

Feike Dietz, *Lettering Young Readers in the Dutch Enlightenment: Literacy, Agency and Progress in Eighteenth-Century Children's Books* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, 284 pp., ISBN 9783030696320).

Feike Dietz's *Lettering Young Readers in the Dutch Enlightenment* explores the ideological agendas of early modern children's books. Dietz's argument is that these books offered children a limited and limiting form of agency, deploying a discourse that was 'empowering as well as disciplining' (5). She contextualizes children's books generally by pointing to the Enlightenment's new sense of the child as a potentially reasonable thinker. Although this was an international movement, Dutch children's books were also informed by a larger push for unity and progress in the face of the country's political and economic decline, making these books important cultural responses to, and tools in, negotiating political change.

The field of the history of children's books and of teaching literacy has centered, Dietz explains, on questions of agency. Many scholars have argued that children's books generally left little room for children to develop their own sense of self, but others claim that children's books began to allow opportunities for individual growth in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Dietz charts a middle course, showing that these books were 'restrictive as well as empowering' (6). Dietz's book represents an important and original advancement in the field in two ways. First, she discusses not just the traditional books associated with teaching literacy (such as primers), but also books on a range of topics for children of different ages, broadening the definition of literacy to include 'the cultivation of social, interpretative and critical literacy skills' (12). Second, she situates Dutch children's books in relation to materials published in Germany, France, and England, showing them to be a product of international cultural exchange. The book is split up into three parts that follow the growth of the child, from the small child learning to read to the young teen learning to express her ideas in complex epistolary writing. The books she discusses were deployed to varying degrees in the service of the formation of active, productive, freely compliant citizens of the Republic.

The first section, 'Young Readers as Social Participants', concentrates on books teaching rudimentary literacy. Generally, ABC books presented children with ideologically motivated connections between the letters they were learning and the world around them. Dutch books, Dietz argues, were different from the English and German primers that inspired them, in depicting the world as a social system to which children might imagine

themselves contributing productively as adults. Johan Hendrik Swildens's popular *Patriotic A-B Book for Dutch Youth* (*Vaderlandsch A-B Boek voor de Nederlandsche Jeugd*, 1781) represented idealized Dutch society as harmonious, unified, and efficient. Reading was treated as a type of labor that would enhance 'industrious virtuousness' (74). Such strategies in teaching literacy were intended to reform and prepare children for adult life, setting them apart from English books of this kind, which were more focused on the individual: 'rather than promoting individual social-economic growth, the Dutch books stress the value of workmanship and encourage everyone to perform their appropriate labours as optimally as possible' (89). Emphasis on the collective as opposed to the individual benefits of education were, Dietz shows, important in the conflict-ridden society of the late-eighteenth-century Republic.

The second section, 'Young Readers as Knowledgeable Citizens', looks at knowledge formation and skill development in books on more advanced subjects, such as geography, natural philosophy, and history. These texts were influenced by the broader Enlightenment emphasis on experiential learning, which encouraged children to observe for themselves by, for instance, presenting material in the form of dialogues between children and teachers. Some of these books, written by those on the side of the reformist Patriots in the fractured Republic, aimed at unifying the country by educating culturally and socially disadvantaged groups. While they were often adapted from foreign originals, they also showcased innovative teaching methods. In *Geography for Children* (*Aardrykskunde voor kinderen*, 1779), Elisabeth Wolff, for example, depicted children as engaged in imaginative travel. Authors like Wolff had to walk a fine line between encouraging individual exploration and ensuring that children ended up drawing morally proper conclusions. History books show much the same problem: while they trained children to discern between competing historical narratives, they also put forward a strong sense that there was a clear truth to be discovered from them. Their goal was always that 'young readers would be able to properly assess and interpret political events and thus would support the political (re)formation and moral progress of their fatherland' (145).

In the third section, Dietz turns to 'Young Readers as Epistolary Literate Writers', concentrating on the differences in books addressed to boys and girls. Perhaps the most remarkable author she discusses is Margareta Geertruid de Cambon-van der Werken, who wrote novels for boys and girls that gained popularity both at home and abroad. Inspired by French and English literature, *The Little Grandisson* (*De kleine Grandisson*, 1782-1786) is about a twelve-year-old boy who is raised in England. His letters display his growth over time as he learns simultaneously how to be a better reader and writer and how to be a more upstanding individual. *The Little Grandisson* was a truly transnational phenomenon: it became a bestseller in the Dutch Republic, and it was translated via French into Swedish, German, and English (in a work

that was edited by Mary Wollstonecraft). Its wide appeal was based on its promotion of 'a type of virtuous England-oriented citizenship that, according to elite Orangists like De Cambon-van der Werken, was necessary for the Republic to strengthen its international position and inland situation' (190).

Works written for girls had to balance a newly developing interest in stimulating female literacy with concerns about maintaining female modesty and propriety. Epistolary novels were able to navigate these potentially competing requirements by presenting literacy as conducive to female community and friendship. The innovation of these novels is that they depict young girls writing to each other without adult interference. In works such as De Cambon-van der Werken's *The Little Klarissa* (*De kleine Klarissa*, 1790), the girls adopt, in Dietz's phrase, techniques of 'peer mothering'. Such books present reading and writing as appropriate pastimes with a beneficial influence on moral education for women. Dutch-French conversation books similarly portrayed girls in same-sex educational environments, allowing for the promotion of female literacy but only within female-dominated settings. Tellingly, when the anonymous *Almanac for Girls, by Girls, for the Year 1795* (*Almanach voor meisjes, door meisjes, voor 't jaar 1795*), had girls express more radical ideas about marriage as a form of enslavement, it was quickly prohibited.

Overall, Dietz's book sketches a cultural environment she calls 'ambivalent' about children's agency (239). On the one hand, children were taught to think and interpret for themselves, no longer treated as empty vessels to be filled with adult ideas, but on the other, these books advanced political agendas in their intent to shape their readers into morally upright citizens. Personally, my impression in reading Dietz's analysis is somewhat less conflicted. It seems to me that these books were working hard to 'manufacture consent', in Noam Chomsky's famous phrase. While there is a good deal of richness and variety in early modern Dutch children's books, they impose their repressive morality on their readers, all the more insidiously when they claim to encourage individual thinking and observation. Dietz's book is an impressive and interesting overview of the production of books for children at a politically vexed time. Most importantly, she situates children's books in a complex international environment while at the same time highlighting their uniquely Dutch approach. Her transnational reading of this material has much to offer to anyone interested in the teaching of literacy in early modern Europe.

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