The Female Crusoe: Hybridity, Trade and the Eighteenth-Century Individual


**Abstract**

What does the story of Robinson Crusoe have to do with understanding past and present women’s lives? The Female Crusoe: Hybridity, Trade and the Eighteenth-Century Individual investigates the possibility that Daniel Defoe’s famous work was informed by qualities attributed to trade, luxury and credit and described as feminine in the period. In this volume, Robinson Crusoe and the female castaway narratives published in its wake emerge as texts of social criticism that draw on neglected values of race and gender to challenge the dominant values of society. Such narratives worked to establish status and authority for marginalised characters and subjects who were as different, and as similar, as Defoe’s gentleman-tradesman and Wollstonecraft’s independent woman. The Female Crusoe goes on to address the twentieth-century engagement with the castaway tale, showing how three contemporary authors, in their complex and gendered negotiations of power and identity, echo, even while they challenge, the concerns of their eighteenth-century predecessors. This work will be of interest to students interested in literary engagements with individualism and women’s rights in the eighteenth and twentieth centuries. C.M. Owen lectures in the English program at the School of Social Sciences and Humanities at Murdoch University in Western Australia and is a Research Fellow at the University of Melbourne.

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C.M. Owen, ‘The Virginal Individual’, The Female Crusoe: hybridity, trade and the eighteenth-century female individual, Amsterdam: Rodopi Books, 2010: 139-164. Sarah Prescott, ‘Penelope Aubin and the Doctrine of Morality: a reassessment of the pious woman novelist’, Women’s Writing, Volume 1, No.1 (1994), pp. 99–112. Debbie Welham, ‘The Particular Case of Penelope Aubin’, Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies, Volume 31, Number 1 (2008), pp. 63–76. Debbie Welham, “Delight and Instruction? Women’s Political Engagement in the Works of Penelope Aubin”, Robinson Crusoe was published in 1719, at the beginning of a century that witnessed great changes in the economic order. Instead of an individual’s place in society being determined at birth, and being wholly related to their family name and rank, people entered professions and new social arrangements based not on family or church, but on their work. Homo Economicus (“economic man”) was the symbol used to discuss the new individualism of the eighteenth century -- one which depended explicitly on an individual’s participation in a newly competitive, credit-based marketplace. He readily admits to the reader his reasons for travel: it is more profitable to trade with indigenous peoples of non-Western cultures, since they value goods differently than Europeans do. The Female Crusoe: Hybridity, Trade and the Eighteenth-Century Individual investigates the possibility that Daniel Defoe’s famous work was informed by qualities attributed to trade, luxury and credit and described as feminine in the period. In this volume, Robinson Crusoe and the female castaway narratives published in its wake emerge as texts of social criticism that draw on neglected values of race and gender to challenge the dominant values of society. Such narratives worked to establish status and authority for marginalised characters and subjects who were as different, and as similar, as Defoe’s gentleman-tradesman and Wollstonecraft’s independent woman.