

The Fortress of American Solitude: Robinson Crusoe and Antebellum Culture, by Shawn Thomson. Madison and Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2009. Pp. 243. \$51.50. ISBN: 978-0-838-6-4217-7.

Positioned as a central component of a boy's library in leather-bound and elaborately illustrated editions, *Robinson Crusoe* held conflicting cultural meanings in antebellum America (1815–1861). Its text encouraged young men to escape from the domestic realm and sentimental family, whilst the gilded pages of its book symbolized the comfort and prosperity of the white, middle-class home. Shawn Thomson's *Fortress of American Solitude: Robinson Crusoe and Antebellum Culture* examines Defoe's narrative as a vehicle employed by men and women in nineteenth-century America to express the conflicting pressures of individual achievement and familial relations that structured their lives. According to Thomson, *Robinson Crusoe* held a powerful yet precarious role as an "icon of manhood" in antebellum American culture (13), through whom discourses of gender, race, and social class could be mediated. Thomson's study considers how literary and popular fiction, and non-fiction, produced in this cultural context focused on *Crusoe* as both helpless castaway and self-made man to reinforce and critique dominant middle-class ideologies.

Thomson begins his argument by noting that he is neither attempting to trace Defoe's influence on American letters by examining explicit references to *Robinson Crusoe* in antebellum works, nor is he seeking to catalogue American "Robinsonades"; such parameters explain the otherwise surprising exclusion of Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838) as a major case study. Instead, Thomson analyzes the different meanings held and functions performed by what he refers to as the "Crusoe topos," particularly in relation to antebellum ideals of masculinity—which is to say ideals of *white, middle-class* masculinity. This topos, while rooted in Defoe's novel, extends outward to include the cultural meanings and uses of both specific editions of that text, such as an illustrated *Robinson Crusoe*, and other related narratives: accounts of Alexander Selkirk's marooning, William Cowper's "The Solitude of Alexander Selkirk" (1782), and other

newspaper accounts of shipwrecks and castaways. The breadth and popularity of this topos allowed Crusoe to accumulate and sustain multiple and divergent cultural meanings for readers in different arenas of American society.

Chapter One of *Fortress of American Solitude* positions *Robinson Crusoe* as a staple of antebellum boyhood literature, given to white, middle-class young men with the purpose of demonstrating the value of self-made manhood and the necessity of steady moral and intellectual maturation. However, this form of powerful individualism proved unachievable within the structures of laissez-faire capitalism, leading to the alienation of middle-class American men. Such men, Thomson contends, then retreated into the other image of masculinity provided by the Crusoe topos: the solitary castaway. As Crusoe fails as an emblem of productive energy, he becomes reconstructed as “an emotional fortress of solitude” that creates sympathetic bonds between alienated white men by allowing them to imagine themselves as isolated (24). This topos thus shields these men from their complicity in the systems of capitalism, imperialism, and white supremacy that structured antebellum society. In the five chapters that follow, Thomson examines how canonical and non-canonical writers—including female and African-American authors—either appropriate the Crusoe myth to connect their works with middle-class values or reconfigure and challenge the cultural ideals espoused by the Crusoe topos to attack bourgeois ideologies.

In Chapter Two, the first of three chapters focusing on Herman Melville, Thomson reveals Melville’s employment of the imperative to escape the domestic (characteristic of the Crusoe topos) to structure his critique of antebellum middle-class manhood in *Typee* (1846). Tommo and Toby’s time on the island of Nukuheva illustrates their dependence on civilization, rather than their self-reliance, and their desire for an insular paradise is compromised by their attempts to trade with the Typee, which introduce imperial and market relations between the island and America. Moreover, the nature of Tommo’s return suggests that he cannot be fully reconciled to the domestic, revealing the tensions created by boyhood readings of *Robinson Crusoe* that both encouraged white, middle-class young men to create an identity outside of the family and fostered sentimental attachments by valorizing their restoration within the domestic sphere. Thomson reads Tommo’s remembrances of his time with the Typee as Melville’s attempt to form a masculine identity that resists the role of patriarch and provider and thus challenges both the Crusoe myth and domestic ideology. A challenge to the Crusoe / Melville desire to escape the home is located in the anonymous *The Spuytenduyvel Chronicle* (1856). Thomson argues that this domestic novel proposes that masculine passions should be controlled within the familial sphere, rather than exercised outside of it, as a former mariner is forced to confess the wastefulness of his time at sea in order to be restored to the sentimental family.

A productive comparison between Melville and Frederick Douglass is pursued in Chapter Three, in which Thomson details how both authors attack the Crusoe topos as a structure that uses “castaway pathos” to mask the privilege of white manhood behind a “fantasy of powerlessness” (83). Douglass argues that by

picturing themselves as castaways, white men isolate themselves from their participation in the slave economy and their power to end it. This shared sense of isolation creates sympathetic bonds and privileged structures between white men, from which Douglass himself is cast out. Furthermore, the Crusoe construction of masculine development as centered on a departure from the family is inaccessible to Douglass and other male slaves, whose family structure is effaced by master-slave relations. Melville's attack on the empty responses to slavery takes place through his reconfiguration of the Crusoe-Friday friendship. Thomson suggests that in "Bartleby the Scrivener" (1853) and "Benito Cereno" (1855) Melville exposes the trope of sentimental mixed-class and mixed-race friendships as a fantasy of white empowerment. In doing so, he attacks the argument that the slave system was based in white benevolence by showing how the Crusoe topos blinds Delano to the horrors on board the slave ship. This chapter contributes to the growing scholarship on the connections between Melville and Douglass (e.g. Levine and Otter) and effectively demonstrates how the particular political tensions of antebellum America led to culturally specific mediations of Defoe's narrative.

This argument is followed, in Chapter Four, by Thomson's reading of *Pierre* (1852) as a "failed Crusoe," linking Melville's author-protagonist with Crusoe through their shared castaway status. But, unlike Crusoe, Pierre's time as an urban castaway fails to lead him to manhood and redemption. Pierre's failure to capitalize on the contents of his blue chintz chest (as opposed to Crusoe's exploitation of the objects he removes from the ship) reveals his disconnection from the objective world, and thus his failure to master Crusoe's model of maturation. The relocation of the Crusoe topos to the sentimental family is further considered in the chapter's second case study, Elizabeth Stoddard's *Two Men* (1865). Thomson details Stoddard's uses of *Robinson Crusoe* to access competing models of antebellum masculinity in Jacksonian America, all of which posit a false and destructive separation between men and the domestic realm. While the masculine Crusoe topos appears to be the antithesis of the home—the feminine scene of anti-adventure—Stoddard challenges this separation of the masculine and feminine. Her novel depicts Philippa, the illegitimate daughter fathered by Osmond Luce on his Crusoe-like adventures in South America, reading Defoe's novel. *Robinson Crusoe* becomes a site at which Philippa's identity is constructed and through which others attempt to read her, allowing Stoddard to demonstrate that masculine autonomy and female domesticity are reciprocally constituted. While Thomson fails to engage with Amy Kaplan's concept of "Manifest Domesticity" (domestic discourses as both enabled by and contributing to imperial discourses), the chapter effectively shows how the cultural meanings of the Crusoe topos illustrate the mutually reinforcing nature of the separate spheres (Kaplan 23–50).

Chapter Five, "Crusoe in the Yankee Nation," discusses tensions between the Crusoe model of self-reliant individualism and Yankee shrewdness at a time when the idealization of self-control was rendered obsolete by the desire for quick

profit that accompanied westward expansion. A brief consideration of *The Crater* (1847), James Fenimore Cooper's "Robinsonade," reveals that different facets of the Crusoe myth were adopted by different social classes. Thomson argues that *The Crater* exhibits Cooper's anxieties that the spiritual aspects of the Crusoe story may be lost under the pressures of nineteenth-century expansionism. These concerns are expressed through the novel's working-class characters, who see Crusoe as a model for an escape from social restraint. Thomson then finds a reimagining of Robinson Crusoe as a popular frontier hero in George Payson's *Golden Dreams and Leaden Realities* (1853), a non-fiction account of his experiences in the 1849 Gold Rush. Within the machinery of capitalism, Crusoe's Puritan belief in improvement through labor appears anachronistic; there is no spiritual renewal in this adventure, only fortune-seeking at a violent frontier. Yet Payson is able to engage with Crusoe's form of rational domesticity, using Defoe's hero to reduce the tension between masculine endeavor and the domestic space, necessary to validate the changed role of men in a frontier home that lacked a female presence.

Thomson shifts his perspective away from Crusoe and antebellum masculinity in the final chapter, which considers female mediations of the Crusoe topos. Not only did Robinson Crusoe provide women with an entrance into the masculine psyche, it granted them the opportunity to "transform the Crusoe topos from a masculine fantasy of self-actualization to an intense concentration of self isolated from the intricate web of domestic relationships and rituals" (174). Thomson examines female readings of the Crusoe story in literature and in life; the intriguing *New York Times* article "A Female Robinson Crusoe" (April 20, 1859) is illuminated by Thomson's analysis of how the female shipwreck victim, perhaps unconsciously, restructures the elements of the Crusoe tale to reconnect herself to the principles of feminine domesticity, rather than masculine adventure. The chapter concludes with an analysis of the castaway trope in the poems of Emily Dickinson, which "provided a metaphor for the instability of laissez-faire capitalism and the anxiety of falling out of the middle class" (193). Placing this Dickinsonian trope alongside its use in popular and journalistic writing usefully demonstrates both Dickinson's sense of isolation from society and her engagement with one of her culture's most enduring images.

The Fortress of American Solitude is a valuable contribution to the study of antebellum American literature that reveals the frequency with which writers returned to Robinson Crusoe as a figure through whom they could focus their articulations and critiques of dominant ideologies. The number and variety of texts Thomson considers provides strong support for his claim of the appeal, power, and pervasiveness of the Crusoe myth. But the diversity and scope of this study also results in the treatment of certain texts being somewhat limited; "Bartleby" and *The Crater*, in particular, would seem to merit further consideration. Similarly, Thomson's central concept of the Crusoe topos, while largely illuminating the strength of Crusoe as a cultural icon, can sometimes appear too broadly constructed. This breadth prompts questions of whether the cultural associations

of figures such as the female urban castaway were really constructed through discourses directly linked to the Crusoe story, and whether they therefore conveyed the specific values that Thomson attributes to Defoe's hero. However, these moments of disconnect are compensated for by the ways in which extending the figure of Robinson Crusoe beyond the pages of *Robinson Crusoe* reveals the cultural uses and reconfigurations of Defoe's story. Moreover, such extensions allow Thomson to draw hitherto unseen connections between Defoe and authors whose work less obviously draws upon Defoe's own, such as Douglass and Dickinson. In its elucidation of both the malleable nature of the Crusoe story, and the ability of the figure of Crusoe to negotiate divisions of race, gender, and social class, Thomson's study will be of interest to scholars of the cultural work of antebellum American letters and those concerned with the reception and reiterations of Defoe's writing.

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Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, (c)2009. Physical Description: 243 p. ;, 25 cm. Bibliography, etc. Note: Includes bibliographical references and index. Formatted Contents Note: Robinson Crusoe as a topos of masculinity in nineteenth-century America A remembrance of things Typee: Herman Melville and the making of the man who slept with cannibals Outside the fortress of solitude: castaway pathos in Frederick Douglass's My bondage and my freedom and Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the scrivener" and "Benito Cereno" Failed Crusoes: competing models of manhood in H After Crusoe returned to his habitation, he spent a week building a cage for his parrot. He then thought of going back to get the kid from his bower. It was so hungry that once it was fed, it became quite tame and followed Crusoe home like a dog. By this time it was the 30th of September and he had spent two years on the island. He spent the entire day thanking God and cursing his past wickedness. Sometimes at his work, he was struck with despair, seeing himself as a prisoner locked in by the ocean.Â In Chapter 9, "I Sow My Grain," Defoe continues to show us how ingenious Robinson Crusoe is as he is able to master the elements and is able to plant two crops a year, and is also able to master the art of basket weaving in order to have some containers for his harvest. The official Facebook account of Fairleigh Dickinson University.Â TEANECK, N.J. â€ The Fairleigh Dickinson University athletic department earned the NEC Building Communities Award as announced by the conference office on Wednesday afternoon. TEANECK, N.J. â€ The Fairleigh Dickinson University athletic department earned the NEC Building Communities Award as announced by the conference office on Wednesday afternoon. Fairleigh Dickinson University. 22 June at 09:33 Â.