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# "Lacking Members of Play": Sexual/Textual Politics in J. M. Coetzee's *Foe*

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**Abstract:** This essay considers the divide between two camps of critics responding to the use and potential abuse of a white woman narrator in J. M. Coetzee's *Foe* (1986) and finds within the novel a critique of contemporaneous feminist discourses. I identify a rhetoric of rape deployed by the novel's protagonist, Susan, against the mute ex-slave, Friday, and consider its effect on Susan's ability to mediate between oppressed and dominant groups, represented by Friday and the author—(De)Foe—respectively. Ultimately, I argue that Susan's curiously masculine sense of desire complicates the charge that Coetzee is simply appropriating the voice of a woman, finding instead that he utilises Susan's attempted penetration into Friday's silence to demonstrate the faults of a second-wave feminism that exploits various categories of otherness.

**Keywords:** J. M. Coetzee, *Foe*, feminism, rape

"Does he have it in him to be the woman?" (160) asks David Lurie, the philandering protagonist of J. M. Coetzee's 1999 Booker Prize-winning novel *Disgrace*, as he struggles to comprehend the violent rape of his daughter, Lucy, by imagining himself in her place. As Lurie's own sexual harassment hearing shows, the answer to this question, in *Disgrace*, is a resounding no. However, amongst David's precursors are three female narrators: the narrators in *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), *Foe* (1986), and *Age of Iron* (1990). Coetzee, it would seem, believes in *his* ability to "be the woman." However, Coetzee does not take lightly what Lucy Valerie Graham calls his "textual cross-dressing" ("Use of the

Female" ii). In *Foe*, which writes back to Daniel Defoe's 1719 adventure novel *Robinson Crusoe*, Coetzee is openly critical of the male author, Foe, whose truncated name gives the novel its title. The novel allows Coetzee to warn against unquestioningly accepting the authority of the male author.

In *Foe*, Foe approaches the protagonist Susan Barton to obtain an epistolary recollection of her time as a castaway on the island given life in *Robinson Crusoe*. Susan hopes that Foe, with his literary success, will "set [her story] right" (47) so that it may be published. As readers well know, Foe's version of "set[ting] it right" involves completely erasing Susan from the narrative: she is not present in *Robinson Crusoe*. Thus instead of becoming the author of the first female castaway narrative, Susan Barton becomes the victim of Foe's vampiric tendencies as an author, not even a presence on the shelves alongside the other women whose lives Foe has narrativized. To call Susan the (only) victim and be done with it, however, significantly misses the novel's central postcolonial concern: the difficulty—or perhaps impossibility—of representing the silenced colonial subject, Friday, a mute ex-slave who inhabits the island, in a manner that does not further oppress him. Further, calling Susan *the* victim disregards her role in enacting precisely this kind of oppression upon Friday—an oppression that, as I will argue, takes the form of her metaphoric rape of Friday, which draws the reader into a sexually violent quest for the voice of the silenced. Susan's writing project fails as she and her story are erased by Foe's pen. And yet, her overtly sexualised violation of the racial other suggests Coetzee's critique of second-wave feminism. This, as I will argue, complicates the charge of gender appropriation sometimes levelled against Coetzee as the male creator of a female narrator whose quest for literary recognition ends in failure.

Fiona Probyn divides feminist criticism of J. M. Coetzee's white women narrators into two camps, to use a word with no small amount of relevance in Coetzee's oeuvre. The smaller camp comprises such critics as Josephine Dodd and Benita Parry, who condemn "Coetzee's mimicry of the white woman's voice as an appropriation of otherness" (Probyn, par. 2). For Dodd, Coetzee's postmodern re-imagining of Daniel Defoe's

novel, which thrusts a woman to the helm, fails to provide a productive trajectory for that woman: "Despite the poststructuralist acrobatics of J. M. Coetzee's novels[,] . . . something sadly familiar and sadly predictable is happening in [his] textual production of 'woman'" (157). What Dodd finds in her reading of *Foe* is a re-inscription of the masculinist sexual politics that to her mind have plagued South African literary production rather than the useful mobilisation of a white woman narrator by a male author. In this novel, she argues, the female narrator is ultimately forced "into submission" (164).

This is so because Susan's letters that address an unnamed "you" (later identified as the novelist Daniel Foe) make up only the first three parts of *Foe*. These letters chronicle Susan's arrival on the island inhabited only by Cruso and his manservant Friday; the trio's eventual rescue and journey to England, during which Cruso dies; and Susan's travels around England with Friday as she tries to write and publish her account of castaway life with the assistance of Foe. Susan wishes to focus her narrative on the time shared on the island with Cruso and Friday but views this narrative as incomplete without the voice of Friday, who has purportedly had his tongue cut out; she therefore endeavours to make him tell his story. Foe views Susan's year on the island as only a small part of her story and wishes to incorporate it as a mere episode in her quest to find her daughter, who is missing somewhere in the Bahia region of Brazil. Although Susan refuses to tell Foe much about the time she spent searching for her daughter, he asks her about her experiences in Bahia again in Part III of the novel, shortly before Susan's narration is usurped by an unnamed narrator in the novel's fourth and final part. This unidentified observer, from a point hundreds of years after the events Susan describes, narrates two scenes, observing in the first scene a dead Susan and Foe in Foe's office-turned-heritage site "side by side in bed, not touching. The[ir] skin, dry as paper, is stretched tight over their bones" (Coetzee, *Foe* 153). In these same rooms, the narrator also discovers a box of Susan's letters, yellowed and crumbling. In the second scene, the narrator dives beneath the wreck of a ship to find "Susan Barton and her dead captain, fat as pigs" (157). The final images of Susan preserve her not as a castaway or writer but as a drowned, bloated paramour.

Whatever advances *Foe* makes in terms of exploring the problematics of women's writing, with Susan attempting to appropriate the phallic pen of the male author to (pro)create her own story, Dodd's camp argues that her failure to write and publish work on her own terms is reinscribed as her authority is usurped in the novel's final section. The irony is particularly sharp considering that one of the main effects of the intertextual relationship between *Robinson Crusoe* and *Foe* is that *Foe* appears to be premised on the reinstatement of (De)Foe's discarded female author. Regardless of whether the unnamed narrator of this final section is Coetzee himself—and Dodd questions the accuracy of this popular critical assertion—according to Dodd, *Foe*'s final scene enacts the appropriation it claims to expose. Notably, the narrator, in a clear allusion to Adrienne Rich's poem, "dive[s] into the wreck" (Coetzee, *Foe* 142) to find Susan consigned to a watery grave and her manuscript decomposing on a dusty floor.

Just as critical of the novel as Dodd is, Parry finds Coetzee's withholding of Friday's voice not only suspect but ironic. "Why," she asks, "does a male novelist take the risk of simulating woman's speech . . . while this same white novelist refrains from dissembling the voices of [non-white people] excluded from the dominant discourse[?]" (158). For Parry, if the leitmotif of silence in the novel is intended to underscore the primacy of the body's semiotic self-sufficiency—the body as its "own sign" (Coetzee, *Foe* 157)—Coetzee's "bestowing authority on the woman's text, while withholding discursive skills from the dispossessed, is to reinscribe, indeed re-enact, the received disposal of narrative power" (Parry 158). Parry argues that the "obsessional will to utterance" of Coetzee's "female and European narrators who literally perform the constitution of the subject in language and are authors of . . . the inaudibility of those who are narrated" enables the ethical choice to *not* speak for the Other that Coetzee, hidden behind his woman narrator, is able to occupy (154). In other words, if Coetzee intends, finally, to assert the discursive inaccessibility of those who stand beyond the limits of Western language, why does he assume—or better, appropriate—the voice and body of a woman to make this point?

The defense of Coetzee made by those critics writing out of the other, more populous camp, is that Coetzee's use of white women narrators is "an appropriate . . . textual strategy for interrogating structures of power, authority and language" (Probyn, par. 2). His white women narrators enable him to achieve a more nuanced interrogation of pernicious and interlinked structures of oppression. Dorothy Driver studies the idea of woman as "sign" in the context of colonial South Africa and argues that while patriarchal discourse frequently bracketed women with people of colour on the nature side of the nature/culture dichotomy and while white women were thought to share certain experiences of oppression with other oppressed groups, "their simultaneous entrapment within the oppressive [white, colonial] group on whose behalf they may desire to mediate complicates their narrative stance" (13). The very complexity of women's positioning is reflected in Coetzee's nuanced interrogation. Driver writes, "[d]espite the fact, then, that in some sense white women and black people are said to occupy the same 'natural' space, white women have been sharply differentiated from blacks and have, in fact, been used to maintain the difference between white and black" (14). It thus makes little sense to propose, as David Attwell does, that Coetzee's gendered performances render "the feminine as sign for *other* kinds of difference" (qtd. in Kossew 167; emphasis in original). This contention, blind to the particularities of oppression, suggests that all victims are equally victimised and denies the possibility that one victim could oppress another in a way that is not borne out by Coetzee's fiction.

Sue Kossew draws attention to the ambiguous and ambivalent territory occupied by Coetzee through his adoption of white colonial female narrators, from Magda in *In the Heart of the Country* to Susan in *Foe* and Elizabeth Curren in *Age of Iron*. This has proved fertile ground, Kossew notes, for contradictory readings of the texts in which these women appear, with some accounts describing the texts as "sexist" and others as "feminist" (168). The repeated affirmations of (textual and personal) authority and "substance" (Coetzee, *Foe* 51) made by Coetzee's white women narrators is, as Kossew argues, "undermined by an authorial irony, an irony that is inevitably linked to [each woman's] own lack of authority in a patriarchal, colonial society" (168–69). Coetzee, as a white,

male Afrikaner, undoubtedly sits at the helm of such a society—or, as he has described it himself, the lip of the volcano—however reluctantly ("Tales" 9). Kossew believes that Coetzee attempts, in assuming a female voice, to turn this irony upon himself; his subjection of the woman's voice to "abjection and marginalisation" (Kossew 169) is therefore a self-marginalisation, an undercutting of his own "author/ity" (171).

As Kossew and Melinda Harvey demonstrate in their introduction to *Reading Coetzee's Women*, Coetzee has ruminated upon what it means "to write as a woman narrator" (8). They cite an interview with Joanna Scott in which Coetzee deconstructs this very idea in his response to a question about whether men can ever adequately write as women:

> "A complicated question. One way of responding is to ask, is one, as a writer, at every level sexed? Is there not a level where one is, if not presexual, then anterior to sex? First anterior to sex, then becoming sexed? At that level, or in that transition between levels, does one actually 'take on' the voice of another sex? Doesn't one 'become' another sex?" (qtd. in Kossew and Harvey 8).

Coetzee's questions are provocative—perhaps deliberately so, given his use of scare quotes to suggest that men may not only "take on" the voice of women, but actually "become" women through their writing. This provocation however seems to undermine the cautiousness with which Coetzee has approached what Carrol Clarkson calls his "woman-izing" (2). A prime example of this caution is the question, mentioned above, that David Lurie ponders in *Disgrace*—"Does he have it in him to *be* the woman?"—referring specifically to his daughter, the victim of a gang rape (160; emphasis added). The novel suggests that he does not; and yet David Lurie chillingly acknowledges that what he can imagine, "if he concentrates, if he loses himself," is that he can "be there, be the men" who raped his daughter (160).

The question of whether Coetzee can "be the woman" in *Disgrace* is more difficult to answer because the women victims of rape remain largely silent, as does Friday, the victim of Susan's metaphoric rape. Coetzee's retreat from testifying as a woman narrator to the experience of

rape is congruent with what Laura Wright, amongst many others, posits as his "respect for alterity that cannot be imagined" (100). Coetzee is apparently more confident representing the violator than he is the violated: Susan becomes like David Lurie as she seizes the phallic pen and violates Friday.

In their analysis of *Foe*, many critics reject the image of Coetzee rocking smugly back on his heels behind Susan's botched attempts to retrieve Friday's voice. As Kossew notes, *Foe* is far too ambiguous to be simply a smokescreen for Coetzee's misogyny; perhaps, too, Coetzee's fixation on the fallibility of the white settler colonialist narrator is a sort of self-flagellation or complex articulation of guilt, or, as Olfa Belgacem writes, "a testimony which offers some relief for the storyteller/writer but keeps the other, nonetheless, locked up in 'the dark chamber' of non-representability" (193). Belgacem, interestingly, places little importance upon the gender of Coetzee's white narrators. She finds all of his narrators to be wanting on the basis of their race:

> Many [narratorial] voices are heard, indeed, but they all have too high a pitch for the silent voice of the [racial] other to be heard. . . . [T]he voices we hear are conflicting voices having different stances and different backgrounds, but are of the same *color*, if voices were to be given somatic characteristics. We certainly hear the voices of the white colonists . . . [and] other voices arise as well like the feminine voices of Curren and Susan Barton. They all interact allowing sometimes for the author's own voice to surge from the fissures of their discourses. As to the colonial other, s/he stays in the background. (184)

However, if, in exposing the colonising actions of a white writer who attempts to give voice to the "other," Coetzee intends to implicate only himself in a sort of perverse literary punishment that nonetheless enables his "own voice to surge," we find ourselves asking the same question: Why make this narrator a woman?

We can confidently dismiss the idea that Coetzee has fallen unwittingly into the Western tradition of aestheticizing the objectification and rape of women, given the implicit acknowledgement of this phenomenon

in his fiction.[1] Coetzee has engaged with feminist thought in both his fiction and his criticism, sometimes disparagingly. "The Harms of Pornography," Coetzee's response to Catharine MacKinnon's call to "delegitimize" pornography, questions MacKinnon's "account of desire and sexuality in the service of [male] power," which he views as "totalizing in its ambition" (72). MacKinnon's sweeping dismissal of pornography, Coetzee argues, would threaten the work of "serious writers" who are dedicated to "exploring the darker areas of human experience" (74). He further explicates this by imagining a seemingly autobiographical "male writer-pornographer":

> "If I were to write an account of power and desire that, unlike yours, does not close the book on desire (by defining its genesis and its ends), but on the contrary sees (but also does not see), in its own desire to know its desire, that which it can never know about itself; if this hypothetical account were further to be offered, not in the discursive terms of 'theory,' but in the form of a representation, an enactment, perhaps in the medium of film; if this representation were to share a thematics with pornography (including perhaps torture, abasement, acts of cruelty), and in other crucial respects as well—its gender politics, for instance—were wide open to bearing the same interpretation as much material classed as pornography—if this project were carried through and offered to the world, what would protect it from suffering the same fate—'delegitimization'—as a work of pornography, except perhaps its *seriousness* . . . as a philosophical project?" (72–73; emphasis in original)

Perhaps there lies in this proposal no small amount of self-interest. We find in nearly every one of Coetzee's novels one or another of the acts he lists as pornographic—the multiple brutalities in *Dusklands*; Magda's rape by Hendrik in *In The Heart of The Country*; the torture of the Barbarian Girl in *Waiting for the Barbarians*; the rapes of Melanie and Lucy in *Disgrace*; the rape and murder of Ana Magdalena in *The Schooldays of Jesus*; and, as I will suggest, the metaphoric rape of Friday in *Foe*. Although the publication of *Foe* precedes both MacKinnon's

*Feminism Unmodified* and Coetzee's response to it, what is relevant to my essay is Coetzee's refusal to "close the book on desire" by deeming it a solely patriarchal construction (Coetzee, "The Harms of Pornography" 72). The critical accounts that focus on the centrality of desire in Coetzee's oeuvre typically focus on his male protagonists. Jana M. Giles, for example, focuses on the reprehensibility of the rapes committed by David Lurie and Dmitri. She observes that "the urge to reproduce is a significant factor in [Coetzee's] male characters' motives" (102).

While rape is more than merely an "urge to reproduce," Giles argues that the men of Coetzee's fiction are shaped by a disinterested aesthetic that moves them to deny the agency of women whose beauty, in the words of David Lurie, "does not own itself" (*Disgrace* 16) but prompts a subjective experience belonging to the beholder. Giles identifies a resultant desire to reproduce, "reflecting the imperative that the finest specimens of the species have a duty to procreate" (91). This is the kind of motivation to rape I have in mind for Susan; while she is not moved to violation by Friday's beauty in the same way that David Lurie is moved to violation by Melanie's, Susan's urge to reproduce, similarly to the urges of David Lurie and his ilk, enables her to violate Friday's agency. Of course, in *Foe*, the product of reproduction is not a human child but a published work, and the protagonist is not a man but a woman, one whose desire revolves, significantly, around the wielding of a phallus.

What distinguishes Susan Barton from Coetzee's desirous and "pornographic" male narrators and protagonists is quite obviously her gender, a fact that manifests as a lack. Of course, in Lacanian psychoanalytic terms, lack is essential to desire in that the object of one's desire must be something that one does not already possess. Susan lacks not only the phallus, which amounts—when appendaged to a white, European person—to social power, but also its symbolic analogue, the pen, which represents among other things the literary success she covets. Susan seems to accept rather than lament her lack of social power, being only too happy to submit herself sexually to a succession of men in positions of power: the ship's captain who pilots her to the island; Cruso, master of the island; and finally, Foe. Through Susan's first-person narration, her sexual encounters with these men morph from barely consensual

acts to ones she apparently chooses because they are necessary to her advancement. When Susan awakes to find Cruso's "hand exploring [her] body" (Coetzee, *Foe* 29), an experience that brings to her mind previous sexual encounters with the ship captain, she makes an attempt to escape his sexual attention before deciding, "he has not known a woman for fifteen years, why should he not have his desire?" (30), and finally relenting to an unnarrated sexual act. In a disconcertingly melodious reflection on this violation, Susan's suggestion that "we yield to a stranger's embrace or give ourselves to the waves; for the blink of an eyelid our vigilance relaxes; we are asleep" (30) mirrors the response David Lurie imagines Melanie having to their "undesired" sex act in *Disgrace* (25). Melanie appears to have "decided to go slack, die within herself for the duration, like a rabbit when the jaws of a fox close on its neck" (Coetzee, *Disgrace* 25). In both cases, women who are victims of non-consensual sexual intercourse resign themselves to the act, becoming barely responsive when met by overpowering and predatory behaviour.

Susan evokes the slackness and resignation of feminised bodies in response to male power and desire in her discussion of the animalistic monotony which she believes is a result of Friday's lack of a tongue: "lacking members of play, what is there for beasts to do when bored but sleep?" (Coetzee, *Foe* 85). According to Susan, the tongue, which provides access to the world of language in which "we jest and lie and seduce," and the fingers, which enable their possessor to play music, are both "members of play" (85). Sleep, from this perspective, entails passivity to the predations of a more powerful will: the will of one equipped with the "members of play." Yet Susan misses the most obvious meaning of "member," a reference to male genitalia which is nonetheless suggested by her implicit connection of glossal and genital mutilation. Musing on Friday's apparently amputated tongue, she writes: "It was no comfort that his mutilation was secret, closed behind his lips (as some other mutilations are hidden by clothing)" (24). She later refers to circumcision, wondering if Friday lost his tongue "at the age when boy-children among the Jews are cut" (69) and to outright castration: "had the cutting out of his tongue taught him eternal obedience . . . as gelding takes the fire out of a stallion?" (98). In Part Three of the novel, she admits to Foe that she "had

continually to fear that evidence of a yet more hideous mutilation might be thrust upon [her] sight" (119). She recounts seeing Friday dancing, which caused his robes to fly up and expose his naked body: "What had been hidden from me was revealed. I saw; or should I say, my eyes were open to what was present to them" (119). And yet, horrified by the idea that Friday might be castrated, Susan does not divulge what was revealed to her, so we remain unclear as to which "members of play" he truly lacks. Friday's "hideous mutilation" aptly summarises her own lack of voice *and* phallus, and therefore, in the pen/penis connection theorised by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, lack of "literary power" (4). Without this member, Susan, too, lies back to sleep, allowing the patriarchal society in which she finds herself to have its way with her. It is only when Foe threatens to take Susan's account of her experiences away from her that she attempts to overcome her "mutilation" by taking the lead in her sexual encounter with Foe and more seriously, I argue, engaging in a rhetoric of rape that further victimises Friday.

Susan's sexual encounter with Foe differs from her encounter with Cruso in terms of its power dynamics. Belgacem points to Susan being "a reader 'reared on travellers' tales,' one that has internalized patriarchal subjugation" (63) to explain why she accepts Cruso's advances. Foe, however, represents a threat to "the story [Susan] desire[s] to be known by" (Coetzee, *Foe* 121). Of course, Susan's desire to be known according to her own story implies that the story as it stands, on the pages penned by Foe, lacks the "substance" (51) she wishes it to possess, and that she, inscribed therein, is insubstantial. Susan attempts to overcome this lack by adopting a traditionally masculine position during intercourse. She patronises Foe, "calming" and "coaxing" (139) him and exposing his bodily and sexual shortcomings before straddling him and finally telling him, "This is the manner of the Muse when she visits her poets. . . . [S]he must do whatever lies in her power to father her offspring" (Coetzee, *Foe* 139–40). According to Belgacem, by embracing fatherhood and a traditionally male position during copulation, Susan "gains both the phallus which she has so far been denied as a female character and, consequently, the pen which will allow her to mother her story" (63). This reading has credibility and is repeated by other critics,

but it ignores the penetrations that violate Friday that Susan commits in usurping the phallic pen.

Many critics touch on Susan's exploitation of Friday (Susan says, "To tell my story and be silent on Friday's tongue is not better than offering a book for sale with pages in it quietly empty" [Coetzee, *Foe* 67]), but they only minimally explore this aspect of the novel in terms of sexual/textual desire: that is, Susan's sexual desire for textual (re)production. Critics reinscribe the suggestive language of Susan's "penetration" of Friday's silence so that she may produce a story that meets the expectations of her readership without considering the implications of this sexually charged language. Teresa Dovey undertakes perhaps the most extensive exploration of the conflation of the textual and sexual in Susan's exploitation of Friday; she applies a Lacanian lens to *Foe* and concludes that

> [t]he problem for women, and indeed for all writers wishing to signal their otherness within phallic discourse, is thus a rhetorical one, a problem of how to point to a strategic silence *within* speech. Friday's muteness provides the means of figuring this silence for Susan Barton as a woman writer; he represents the hole in her narrative, a hole which figures her own hole, that is to say, the absence of the phallus. (380; emphasis in original)

The conflation of women and other groups wishing to "signal their otherness" in writing recalls Attwell's contention that "the feminine [functions] as sign for *other* kinds of difference" in Coetzee's writing, thus homogenising difference. All victims, according to this view, are equally victimised. And yet Dovey implicitly acknowledges that one victim may become victimised by another: "[Friday's] absent penis/tongue allows him to figure as the phallus for Susan Barton as woman writer; he becomes a fetishized substitute phallus which allows her to elude the fact of her own castration in language" (374).

Dovey does not pay sufficient heed to the phallocentric language Susan uses against Friday in her pursuit of his narrative, a pursuit which is, as mentioned, ultimately unsuccessful. Aiming to draw Friday out of "one of his mopes," (Coetzee, *Foe* 78) Susan describes the desire "felt by those of us who live in a world of speech to have our questions

answered," using a relatively chaste simile which likens this desire to that felt "when we kiss someone, to feel the lips we kiss respond to us" (79). The desire to respond to someone's speech, similarly, is "like the desire for the embrace of, the embrace by, another being" (80). Susan presumably selects these similes because she suspects that Friday is a virgin or castrated, "perhaps . . . even unacquainted with the parts of generation" (80). Of course, Friday's missing "members of play" mean that this colloquy is "issueless" both sexually and textually (78). Here we observe the emergence of that "urge to reproduce"—to *father*—which Giles identifies as a significant motive in some of Coetzee's male narrators (102). Importantly, Susan's "urge to reproduce" is not a desire for pregnancy: she insists emphatically that she is not "a mere receptacle ready to accommodate whatever story is stuffed in [her]" (130–31). Instead, she wishes to father her own story, one over which she wants to have complete authority.

Faced with the failure of her textual progeniture, Susan's use of sexual allusion becomes more insidious. Refusing to be stuffed with stories, she instead attempts to stuff Friday, perhaps most notably when she discovers a set of recorders in Foe's drawers and leaves one for Friday to discover. Friday takes up the recorder and plays it privately, repeating a six-note tune he had played on a reed flute on Cruso's island. Extending the courtship/conversation simile, Susan wonders: "are not both music and conversation like love?" (97). She imagines entering into musical communion with Friday in an episode fraught with double entendres: practising "the blowing and fingering" of musical (conversational, sexual) play on her own recorder before ambushing Friday in the act of musical production (96). Growing tired of Friday's limited musical range—"just as we cannot . . . perform forever the same motion and call it lovemaking, so it is with music: we cannot forever play the same tune and be content"—Susan attempts to embellish their song (97). At this point, she realises that Friday, whether intentionally or not, has not responded to her attempts to collaborate in musical conversation: "all the time I had stood there playing to Friday's dancing, thinking he and I made a consort, he had been insensible of me" (98). What Susan diagnoses as Friday's "disdain for intercourse" (98) with her has heretofore

not figured as a major obstacle to her attempted "penetration" and does not stall her campaign to attempt to enter Friday and "descen[d] into [his] eye['I']" (141), that is, his perspective and subjectivity, in order to pen a story.

The desire for what she lacks—Friday's story—culminates in a rhetoric of rape: despite having no access to Friday's thoughts and feelings, Susan figures his silence as a tempting hole that is "waiting for the button" (121). This penetrative imagery recalls that pervasive rejoinder, constitutive of rape culture, which justifies sexual violation by claiming that the victim was "asking for it." With Friday's silence overcome in this way, the novel focuses on Susan's desire "to descend into the mouth[,] . . . to open Friday's mouth and hear what it holds" so that she and Foe can "make Friday's silence speak" (142). The violence of these words is exposed by the imagined sexual excitement of finally discovering Friday's voice. In their exploration of the parallels between rape and representation, Lynne A. Higgins and Brenda R. Silver explain that rape is frequently "turned into a metaphor or a symbol represented rhetorically as titillation, persuasion, ravishment, seduction, or desire" in order to evade its classification as violent behaviour (4). Rosemary J. Jolly identifies the consequences of Susan's "essentially teleological notion" of writing her story: "narrative is seen to heal or 'fix' events, eliminating all elements of controversy or doubt surrounding them. Such a narrative relieves author and reader alike of any responsibility to enquire further about those events" (7). Susan, whose epistolary outpourings constitute the majority of the novel, would have us believe that, where desire is concerned, the means are always justified by the ends—no matter their effect on the Other.

Nicola Moffat explores the implications of *Disgrace*'s evasion of the term "rape": David Lurie attempts to protest his innocence by considering his sexual violation of Melanie as "not rape, not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core" (Coetzee, *Disgrace* 25). Moffat argues that the failure of critics to read this event *as* rape exemplifies a wider phenomenon ("Rape and the (Animal) Other" 414). This misreading reveals the perniciousness of a discourse that at its core aims to absolve perpetrators of sexual violation of their crimes by challenging the

criteria on which they are decided. This rhetoric is constitutive, Moffat argues, of rape culture ("Disgrace" 98). MacKinnon, too, finds potential harm in depicting degrading sexual acts on the page, defining pornography as "the graphic sexually explicit subordination of women through pictures or *words*" (176; emphasis added). Although rape and pornography are not the same, and it may be argued—as Coetzee does—that MacKinnon's attention to pornography is misguided, underpinning the feminist focus on both pornography and rape is a very real fear about the desire to subordinate women uniting both. Indeed, MacKinnon argues that sexual violence enacted on the page or the screen in pornographic content begets sexual violence in real life. And there is a level on which MacKinnon's isolation of the subordination of *women* rings true, despite opening itself to rebuttals that men, too, can be victims of sexual violence: as Moffat argues, rape and its associated cultural rhetoric is "predicated on a dichotomised gender model, where the belief in opposite genders assists the justification of sexual violence" ("Disgrace" 102). Rape perpetuates a masculine/feminine binary by asserting the physical and ideological power of the (masculinised) perpetrator over the subordinated (feminised) victim, regardless of the gender identity of each party (Moffat, "Rape and the (Animal) Other" 414–15). Beyond perpetuating the normativity of sexual violation, then, the rhetoric of rape, which seeks to avoid being defined as such, casts victims as essentially female through its goal of subordinating them.

In this context, to call what Susan is deploying "a rhetoric of rape," which subordinates a potentially castrated male Other through speech, no longer seems so outlandish. Instead, it becomes concerning from a feminist perspective. Why write a woman into the story of *Robinson Crusoe*, only to have her enact greater violence against Friday than the original, male narrator does? Perhaps if *Foe* was not an example of historiographic metafiction attempting to write a woman back into the overtly masculine history of the eighteenth century, the implications of Susan's failed narrative would not be so great. However, despite his apparent intention, Coetzee's representation of Susan's failed narrative might simply underline Linda Hutcheon's observation that "storytellers can certainly silence, exclude, and absent past events—and people"

just as historians have (107). Unfortunately, in this charged exploration of history versus herstory, Susan's failed authorship of "*The* Female Castaway" (Coetzee, *Foe* 67; emphasis added) may become something of a precedent. Dodd despairs of the implications for feminism of calling "Susan Barton *the* feminist focalizer, as [Ina] Gräbe and Dovey do, and then claim[ing] that she is an unreliable narrator and arrogant coloniser" (163; emphasis in original). She continues: "[W]hat impression does this give of feminism? . . . [When] female scholars write such things without batting an eyelid who needs patriarchs?" (163).

For Dodd, this view, and indeed the novel that engenders it, demonstrates the problems of postmodernism, whose claim to avant-gardism is little more than a tease. "To suggest women writing is an insoluble paradox," as she argues *Foe* does, "just doesn't constitute progressive thinking" (163). Rightly so. But here is where the question that lingers in David Lurie's conscience in *Disgrace*, and increasingly in critical commentary of Coetzee's work, becomes useful: What makes us so sure of Coetzee's presumption that he "ha[s] it in him to be the woman," as *Foe* seems to suggest he does?

Critics have taken the smattering of references to feminist works throughout *Foe* as indication that Coetzee earnestly believes he can represent the subjectivity of a woman. Indeed, feminist readers may feel a thrill as Susan sits at Foe's writing desk and begins to write her story, usurping what Gilbert and Gubar call "literary paternity" (8) and taking up, in Woolfian terms, a room of one's own. Susan's reclamation of the pen-is to write on the blank page recalls Gubar's study of female creativity, which argues that the blankness with which women have been painted by the patriarchy can be reclaimed to become "radically subversive" (259). Further, Susan's reflection that "somehow the pen becomes mine when I write with it, as though growing out of my hand" (Coetzee, *Foe* 66–67) refutes the idea of the pen as a phallus, possessed only by men; instead, it approximates that image of writing the body famously elucidated by Hélène Cixous (880). The hole of the narrative created by the absence of Friday's testimony, too, represents, in addition to what Coetzee characterises as the "sexual signification" offered by the hole's ability to be penetrated (Coetzee, "Doubling the Point" 75), a

transcendent and uninscribable symbol of the feminine appearing in the work of Monique Wittig, "which male authoritarian language cannot appropriate" (Coetzee, "Doubling the Point" 404n18). Finally, mirroring the poetic speaker of Adrienne Rich's poem, the unnamed narrator of *Foe*'s final section dives "into the wreck," an allusion to the concern of Rich that women have not been sufficiently represented in the writing of (his)tory.

Yet these allusions to feminist theory conflict with Susan's peculiarly masculine form of desire, at least in metaphoric terms. She rejects her female body as a site of reproduction and claims instead that she will "father" her story—thus thwarting Cixous' assertion that women's writing might consist of "an amniotic flow of words that reiterates the contractual rhythms of labor" (qtd. in Gubar 262). Susan's desire—the "libido" that Cixous claims "will produce far more radical effects of political and social change than some might like to think" (882)—is merely derivative of the desire, denounced by MacKinnon and Moffat, that insists upon the feminisation and subordination of victims entailed in its fulfilment. I suggest that the failure of these feminist precepts to engender anything resembling *écriture feminine* in *Foe* is the result of intentional sabotage by Coetzee, who does not "close the book" ("Giving Offense" 72) on female desire—and yet does not presume to represent it wholly. After all, Susan's desires shade closer and closer to Coetzee's male narrators, with their penetrative "urge to reproduce." Through Susan, Coetzee shows the risk of a simplified feminism that crudely attempts to seize the pen and body forth a narrative that penetrates—metaphorically rapes—the silenced in the pursuit of literary success. Thus, it seems appropriate to suggest that Coetzee's failure to "be the woman" in *Foe* is not an oversight but a measured deconstruction of a strain of feminism current at the time of the novel's publication.

The language of desire that Susan uses in her feminist mission to pen her own narrative adds another layer to Michael Marais' discussion of the reader's implication in the text. Marais claims that the epistolary form of the novel, addressed in the first section to an unspecified "you," conflates the reader with Foe (the novel eventually reveals that Susan has addressed her letters to him). The shift from letter-writing to speech

between Susan and Foe in the third section emphasises readers' detachment from the narrated action and foregrounds the acts of reading and interpretation in which they are engaged, which mirror those attempts by Foe and Susan to interpret Friday's silence. Friday and the novel are thus aligned as silent objects of interpretive domination: readers of the novel thus join Foe and Susan in a project of interpretation (Marais 12). According to Marais, the interpretation of *Foe* is inherently political:

> the process of reading the novel is not a safe, passive, ideologically innocent activity removed from the imperatives of the historical present: it requires an active engagement with the politics of domination. . . . [T]he identification of reader with author further politicizes reading, since, as with the master/slave relation, the author/character/text relation is grounded in domination. (12)

For Marais, *Foe*'s reader risks replicating the colonising activities of Susan and Foe if they do not take heed of the fact that "the ideological principles which inform imperialistic practice pertain equally to reading practice" (14). More than domination in a broadly colonial context, however, I argue that the reader of *Foe* is implicated in a patterning of desire that can only be fulfilled by the violation of the racial Other.

By deploying some of the key ideas of twentieth-century feminism in concert with her boldly expressed statements of desire, Susan involves the reader in what Froma I. Zeitlin, speaking of the sexual/textual patterns of Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn," describes as "an eroticized quest for knowledge" (279), to which the reader, supportive of the tenets of gender equality, is allied. In terms nearly identical to those I use in my discussion of *Foe*, Zeitlin argues that "the sexual rhetoric of the poem organizes the relationship between the object and its viewer and implicates the reader/listener in the poet's own strategies of desire and the fluctuating rhythms of [Keats'] 'courtship'" (279). Drawn into Susan's feminist writing project and sympathetic to her plight and ultimate failure, Coetzee implicates the reader in the violations enacted in the name of Susan's desire, to which the interpretation of Friday's silence and retrieval of his voice are the anticipated climax. This is problematic

for reasons that hearken back to Jolly's diagnosis of Susan's conception of narrative as "essentially teleological" (7): the means (violation) will be justified by the ends (a story in which Friday's voice is present, or, at the very least, his silence is interpretable). The sexual corollary provoked by Susan's language of desire is that the violations entailed in reaching the envisioned climax in which Friday tells his story in an intelligible manner are justified, and this is constitutive of rape culture. To avoid colluding in such, the reader must resist Susan's attempts to penetrate Friday and the hole of his silence in the name of her authorial success.

Susan's failed narrative, therefore, is a failure of *this kind* of feminism, one that is merely derivative of the male penetrative tradition and that is blind to the further forms of oppression enacted in its pursuit—not, as Dodd despairs, of feminism more generally. Coetzee does not suggest how women might overcome such failures. He appears to mock second-wave feminist exhortations, current at the time he wrote *Foe*, in a pointed allusion to Gilbert and Gubar's question: "If the pen is a metaphorical penis, with what organ can females generate texts?" (7). Coetzee thus suggests that he does not have it in him to be the woman; possessing "members of play," he cannot practice *écriture feminine* any more than he can give voice to Friday. The implied failure of second-wave feminism in *Foe* parallels Coetzee's refusal to be, or even to fully represent, woman: eventually dropping the feminine voice of the first three sections of the novel, he acknowledges that his own sympathetic imagination has a limit.

Rather than reading Susan as simply a victim in light of the usurpation of her narrative by a male author, the novel asks us to pay attention to the various violations committed in the name of "desire" that she instigates against Friday. Despite attention from the two camps of feminist critics I detailed above, Susan's rhetoric of masculine desire has been overlooked in readings of *Foe*. In eliding this sexual/textual (re)productive urge, critics have overlooked the debates at the heart of Coetzee's play at being the woman, a performance of masculinised sexual desire undertaken in Susan's women's clothing. Through the failure of Susan's narrative, *Foe* shows that aspects of second-wave feminism are remiss in their simplistic seizure of the (male) "members of play," which risk

violating—as exposed through Susan's rhetoric of rape against Friday—other oppressed groups. The failure of Susan's narrative in *Foe* thus suggests not an attempt by Coetzee to "close the book" on female desire, nor female authorship; instead, it acts as a caution against both a simplified feminism and the unchecked desire present in many of Coetzee's characters—whether they "have it in [them] to be the woman" or not.

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**Note**

1 Several critics argue that Coetzee forces readers to make their own ethical judgements about the sexual violence represented in his novels by drawing attention to the misleading aestheticisation of rape in the Western artistic tradition. For a discussion of Coetzee's engagement with rape in the Western tradition and his interrogation of its representation, see Giles, p. 91, and Graham, "Reading the Unspeakable," p. 441.

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