

Margaret Ferguson

Association me entusiasmaron. Investigadores como David Damrosh han estado haciendo un valioso trabajo con el concepto de literatura "mundial", no en el sentido de una construcción imperialista que surge en la academia de los Estados Unidos, sino en el sentido de una disciplina bien preparada históricamente para poder seguir los nuevos desarrollos en la producción y recepción de textos valorados como "literarios" en distintos puntos geográficos. La "nueva" Literatura Comparada evidentemente tiene una gran deuda con el libro de Pascale Casanova *La République mondiale des Lettres* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1999). Traducido al inglés en el 2004 como *The World Republic of Letters* y publicado por Harvard University Press en la serie "Convergences: Inventories of the Present", fundada por Edward Said, el libro de Casanova busca ser una especie de "bisagra" entre la tradición de una crítica poscolonial, "que ha jugado un papel importante al volver a introducir la historia, y la historia política en particular, en la teoría literaria", por un lado, y, por el otro, la tradición francesa de un estudio literario "formal". Libros como el de Casanova, sumados al trabajo reciente en el área de la teoría y la práctica de la traducción, son un contrapeso para mi tendencia al pesimismo sobre el futuro de la Literatura Comparada en las instituciones de Estados Unidos. También me ayuda a contrarrestar el pesimismo mi entusiasmo por aprender más sobre el lugar que la Literatura Comparada ocupa en otros lugares y sobre los recursos disponibles en los mismos. Es mi esperanza que la disciplina pueda progresar —e incluso cambiar— en lugares tales como su universidad en Mendoza.

## ON OLD PERIODS AND NEW COMPARATIVE LITERATURES

An Interview with Margaret Ferguson  
—Professor and Researcher  
at the University of California, Davis

by Belén Bistué



### Introduction

Margaret W. Ferguson received her doctoral degree in comparative literature from Yale University. She has taught at Yale and Columbia, and at the University of Colorado, Boulder. She currently teaches English Literature at the University of California, Davis, where she also teaches courses for the Graduate Program in Comparative Literature. Her work has been recognized through both teaching and research awards, including fellowships from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, and, most recently, the American Council of Learned Societies. In the last elections of the Modern Language Association (MLA), she was elected to serve as second and first vice-president of this institution for the term 2012–2014, and then as president from 2014 to 2015.

Her research has focused on the comparative study of key authors in early modern English, French, and Italian letters, in the fields of both Latin and vernacular literary production. In addition to literary and cultural analysis, her work encompasses a theoretical

reflection on the topics of gender, sexuality, education, literacy, and translation. She has also explored these topics from the perspective of feminist and postmodernist theories. Among her most influential publications are a critical edition of the work of English Renaissance dramatist Elizabeth Cary, *The Tragedy of Mariam, Faire Queen of Jewry (1613) and The Lady Falkland: Her Life* (University of California Press, 1994), made in collaboration with Barry Weller, and her books *Trials of Desire: Renaissance Defenses of Poetry* (Yale University Press, 1983) and *Dido's Daughters: Literacy, Gender, and Empire in Early Modern England and France* (The University of Chicago Press, 2003). The latter offers a comparative analysis of early modern debates on women's literacy in the context of the formation of European national empires. She is currently writing a book about cultural debates on the hymen in early modern England, and about the ways in which these early debates and the myths on which they drew are still part of Western culture.

The questions we sent her represent the various interests of the researchers working at the Centro de Literatura Comparada of the Universidad Nacional de Cuyo. The aim of these questions is to help widen our scope of reflection by considering some of the key challenges that a comparative approach to the early modern period entails. We believe Dr. Ferguson's answers shed a brilliant light on this wider territory.

#### Interview

1. Starting at the most general level, we wanted to ask you what benefits you see in a comparative approach to the study of medieval and Renaissance literature.

**MARGARET FERGUSON:** A comparative approach seems important even for the most basic scholarly and pedagogical operations involving some self-reflexive definition of what is meant (historically and in modern institutions) by those two period-terms. "Medieval" requires us to consider what evidentiary fields are constituted as "between" a certain understanding of ancient and modern cultures. "Renaissance"—a nineteenth-century French term that builds on Italian humanist metaphors of an era in which classical scholarship was "reborn" after what some humanists shockingly defined as a "dark" era of Christian culture—also invites us to do basically comparative conceptual work across languages as well as historical eras. Your question invites a much longer answer than I can give here, but I would add that a comparative approach to medieval and Renaissance literature enriches our study of genres of discourse as phenomena that cross borders between languages—regional as well

as national—and among differently educated groups of writers, readers, and spectators. On a cautionary note, I'd also say that, while a comparative approach can help us mitigate the ideological effects of our own educations in an era tragically marked by competing nationalisms, it can never help us escape them completely.

In a recent essay on Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*, for instance, I was fascinated to see editors and critics justifying their preference for the "Petruccio/Katherine" plot on the grounds that it was more truly "English" than the "subplot" involving Katherine's sister Bianca and her suitors. The subplot is seen as coming from an "elite" tradition of "erudite" Italian comedy whereas the "main" plot is alleged to draw more on "folk" materials (including brutally misogynist discourses about punishing "scolding" wives). A comparatist approach allows one to question such a scholarly construction, which underlies the decisions of several modern film and theater adaptations of Shakespeare's famous comedy. The comparatist critic (and teacher) can begin her critique of the "anglocentric" interpretation of the play by noting that Petruccio, who seeks patriarchal mastery in the play's main plot, may have more kinship with Bianca's several male "servant" suitors than the anglocentric traditions of interpretation (and staging and filming) allow. Petruccio's name comes from an ambitious servant in an English Renaissance translation of an Italian play by Ariosto (the play that is the "source" of Shrew's supposedly "elite" and foreign subplot), and Petruccio's character—in a comparatist reading of the Shakespearean play—has at least as much in common with other "servant" suitor figures as he does with kings like Henry V who themselves star in nationalist fantasies (Henry V, in Shakespeare's history play, masters and humiliates a French princess he calls "Kate.")

A comparatist perspective may serve, then, as an "enabling condition" for an approach to Renaissance literature that seeks to deconstruct what I call "imperial nationalist" fantasies as these are adumbrated in many canonical works of the period—in part because pedagogical canons were arguably formed, as John Guillory has suggested in *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (University of Chicago Press, 1993), to facilitate British and American students' learning of English as a "prestige" language.

2. And what are the potential difficulties and challenges of this approach?

**M.F.:** The first challenge is both simple and very complex: having the time that is taking or making and paying for the time to learn several languages beyond the ones you learned at home and/or in your first years of schooling. In the U.S., learning even a "second" language

rarely begins before middle school (7<sup>th</sup> grade, when children are already 12), and "foreign" language courses, like those in music and art, are often the first to be cut when public school funding is tight (as it has been in some states—California, for instance—since the so called "tax revolt" of 1978). When one gets to the university, it is often difficult to justify taking a "beginning" language course either to one's parents or to those who are administering curricular requirements, which stress "breadth" for the first two years of college.

For the comparatist who wants to work in pre-modern eras of literature and culture, there is the challenge not only to learn several (ideally, many) languages well, there is also the challenge to read widely in the economic, social, and cultural historiographical texts of one's chosen period, while also learning as much as possible about non-textual artifacts, each genre of which has its own semiotic codes. Really to do comparative work well, moreover, one must read widely in modern literary theory and philosophy so one can attempt to describe as precisely as possible one's own critical presuppositions as one shapes—and reshapes—a "comparative" evidentiary field whose boundaries are not given and may well not be familiar to one's readers. It is not an accident that in the period since WWII, comparative literature and the multilingual field of literary theory have often occupied the same institutional space (as they did for example at Yale in the 1970s, when Jacques Derrida found a visiting professorial position in the Comparative Literature department even though he was unacceptable to the Philosophy department).

**3. Now, focusing more on your personal experience and taking into account that you have performed pioneer work in different areas of English literature of the early modern period (we are thinking of your readings of foundational authors such as Shakespeare and Milton from new perspectives, of your recovery of the work of Elizabeth Cary, in your insightful analysis of Aphra Behn's 'juggling' of social and racial categories in her writings, and of your current study of cultural debates on the hymen in early modern England), we wanted to ask you about the role of your comparatist training in this work. Has your formation in comparative literature been an important factor? How so?**

**M. F.:** Comparative Literature and comparative thinking across disciplines has been important for throughout my career since I was an undergraduate at Cornell University. As an undergraduate, I fell in love with anthropology, with medieval and Renaissance art—sculpture, painting, manuscript, and book illustrations—and with Dante's *La Divina Commedia* as taught by the great Dantista John Freccero. He persuaded me that I had the ability to go to graduate school in Italian

literature—although at the time my Italian language skills were rudimentary—and I went to Yale in 1969 planning to become a medievalist with emphases on Latin, Italian, French, and Provençal poetry. After a year of studying Romance philology (which we called "vowel movements"), I transferred to Comparative Literature, in part because that was where new ideas in critical theory were being taught and debated most intensively and also in part because my historical lens was widening. I wanted to take courses in nineteenth and twentieth century history, literature, and culture in German, French, and English as well as Italian.

I never felt at home in any single "national" literature and was indeed from my graduate student days interested in critiques of how nationalist ideologies underpinned certain academic fields including Comparative Literature insofar as that discipline in the U.S. academy bore the imprint of competitions between English, French, and German literatures and conceptions of literary value. I wrote my dissertation on concepts of exile with chapters on texts by the Stoics, Ovid, St. Augustine, and Joachim du Bellay. My approach to the topic was deeply influenced by a year I spent in Paris in the early 70s reading Derrida, attending one of his seminars at the École Normale, watching *nouvelle vague* films, and reading Cervantes, Proust, Woolf, and other writers I had somehow missed in my formal course work. I felt that my training as a comparatist was always an exercise in learning how much I do not know. Gaining a sense of new terrains, shifting scales of information and inference, is at the heart of comparative scholarship as I have practiced and thought about it.

My first serious education in English literary history from Chaucer to the 20<sup>th</sup> century came when I took a job at Yale as an Assistant Professor of English. I had to work up a number of "great" male English poets quickly for a survey course, and soon thereafter I taught big lecture courses on Milton and Shakespeare. I felt very much an outsider in the field of English literature, and it took me a while to feel I had enough education and authority to publish on English writers. (My first publications were on St. Augustine and Joachim Du Bellay). The Anglophone writers who have most fascinated me, including the ones you mention in your question, are all multilingual and interested in issues of translation—of cultures and languages. Elizabeth Cary learned many languages including Transylvanian and felt herself to be an "internal exile" as a Catholic woman in Protestant England. The play I co-edited—the first to be published in English by a woman—explores a story from Josephus's *Antiquities of the Jews*, originally written in Greek and translated into English by the Catholic convert Thomas Lodge in 1602. Cary drew on Lodge's translation when, as a young woman, she wrote her play about a Maccabean princess unhappily married to the tyrannical king Herod. Aphra Behn

translated works into English from French and wrote an amazing poem praising an English translation of Lucretius for bringing forbidden knowledge of the world to women as Satan had brought knowledge to Eve. I have been interested throughout my career in Anglophone writers who notice that there are many rather than one version of "English" and who play with different dialects and with hybrid genres of discourse.

My current work on the "hymen" is very much concerned with the translation of a certain Greek term (which evidently denoted a "membrane" in Aristotle's writing—the kind of membrane that he believed surrounded organs of all warm blooded creatures) across various spaces and times to early modern England, where it is first recorded in its "medical" sense (according to the Oxford English Dictionary) in a compendium of (often competing) views of the body in general and female anatomy in particular that was published by Helkiah Crooke in 1615. But the word also denoted a minor Greek god associated with wedding processions and its cries or hymns; and it is also the name of an early Christian attached for his "vain and babbling tongue" by St. Paul. I am interested in knowing more about when, and with what consequences, the "somatic" or histological hymen intersected with the Christian "blasphemer" evidently named after a Greek mythological figure who according to some stories was not really a god at all but a mortal boy who died on his wedding day. With the help of the wonderful new text-searching capacity of EEBO-TCP (Early English Books Online/Text Creation Partnership), I have recently found the word "hymen" translated in three different ways, as a "skinne," a pagan "god," and an early Christian blasphemer, in an English text published in 1538, nearly a century before the first use "hymen" (in just one of its significantly different meanings) by the OED. Digital tools are allowing scholars to pursue philological inquiries—a seemingly old kind of scholarship—in the light of new theoretical and cultural questions.

Although my book focuses mainly on sixteenth- and seventeenth-century textual and visual materials (including paintings of the scriptural story of the wise and foolish virgins), I attempt, in my final chapter, to use Renaissance traditions of skepticism toward the hymen as an "invisible" membrane signifying female sexual purity and toward Hymen the minor pagan god, in order to pose questions about the modern tendency to commodify—and reify—"the" hymen through surgical procedures that draw on the prestige of Greek scientific nomenclature. "Hymenoplasties" are being regularly advertised, and mystified, under that name, which obscures the parallels between such operations and other kinds of "body writing" including the set of culturally fraught operations known as circumcision but also as "female genital mutilation." Names matter for my project, so does translation.

**4. What type of comparisons are at the base of your equally groundbreaking and perhaps more visibly comparative study of the interrelations among literature, literacy, gender and the formation of national empires in *Dido's Daughters*?**

**M.F.:** I have long been fascinated by writers who experiment with hybrid genres and with theories and practices of translation. *Dido's Daughters* devotes four of its seven chapters to historical women writers who were themselves multilingual and who practiced various kinds of translation and imitation in their efforts to define their writerly authority. My work as a comparatist has led me to the critical study of transnational formations (the history of Roman imperialism for instance) and to the study of multiple literacies and language uses within the territories claimed by early modern monarchies such as England and Spain. *Dido's Daughters* repeatedly returns to the old sociolinguistic joke-question: 'What's the difference between a language and a dialect? A language has an army and a navy'—and, I further suggest, a system of state-supported schools in which a *Hochsprache* or standardized version of the official (national) language is taught.

I am very interested in a "critical comparative literature" in which scholars such as Talal Assad pose questions about what political, ideological, and economic factors shape students' perceptions of a hierarchy of values encompassing and enforcing a hierarchy of languages. Such an ideological matrix forms decisions about which languages to study—and where to pursue comparative literary or cultural studies training. I think that there is an exciting area of overlap today between Comparative Literature, Anthropology, Cultural Studies (which latter field, in the U.S. has been very focused on Anglophone texts of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries), and Translation Studies. I also think that comparative judgments and practices of gathering examples are at the center of the objects of literary and linguistic studies we call (using Greek-rooted names) grammar, syntax, and rhetoric. These interrelated objects or areas of study are central to the histories of occidental education both in schools and in homes. Much of my writing, including *Dido's Daughters*, attempts to contribute to a critical study of education considered as a matrix for the definition and study of "literature." Drawing comparisons between different theories and practices of education has led me to a new appreciation for the long and multilingual discursive tradition called "la querelle des femmes"; in this tradition, comparative judgments of masculine and feminine "nature" have been questioned and significantly translated—into statements about gender as a function (in part) of rhetorical performance and educational opportunity.

5. *From an international perspective, we wanted to ask you about a term that you are using and that is frequently used by scholars in the North American and British traditions but is still difficult to translate into Spanish. How would you define the notion of an 'early modern period' for an audience of international comparatists who use a variety of relating, and sometimes intersecting, terms for the period to which this periodization category refers? What are the benefits of using this term in the field of comparative literature?*

*M.F.:* This is an interesting question and a difficult one! It seems to me that "early modern" is a phrase that may NOT translate easily into an international context because it has been marked by its uses—in English scholarly discourses—for purposes central to the movement that became known as "the New Historicism." Although that movement was heavily influenced by the work of Michel Foucault, the scholars who made the method or set of emphases famous were mainly interested in English culture of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries (what used to be called the Tudor/Stuart period, or "Ren/Ref," in history departments). By referring to their period as "early modern" rather than as "Renaissance," scholars such as Stephen Greenblatt and Louis Montrose sought to distinguish their mode of cultural analysis from the "history of ideas" associated with Renaissance studies as a modern scholarly field with deep ideological ties to the Italian Renaissance of the tre and quattrocento. The period term "early modern" was consonant with a certain sympathy with a Marxist view of history ("early modern" maps to some extent onto "early capitalist" or what Marx called the era of "primitive accumulation" and what some Marxist historians have analyzed as the "transition" from feudal to capitalist socio-economic formations). The term also, one can say in retrospect, marked a shift of scholarly focus from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic world—a modern shift that repeated, respected, and partially analyzed the epochal shift discussed by Sadir Amin in his book *Eurocentrism* and by Derrida, Todorov, and many others who have seen the defining characteristic of the "Renaissance" not as the rebirth of ancient culture but rather as the conquest of a "new world" in the name and image of an "old" Europe. In "Structure, Sign, and Play," Derrida sees the European conquest of the Americas as the traumatic event enabling the "birth" of "ethnology as a science" "it could have been born," he writes, "only at the moment when a de-centering had come about at the moment when European culture had been dislocated, driven from its locus, and forced to stop considering itself as the culture of reference" even as it also embarked on its multi-national effort to reinvent (and re-legitimize) the Roman empire. If one reads the New

Historicist interest in an "early modern" period as posing serious questions about the relation of literary culture to social and economic histories not only of the English nation but also of England as a competitor in what Immanuel Wallerstein calls the "World System," then the period phrase might well prove useful to comparatists located in parts of the New World that were initially colonized not by England or Holland but rather by Spain. If some of the idealizing connotations of "Renaissance" overlap with those embedded in the phrase "Siglo de Oro"—period phrase still used in some job descriptions for Peninsular scholar-teachers in American universities—perhaps "Early Modern" could be repurposed from its Anglophone polemical contexts to serve the particular critical aims of Latin American comparatists—you, who, like the North American New Historicists, are always already comparing old and new world versions of a (politically and ideologically fractured) linguistic and literary tradition.

6. *Narrowing the location to the [North] American academy, what is the current place of comparative literature in U.S. universities, as discipline, as university department, as a subject in the college curriculum? How does it stand in relation to the humanities and to less traditional programs such as cultural studies?*

*M.F.:* This, again, is an interesting and difficult question. It seems to me that as a designation for a department in the institution of the U.S. research university, Comparative Literature today is an increasingly anachronistic notion. Comparative critical operations, variously defined, are certainly to be found in Spanish, French, and English departments, as well as in Cultural Studies, although the latter area has evolved to have a close relation to American studies—with a distinctly presentist emphasis. Comparative Literature departments continue to exist as valuable sites where graduate students can—and are indeed required—to work in more than one "national" literary tradition and where they are asked to reflect on problems of translation both in pedagogical and in theoretical contexts, but Comparative Literature departments are rarely successful in placing their doctoral students in "comparative literature" jobs. Instead, if students with Comparative Literature degrees seek jobs in the U.S. (many students do not—which would be another topic worthy of discussion!) they tend to compete for jobs in "national" foreign literature departments, or in English departments at liberal arts schools with general "humanities" course requirements, or in those few institutions beginning to require "world" literature courses.

Having begun its institutional existence in the U.S. as a distinctly Eurocentric field that privileged certain languages in relation to certain historical periods (Italian, English, French, Greek, Latin and

sometimes Spanish were favored for comparatists specializing in medieval and early modern/ Renaissance; French and German were favored for comparatists specializing in Romantic literature, and a somewhat wider spectrum of languages, including Russian, was authorized for those specializing in the Modern period). Comparative Literature as a discipline is now being challenged to "globalize" itself, sponsoring courses on Arabic, Chinese, and Japanese literature, for instance, and housing scholars who work on Ottoman Turkish culture or on Francophone African literacies.

What literatures are now to be compared with what others—and indeed, how one defines "a" literature at all in relation to the teaching of what is called "heritage" languages—are open and complex questions that will be addressed in tight conjunction with funding decisions that are increasingly not made by teacher/ scholars in U.S. academic institutions. Spanish, Chinese, and Korean are all "heritage" languages in the U.S. that pose special problems for the teacher—and for the teaching of comparative literature. Students who have learned to speak these languages at home do not necessarily know how to write them or have the desire (or time) to learn to read their literatures. For this and other reasons, I confess that I often fail to see a rosy future for Comparative Literature in the U.S., but I was heartened by attending several excellent sessions on translation theory in relation to comparative literature at recent meeting of the Modern Language Association. David Damrosch and others have been doing valuable work on "world" literature not as an imperialist construction arising from scholars in U.S. universities but rather as a discipline well-suited historically to trace new developments in the production and reception of texts valued as "literary" in different geographical sites. The "new" comparative literature evidently owes a significant debt to a 1999 book by Pascale Casanova translated into English (in 2004) as *The World Republic of Letters*. Published by Harvard University Press in a series called "Convergences: Inventories of the Present," that was founded by the late Edward Said, Casanova's book attempts to serve as a sort of "pivot" between the tradition of postcolonial critique, "which has played an important role in reintroducing history, and in particular political history, into literary theory" on the one hand, and, on the other, the French tradition of "formal" literary study. Books such as Casanova's, and recent work in the theory and practice of translation, have countered my tendency toward pessimism about the future of Comparative Literature in U.S. institutions. Also countering that pessimism is my eagerness to learn more about the positioning and resources of Comparative Literature in other places. I very much hope that the discipline can thrive—and change—in sites such as your own university in Mendoza.

RESEÑAS