

Spring 2005

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

Jane Hedley
Bryn Mawr College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/bmrcl>
[Let us know how access to this document benefits you.](https://repository.brynmawr.edu/bmrcl/vol5/iss1/8)

Recommended Citation

Hedley, Jane (2005). Review of "Review of Margaret W. Ferguson, *Dido's Daughters: Literacy, Gender, and Empire in Early Modern England and France.*," *Bryn Mawr Review of Comparative Literature*: Vol. 5 : No. 1
Available at: <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/bmrcl/vol5/iss1/8>

This paper is posted at Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr College. <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/bmrcl/vol5/iss1/8>

For more information, please contact repository@brynmawr.edu.

Margaret W. Ferguson, Dido's Daughters: Literacy, Gender, and Empire in Early Modern England and France. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2003. 506 pp. (+ i-xiv) ISBN 0226243125 (paper).

**Reviewed by Jane Hedley
Bryn Mawr College**

This enormous book is relentlessly complex. Should you take it on, to the tune of four hundred plus pages of densely layered argument? In a word, yes. The book is in two parts. Part I takes a deeply skeptical look at both the concept of literacy and the twentieth-century history of literacy studies: I came away from this section of the book with a new understanding both of the concept itself and of the political stakes of its deployment in "imperial contexts." Part II consists of consecutive "Case Studies" of four Early Modern writers -- Christine de Pizan, Marguerite de Navarre, Elizabeth Cary, and Aphra Behn -- who were relatively privileged, educationally and socially, yet none of whom could claim full literacy in the context of her own time and place. Ferguson's treatment of each writer's literary agenda is complex, persuasive, and -- in spite of her refusal to let any scholarly, critical or theoretical influence go unacknowledged -- stunningly original. She has used these case studies to establish that Early Modern literacy was unstable, contested, and politically fraught. Writers who were female were engaged, perforce, in a process of literary self-fashioning which exposes that instability, that politicization.

Ferguson begins by suggesting that our pragmatic, "commonsense" understanding of literacy as "the ability to read and write in one vernacular language" (3) is doing a great deal of ideological work that needs to be unmasked and interrogated. Throughout the Early Modern period, "literacy worked as a field of serious cultural conflict," conflict that is "only partially recoverable through the inherently problematic archive of written documents" (12). We can begin to do the kind of work that is needed, she suggests, when "instead of asking 'What is literacy?'" we start to ask: "'What counts as literacy for whom, and under what particular circumstances'" (4). To do this is to put the term itself "under erasure," and indeed Ferguson begins her account of how the term "literacy" has been deployed by proposing that the habits of reading "and above all, of skepticism" that have been developed under the aegis of deconstruction be brought to bear upon literacy studies.

In this way she offers to build a bridge between institutional domains that have been cut off from each other by the professional stratification of the humanities. An ungrateful construal of this offer, from the perspective of literacy studies, would find the wily Dido, who according to Christine de Pizan stole the North African site of her city of Carthage from its native inhabitants by making a territorial bargain that could subsequently be re-read to her advantage, to be an "apt guide" indeed into the territory this latter-day daughter of Dido is seeking to colonize. The following sentence from her first chapter works hard to forestall such a reading of her project; I quote it in full to give prospective readers a foretaste of Ferguson's densely impacted prose:

This is not to privilege literature -- much less a notion of 'literary language' -- as something that can rescue or improve literacy studies; it is, however, to say that habits of attention and, above all, of skepticism -- habits that can be fostered in any part of the educational institution but that are sometimes associated, often disapprovingly, with the domain of deconstructive theory -- are in my (not disinterested) view critical to remedying a situation of divorce that is arguably having unhealthy repercussions. (36)

More baldly put, Ferguson's claim on behalf of deconstruction is that its practitioners do a kind of self-reflexive, skeptical reading that is very much needed to expose the lies that have been told by statistics and the complexities that have been papered over by simplistic narratives in the field of literacy studies.

Ferguson is arguing for, and seeking to contribute to, "a new history of literacy that at least partially remembers forms of literacy other than our own, forms that are paradoxical (to most of us) because they entail thinking of literacy beyond the English word's literal rootedness in the Latin word *littera*" (23). Our own form of literacy is alphabetic and grammatical; it involves not only the ability to read, but an ability to make sense of what we read that is conditioned upon prior reading. By acknowledging alternative ways of thinking about what might count as linguistic skill or knowledge, we will become able to see our own working definition of literacy as one that disassembles its *own* paradoxicality: in citing the Latin root of the English word 'literacy,' Ferguson is reminding us that 'full' literacy in English or in French presupposes knowledge of Latin, since these languages draw their grammar from the Latin language. More broadly, she is arguing for the inextricability of linguistic and cultural knowledge in every setting where literacy gets described and/or measured -- especially in contexts of colonial encounter between 'literate' colonizers and 'illiterate' native people. Derrida's reading of Lévi-Strauss's "writing lesson" is put forth toward the beginning of Part I as a model for her own challenge to the way in which a binary opposition between literacy and illiteracy privileges writing, a knowledge of

formal grammar, and what Ferguson calls a "'set' toward signs" over other forms of linguistic and cultural knowledge.

Within the European context, she argues, documentary evidence as to which part of any population could read and write at any given historical moment is itself much harder to 'read' than most historians of literacy have been willing to acknowledge. During the Early Modern period, from 1400 to 1690, many people could read but not write: what is sometimes called 'passive literacy' (Ferguson prefers to term it 'partial literacy' or to speak instead of coexistent 'literations') was prescribed for even the most socially privileged women by the educational treatises that survive from the period. Among the lower classes, many people could sign their names without being able to read; it is also plausible to suppose that many women signed legal documents with an X in the presence of their husbands even though they *could* read what they were signing. The bottom line is that we should not give credence to the statistical information we have been fed by social historians concerning Early Modern literacy: Ferguson advocates extreme skepticism toward all such attempts to figure out how the abilities to read and to write were distributed across particular human communities. She suggests, moreover, that the field of literacy studies, which came into its own in the United States and Western Europe after the Second World War, was itself (de)formed by an imperial mandate that valorized "the ability to read and write in one vernacular language" as an index of successful modernization.

Vernacular languages are not "one"; English especially is not, and especially not in the Early Modern period, with French being spoken at the English court in the wake of the Norman conquest. In both legal and literary contexts, moreover, as Ferguson points out, the stabilization and codification of "English" and "French" was largely the work of a clerical class for whom the Latin language was the gold standard of grammatical intelligibility and correctness. English could be your "mother tongue," your only daily medium of communication and of thought, yet you would nevertheless be pronounced illiterate or imperfectly literate for being without the systematic grammatical knowledge that was the particular province of a professional class of clerks and educators. During the Early Modern period both English and French became "prestige dialects" that were not accessible to a great many inhabitants of England and of France by virtue of their geographic location (they lived at a distance from the cultural centers where these "national vernaculars" held sway), or else by virtue of a gender and/or class position that limited their access to "forms of the written language culturally marked as worthy of reproduction through manuscript copying and, later, print" (86).

We will only succeed in making women's linguistic and literary competences eligible for description, Ferguson argues, to the extent that we are willing to "disaggregate our modern conception of literacy" (75) by taking an interest

in "partial literacies" of various kinds. But it is no accident that literacy has been constructed in such a way as to discourage us from doing this. Early Modern discussions of literacy (a term that, as Ferguson reminds us, was used until the twentieth century to refer to literary as well as linguistic competence), are rife with gender-inflected metaphors ("mother tongue," "old wives' tale," "Malapropism") which are never innocent of an intention to denigrate the linguistic and literary competence of women in order to secure for a masculine clerisy the authority to police and "authorize" linguistic usage. In this connection, Ferguson gives Thomas Wyatt's well-known Petrarchan sonnet, "Whoso list to hount," an ingenious new allegorical reading: in his pursuit of an elusive Petrarchan "hynde," she suggests, Wyatt has depicted the quest for what Dante called "vulgari eloquentia," the "eloquent vernacular," as "vain travail" in the service of "a cruel, teasing, and sullied woman" (122).

In the "Case Studies" of Part II Ferguson is doing work I find more interesting than the skeptical deconstruction of Part I, but for which that work of critique and dismantling is a necessary prologue. This section's four chapters focus our attention on the "literate performances" of two English and two French women whose lives and writings are dispersed across three centuries. Ferguson's relentlessly nuanced cross-comparison brings each writer's horizon of literacy clearly into focus, along with her class position, her political commitments, and her degree of access to print, performance, or other means of disseminating her writings.

These are writers no one was teaching or talking about when I was a graduate student in the late 1960s. I remember being regaled by one of my teachers, a friend and admirer of the late Rosemond Tuve, with an anecdote that weirdly confirms this: it seems that when Miss Tuve, the first woman ever to be tenured in English at Princeton, announced at a dinner party that she'd "been thinking about Christine lately," everyone present was startled to think of her taking an interest in Christine Keeler, the high-class prostitute whose involvement in "the Profumo affair" had brought down the British government in 1963. Like Tuve, Professor Ferguson has been "thinking about Christine": she belongs to the first generation of New Historicists, educated in the late sixties and early seventies, who with very little assistance from their own teachers have by now transformed the landscape of Renaissance (a. k. a. Early Modern) literature. They have done this by broadening our understanding of what counts as literature, by giving us new questions to ask about its relationship to other social practices, and by taking an interest in the political work it was doing in particular metropolitan settings at a particular historical moment -- the moment of emergence of the European nation-states.

Insofar as, throughout the early modern period, a professional class of clerks and educators had a stake in excluding women from the ranks of the *litterati*, a woman seeking to make a place for herself among those ranks would have to have developed strategies of self-description, self-promotion, and perhaps even of self-understanding that were unconventional and/or devious.

Ferguson stresses that each of these four woman writers was "adept at reinterpreting authoritative texts to serve new purposes"; each "developed rhetorical strategies for avoiding censure while contesting dominant concepts of both literacy and gender" (178). All of them were multilingual; all were engaged in "acts of covert and overt translation" that risked giving offense to those in whose interest it was to police the "emergent boundaries," both geographic and linguistic, "between nation-states" (178).

Christine de Pizan is a good case in point: the *Livre de la Cité des Dames* was written in French early in the fifteenth century, but became even better known in England during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. Intriguingly, if speculatively, Ferguson suggests that both Christine's writings and those of Marguerite de Navarre helped kindle heretical fantasies among seventeenth-century English women about "what queens . . . might do to reform the world" (224). Ferguson finds the *Cité des Dames* offering "a strikingly unconventional and amoral perspective on female literacy" (219) in its celebration of literate women like Dido and de Pizan's namesake Saint Christine, who are "thieves of cultural treasure." As long as it is a question of stealing this treasure from clerks who have slandered women's capacities and contributions, such thievery will seem to have earned our applause. But Ferguson argues that Christine also stole from female precursors who were less well endowed with "cultural capital": she did not cite these women's lives and/or writings because she could not afford to have her own revisionary project associated with theirs. And thus she failed to offer near-contemporaries like Na Prou Boneta and Marguerite Porete refuge in her City, re-assigning their beliefs and teachings to *clergesses* who defied a pagan Roman authority, instead of the Christian authority she was herself too prudent to challenge openly.

Ferguson's insistence on uncovering a "darker side" of Christine's performance of literacy is a telling index of how far we have come since this Early Modern feminist began to be written about, in a spirit of more or less uncritical admiration, thirty years ago. At the same time, however, the evidence that Christine actually knew these other women's writings and teachings is (of necessity) indirect and circumstantial. It "seems less likely" to Ferguson that she was "simply ignorant" of them, but this would also be less interesting than the complex agenda Ferguson attributes to her. By the end of her chapter on Christine, I could not decide which of Dido's daughters to credit with that complex agenda: Christine de Pizan, or Ferguson herself.

For each of these writers Ferguson inflects "literacy" in a particular way, and in each woman's writings a particular rhetorical or linguistic device affords a point of access to her political project that the writer herself would not have chosen for us. Christine uses 'doublets' a good deal: Ferguson speculates that she does this partly to render covert assistance to her women readers, who are likely to be "*illiterate* in the dominant clerkly sense of being unable to read Latin," and partly to smuggle "conceptual *alternatives* into the discursive arena under the guise of synonyms" (186). Elizabeth Cary uses "equivocation" (a set of verbal practices that includes what would begin to be called "punning" in the eighteenth century) to "destabilize relations between signs and signifiers" on behalf of her female characters' exploration and exploitation of "gaps between who one is, in the eyes of others, including persecuting others, and who one *says* one is, to oneself or to others" (324; italics mine). Marguerite de Navarre's signature device is the paradoxical phrase "*loing près*," "far-near," a phrase that captures the power of writing itself to "conceive of and 'translate'" the word of God" (229), to traduce and transform literary sources, and above all to re-conceive the French empire from an eccentric standpoint that is "both far from and close to the kingdom's courtly center" (232). Such devices as these did political work that was surreptitious and devious for writers whose authorial standing was insecure and contested.

In Aphra Behn's New World narratives, Ferguson identifies the narrative device of "triangulation" as one that secures for Behn an authorial stance of ambivalent complicity with the European colonial project. We need to be "comfortable with ideological contradictions" if we would grasp the subtle and shifting relationship between critique and exploitation that is enabled by this device. Noting that Behn's "posthumous notoriety" includes a vigorously denied rumor that she had been romantically involved with the eponymous hero of her novella, *Oroonoko* (369) -- a rumor for which it would be a mistake on our part *either* to hold Behn responsible (it was, after all, posthumous) or to absolve her of responsibility (since it is a reputation "she herself may well have helped fashion"), Ferguson infers a narrative of authorship "in which the European woman's book is born . . . from a self-willed (partial) censoring of her own sexual attraction to both of her African characters" (369). Within the narrative, Behn holds herself partly responsible for Oroonoko's and Immoinda's physical deaths; as its author, Ferguson finds her taking advantage of their "condition of silence," their illiteracy, to tell a subtly self-serving version of their story in order to secure for herself, as well as for her "news" of them, a European literary afterlife.

"There are very few scholars of the Early Modern period," says Mary Beth Rose on the cover of the paperback edition of *Dido's Daughters*, "who possess the combination of traditional erudition and theoretical expertise that Margaret Ferguson does." True enough: yet this book's literary and historical

scholarship is so thoroughly and untraditionally saturated with Ferguson's deconstructive skepticism as to constitute erudition of a very special kind. Both literary and historical erudition, in this *tour de force* of a book, have suffered a sea change. At the same time, however, it is rare to encounter a practitioner of deconstructive close reading whose appetite for history is so voracious. In her Prologue Ferguson explains that she seeks to steer a middle course "between a historicism which says that one can and should interpret the past without imposing on it one's present views and a presentism which says one can and should read the past *only* from the concerns and perspectives of one's present moment" (15). Like other New Historicists she could be accused of the latter more readily than of the former, but I don't know of any other literary scholar working today whose own political concerns could have engendered such a skeptical, yet learned piece of historiography.