


Kingdom'. Colley's book and the rule Lepore finds there is too densely specific and too nuanced to be easily applied to today. The constitutions about which she writes are so varied, they appear in so many places, and so many different kinds of people—reformers, reactionaries, revolutionaries—write them that easy traffic between then and now, the past and today, is inadvisable. Even so, the clarity, simplicity and strength of her argument exert their own force; the temptation is to map yesterday on to today. My own reading of Colley suggests that using her framework in today's context means considering the drafting, revising and doing away with constitutions around the world as responses to political upheavals wrought by an age of ongoing and ever-developing warfare. 

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Richard de Ritter, *Imagining Women Readers, 1789–1820: Well-Regulated Minds* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), 240pp. ISBN 978-0-7190-9033-2; £80 (hb).

THE SUBTITLE OF RICHARD DE RITTER'S STUDY of women readers, 'well-regulated minds', is drawn from Priscilla Wakefield's *Mental Improvement* (1798), a set of educational dialogues that range across a striking range of topics: from whaling and fisheries, to the uses of trees and metals, and the production of salt, sugar, wool and glass. Mrs Harcourt, one of Wakefield's educational parents, states that 'a well regulated mind is marked by the judicious disposal of time, converting even amusement into instruction' (qtd on p. 8). The relationship between amusement and instruction—between what it means to read at surface-level and deeply; or between reading for pleasure and for moral improvement—is at the centre of de Ritter's study of 'the place of the female reader in British culture between 1789 and 1820' (p. 1). Exploring cultural representations of reading by Anna Lætitia Barbauld, Maria Edgeworth, Elizabeth Hamilton, Mary Hays, Hannah More, Charlotte Smith, Jane West, Wakefield, Mary Wollstonecraft and Jane Austen, the book is a welcome addition to existing scholarly work on women's reading, building most of all on Jacqueline Pearson's landmark study, *Women's Reading in Britain, 1750–1835: A Dangerous Recreation* (1999). Drawing on previous work on women's lives by Angela Keane, Nancy Armstrong, Harriet Guest and others, De Ritter's main concern is to challenge previous accounts of reading as a predominantly private, domestic activity for women; rather, as 'a form of symbolic labour [...] conceptualised through the discourses of work and professional specialisation',

reading cannot be so easily separated from the public sphere (p. 199). For De Ritter, imagined female readers are 'fractured figures' and 'representing them throws a range of binary oppositions into disarray' (p. 199).

Chapter 1 opens with a discussion of Locke's famous concept of the mind as *tabula rasa*, emphasising how the 'materialist, and significantly bibliographic, image of the mind as 'white paper' implies that the reader and the book are in some ways interchangeable' (p. 17). If the mind is a blank page, then it is both attractively and dangerously open for population by the written pages of purchased books. De Ritter draws our attention to Locke's observation in *Of the Conduct of the Understanding* (1706), that '[r]eading furnishes the mind only with the materials of knowledge; it is thinking makes what we read ours'—a distinction that underpins many of the attacks on women's unregulated reading collected throughout the book (quoted p. 18). Tracing Lockean ideas of influence in Thomas Gisborne's popular conduct book, *An Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex* (1797) as well as instructive articles on reading habits in the *Lady's Magazine*, De Ritter demonstrates how concerns that female readers 'would fail to undertake the labour of active thought as they read' (p. 19) were a product of inherited Enlightenment principles and more recent market developments, as readers gained new access to books through circulating libraries, themselves often soiled and dirtied by use: '[t]he circulating book, the (female) body and the mind imagined as a blank sheet were thus conflated by the potential legibility of their surfaces' (p. 21). The corruption of the *tabula rasa* paradigm by new 'habits of consumption' offers a useful way of approaching Mary Hays's *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1796), a text in open dialogue with Locke. The complication of any easy separation between the female mind and the body is suggestively taken up at the end of the chapter through a turn to Hannah More's criticism of 'shallow' anthologies of 'hackney'd quotations' (p. 41), and her promotion of more diligent reading through images of social utility, moral responsibility and careful labour.

Chapter 2 investigates these 'responsible, labour-intensive modes of reading' in more detail. Staying with More, her *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* (1799) again warns against 'relaxing reading' and promotes 'invigorating reading': the latter, De Ritter argues, via Burke, imagines reading as 'an act of sublime effort for women', which 'challenges the separation of labour and leisure' (p. 59). Reading itself becomes gothic, 'constantly haunted by the presence of the body' (p. 83). More's stumbling block is how to 'transcend the language of the body: seemingly, at every point at which she extols the labour of the mind, she encounters metaphors of materiality' (p. 62). A similar conservative anxiety about bodies at work can be traced Priscilla Wakefield's *Reflections on the Present Condition of the Female Sex* (1798), which advocates for 'productive' reading by the middle-class woman, but warns that those in what she calls the 'third class', working in manual employment, should avoid


play and novels as 'A BANEFUL POISON' (qtd on p. 70). As De Ritter concludes, 'reading becomes an impediment, rather than a complement, to labour' (p. 70).

If chapter 2 dealt with the potential 'products of reading' (p. 83), chapter 3 turns more overtly to politics in considering of the effects of the French Revolution on educational philosophies developed by Maria and Richard Lovell Edgeworth in *Practical Education* (1798) and Elizabeth Hamilton in *Letters on the Elementary Principles of Education* (1801–02). As De Ritter points out, 'the pedagogical relationship [...] might be viewed as a microcosmic exploration of the use and abuse of power, and of the reaction it provokes' (p. 91). How best to teach disciplined reading in a post-revolutionary world is a key concern, taken up by the Edgeworths as they move away from Locke's recommendation that parents instil 'fear and awe' in the child in order to have 'first Power over their minds', and towards the cultivation of a more 'sociable domestic environment' (p. 97). The discussion of how the Edgeworths and Hamilton revise and reappraise Locke's educational theories in the aftermath of revolutionary hope and disappointment emphasises the close relationship between educational and political reform. The chapter also returns to Hays's *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* to compare Emma's restricted access to books in childhood with William Godwin's promotion of curious, self-directed reading to empower the child in his essay 'Of Choice in Reading' (p. 107), and in doing so illustrates the difficulties in devising a suitable 'ethics of parental authority' in the aftermath of Revolution (p. 11).

Chapter 4 continues with the Edgeworths to investigate 'the extent to which women's internalisation of professional ethics legitimised their reading practices' (p. 134). This chapter engages most closely with Jürgen Habermas's theory of the 'bourgeois public sphere' and its exclusionary implications for women; however, in challenging the distinction between public and private, and advocating for a wider definition of reading as 'symbolic labour', De Ritter's argument is more subtly in conversation with Habermas throughout the book. It is difficult to surpass Harriet Guest's influential reading of Edgeworth's *Letters for Literary Ladies* in *Small Change: Women, Learning and Patriotism, 1750–1810* (2000), but there is much to learn from De Ritter's nuanced reading of Edgeworth's representation of 'a somewhat paradoxical state of affairs in which women's "wisdom"—the currency of their social utility—can only be acquired in terms of "leisure"' (p. 139). This forms the background for tracing the promotion of 'leisured wisdom' in *Belinda* (1801), as Belinda's ability to think for herself comes from her concentrated perusal of books in the domestic setting—an 'ethic of intellectual labour' (p. 161), albeit one that remains 'distinctly class-bound' (p. 134).

Chapter 5 turns from intellectual labour to consider the pleasures of the text though a focussed comparison of Barbauld's and Austen's attitudes to novel reading. De Ritter's attention to Barbauld's 'On Female Studies' and 'On the Origin and Progress of Novel-Writing' (her introduction to *The British Novelists*) demonstrates how much there is to gain from Barbauld's essay

writing: her vigorous remarks on reading Radcliffe's novels deserve to be better known among scholars of the gothic. Some fascinating parallels emerge between Barbauld's comments on the shame experienced after binge-reading a Radcliffe novel ('once we have read it, it is nothing; we are ashamed of our feelings' [qtd in p. 173]) and *Northanger Abbey*, as both display 'a pattern of narrative pleasure abruptly curtailed by embarrassment and shame' (p. 177). Austen's readers, both imagined and real, have been particularly well served by Katie Halsey's *Jane Austen and her Readers, 1786–1945* (2012) and Olivia Murphy's *Jane Austen the Reader: The Artist as Critic* (2013), but De Ritter still has much to offer us here, raising the good question of whether we should assume that Catherine ever finishes *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794). For De Ritter, 'this unwritten moment is displaced on to the 'awaken[ing]' Catherine experiences after having been reprimanded by Henry Tilney' (p. 179). While this might seem like a minor plot quibble, the ambiguity surrounding Catherine's progress with *Udolpho* is potentially significant: if 'Austen allows Catherine's reading of that text to continue to flourish in the silent spaces of her novel', then 'the possibility of the reader's pleasure is never foreclosed' (p. 180), and the kind of 'shame' in finishing a gothic novel that De Ritter has shown us in Barbauld is resisted by Austen.

While the focus of the book is clearly on the imagined woman reader, De Ritter incorporates several experiences by readers drawn from diaries and letters, and from the excellent *UK RED: UK Reading Experience Database* <<https://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/reading/UK/>>. Chapter 4 also tantalisingly discusses practical access to Bristol Library for women in the 1780s and 1790s (pp. 130–01). These deepen our understanding of the theoretical reader as a construction, but appear relatively infrequently throughout the book, and the distinction between the 'real' and constructed reader could have been more firmly addressed at those points. But this does not lessen the benefits of De Ritter's excellent study, which provides a fascinating account of 'the social and cultural specificity' of women's reading in the Romantic period (p. 2), and how Enlightenment, Revolutionary and economic discourses shaped its metaphors. 

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