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Foe vs. Foe

The Battle for Narrative Voice in Coetzee's *Foe*

The feminist and postmodern critical discussions that revolve around J. M. Coetzee's *Foe* often focus on the importance of narrative voice. His retelling of *Robinson Crusoe* comes to us from the point of view of a female castaway who, many critics claim, represents the silencing of feminine perspective. There are others, however, who see Susan Barton not as a woman overrun by dominant male perspectives, but rather, as a storyteller caught in a battle with a story-receiver for authorial control. Such critics label Susan as a confessor who only desires that Crusoe hear the truth in her story; they sentence Foe to the role of an oppressor who disregards the castaway's true story in favor of a fictionalized account of a shipwreck tale. Some critics see Susan as the reluctant subjugator of a muted Friday. These criticisms, however, do not fully explain the mysterious fourth section of the novel or the appearance of Susan's unrecognizable daughter. Rather, they skirt around these issues, chalking them up to authorial quirkiness, an assumption that deflects a careful consideration of certain sections of the text and leaves gray areas, which critics can conveniently mold to fit their theories. It is my contention that Coetzee does not intend to place Susan in the realm of confessor, nor does she merely represent a feminine perspective on a male text. Instead, she is a reified character beyond Foe's control. To put it simply: Susan Barton is not a woman whose story is stolen or misinterpreted; she is the *physical* manifestation of Foe's own ideas and she represents the battle between author and character for absolute narrative control; she is a muse who takes on a life of her own.

The first section of *Foe* concerns Susan's stay on Crusoe's island. At this point, Susan has already reached full physical status and has manifested memories of her own. The island is as

real and concrete to her as our world is to us. There are indications, however, that things are not what they seem. With a voice already stronger than her island counterparts, Susan finds herself unable to distinguish between fact and fiction in Cruso's stories. She remains unaware of her own manifestation as a character, and she considers herself a real person engaged in a real experience. Susan asks Cruso, "Why in all these years have you not built a boat and made your escape from the island?" (Coetzee 13). He replies, "And where should I escape to?" (13). Cruso's answer confuses Susan, and she determines that talking to Cruso is "a waste of breath" (13). She cannot understand that Cruso does not have a history. He is a character without a past who sees no need to reflect on how he came to exist, but instead remains content to build terrace after terrace like one confined to the pages of a novel, destined to repeat the same action over and over. He does not desire escape; he would die without the island.

Although her face-to-face battle with Foe has yet to begin, they are already struggling for control and Susan can feel Foe's hand upon her. After angering Cruso and then finding forgiveness for him inside of herself, a strange feeling sweeps over Susan:

When I lay down to sleep that night I seemed to feel the earth sway beneath me. I told myself it was a memory of the rocking ship coming back unbidden. But it was not so : It was the rocking of the island itself as it floated on the sea...I stretched out my arms and laid my palms on the earth, and, yes, the rocking persisted, the rocking of the island as it sailed through the sea...They say Britain is an island too, a great island. But that is a mere geographer's notion. The earth under our feet is firm in Britain, as it never was on Cruso's island. (26)

The island sways under Susan because it is literally adrift in the consciousness of Foe. Unable to understand this (the rocking seem so real to her,) Susan instead credits the island's seclusion and

size. What she feels, though, is the creative control of Foe as he rocks his still distant characters to sleep, unaware that one of them is becoming all too real for him.

The second section of the novel brings Susan and Foe closer to a physical meeting. Unable to survive as a character without his island, Cruso passes away on the ship that carries him, Susan, and Friday away from the shore. Susan is strong enough not only to leave the setting Foe has placed her in, but also to take Friday with her. In a sense, she leaves behind the only voice that could challenge her own and has accompanied herself only with a benevolent mute. Her grip on the story tightens while Foe's slips, as she makes the journey across the water from the island of her character life to the island of Foe, where she will become an entity he must face in the physical world. The realm between fact and fiction remains uncharted as Susan resides somewhere between the two in the second section. In "Do We of Necessity Become Puppets in a Story?" Lewis Macleod notes:

In Foe the struggles between Susan and Cruso, and Susan and Foe, at bottom have to do with who gets to establish and maintain the narrative framework and with who is going to seduce (and/or compel) whom into living inside his or her story world. (3)

I would argue, however, that the trip across the ocean from the castaway's island to England represents the journey of Susan from character to person. Instead of there being a line between two "story" worlds, a convergence between real life and story world takes place as Foe and Susan move closer to each other.

This physical manifestation creates an odd side effect. As Susan becomes more real to Foe, both as a spiritual character and as a functional person, she begins to become less real to herself. That is, her memories are already becoming hazy. They fade quickly in the presence of

true reality, so while she comes physically closer to her maker, she becomes aware of her own lack of substance. Susan's sense of self cannot hold up when faced with actual people.

Susan's newfound insecurity makes her weary of replacement as Foe's muse in the second section of the novel. She feels distanced from her author now that she has left the island behind and wishes to remain fresh in his mind. The letters she writes to him receive no response, so she falls back on subconscious strategies. Unable to reach Foe, Susan laments, "How I wish it were in my power to help you, Mr. Foe! Closing my eyes, I gather my strength and send out a vision of the island to hang before you like a substantial body," reminding Foe that she is the muse for his story and that Cruso's death need not end her as well (Coetzee 53).

As the section progresses, Susan begins to question the validity of her story. As her memory of the island grows more distant in her mind, and without any real sense of herself in her new island home, details slip from her recollection and she wonders if her tale is interesting enough. She asks, "Are these enough strange circumstances to make a story of? How long before I am driven to invent new and stranger circumstances: the salvage of tools and muskets from Cruso's ship" (67). In *Robinson Crusoe*, these details come to life, and so one may assume that Susan's memory of the island represents one of Foe's initial drafts. It is he who questions the concrete details in Susan's mind and finds them lacking. Susan can feel that Foe is unimpressed with her version, and she worries about her usefulness to the author. His inattention to her letters and Friday's ever-present silence gives Susan plenty of time to ponder her status and she notes:

I write my letters, I seal them, I drop them in the box. One day when we are departed you will tip them out and glance through them. 'Better had there been only Cruso and Friday,' you will murmur to yourself: 'Better without the woman.'

Yet where would you be without the woman...Many strengths you have, but invention is not one of them. (73)

Susan worries about losing her place in Foe's story, but she remains unaware that she is losing her life as well. As Foe begins to see the need for more adventure in his tale, Susan rapidly becomes a character who resists change and will end up dispensable in later drafts. She will no longer service his story and is holding Foe back from concentrating on the details he would like to embellish: Crusoe's ingenuity, Friday's kindness, the building of a livable habitat on a deserted island, rescue and gunplay, and the interaction with cannibals so prevalent in *Robinson Crusoe*. Susan will not go without a fight however, and Foe seems as unable to rid himself of her presence as she is unable to rid herself of Friday. She holds on to her story because, "story is nothing less than the framework that provides order to consciousness; it is *the* necessary mechanism for personal agency, the necessary condition for any type of control and power in the world. Without it you fall off the radar" (MacLeod 2). Susan intends to remain in Foe's radar and invades his physical life to make sure this happens.

In response to this invasion, Foe makes Susan's daughter appear during section two in a physical manifestation Susan does not recognize. In Susan's island memory, she was shipwrecked while traveling from Bahia where she was searching for her missing child. When a strange girl starts standing across the street from Foe's house where Friday and Susan have taken residence, the girl angers Susan with her insistence that Susan bore her. Becoming convinced that Foe has sent the girl to torture her, Susan asks, "Who is she and why do you send her to me? Is she sent as a sign you are alive? She is not my daughter. Do you think women drop children and forget them as snakes lay eggs?" (Coetzee 71). Indeed, as Foe remains unable to extract himself from Susan's clutches while he writes his story, he decides to make her aware that she

does not actually exist so he can sever her power over him. Merely telling her would not accomplish his goal, as Susan has proven stubborn and tenacious; however, if he can present her with her memories and show her that they are without substance, he can undermine Susan's confidence and begin to weaken her. This is the only reasonable explanation for the presence of a daughter Susan does not recognize. The child has the same name as her mother, a construction that indicates how muddled the world between character and writer has become. Foe can conjure the idea of Susan's daughter, but he can never give her the substance that he has developed in his other character. The daughter is only a foil for Susan and never achieves complete emotional reality. She is vague and seems only to reflect Susan's emotions.

Foe and Susan finally meet face-to-face in section three. As their physical beings have moved closer, the battle of character vs. author, and therefore Foe vs. Foe, has reached its climax. The two must then decide who controls the story. Foe tries in vain to convince Susan that the island story is not the one she should focus on, instead she should concentrate on the details of her own life. His tender demeanor in these sections indicates a desire to help his character find her way. However, I believe that Foe's avoidance of Susan until this point is indicative of his fear of her. His attempts to lead her away from the island are designed not to help her, but rather to help himself. Foe wants control of his story back and he employs any means necessary to make that happen. Not only does he tell her, "The island is not a story in itself," but he also brings in Susan's unrecognizable daughter, and finally he consumes her with sex or takes her physicality back by joining it with his own.

By this point, Susan is aware that she has lost control of the island story and is becoming aware of her own status as character and not person. She seems to achieve a better understanding of Cruso and his love for the island, perhaps grasping the security it provided him as a fictional

character in a fictional setting. As Macaskill and Colleran point out, “she finds herself and her resistance to Foe corresponding more and more to Crusoe’s struggle against the intransigence of the island, she comes to inhabit a position equivalent to that of a cultivator preparing and hoping for the planters to come” (449). In this manner, Susan finally understands Crusoe’s terraces, for she now wishes for the kind of security Crusoe had when he was stuck in the pages of Foe’s novel. By removing herself from the island, she has literally written herself out of the story. This leaves only a mute Friday who, having spent most of this draft in a trance, will not remember her even after Foe gives him a voice. Forever building terraces was perhaps the better option.

The final section of the novel remains the most confusing aspect of the story if one does not understand that when Susan and Foe have sex they literally become one again. Critics have speculated that Coetzee himself is the narrator of the last section. I would argue, however, that this narrator is the remnants of Susan’s character who Foe has once again consigned to the story. Therefore, the shipwreck she has often speculated about is now her home. Like Crusoe and his terraces, Susan will remain forever in the shipwreck of dead drafts, residing beside a mute Friday whom Foe has left behind in favor of a more interesting, cannibal Friday. In short, he writes a version that might actually sell books.

The bodies of her daughter, herself, and Foe shrivel up because they are the ashes of a past draft. Crusoe will strike the two from *Robinson Crusoe*’s pages forever, although Susan’s name will appear in other Foe stories. I contend that the author drafted those stories after her namesake and not Susan herself, since Susan is Foe’s first attempt at the character and her daughter is the revision. Foe will go on to form another version of himself called Defoe, a version who would never give in to the will of a character as much as Foe allows himself to. Only Friday remains breathing, however faintly, because he appears to hold no opinion of the

island and can easily be rewritten to fit his author's needs. The original version of Crusoe is gone, possibly to character heaven on his terraces while Susan floats below him. Defoe will write a second version of the character who will become Crusoe, a heroic yet slave-owning adventurer with a survivalist spirit. Essentially, "In these final moments of the narrative, Coetzee positions a new narrative voice and, in displacing that of Susan, as well as those of Crusoe and Friday, dissolves all previously established authorities. In its place he offers a substance and a silence" (Macaskill and Colleran 451). This silence leaves room for a new and improved draft of a story that simply was not successful.

Not explaining the confusion surrounding Susan's daughter or the strange manifestation of a new narrator at the end of *Foe*, leaves the book open to a number of interpretations which critics can mold and manipulate to fit their theories. However, one cannot neglect these critical parts of the novel and with them comes a different explanation. This explanation is more than just the struggle for a woman's voice, or the power play of storyteller versus story-receiver. It is a battle for story and history in which, "History is more than a referent; it is in fact a tyrannical presence, but it is nevertheless elusive and cannot be brought into full consciousness by those who are caught up in it" (Attwell 579). It is a battle only explained by the physical reification of a narrator and muse spun out of control. It is an example of an author's struggle to control his characters and therefore to control his art.

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