
The first three chapters of this study read Robinson Crusoe primarily through the prism of J. G. A. Pocock's argument in The Machiavellian Moment (1975) that in the early eighteenth century trade is represented as effeminate by contrast with the masculine norm of military violence. This theme is augmented by Catherine Ingrassia’s commentary on the parallels between credit and virginity. Pursuing the idea that trade is feminizing allows C. M. Owen to imply a cause behind Defoe’s interest in Moll and Roxana as hybrid man-woman things, and to suggest that Crusoe himself is a curious kind of not-male. His sexless sojourn on the island is likened to a feminine, virginal condition (68–69), which is disrupted by Friday who figures as “the epitome of a naked, natural and military man” (73).

This section of the book may prompt some readers to question how they have misread Robinson Crusoe for so many years, and others to wonder at the kind of literary conceit that is being implied: after all, it might be noticed that Crusoe makes many voyages as a tradesman, usually in pursuit of slaves, is frequently depicted shooting at animals, and often depicted as threatening death to other men, or being threatened by them; that he kills cannibals to liberate Friday, and is thereafter treated by him in the fawning and grateful manner appropriate to a colonized subject. In this aspect of his representation Defoe derives his tale from such men as Alexander Selkirk, a privateer whose story is told in Woodes Rogers’s Cruising Voyage Round the World (1712), a man ready to kill, steal, and probably rape (as during their raid on Guayaquil) in pursuit of Spanish gold. If, as Pocock, Hirschman, and Ingrassia have suggested, trade and credit are represented as “feminine” in some manner and in some writings, and if, as Owen concludes (in the final pages, more soberly than in her opening chapters), Defoe has a “desire to make his upwardly mobile tradesman authentic and credible in the face of the effeminacy of luxury and the fluctuating values of credit” (258), we surely need a
robust historical examination of just what kind of “feminine” this is, and how the association of trade and femininity masked the real violence perpetrated by capitalist tradesmen in the name of what Montesquieu called “la douce commerce.” The terms just cannot be taken for granted and as not needing precise historical definition. Hirschman showed very clearly that trade in Defoe’s lifetime was idealized as rational and rationalizing, a process which induced respect for the other, and was in this way conducive of politeness, disciplining the passions with the interests. While the ideal did represent aspects of the real, it also served to mask the fact that trade was most often in recently stolen goods, involved forced labor (and sexual violence) and international wars between colonizing powers. That Owen does not even experience the need critically to address the difficulty of making Crusoe into a feminine figure is an indication of how a new critical paradigm holds such sway as to make careful and precise commentary on Defoe’s text and its historical context an unnecessary labor.

If there is much to dispute about Owen’s reading of Robinson Crusoe, her work is redeemed by a number of virtues. Her fourth chapter, which discusses Roxana through a consideration of the complex location created for women by the social contractarians, particularly Locke, is graced with intricate, closely argued writing which nicely brings out the contradictions with which the gender is repositioned. Her next five chapters focus on the female castaway in narratives ranging from Defoe’s contemporaries. These include The Adventures, and Surprizing Deliverances of James Dubourdieu, and his Wife and The Adventures of Alexander Vendchurch, by Ambrose Evans (published together in one volume in October 1719), Penelope Aubin’s The Strange Adventures of Count de Vinevil (1721), The Noble Slaves (1722), and The Life of Charlotta du Pont (1723). She then considers Henri Bernardin de Saint-Pierre’s Paul et Virginie (1788; translated into English 1789 and 1795) and Fanny Burney’s The Wanderer (1814). In these readings the castaway island is considered as an “in-between ground of transformation” (231) where social models brought from home can be put on display, critiqued, reforged, and where the potential of women to be independent agents, and the way women writers use the castaway situation to critique the dominant ideology, are nicely explored. Owen closes with a chapter which gives brief consideration to the deconstruction of femininity and “unitary, rational masculinity” in three (post)modern castaway narratives, Barbara Einzig’s short and relatively unknown parody, Robinson Crusoe: A New Fiction (1983), Jane Gardam’s Crusoe’s Daughter (1985), and J. M. Coetzee’s Foe (1986).

As a reader of texts, C. M. Owen is always adept at uncovering the sophistications and complexities of represented situations, and also at building a powerful local sense of how mothers and daughters are being used to articulate political difficulties that originate at home. She writes with particular clarity and kindly caters for the less-informed reader by not presuming prior knowledge about writers and writing they may not have yet encountered. Evidently, even many established scholars will lack an intimate grasp of the castaway tradition which is being described, and will therefore welcome this approach; however, there are
occasions when the value of the work is restricted by a simplified representation of matters which some readers would wish to see discussed in a more sophisticated way. The relationship of Bernadin de Saint-Pierre to the collapsing absolutist regime of Louis XVI, for example, is little discussed as the (quite interesting) commentary is directed to showing how the female figures are being used. For this reader, however, I found myself thinking that the effort to talk about gender and genre across such a vast historical range tended to devalue the categories, a tendency also evident in the subtitle’s reference to “the eighteenth-century individual,” as if class, national culture, and historical moment could be treated as irrelevant. The more the book succeeds, the more its effort at Platonic distillations comes to haunt it, and the more its title deforms what could have been a much more interesting book, had the author given it more time to mature. (A salient example is how the analysis segues into treating “the wanderer” in Fanny Burney as if this figure was identical with “the castaway.” Perhaps, but not without better explanation.) The conclusion, if such it is, amounts to an attempt to review the ground covered in a bare two pages at the end of the last chapter.

The book is manufactured to the high standards usual for Rodopi Press, printed on excellent conservation grade paper in a clearly legible font with substantial margins and leading. It is, physically, a pleasure to read, so it is the more unfortunate that, as is typical these days, the copy editing (unfunded?) has left too many minor faults (missing words in particular). Editorialy, it would also have been much improved by the kind of attentive critical reading which today becomes the more rare as it is unrecognized in research-selectivity “exercises.”

Robert Clark
University of East Anglia

WORKS CITED

