

ALTERING A LEGACY: REWRITING DEFOE IN J.M. COETZEE'S *FOE*

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## Abstract:

Much of the critical discourse on J.M. Coetzee's *Foe* does not fully investigate its relationship with Daniel Defoe's texts, despite *Foe*'s intimate relation with them. This thesis offers a postcolonial reading of Coetzee's Susan Barton, Crusoe and Friday against Daniel Defoe's original characters Roxana, Robinson Crusoe and Friday. Chapter one discusses Roxana-as-feminist, female colonizer, representative of her sex and Amazon and compares her to Barton. It reveals the tendency of critical discourse to attempt to 'know' Barton as they 'know' Roxana, by categorizing her, and reveals how Coetzee's character frustrates attempts to define her. The second chapter addresses eighteenth-century knowledge of race and how it differs from present day, which offers an alternate reading of *Robinson Crusoe* and complicates its use as a colonial handbook. I also discuss masculinity in Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* as an individual characteristic Coetzee alters into something that can be appropriated. His characters are not masculine but can wield phallic symbols such as the pen and the knife to reveal power as systemic rather than individualistic. The final chapter offers an in depth postcolonial reading of Friday and interrogates critical discourse's tendency to read him as representative of 'the colonized,' or as a colonial trope, rather than as the 'seashell' of the story. The myth of the seashell is that it reflects back to the listener the beat of his own heart. Friday is the hole in the story, but he is also the seashell. He cannot be defined by the colonizer, for any definition the colonizer attempts to adhere to him is merely a reflection of the colonizer himself.

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## Introduction

J.M. Coetzee's *Foe* is alternately lauded and condemned for its contributions to postcolonial writing. As a white South African, Coetzee holds a unique position, yet critics often state that his voice is an "oblique rather than a direct challenge" (Head 1) to the issues at hand. Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals*, through his character Elizabeth Costello, presents evidence as extreme as comparing the holocaust to an abattoir, to attribute to animals the highest level of being. At the same time Costello's daughter-in-law Norma, offers a 'normative' vision of animals as "biological automata" (48), little more than machines. Although I will not discuss substantially *The Lives of Animals*, this text is indicative of Coetzee's tendency to present all of the evidence without offering a solution to the reader. Critical discourse on *Foe* follows the same pattern. With his character Susan Barton, her daughter Susan, and Susan's caregiver Amy, Coetzee "invite[s] such widely different interpretations that the author himself has been categorized as both sexist and strongly feminist" (Kosew 168). With *Friday*, Coetzee once again silences the colonized through his representation of the Other, yet he also creates "the curious guardian at the margin" (Spivak 172), withholding knowledge of 'the margin' from the colonizer. Holly Flint finds Coetzee's "brilliance in his ability *to try and fail* at such an endeavor, a necessary failure that makes room for future subaltern voices" (Flint 345; emphasis original). Although Flint is correct to point out Coetzee's try-and-fail technique is often the catalyst for heated discussion, it is not the true subaltern that he makes room for. Indeed the "subject of exploitation cannot know and speak the text of... exploitation even if the absurdity of the nonrepresenting intellectual making space for [the colonized] to speak is achieved" (Spivak 84). Critics often ground Coetzee's *Foe* in the violence of apartheid South Africa at the time of *Foe*'s publishing so as to offer a definitive reading of an otherwise unsettling text. While reading

Coetzee's life into *Foe* does help postcolonial thinkers to reevaluate apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa, Coetzee chose texts written by the father of the English novel and as a result sets his story in the eighteenth century, a great distance from 1980's South Africa.

Coetzee tackles many difficult subjects within *Foe*, including colonialism, feminism, silence and sound, but his interest in Defoe is deeply personal. In his short preamble to his Nobel Prize Lecture, Coetzee tells of his first reading of *Robinson Crusoe*, his fascination with Crusoe himself as a boy of eight or nine, and his discovery of "a man with a wig named" Daniel Defoe, who "puzzled" (NPL np) him. Coetzee finds this Defoe character in a children's encyclopedia and does not understand how he fits into the story with Crusoe and Friday. The encyclopedia claims that he is 'the author,' "but this made no sense since it said on the very first page of *Robinson Crusoe* that Robinson Crusoe told the story himself" (NPL np). Was Daniel Defoe "perhaps another name for Robinson Crusoe, an alias that he used when he returned to England from his island and put on a wig" (NPL np)?

Lewis MacLeod writes that *Foe* is a "writerly rather than a readerly text" (MacLeod 13), but this is not so. Coetzee writes *Foe*, riddling it with canonical references, as evidence of his ability as an expert reader. He has a sophisticated understanding of critical discourse, how it functions by set rules and relies on a master narrative. *Foe*, as a maze of possible storylines, defies western society's obsession with master narratives. Coetzee's text "eschews a strictly linear temporal structure in favor of a beginning that is not an origin, a middle in which competing versions of the truth struggle for ascendance, and an ending that is inconclusive" (Parker 32). He cleverly ties these rules in knots by refusing to commit to a master narrative. Coetzee writes all possible stories simultaneously, creating a plethora of histories equivalent to one another.

Due to Coetzee's intricate play on critical discourse, much work has been done with a focus on silenced histories and postcolonial ramifications. Because many critics assume *Foe* is a Robinsonade, the introduction of the female results in feminist readings. Coetzee raises so many issues in his text that his choice of metafiction, to rewrite Daniel Defoe, not only his works but his very self, becomes lost in the shuffle. This thesis offers an in depth comparative reading of Daniel Defoe's original characters to J.M. Coetzee's reworking. While researching, it became clearer and clearer how extensive Coetzee's knowledge of Defoe's works is. Exactly how many details he utilizes, manipulates and deletes in the creation of his text can never be fully known. I offer here a thorough, though certainly not exhaustive, investigation.

The first chapter places Coetzee's Susan Barton alongside her eighteenth-century counterpart, Roxana. It re-examines the case critical discourse makes for Roxana's proto-feminist actions and follows the repercussions of Roxana-as-feminist through to *Foe*. Critical discourse's tradition of reading Roxana as an extreme form of the eighteenth-century binaries of virtuous/fallen, mother/monster, woman/man, bleeds into interpretations of Barton. As Barton asks when faced with a girl who may be her daughter, "what kind of being is she, so serenely blind to the evidence of her senses?" (76). To force Barton to be Roxana is to ignore half of who she is. Coetzee writes into Barton aspects of both sides of each binary, forcing them to co-exist within her very being. He offers her as a destabilizing force, and yet critical discourse often fails to recognize Barton's function in *Foe* because of the temptation to liken or contrast her with Roxana. When Barton is not Roxana, she is often the female interloper in *Robinson Crusoe*. She becomes reduced to her gender, and critical discourse often labels her a fit or unfit mother despite the fact she proclaims herself 'father' of her story, as she believes she holds primary power over it. She is the female colonizer, the female castaway, always a version of something

more pure, but never herself.

The second chapter addresses an anachronism with respect to race in the eighteenth century and follows it through to a new reading of *Robinson Crusoe*. According to the research of Roxann Wheeler, eighteenth-century conceptions of race were in a state of flux between humoral and anatomical. Skin colour was considered volatile and subject to change in relation to the surrounding environment. Often in critical discourse, the eighteenth century becomes associated with biological racism, which concretely relates outward appearance to interior competence. This is an anachronism Roxann Wheeler points out, since biological racism does not begin until the nineteenth century. Instead, relations between cultures are often mediated by country and religion. With this information, chapter two seeks to read *Robinson Crusoe* and Crusoe's relations with other cultures through the Christian / heathen binary, rather than on the basis of skin colour. Within this binary all heathens are not equal. Defoe overlays versions of English masculinity onto heathen cultures, revealing a personal system of values, while at the same time writing Crusoe as a father-figure. Crusoe's power appears to come naturally, due to his ingenuity, leadership and courage, rather than falling to him because of systemic structures (which Coetzee represents using phallic symbols) as with *Foe's* Cruso and Foe. The second chapter also briefly investigates Michel Foucault's author function in relation to *Robinson Crusoe* and *Foe*, as the texts which appear within *Foe* all belong to the Defoe-author function, and yet Crusoe makes possible the Defoe-author function. Crusoe and Defoe become interchangeable throughout *Robinson Crusoe's* publishing history, causing *Robinson Crusoe's* legacy to become confounded with his original text.

The closing chapter looks closer into the Friday of Coetzee's devising. I refuse to refer to the Friday of *Foe* as *Foe's* Friday, or Coetzee's Friday, as he always belongs to someone else

and never to himself. I do not seek to obstruct his agency, an agency Coetzee so carefully weaves into *Foe*. As Friday is silent, possibly by choice, Friday's body becomes an alternate form of communication. The barrier between colonizer and colonized is often more than simply language. Coetzee emphasizes this by offering a form of communication that even critical discourse claims is 'unreadable'. This poses the question: unreadable to whom? Like Barton, Friday does not internalize his role as the colonized and often ignores his would be masters. The Friday of Coetzee's imagination, so wildly different from Defoe's Friday, offers an implied re-reading of *Robinson Crusoe*. Coetzee, by setting his story as a prequel to *Robinson Crusoe*, offers a version of history in which Foe, a man with a different set of knowledge from Daniel Defoe himself, writes *Robinson Crusoe*. This *Robinson Crusoe* does not spring as a figment of Foe's imagination "dreamed... in a snug bed in Chichester" (*Foe* 40) or as a rewriting of the story of a Scottish mariner, but as the story of a woman and an African man, written over as the tale of a white Englishman. The Friday of *Robinson Crusoe* becomes what Homi Bhabha would call a mimic man. Rather than the Friday of *Robinson Crusoe* as Defoe would write him, as a noble savage who looked rather like himself who was a better Christian and a better shot, Friday sells out his culture, his people, and his god to become a vision of acceptable otherness. Chapter three also interrogates misreadings of Friday, which interpret him through lenses clouded with the literary canon, so that Friday comes to symbolize figures and functions he can know nothing about. While the merits of reading Friday-as-colonized further post-colonial thinking, just as Barton-as-woman allows a feminist reading, critical discourse must be careful not to reduce Friday to 'the colonized'. Assumptions brought to a text about a character, like tinted glasses, become a self-fulfilling prophecy.