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A Review of "Dido's Daughters: Literacy, Gender,
and Empire in Early Modern England and France"
by Margaret W. Ferguson

Julie Campbell, *Eastern Illinois University*



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Margaret W. Ferguson. *Dido's Daughters: Literacy, Gender, and Empire in Early Modern England and France*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003. xiv + 506 pp. + 8 illus. \$25.00 paper. Review by JULIE D. CAMPBELL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY.

Basing her exploration of literacy, gender, and empire upon the premise that literacy was a site of social contest in the European past, Margaret W. Ferguson argues that "literacy is a social phenomenon surrounded and often constituted by interesting lies, as well as by highly interested constructions of evidence on the part of writers from various historical eras, including our own" (5, 7). With this observation in mind, she seeks to "disrupt the still-dominant scholarly consensus that neither historical women nor cultural theories about gender difference had much to do with the changes in literacy that have been seen as causes—or effects—of the modernizing process" (13). To accomplish this task, Ferguson engages with and problematizes numerous ideas popular in the history of literacy studies, then provides insightful analyses of texts by Christine de Pizan, Marguerite de Navarre, Elizabeth Cary, and Aphra Behn.

In the three chapters of Part One, Ferguson gives a dense overview of approaches to "defining and valuing literacy" in late medieval and early modern France and England (6). As she interrogates the history of literacy studies, she stresses that the notion of "contestable inheritance" is a metaphor central to her argument, and she invokes Marx as her muse, especially making reference to his ideas about the transition from feudalism to capitalism (14). Beginning with relatively recent literacy theories, Ferguson critiques the Lévi-Strauss-Derrida debate over writing, ultimately arriving at a theoretical model derived in part from both. She argues that the "hierarchy of superior/inferior is labile," positing that "part of the educator's task is to stabilize it, and part of my task here is to look again at the evidence of instability that the written record provides" (59). She details the "two main positions" in the modern literacy debates as those of the Great Divide theorists, who see literacy as a specific set of skills engendering specific

(but transcultural) mental effects in individuals and in groups, and . . . the ‘culturists,’ who see literacy as a socially embedded and highly-variable set of meaning-making activities that . . . are not necessarily tied to the alphabetic letter but are definitely tied . . . to the epistemological problems of the so-called observer effect. (61)

With these theoretical considerations in place, she proceeds to look at the “intertwined linguistic matrices of the territories claimed by French and British monarchs,” noting that the era in question was characterized by competition among languages and especially by what Renée Balibar terms *colinguisme*, “the association of certain state languages within an apparatus of languages in which they find their legitimacy and their working material” (101).

Ferguson refers to *colinguisme* to construct a critical perspective on three key facets of clerkly language use, “(1) the emergence, in discursive sites ranging from thirteenth-century Latin grammar books to sixteenth-century English courtly poems, of powerfully gendered figures of the vernacular; (2) the increasing use of a ‘regulated’ metropolitan vernacular for literary and bureaucratic purposes in French and English territories; and (3) the developing concern, among *litterati* trained in humanist books to ‘illustrate’ the vernacular so it could compete with Latin and Greek . . . as a language fit for ‘noble’ literary expression” (105). Traversing readings from Chaucer, Thomas Madryn, William Caxton, Gawin Douglas, Roger Ascham, Richard Pynson, and César de Rochefort, as well as Thomas Wyatt, Joachim du Bellay, and Dante, she examines how class signifies regarding “ideologies of gender in connection with ideologies of language” (134) as an “emergent clerkly class or class fraction” sought to shape “vernaculars as tongues suitable for ‘illustrious men’” (129).

Next, Ferguson invokes Benedict Anderson’s notion of nations as “imagined communities” to interrogate issues of imperial nationalism “as a matrix for gendered theories and practices of literacy” (135, 138). Asserting that there was “no such thing as a pure and uniform mother tongue,” she argues that the “feminine personifications of the concept arguably attest to the anxiety that many *litterati* felt about a situation of linguistic variety” (140). To

that end, she surveys examples of conflicted notions regarding the concepts of "Patria" and "mother tongue." She concludes with consideration of goals of "uniformity" for literacy acquisition, commenting especially upon the ways in which such educators as Richard Mulcaster, Erasmus, Edmund Spenser, and Roger Bacon sought to shape notions of literacy.

In Part Two, Ferguson dedicates a chapter each to de Pizan's *Livre de la Cité des Dames*, de Navarre's *Heptaméron*, Cary's *Tragedy of Mariam*, and Behn's *Widdow Ranter* and *Oroonoko*. She chooses such disparate authors and texts because, as she puts it, all four "offer searching commentaries, in writing manifestly aimed at future as well as contemporary readers, on women acting in two apparently contradictory roles: as oppressed subjects of imperial regimes and as rulers, or potential (that is, self-imagined) rulers, of new worlds" (26).

Regarding the *Cité des Dames*, Ferguson focuses on de Pizan's shaping of "personae to articulate a complex vision of empire that included prominent roles for female scribes, prophets, evangelists, and governors," noting that her vision of empire is one of a "universal" or "world monarchy" (180). She asserts, moreover, that the *Cité* is written "in a clerkly variant of a courtly, metropolitan dialect," with its diction and style "shaped by the bureaucratic writing practices developed by the clerks of the Curia . . . and adapted by servants of the French monarchy" (285). Moreover, since De Pizan's writing "became an influence on fifteenth-century English prose through the translation of several of her works . . ." (185), Ferguson concludes that through this "French/English connection, we can glimpse some but not all of the ways in which multilingual women with alphabetic literacy sought . . . to educate some portion of a once and future audience about what queens, or potential queens, might do to reform the world" (224).

Suggesting that de Navarre, like de Pizan, "appropriates both oral and written materials to construct an imperialist ideological project of her own" (225), Ferguson especially focuses on story 67 of the *Heptaméron* in which a virtuous woman journeys to Canada. During her trip, she is exiled on an Atlantic island due to treason

committed by her husband. Because of her personal piety and good reputation, however, when she finally returns to France, she lives “through her literacy,” as the ladies of La Rochelle send their daughters to study with her. Ferguson analyzes this story in terms of its associations with the “Imperial Project,” its narrative frame, and some “costs and benefits” of de Navarre’s literacy as evidenced in the story.

Moving to English texts, Ferguson examines *The Tragedy of Mariam* in light of the way it illustrates “a mode of female literacy that relies on several types of equivocation to articulate (but also to disguise) a critical perspective on England as an imperial nation” (265). She argues that the “Jesuitical theory of equivocation, like the discourse of casuistry to which this historically specific type of equivocation arguably belongs,” was influential upon Cary’s play in which the “verbal universe” hovers “like Jesuitical theories and practices of equivocation on the border between written, spoken, and ‘mentally reserved’ statements . . .” (281). She also goes over the familiar ground of issues regarding women’s speech and divorce that are intrinsic parts of Cary’s commentary in this play. She concludes that although the play “offers a commentary on, but no political alternative to, life in an imperial regime riven by differences among subjects and within them,” Cary articulates small differences regarding Marian’s experiences that do matter regarding issues of empire, gender, and literacy (332).

Finally, Ferguson examines aspects of literacy as colonization in Behn’s works. Specifically, she argues that “Behn’s vision of England as an imperial nation was critically colored by her experience as a woman writer who had worked in the theater—exploiting the anomaly of her gender while also defending against attacks on her status as a ‘public woman’” (333). Looking at *Oroonoko* and *Ranter*, she closely analyzes character development, as well as historical and political contexts. She suggests that Behn “uses her self-fashioned female literacy as she exposes and hides the historical subjects—including herself—about whom she is writing” (372).

Clearly, other interesting cases could have been explored in this study (Mary Wroth’s *Urania*, Margaret Cavendish’s *Blazing*

World) as, indeed, other theories on women's writing and Otherness could have been included (those of Julia Kristeva or Hélène Cixous), but Ferguson sets the parameters of her study to contain a just-manageable, lively discussion of the vast concepts of literacy, gender, and empire and the ways they intersect in these four particular texts. A gift of this study, then, is the way in which it inspires one to consider elements of Ferguson's ideas and textual analyses in conjunction with numerous other texts and theories. In general, the book is a useful one for anyone interested in early modern literacy and women's commentaries on issues of empire.

Kristin A. Pruitt. *Gender and the Power of Relationship*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2003. xvi +196 pp. \$60.00. Review by JAMES EGAN, THE UNIVERSITY OF AKRON.

Gender and the Power of Relationship begins with a metaphysical definition of divine "unity in diversity," a definition offered in the Father-Son colloquy of *Paradise Lost* III and reiterated throughout the epic. Unity in diversity is, of course, a perfect relationship, one which prelapsarian Adam and Eve are made aware of and urged to imitate in the series of lessons they receive in Paradise. Chapter Two reviews the educational process as a whole in the poem, from the divine education of Books V and III, to Adam's conversation with God in Book VIII, and finally to Eve's progress from self-knowledge, to awareness of Adam and their relationship, and to understanding of the "hierarchy of values on which the harmony of Paradise is based" (35). God, in turn, "examines" Adam on his understanding of relationship, and the human couple is allowed ample opportunity to "work out their relationship" (41). This chapter effectively establishes the meaning of "relationship" in two of the three primary settings of the poem, while confirming that the goal of divine pedagogy is to explain how Adam and Eve can "grow into relationship with each other and with the Creator" (44).

Chapter Three links the topic of relationship to the Miltonic motifs of hierarchy and equality, arguing in the process that his