας ἴδοις ἂν ὑπὸ παντὸς ὁμοίως θεάματος τραχηλιζομένους καὶ περιανομένοισι, ὅταν ἔθος καὶ μελέτη γένηται τῆς ὄψεως αὐτοῖσι πανταχοῦ διαφορουμένης.

When Diogenes saw the Olympic victor Dioxiippus making his triumphal entry in his chariot and unable to tear his eyes away from a beautiful woman who was among the spectators of the procession, but continually turning around and throwing side-glances in her direction, “Do you see,” said the Cynic, “how a slip of a girl gets a strangle-hold on our athlete?” And you may observe how every kind of spectacle alike gets a strangle-hold on busybodies and twists their necks round when they once acquire a habit and practice of scattering their glances in all directions.

This anecdote begins with a familiar model of the male active gaze directed at a female, who in this relationship is expected to remain passive.³³ Her power is her beauty; his weakness is his

³³ When it came to sight, to the act of looking and being looked at, there seems to be a pattern in the distribution of gender roles: the male-subject usually looked, while the female-object was looked at. Juxtaposing the penetrating gaze with the penetrating power of the phallus has already become something of a cliché; see e.g. Barton, *Sorrows of the Ancient Romans* 95–

curiosity and, lurking behind it, his lust. The contrast becomes even sharper when we take into consideration the active physical power of Dioxippus the athlete contrasted with the passive weakness of the young girl (*paidiskarion*). At some point, however, Dioxippus' gazes sent by him like arrows rebound from the object and return to him.³⁴ The sight or rather spectacle (*theama*) is no longer 'uncovered' by the meddlesome gaze; it is now the busybody himself who is twisted and turned (*trachelizomenos*) by it.

98; Fredrick, *The Roman Gaze*; H. Morales, *Vision and Narrative in Achilles Tatius' Leucippe and Clitophon* (Cambridge 2005) 29–32. However, many exceptions to this pattern (an erotically charged female gaze) may be found: e.g. Phaedra watching Hippolytus (Eur. *Hipp.* 27), Chloe watching Daphnis (Longus 1.13), Tarpeia watching Tattius (Prop. 4.4). A particularly salient specimen of this phenomenon is the teichoscopy motif, beginning with *Iliad* 3.121–244 (Helen watching the Greek heroes), and taken up later in Euripides' *Phoenissae* 88–201 (Antigone watching the Argive heroes), Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 8.14–80 (Scylla gazing at Minos), Statius' *Thebaid* 7.243–374 (Antigone watching the Theban forces), Valerius Flaccus *Argonautica* 6.503–704 (Medea watching the Greek heroes). Some of these (Scylla, Medea) are, furthermore, erotically charged in a more or less explicit way; a succinct summary of this motif may be found in Horace 3.2.6–9. Cf. H. Lovatt, "The Female Gaze in Flavian Epic: Looking Out From the Walls in Valerius Flaccus and Statius," in R. R. Nauta et al. (eds.), *Flavian Poetry* (Leiden 2006) 60–78; Lovatt, *Epic Gaze* 217–261; T. Fuhrer, "Teichoskopia. Female Figures Looking on Battles," in J. Fabre-Serris et al. (eds.), *Women and War in Antiquity* (Baltimore 2015) 51–70. Yet another venue for accommodating an erotically charged female gaze was the Roman games. The objects looked upon could have been the performers (gladiators) themselves, who not infrequently were quite popular especially among female audiences, but also other (male) members of the audience, and in particular after Augustus' reform, which segregated women's seating and restricted it to the highest levels of the amphitheater; Suet. *Aug.* 44 (on Augustus' reform); Ov. *Ars Am.* 1.165–166, 169–170, *Am.* 2.7.1–6; Prop. 4.8.76–77 (on erotic gazes in the amphitheater). See C. Ewigleben, "'What These Women Love is the Sword': The Performers and their Audiences," in E. Köhne et al. (eds.), *Gladiators and Caesars* (Berkeley 2000) 125–139, at 132–133.

³⁴ This picture vaguely triggers association with the mirror, another of Plutarch's favorite metaphors (as well as narrative devices); see Zadorojnyi, in *Plutarch's Lives* 169–195; Duff, *Plutarch's Lives* 32–33; Stadter, in *Rhetorical Theory and Praxis* 493–510.

It is now he who is the passive, while the active part is taken by the spectacle itself, which—in Helmbold’s translation—is said to get a “stranglehold” on the beholder.

A similar idea seems to be presupposed in the story of Democritus, whose eyes have continuously bothered his “intellect” (*dianoia*), to the point of driving the philosopher to self-blinding. Perhaps it also lurks behind the simile of the soul sending sight, an unruly servant girl, to run her errands, though the inward-directed quality of eyes and seeing is never driven home here. Apart from *On Curiosity*, we find the same motif, or duality, in Plutarch’s *Table Talk*, where it is argued that sight is the strongest stimulus for love and simultaneously the cause of the greatest suffering for the soul. Plutarch outlines a vision of a lover who loses himself when gazing at beautiful people as if he were pouring his entire being into them (681A). Elsewhere in the same work Plutarch also speaks of the eyes (and the nose) as secondary doors leading *into* the soul.³⁵ This paradox of the eye, analyzed by Carlin Barton, has been succinctly summarized in just one sentence: “The eye was very powerful, but, from the other perspective, the eye was excruciatingly vulnerable.”³⁶

This peculiar dualism is a product of the beliefs about the power and the weakness of the human gaze, opinions widely circulated in Plutarch’s time,³⁷ according to which the gaze is at

³⁵ κατὰ τὰ ὄμματα καὶ τὰς ῥίνας, ὡς περ καθ’ ἑτέρας θύρας, ἐπεισάγων τῇ ψυχῇ (645E). See Y. Vernière, *Symboles et mythes dans la pensée de Plutarque* (Paris 1977) 302; F. Fuhrmann, *Les images de Plutarque* (Paris 1964) 104–105, 140–141.

³⁶ Barton, *The Sorrows of the Ancient Romans* 93 (with discussion of the sources at 91–95).

³⁷ The eye was perceived to be an active, fire-emitting organ, comparable to the sun, already in our earliest sources: Hom. *Il.* 1.101, 14.341, 19.12, *Od.* 4.150, 19.446; Hes. *Theog.* 826–827; *Hom.Hymn.Dem.* 70; *Hom.Hymn.Hel.* 9–11; *Hom.Hymn.Herm.* 45, 415; Soph. *Trach.* 606; Pindar *Paean* 9 fr.52k.1–2 S.-M.. See K. Rudolph, “Sight and the Presocratics,” in *Sight and the Ancient Senses*, at 39–40; cf. O. Grusser and H. Hagner, “On the History of Deformation Phosphenes and the Idea of Internal Light generated in the Eye for the Purpose of Vision,” *Documenta Ophthalmologica* 74 (1990) 57–85.

the same time an aggressor and a victim of the perceived object. This particular ambivalence is a heritage of two great theories formulated as early as the pre-Socratic philosophical tradition.³⁸ In brief, both endeavored to explain how the eye is constructed and why we are able to see. According to one of them—now known as ‘extramission theory’,³⁹ formulated by Alcmaeon of Croton⁴⁰ and the Pythagorean school—the eye as an organ produces light rays which, when cast at objects, make them visible. According to the other—‘intromission’⁴¹—which was developed by the atomists and subsequently taken over with modifications by Epicurus and his school, the objects themselves emit some effluences which penetrate the eye and are reflected in it.⁴² Both theories, however, though at the outset mutually exclusive, were

³⁸ The physical or philosophical tradition develops simultaneously with the medical and the mathematical ones; all three together furnish the scheme of Greek optics: cf. D. C. Lindberg, *Theories of Vision from Al-Kīndī to Kepler* (Chicago 1976) 1.

³⁹ See Rudolph, in *Sight and the Ancient Senses* 44. For a brief survey of theories see Lindberg, *Theories of Vision*, on the extramission theory of Empedocles, 4; of the Stoics, 9–10; of Galen, 9–10, 31; as a mathematical theory, 12–13, 45, 50–51, 66, 101, 232; of Euclid, 12–14, 37–38; of Aristotle, 217–218; of Pliny the Elder, 88; of Seneca, 87; of Solinus, 88; of Ptolemy, 15–17; of Augustine, 90; arguments against, 45, 51–52, 66, 106, 134, 136–139, 160–161.

⁴⁰ See Alcmaeon 24 A 5 D.-K. (= Theophr. *Sens.* 26.1–4); cf. however Rudolph, in *Sight and the Ancient Senses* 39–42, who argues that Alcmaeon’s conception constitutes a break with the extramissionist theories present in the poetic tradition, and therefore labels it “reflection theory.”

⁴¹ See Lindberg, *Theories of Vision*: on the intromission theory of the atomists, 2–3, 37, 53, 58–59; of Aristotle, 7–9, 37, 58–59; as a mathematical theory, 50, 78, 85.

⁴² See Democritus 68 B 123 D.-K. (= Theophr. *Sens.* 50.1–6); Lucr. 4.269–521. Cf. W. Burkert, “Air-Imprints or Eidola: Democritus’ Aetiology of Vision,” *ICS* 2 (1977) 97–109; Rudolph, in *Sight and the Ancient Senses* 48; for Lucretius see Lindberg, *Theories of Vision* 2–3.

combined fairly quickly, perhaps even as early as in Empedocles,⁴³ and subsequently in Plato,⁴⁴ resulting in the idea of a dualistic—active and passive—character of the human eye and the ability to see.⁴⁵ This idea resonated in the literary texts of subsequent ages and may also be found in numerous passages of Plutarch's *On Curiosity* that hint now at the active, now at the passive, quality of the human gaze.⁴⁶

⁴³ An argument chiefly based Empedocles' comparison of the eye to a lantern in 31 B 84 D.-K. See W. J. Verdenius, "Empedocles' Doctrine of Sight," in *Studia varia Carolo Guglielmo Vollgraff oblata* (Amsterdam 1948) 155–164; A. A. Long, "Thinking and Sense-Perception in Empedocles: Mysticism or Materialism?" *CQ* 16 (1996) 256–276; Lindberg, *Theories of Vision*; D. Park, *The Fire within the Eye. A Historical Essay on the Nature and Meaning of Light* (Princeton 1999) 35; *contra*: Rudolph, in *Sight and the Ancient Senses* 45, who after D. Sedley, "Empedocles' Theory of Vision in Theophrastus' *De sensibus*," in W. W. Fortenbaugh et al. (eds.), *Theophrastus: His Psychological, Doxographical, and Scientific Writings* (New Brunswick 1992) 20–31, argues that crediting Empedocles with mixing both theories is an erroneous interpretation resulting from an Aristotelian conflation of the opinions of Plato on the one hand and Empedocles on the other.

⁴⁴ The Platonic conception is most fully presented in *Timaeus* 45B–D; according to him, visual rays coming from the eye and daylight together form the instrument of seeing, and serve as intermediary between the eye and the object seen which also passes on motions or emanations; see Lindberg, *Theories of Vision* 5; cf. A. Merker, *La vision chez Platon et Aristote* (Sankt Augustin 2003).

⁴⁵ However, some ideas of the passivity of the eye appeared in the extramissionist theory quite early, and vice versa: those testifying to the active role of the eye are to be traced in the intromissionist conceptions. For instance, in the extramission theory of Alcmaeon of Croton, although the process of vision is still considered to be active, "the eye loses its agency and begins to take the role of a receptacle" (Rudolph, in *Sight and the Ancient Senses* 40); on the other hand, in Democritus' intromission theory "eye is an active participant in, rather than a passive recipient of, vision" (Rudolph 50).

⁴⁶ But in his other works as well, especially in *Table Talk* (625F) where he explicitly speaks of "rays" (τὰς ἀνγὰς) of vision that go out from the eyes, and immediately quotes another opinion of the sort that we see what come to the eye from the object seen (τοῖς προσπίπτουσιν ἀπὸ τῶν ὀρατῶν εἶδеси πρὸς τὴν ὄψιν ὀρώμεν, 626A); then he refers to Plato, following his opinion that "a bright spirit darted from the eye mixes with the light about the object, and

There is no doubt that Plutarch's treatise against meddling remains indebted chiefly to the extramission theory. The active power of the curious gaze is given prominence in everything that is said about its ability to creep in through open doors and clutch the object of the busybody's interest. And yet the alternative intromission theory seems to underlie the anecdote of Dioxiippus and others: the assumption that the eyes lead inside, and that they are "natural inlets to the soul" (an idea found as early as Plato's *Phaedrus*).⁴⁷ In the end therefore, they emerge as two-way passageways, like the real doors and windows of a real house. Windows focused chiefly on the external world, leading outside, but in the end were a vulnerable inwardly passageway as well, one leading inside the human soul, which itself could be enslaved by the spectacle beheld.

Conclusion

In this analysis I hope to have shown that sight is the main preoccupation in *On Curiosity*, which engages in the cultural and philosophical discourse on visual perception. Curiosity is in the eye of the beholder—both literally and figuratively—as one may gather from Plutarch's treatise. First, it is inextricably connected with sight, seeing and looking into, and only passingly associated with gossip and hearing. As such, furthermore, it is presented as

those two are perfectly blended into one similar body" (transl. Goodwin): πνεῦμα τῶν ὀμμάτων ἀνογειδὲς ἐκπίπτον ἀνακίρναται τῷ περὶ τὰ σώματα φωτὶ καὶ λαμβάνει σύμμηξιν, ὥσθ' ἐν ἐξ ἀμφοῖν σῶμα δι' ὄλου συμπαθὲς γενέσθαι (626C).

⁴⁷ *Phaedrus* 255C (transl. Fowler): τὸ τοῦ κάλλους ῥεῦμα πάλιν εἰς τὸν καλὸν διὰ τῶν ὀμμάτων ἰόν, ἧ πέφυκεν ἐπὶ τὴν ψυχὴν ἰέναι. On the influence of the *Phaedrus* in the second century A.D. see M. B. Trapp, "Plato's *Phaedrus* in Second-Century Greek Literature," in D. A. Russell (ed.), *Antonine Literature* (Oxford 1990) 141–173. Both Platonic and earlier philosophers' theories of vision were part of the educational background of intellectuals contemporary with Plutarch, e.g. Achilles Tatius whose novel displays a great interest in vision and betrays scholarly theoretical underpinnings: O. Bykchov, "ἡ τοῦ κάλλους ἀπορροή: A Note on Achilles Tatius 1.9.4–5, 5.13.4," *CQ* 49 (1999) 339–341.

a two-way and reciprocal phenomenon, which implies that the curious gaze may touch and hurt the object seen, but the object itself may also catch and ensnare the curious beholder. This particular symmetry perfectly corresponds with the meaning of this word in English, since curiosity, as Carlin Barton aptly puts it, characterizes at the same time “the one who looks and the object which attracts that look.”⁴⁸ The imagery employed by Plutarch to exemplify the phenomenon of sight and seeing, which floats around the figurative and the literal use of windows and doors, once again proves Plutarch’s mastery in contextual negotiation.⁴⁹ By implication, however, this imagery displays a peculiar anxiety about a certain vulnerability of the passageways, anxiety which must have been shared by Plutarch himself and his readership and which led him to insist on the need for watching over the windows and doors of both the soul and the household.⁵⁰

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⁴⁸ Barton, *The Sorrows of the Ancient Romans* 87; in classical Latin, however, the term *curiosus* is exclusively self-oriented; therefore, the Latin equivalents of what in English is called a ‘curiosity’ would be *mirabilia* and its cognates.

⁴⁹ To paraphrase Alexei Zadorojnyi (in *Plutarch’s Lives* 170), who calls Plutarch “a master of proemial negotiation.”

⁵⁰ I would like to express my warmest thanks to Katarzyna Jażdżewska, Janek Kucharski, and Alexei Zadorojnyi, as well as the anonymous referees for all their valuable suggestions which have contributed greatly to the improvement of this article.