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Margaret W. Ferguson, *Dido's Daughters: Literacy, Gender, and Empire in Early Modern England and France*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2003. xiv + 506 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$25.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-226-24312-5.

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Virgil's *Aeneid* portrays Dido as a woman fated to be abandoned by Aeneas on his way to establish the city of Rome. The ancient queen of Carthage invoked in Margaret Ferguson's indefatigably erudite study is rather the Dido figured in Christine de Pizan's *Livre de la cité des dames*, a Phoenician princess who acquires and rules an empire that rivals that of Rome. For Ferguson, Dido's challenge to the masculinist politics and culture of Rome make her the "cultural mother" of some of the most prominent woman writers of the late medieval and early modern periods. When Christine de Pizan, Marguerite de Navarre, Elizabeth Cary, and Aphra Behn claimed the traditionally masculine province of authorship, they, like the Carthaginian queen, were "successfully seizing properties and prerogatives normatively defined as male" (p. 7).

Ferguson, a New Historicist, divides her book of literary criticism into two sections. The first part interrogates current theories of literacy, gender, and imperialism while it challenges deterministic models of modernization and progress. The second half features close readings of the work of four women writers, two French and two English, whose careers spanned the fourteenth through the seventeenth centuries. Multi- and inter-disciplinary in the most capacious sense of the terms, Ferguson's work particularly seeks to bridge the gap between feminist inquiry and literacy studies. "This study's central argument," Ferguson writes, "is that literacy is a social phenomenon surrounded and often constituted by interesting lies, as well as highly interested constructions of evidence on the part of writers from various historical eras including our own" (p. 7).

Situating her analysis in the late medieval and early modern eras, the period in which "oral, manuscript, and print culture overlapped and competed" (p. 6), Ferguson sets out to destabilize the "pragmatic" conception of alphabetic literacy that she sees enshrined in the academic fields of history, anthropology, and literary studies.[1] Literacy, she contends, must be more broadly defined than simply the ability to read and write in one language. "Literacy, in my usage, almost always connotes "literacies" and points to a social relation that has interpersonal, intercultural, international, and interlingual dimensions" (pp. 3-4). Building upon the work of John Guillory, who suggests that literacy would be more fruitfully envisioned as a series of questions about readers and their texts [2], Ferguson proposes that scholars ask not what literacy is, but rather "What counts as literacy for whom, and under what particular circumstances?" (p. 4). Such a question acknowledges that the meaning of the term, always unstable and always contested, shifts over time and place. Furthermore, it makes visible gendered and hierarchical "ideologies of partial literacies" employed to restrict literary endeavor to a professional class of male *literati* (p. 11). Whereas the most prevalent definition of full literacy during the late medieval and early modern periods implied the ability to read and write in Latin, a person was likely to be labeled "unskilled in letters" if he or she could read but not write, or read and write only in the vernacular (p. 73). Such competing definitions and multiple forms of literacy, Ferguson warns, muddy the evidential waters for scholars seeking to ascertain how many men and women in a given historical moment could read and write. Statistics regarding literacy rates in early modern Europe, such as those compiled by David Cressy for Tudor and Stuart England, are therefore simply unreliable.[3]

As a monolithic definition of literacy erases readers and alternative forms of reading from the historical record, a deterministic model of language development obscures a vital aspect of the history of modernization: the codification of standardized languages. Medieval and early modern France and England were characterized by *colinguisme* [4]; English and French were terms for “multiple spoken, and in a given historical moment, equally multiple written language practices” (p. 111). Like literacy, Ferguson argues, standardization is best understood as an ongoing field of social contest. The clerkly discourses that helped to construct standardized English and French as “prestige” dialects during the early modern period were as marked by ideologies of gender and status as twelfth- and thirteenth-century discourses about Latin had been. Vernacular dialects were feminized (“mother tongues”) and thereby devalued while Latin, the province of the educated clerkly class, was celebrated as masculine, even divine. Gendered notions of language consequently informed the later nation-building efforts of early modern states. Engaging with Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* [5], Ferguson contends that “preprint clerkly ideologies about the value of the ‘illustrious vernaculars’” helped to shape the development of the standardized print languages that were critical to the rise of nationalism and capitalism in the West (p. 136).

In the second half of her densely written study, Ferguson offers case studies of the “imperial fantasies” of four of Dido’s figurative daughters. Each author’s work is presented as a different mode of female literacy in action. Literacy here is a process of self-fashioning, a set of rhetorical strategies by which these culturally transgressive authors seek to avoid criticism even as they are “contesting dominant concepts of both literacy and gender” (p. 177). The literacy of Christine de Pizan’s *Livre de la cité des dames* of 1405 is a literacy of appropriation. “A *bricoleuse* whose methods of compilation serve a highly original allegorical vision,” de Pizan’s appropriations are wide-ranging (p. 17). Her vision of an empire ruled by a transplanted female ruler, Ferguson argues, re-appropriates and revises “an idea of female nature that had been misrepresented by male authors from the beginning of time to the present” (p. 80). In her appropriation of the clerkly (male) style of writing, de Pizan adapts the rhetorical device of the “doublet” (defined as a phrase such as “to have and to hold” in which the second terms seems to be a synonym for the first) to educate her “partially literate” female readers. The device also serves to open up potentially subversive terrain within her text, Ferguson notes. “Conceptual *alternatives* can be slipped into the discursive arena under the guise of synonyms; the rhetorical elaboration of an “official” style can become a method of prudential writing aimed at different audiences” (p. 186).

On the basis of evidence that is perhaps more speculative than compelling, Ferguson suggests that Christine de Pizan also appropriates the words of female heretics such as Na Prou Boneta, a Beguin visionary burned at the stake in 1328 (p. 208). While a connection between the two women cannot be substantiated, Ferguson nonetheless finds it likely that de Pizan was aware of Na Prou’s teachings. “I cannot state that de Pizan knew the Latin text of Na Prou Boneta’s confession...but I surmise that de Pizan knew, by oral report or by reading, words spoken by women who were *like* Na Prou Boneta in many respects...” (p. 211). Similarly, Ferguson contends that de Pizan was familiar with the ideas of Marguerite Porete (burned in Valenciennes between 1296 and 1306 along with her book, the *Mirouer des simples ames*), finding echoes of Porete’s thought in the *Cité des dames*. Reluctant to conclude that de Pizan was either ignorant of or disagreed with the theological ideas expressed by these heretics, Ferguson holds that the author instead “shadows forth” their teachings. However, de Pizan’s admiration of the women who claimed unmediated access to God’s word is veiled; de Pizan prudently places their unorthodox words in the mouths of the orthodox saints who populate the *City of Ladies*. “Potentially heretical ideas about religion and women’s social roles” are thereby woven into de Pizan’s text (p. 224).

Marguerite de Navarre observed at close hand the empire-building efforts of the French crown during the early decades of the Protestant Reformation. The literacy practiced by the sister of Francis I, Ferguson asserts, is a literacy of reformation and translation. De Navarre’s “literacy of translation” is not only of one language to another but of sacred into secular and speech into writing. She “defines

“true” literacy...not simply as technical skills of reading and writing, but rather as the workings of God’s spirit through the words (written but also oral) of his servants, especially his women” (p. 228). The “reformation” invoked here is not only a religious reformation but a reformation of the imperialist project. In story sixty seven of the *Heptaméron*, Ferguson asserts, de Navarre offers a commentary on that project when she presents a vision of a reformed empire ruled by a woman, in which an “idealized feminized Christianity takes on the ideological form--and force--of a “good” imperialism” (p. 263).

Ferguson designates the literacy of the English Catholic Lady Elizabeth Cary as that of equivocation. In early seventeenth-century England, the negatively-charged “equivocation” implied duplicity and was associated with Catholics, traitors, and women (p. 272). Much as de Navarre’s work exposes the hypocrisy of the French colonizing project even as it participates in it, Cary’s literacy of equivocation celebrates as well as censures England’s status as an imperial nation. The practice of equivocation allows Cary to critique, albeit covertly, the religious and political policies of the Stuart monarchy in *The Tragedy of Miriam* (published 1613). In Cary’s biblical drama, the Maccabean princess Miriam is beheaded after being falsely accused of attempting to poison her husband Herod, the Roman-appointed governor of Judea. Ferguson argues that the play, with its refusal to restore “natural” order at the end, furthermore interrogates the “legitimacy of the absolutist state, its rhetorical and legal justifications, and its imperialist designs” as well as the “legitimacy of any state that is supported on and with reference to the institution of marriage” (pp. 330-331).

Ferguson’s final case study is the late seventeenth-century author Aphra Behn, whose literacy is described as a “project of literate colonization” (p. 337). Ferguson reads Behn’s late colonial works, *Ooronoko, or the Royal Slave* (1688), a novella about an enslaved African prince who rebels against the English in Surinam, and *The Widow Ranter, or the History of Bacon in Virginia, A Tragicomedy* (1690), a play about the rebellion of Nathaniel Bacon against the English rulers of Jamestown. Both works, she writes, are reflective of a self-fashioning project that “clearly contributes. . . to a larger cultural project of legitimating England’s imperial ambitions and colonizing activities while also intermittently criticizing aspects of her country’s (and especially her countrymen’s) behavior toward non-English subjects” (p. 338). In Ferguson’s analysis, Behn, perhaps more than the three previous authors, is a flawed heroine. Behn’s desire for self-promotion make her works morally ambiguous; she “exposes and hides her country’s imperialist project as she exposes and hides the historical subjects--including herself--about whom she is writing” (p. 372).

*Dido’s Daughters* is a work of almost overwhelming erudition that offers an intricate and imaginative analysis of the formative roles of gender, language, and literacies in the modernization process.

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## NOTES

[1] Ferguson’s analysis of the field of literacy studies considers, in addition to that of a vertiginous array of other scholars, the work of Elizabeth Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques* (Paris: Plon, 1955), trans. John and Doreen Weightman, (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin Books, 1976) and Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New York: Methuen, 1982). Her critique of the “Great Divide” school expands upon the work of Jacques Derrida, “Structure, Sign and Play,” in *The Structuralist Controversy: The Languages of Criticism and the Science of Man*, ed. and trans. Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970), pp. 247-272.

[2] John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

[3] David Cressy, *Literacy and the Social Order: Reading and Writing in Tudor and Stuart England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

[4] Ferguson takes the term from Renée Balibar, *L'institution du français: Essai sur le colinguisme des Carolingiens à la République* (Paris: Hachette, 1974).

[5] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

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