J. M. Coetzee’s Feminine Writing and His Female Narrators:
A Comparative Reading of *Foe* and *Age of Iron*

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摘要

本論文旨要探討柯慈如何在《仇敵》與《鐵器時代》裡呼應西蘇「陰性書寫」的概念。身為一個男性作家，柯慈將如何呈現女性特有的性別經驗？為了更進一步闡述我的論點，本論文將分成三個章節作討論。第一章以女性敘事者蘇珊巴頓與伊莉莎白柯倫的書寫为中心，呈現角色所建立的兩種關係：第一種為「作者—敘事者/伴侶—媒介/讀者—接收者」的三角關係，第二種為類似「父親—母親—女兒」的擬態家庭關係。前者指出角色如何建立「書寫的主體」與「書寫過程的參與者」之間的關係，後者則指出角色如何在「家庭」的架構下建立人際關係，並打破傳統家庭思維。第二章著重於柯慈如何運用他「富同情心的想像」來描繪女性特有的性別經驗，同時也將這些女性經驗和書寫結合，呼應出西蘇「陰性書寫」的概念。第三章揭露柯慈另一項挑戰父權制度的做法：「性別交互滲透」，這個概念顛覆傳統性別二元觀，創造了性別流動的可能性，男性也可以陰柔，女性也可以陽剛。透過上述三項分析，柯慈展現了他對女性的關懷。不可否認地，身為男性作家，對於陰性書寫，柯慈仍有他的侷限性。然而，如同西蘇一直強調的，陰性書寫本來就不該被其名稱所桎梏，作家性別並不是決定其作品是否為陰性書寫的主要因素。藉著挑戰父權制度、書寫女性經驗以及顛覆性別刻板印象，柯慈的《仇敵》與《鐵器時代》可以被歸類到陰性書寫的範疇裡。

關鍵字：柯慈、《仇敵》、《鐵器時代》、西蘇、陰性書寫
Abstract

This thesis aims to examine how Coetzee’s *Foe* and *Age of Iron* correspond to Hélène Cixous’s conception of feminine writing. As a male author, how does Coetzee present women’s sex-specific experiences? To further demonstrate my assertion, my thesis contains three chapters. In Chapter One, I show two geometric relationships to clarify how characters build relationships by means of the female narrators’ writings. One is the triangular “narrator-writer/medium-companion/narratee-reader” structure, and the other is the father-mother-daughter quasi-family relationship. The former one shows how characters form a relationship of “mediating agents and participating actors,” and the latter one indicates how characters build “personal relationship within the context of family,” breaking down the traditional triangular structurality of the family. In Chapter Two, I argue how Coetzee uses his “sympathetic imagination” to delineate women’s sex-specific experiences and relates them to Cixous’s conception of feminine writing. In Chapter Three, I present how Coetzee breaks down the traditional binary values of man/masculine and woman/feminine and creates the possibility of gender fluidity. Man can be feminine, and woman can be masculine. In the light of my arguments above, Coetzee shows his deep concern for the feminine. It is undeniable that, as a man, Coetzee has his limits of presenting feminine writing to its fullest extent; however, as Cixous has emphasized, feminine writing should not be trapped by its name. The author’s biological sex is definitely not the crucial point to define feminine writing. By challenging the patriarchal system, delineating women’s sex-specific experiences and breaking down the traditional gender confinements, Coetzee’s *Foe* and *Age of Iron* could be legitimately considered as feminine writing.

Keywords: J. M. Coetzee, *Foe*, *Age of Iron*, Hélène Cixous, feminine writing
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This is the age of no regret. Twenty-five.

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Introduction

“What is a writer’s freedom? To me, it is his right to maintain and publish to the world a deep, intense, private view of the situation in which he finds his society.”
(Nadine Gordimer; qtd. in Ian Glenn 16)

“One writes the books one wants to write. One doesn’t write the books one doesn’t want to write. The emphasis falls not on one but on the word want in all its own resistance to being known.”
(J. M. Coetzee; qtd. in Rosemary Jolly 97)

The contemporary novelist, essayist and critic J. M. Coetzee is awarded both the Booker Prize and the Nobel Prize. His widely studied and highly acknowledged oeuvre have been occupying significant places in (post-)apartheid South African literature. From his first published novel *Dusklands* in 1974 to the recently published fictionalized memoir *Summertime* in 2009, as Jane Poyner points out, Coetzee address[es] themes and issues pertinent to the (post)colonial and apartheid situations: colonial discourse, the other, racial segregation, censorship, banning and exile, police brutality and torture, South African liberalism and revolutionary activism, the place of women, the relationship of South Africa’s peoples to the land and, not least, the ethico-politics of writing. (Poyner 1)

Poyner here pinpoints many of the most interesting and problematic aspects in

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Coetzee’s works. Having experienced what had happened in the era of apartheid in South Africa, Coetzee throughout his novels shows his concern for the society in both an explicit and implicit way. I think Coetzee has performed his freedom as a writer and he really writes down the novels he wants to write because in his writings he raises numerous social, racial, political and even ethical issues which he keenly observes in his society. As a matter of fact, Coetzee’s works have received fervent critiques, especially in his writing “about what human beings do to fellow human beings in South Africa” (qtd. in Glenn 15). Disgrace, the novel delineating the racial and political miseries and sickness in South African society, serves as the best example; though this novel receives both positive and negative responses, Coetzee’s resolution to well practice “a writer’s freedom” has never been stopped.

Coetzee is good at expressing his commentary on the society through his fictional characters. In fact, in many of his novels, Coetzee is fond of using first-person narrators to narrate the story and his use of narrator-author figures interests many critics. Michael S. Kochin addresses that Coetzee’s novels “constitute a critique of what Foucault called the author function” and are “rich in characters who are author-figures” (79). As Kochin illuminatingly observes, Coetzee creates the author-narrator paradox in many of his novels by using first-person narrators. For example, Eugene Dawn and Jacobus Coetzee in Dusklands, Magda in In the Heart of the Country, the magistrate in Waiting for the Barbarians, Susan Barton in Foe, Mrs. Curren (Elizabeth Curren) in Age of Iron and Señor C in Diary of a Bad Year. Among these author-narrator figures, it is not difficult to notice Coetzee’s preference to use female protagonists as story narrators. The issue of female author-narrator figures, as David Attwell pointed out in the “Afterword” to Critical Perspectives on J. M. Coetzee in 1996, has not been fully explored and therefore will become one of the
most noticeable elements in much of the criticism. He states:

[T]he question of the feminine narrators has been insufficiently explored. Feminist readings of Coetzee have been slow to develop, perhaps because Coetzee seems in an immediate way to be a powerful ally of feminism: Magda, Susan Barton and Elizabeth Curren are all displaced figures who resist pre-existing and more dominant modes of address, seeking to define themselves in worlds not of their own making…The feminine in these characters…serves to dramatize Coetzee’s own self-positioning with respect to the versions of authority, both social and discursive, that compete around him. In other words, here we have the feminine as a sign of other kinds of difference, a situation involving tension that need further description and explanation. (215)

Attwell points out here that Coetzee’s use of female narrator-author figures is an interesting topic worth being explored since his female protagonists (such as Magda, Susan Barton and Elizabeth Curren) all live in a world created and dominated by men. Their multiple identities as women, whites and narrators have put them in problematic situations. In fact, Coetzee’s female narrators are often considered to be the substitutes for his own voice. Yet, why does Coetzee choose women as narrators? As a man, is Coetzee qualified to voice for woman? If yes, then why? How does he do it?

Coetzee’s use of female narrator-author figures has received fervent discussions from critics. Josephine Dodd, for example, in “The South African Literary Establishment and the Textual Production of ‘Woman’” focuses on the textual production of woman in Coetzee’s Foe. Dodd raises two crucial questions here: “How does one write as a woman? How does one ride the muse without a penis/pen?”

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2 The other literary work Dodd has discussed is Nkosi’s Mating Birds.
Dodd indicates that women “manage to attract attention and qualify for having their stories listened to” (158); however, she does not think that Coetzee lets Susan Barton manage the whole story. In the last part of *Foe*, Dodd thinks that Coetzee “usurps Susan Barton’s voice to dive into the wreck himself” (161). It seems that she cannot accept Coetzee’s textual arrangement because she denounces him for using Susan Barton’s body as the “entry to his fiction” (161). She questions:

Why do women’s bodies have to be used as the vehicle for discussions of socio-political issues like racism or aesthetic inquiries into the nature of creativity? I said earlier that this wasn’t the shock of the new but rather more of the same: I suggest that we don’t fall for patriarchy’s trick of simply boring women into submission. (164)

Dodd wonders why women’s bodies have always been used as a vehicle for the patriarchal system to achieve something that brings even more serious oppression to women. Therefore, Dodd sees Coetzee’s use of female narrators as a kind of patriarchal trick of putting women into submission again.

Yet, in her “‘Woman’s Words’: A Reading of J. M. Coetzee’s Women Narrators,” Sue Kossew has different interpretations of Coetzee’s use of female narrators. She suggests that Coetzee’s women narrators are each, in their own ways, concerned to find an authentic “woman’s voice” to set against patriarchal authority but their search is complicated by their own complexity in that authority. (168)

Kossew here takes Magda, Susan Barton and Mrs. Curren as her target examples to elaborate on the issue of women narrators. She points out that these three female protagonists share some significant traits—all of them are both the colonizing and the colonized white women (168), who are presented “in the act of writing” and
“resolutely position themselves as authors of their own narratives” (qtd. in Kossew 168). For Magda, language is “both the tool of oppression and potential liberation” (qtd. in Kossew 169) and her desire to find an “authentic” language is not just the desire for “a woman’s sentence” which will subvert the patriarchal structure but is also a desire to communicate on a level of equality with “the downcast” colonised other (169).

Similarly, language or writing for Susan Barton is the tool of “the epistemic violence” (171) and “the operation of power and author/ity” (171) because she and Foe are the only two people who have the ability to write and to decide which stories they want to include in their writings. But, Susan Barton does not accept the new storyline Foe has set for her; instead, she “seeks to assume the phallic power of Foe’s pen” (173). For both Magda and Susan Barton, writing is a powerful tool in which they desire to reclaim their places in a male-dominating world. On the other hand, Mrs. Curren’s writing is slightly different from Magda’s and Susan Barton’s because “motherhood is the very reason for her act of writing.” Her text serves as the link to her daughter, “forming an umbilical ‘rope of words’ linking generations of mothers and daughters” (175).

In her “Displacing the Voice: South African Feminism and J. M. Coetzee’s Female Narrators,” Laura Wright also chooses Magda, Susan Barton and Mrs. Curren as her targets for further discussion. Like Kossew, Wright also points out these three women’s problematic positions “in between, stranded on literal and figurative islands as both colonial dominators (white) and subjected, second-class citizens (women)” (12). Wright indicates that the reason why Coetzee writes from the perspectives of female narrators results from Coetzee’s “own tendency to identify with the position of
white women as both complicit with, and victimized by, patriarchal and colonial institutions like those of apartheid and literary production” (13). For Coetzee, speaking from the female voice makes him “as close to the truth as possible” (14), because these white women’s positions echo corresponding to Coetzee’s own position in South Africa. Wright suggests that Coetzee’s use of female narrators “can be read as an attempt to resurrect a feminine ethos repressed by patriarchal colonial politics” (14). More importantly,

the white female voice may be one of the only authentic places from which to speak. For Coetzee, the use of the feminine narrative voice represents the disjunction between his self-proclaimed denial of the paternal…and his socially ascribed position as white, South African, and male. (14)

In addition, Wright also discovers that Magda, Susan Barton and Elizabeth Curren constitute an interesting “matriarchal triad of virgin/mother/crone” (14) but she specifically points out that these female characters do not “necessarily constitute a continuum,” they are “illustrative of a progression in [Coetzee’s] ability to express an identification with the feminine and, in the case of Elizabeth Curren, perform femininity within his narratives” (12).

Along the line of criticism developed by the critics above about Coetzee’s maneuver of female narrators, in my thesis I shall provide a reading that both negotiates a space between these polarities and presents novel observations which the critiques rarely disclose. Though critics have elaborated quite a lot on Coetzee’s women narrators, there are still some issues left unexplored, such as the relation between Coetzee’s writing and Hélène Cixous’s feminine writing. Actually, Kossew and Wright have mentioned some points related to the idea of feminine writing. For
example, Kossew indicates the complexities of life and death (175) and Wright points out the femininity performed by Coetzee in his writings (12), but they do not provide further analysis.

As an ardent reader of Coetzee’s novels, I have been highly interested in his maneuver of female narrators and their writings. As a man, does Coetzee know how to narrate a woman’s story and delineate the sex-specific experiences of woman? Is he qualified to do so? Why does he show his concern for women and feminism? To find proper explanations to the questions above, my thesis aims to give a detailed examination of Coetzee’s feminine writing and his female narrators but I shall focus my analytical perspective on *Foe* and *Age of Iron* only.

Published in 1986 and set in the eighteenth century, *Foe* is Coetzee’s imaginative rewriting of Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*. Coetzee creates a white heroine Susan Barton in a man’s world and tells stories through her perspectives. On the other hand, *Age of Iron*, published in 1990 and set in the apartheid South Africa, delineates the cruel inhuman apartheid system through the voices of Mrs. Curren, a white classic professor. Set in different contexts, it seems problematic to make a comparative reading of *Foe* and *Age of Iron* at the very first sight, but actually these two novels share certain interesting issues.

According to Nadine Gordimer, *Age of Iron* is the divide of Coetzee’s novels because “until *Age of Iron*, J. M. Coetzee’s fiction has made no mention of South Africa, has been distanced from it” (xi). Therefore, a strong contrast is shown here: *Foe* implicitly shows the oppression of the black people through its imaginative rewriting of the canon, while *Age of Iron* directly presents the real South Africa scope through its realistic delineations. To be more specific, *Foe* shows the unequal relationship between the white and the black, while *Age of Iron* depicts the real
historical events. We have to keep in mind that no matter he sets the novel in an imaginative island only exiting in a canon or in a real modern city, Coetzee shows his concern for the apartheid society in an explicit or implicit way. As a matter of fact, both *Foe* and *Age of Iron* are written at the height of the apartheid era in 1980s and these two novels show how “literature offer a way of working through a collective history” (Durrant 24). More importantly, these novels fully delineate “the relationship between the testimony of apartheid’s victims and the confessions of apartheid’s perpetrators, and between both these forms of truth telling and the recovery of factual truth” (23). *Foe* and *Age of Iron*, through the letter-diary writings of the female protagonists, reveal the apartheid truths and make confessions.

As I mentioned above, *Foe* and *Age of Iron* are presented in letter-diary forms of the women narrators. Interestingly, these two novels have certain relation to the epistolary novel in the nineteenth century. Patrick Hayes stresses that the main characteristic of the epistolary genre is “to feature mother as the heroine” (117). He thinks that *Age of Iron* is exactly the example since

[t]here are no mothers as heroines in the entire history of the genre until *Age of Iron*, where, in as grotesque a parody of the epistolary heroine as ‘the knight of the sad countenance’ was of the chivalric, the heroine is not only a mother, but as a disgusting and decaying body. (117)

Mrs. Curren is the decaying mother who is in quest of her daughter’s love and the reconciliation of history. On the other hand, Hayes seems to neglect the fact that Susan Barton is also a mother, in pursuit of the truth. Actually both novels “duplicate a woman’s consciousness by providing her letters, and then allowing the audience to get inside by reading those letters” (117). However, in addition to modern readers like us, in *Foe* and *Age of Iron* there are implied readers. In *Foe* Susan Barton’s implied
reader is Foe and her “diary-letters are in fact written ‘into’ his absence” (Haeming 176). Similar situation happens in Age of Iron because Mrs. Curren’s letter is written into her daughter’s absence. Obviously, characters in these two novels have built a relationship between writer and reader. Writing is constituted “as the medium in which author, character and narrator meet on mutual terms” (Graham; qtd. in Jolly 101) and “writing is that which ‘gives birth’ to relations of mutuality without coercion: relations between author and character, and character and reader” (101).

More importantly, in addition to the above issues Foe and Age of Iron share with each other, the most significant issue in the novels is Coetzee’s deep concern for feminism. André Brink suggests that “[f]emininity indeed offers a prominent domain of experience in recent South African fiction” (14) and Coetzee in his novels puts much emphasis on the “explorations of the female experience” (14). Through his literary imagination, Coetzee explores the field of feminine writing. As a matter of fact, many ideas Coetzee presents in his writings, such as the desire to write and the relationship between writing, life and death, reflect Hélène Cixous’s concept of feminine writing.

Cixous is well-known for écriture féminine—that is, feminine writing—which launched [her] into the midst of cultural and political debates on feminist discursive practices from the mid-1970s. Although the direction, style and genres of Cixous’s texts have varied since the publication of one of her most influential pieces, ‘Le Rire de la Mésude’ (1975), her rejection of dominant patriarchal norms has consistently relied on the thematizing of a disruptive feminine writing. (Anchisi 1)

As one of the leading characters of the French feminism, Cixous in her writings challenges the male-centered mode of thinking and the patriarchal system. She gives
every effort to oppose the rigid binary sexual stereotypes the patriarchal system has set for women, so she strongly advocates women to come to writing and to free themselves from their oppressed, inferior and unequal positions. Writing their bodies is the crucial thing for women to start because if women are to discover and express who they are, to bring to the surface what masculine history has repressed in them, they must begin with their sexuality. And their sexuality begins with their bodies, with their genital and libidinal difference from men. (Jones 12)

But, there is one thing worth our attention. Though feminine writing is termed as “feminine” writing, it is not necessarily written only by, of and for women. The reason why Cixous calls it as “feminine” writing is because women have the sex-specific experiences such as pregnancy and childbirth that men do not have. These experiences make women much closer to feminine writing; however, these sex-specific experiences are not the only ways to get into feminine writing. It is more appropriate to regard these women experiences in a metaphorical way and to take them as tools to help us better understand feminine writing. Accordingly, those women who do not have and those men who will never have the experiences of pregnancy and childbirth can still practice feminine writing. In his *Foe* and *Age of Iron*, using his sympathetic imagination, Coetzee presents women’s desire to write and delineates women’s sex-specific experiences. In addition, he even further connects writing to life and death, which are also the themes Cixous discusses when it comes to feminine writing. To further demonstrate my assertions, my thesis seeks to explore the relation between Coetzee’s writing and Cixous’s feminine writing first of all and to argue that feminism is also an important issue for men. Therefore, the main body of my thesis consists of three parts. First, I shall build the relationships of the characters by means of the
female protagonists’ writings. Then, after the characters’ relationships are constructed as the base of my discussion for feminine writing, I shall examine how Coetzee’s writings reflect Cixous’s concepts of feminine writing. Last, I shall break down the traditional binary thought of man/masculine and woman/feminine by revealing the feminine sides in male characters and the masculine sides in female ones. In the following, I shall give the brief summary of each chapter.

Chapter One invites the readers to take a more intimate look at the close relationships of characters in Foe and Age of Iron. Characters in the novels construct two interesting relationships. One is the “narrator-writer/medium-companion/narrate-reader” structure and the other is the quasi father-mother-daughter relationship. The former reveals how characters form a relationship of “mediating agents and participating actors” and the latter one shows how characters build “personal relationship within the context of family.” Built upon the female protagonists’ writings, these two relationships clarify the complicated relationships of characters and at the same time provide the base for my further exploration of Cixous’s feminine writing.

Chapter Two provides a Cixousian reading to examine Coetzee’s feminine writing through the voices of his female narrators. This chapter mainly focuses on Cixous’s four writings—“The Laugh of Medusa,” “Castration or Decapitation?,” “Coming to Writing,” and The Newly Born Woman (especially the part “Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays”)—to explores Cixous’s “various suggestions and hints” of feminine writing. Then, I shall examine Coetzee’s writings in terms of the following issues—the desire to write, writing’s relation to life, and the ambiguous relationship between writing and death—to reveal how Cixous’s concept of feminine writing is reflected in Coetzee’s writings.
Chapter Three shifts the attention towards the chiasmatic infiltration of the traditional sexual stereotypes. As a matter of fact, woman is not the only victim of the patriarchal system because when the patriarchal system sets rules for woman, it at the same time restricts man. Therefore, both man and woman need to be liberated from the traditional binary thought. In this chapter, I shall break down the rigid confinements of man/masculine and woman/feminine by revealing the masculine sides of Susan Barton and Mrs. Curren, and the feminine sides of Friday, Cruso, Foe and Vercueil. Man does not have to be masculine and woman does not have to be feminine.

Though as a man, Coetzee is not excluded from feminine writing because biological sex is not the determinant factor of feminine writing. Also, how one wants to display himself/herself should not be restricted by his/her biological sex. Coetzee’s *Foe* and *Age of Iron* provide us the scope of feminine writing and shows us a good example of breaking down the confinements of the rigid patriarchal system.
Chapter One: The Two Geometric Relationships

“There I lay sprawled on the hot sand, my head filled with the orange blaze of the sun, my petticoat (which was all I had escaped with) baking dry upon me, tired, grateful, like all the saved…”

(J. M. Coetzee, Foe 5)

“This was the day when I had the news from Dr. Syfret. The news was not good, but it was mine, for me, mine only, not to be refused.”

(J. M. Coetzee, Age of Iron 4)

The opening scene of Foe presents the image of Susan Barton as a goddess born again from the shipwreck. Emerging from the sea with her “long hair floating about [her], like a flower of the sea” (Coetzee, Foe 5), Susan Barton is depicted as Venus, who is born from the sea with her long curly blonde hair covering her naked body. The description of her long floating hair as the flower of the sea makes Susan Barton look more feminine, and the scene that she lies sprawled on the hot sand with the wet, thin and translucent petticoat only makes her even more sexually attractive. Since the sea has always been considered as the origin of all lives, young Susan Barton’s emergence from the sea can be seen as a sign of rebirth. With the feminine and sexually attractive Susan Barton surrounded by the waters, Foe is instilled with waves of hope and a prospect of a new life. Unlike the liveliness in Foe, Age of Iron begins with a delineation of “a dead place, waste, without use” (Coetzee, Age of Iron 3). The beginning of a dead place foreshadows Mrs. Curren’s impending death and this lifeless atmosphere hovers around till the end of the novel, and it turns to deathly
stillness when Mrs. Curren receives the bad news from Dr Syfret. Mrs. Curren is diagnosed with terminal cancer, but she does not refuse to believe it; instead, she tries to “take [it] in [her] arms and fold to [her] chest and take home, without headshaking, without tears” (4). Mrs. Curren’s impending death makes a sharp contrast to Susan Barton’s beginning of a new life and more intriguingly, the timing they start to write makes an amusing contrast: Susan Barton starts her writing after her survival from the shipwreck while Mrs. Curren begins to write after knowing she is going to die. The issues of life and death are intertwined in Susan Barton’s and Mrs. Curren’s writings and provide a close connection to Hélène Cixous’s concept of feminine writing (which will be under further discussions in the next chapter). With the female protagonists’ writings situated at the core of the discussion, this chapter intends to, first of all, explore the issues that continue from Foe to Age of Iron and secondly, argue that characters in the two novels build two geometric relationships: one is the triangular “narrator-writer/medium-companion/narratee-reader” structure, and the other is the quasi father-mother-daughter relationship.

As Ina Gräbe sharply observes, Foe and Age of Iron share “some continuing themes and strategies…, showing to what extent Coetzee’s assessment of a particular sociopolitical situation is channeled through spokespersons” (122). There appears, indeed, a continuum of characters from Foe and Age of Iron. Generally speaking, characters in Foe change from “mediating agents and participating actors” to “personal relationships within the context of ‘family’” (123) in Age of Iron. According to Gräbe, characters in Foe are divided into mediating agents of writing and participating actors (123), the former ones refer to Foe and Susan Barton and the latter ones refer to Friday and Cruso, for example. On the other hand, the real mother-daughter relationship in Age of Iron refers to Mrs. Curren’s relationship with
her daughter. More importantly, the links between the characters are presented only as
“a coincidental metafictional reflection on the nature and relevance of writing and
story-telling” (123) and this transition eliminates the contextual differences between
*Foe* and *Age of Iron*, providing possible discussions of characters in the light of
“personal or personalised relationships that Coetzee channels the reflection on the
relevance of writing” (123). To further demonstrate the continuing themes and
strategies Gräbe has mentioned, in the following parts of this chapter, discussions of
two special relationships are provided: the triangular

“narrator-writer/medium-companion/narratee-reader” structure shows how characters
form a relationship of “mediating agents and participating actors” and the quasi
father-mother-daughter relationship indicates how characters build “personal
relationship within the context of family”. These two relationships characters form in
both *Foe* and *Age of Iron* not only reflect Gräbe’s observation that the two novels
share certain continuing themes, but also provide extra remarks on what Gräbe has not
noticed in her essay. I shall begin with my discussion of the triangular

“narrator-writer/medium-companion/narratee-reader” structure first and then provide
another discussion of the quasi father-mother-daughter relationship.

A clear triangular “narrator-writer/medium-companion/narratee-reader”

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3 Gräbe points out that characters in *Foe* change from “mediating agents and participating actors” to
“personal relationships within the context of ‘family’” (123) in *Age of Iron*. Tellingly, it is easier to
understand that in *Foe* Susan Barton and Foe play the roles of mediating agents while Cruso and Friday
play the roles of participating actors. However, characters in *Age of Iron* have the similar structure: Mrs.
Curren plays the part of mediating agent and Mrs. Curren’s daughter and Vercueil play the parts of
participating actors. What is more, there is a real mother-daughter relationship (Mrs. Curren and her
daughter) in *Age of Iron* but there is also an ambiguous mother-daughter relationship (Susan Barton
and the mysterious girl) in *Foe*. Most intriguingly, in these two sets of mother-daughter relationship,
there are husband figures: Foe and Vercueil. Therefore, in my discussions here, on the one hand, by
following Gräbe’s arguments I further elaborate the continuing themes in *Foe* and *Age of Iron* and on
the other hand, I try to argue that as a matter of fact, in these two novels the relationships between
characters are not singular; characters form various relationships. And most importantly, characters
share both the “narrator-writer/medium-companion/narratee-reader” structure and the quasi
father-mother-daughter relationship.
structure (see fig. 1) appears in both *Foe* and *Age of Iron*\(^4\) since these two novels are written in letter-diary forms. Briefly speaking, characters are divided into two sets for

![Diagram](image)

**Fig. 1.** The triangular structure in *Foe* and *Age of Iron*.

\(^4\) Magda is Coetzee’s other female narrators often discussed, but in my thesis I do not put her into discussion. The crucial reason is that characters in *In the Heart of the Country* do not build the triangular “narrator-writer/medium-companion/narratee-reader” structure and the quasi father-mother-daughter relationship.
discussion: the first group includes Susan Barton, Cruso, Friday and Foe in *Foe* and the second group contains Mrs. Curren, Vercueil and Mrs. Curren’s daughter in *Age of Iron*. I shall start my analysis of the triangular structure in *Foe* first and then elaborate on how this triangular structure continues in *Age of Iron*.

Obviously, in *Foe*, “Susan Barton/Cruso-Friday/Foe” constructs a triangular “narrator-writer/medium-companion/narratee-reader” structure. Susan Barton is the narrator-writer figure, Cruso and Friday are the medium-companion figures and Foe is the narratee-reader figure. Except for the last chapter, *Foe* is narrated from the perspective of Susan Barton, the new character Coetzee adds to his rewriting of *Robinson Crusoe*; Cruso’s world here in *Foe* is no longer a world of men. Susan Barton intrudes men’s world in a role of a writer, which is often considered as the privilege of men. The first part of Susan Barton’s writing records her days with Cruso and Friday on the island and tells the readers how they are rescued; the second part of her writing notes down her days in England with Friday and her encounter with a mysterious girl who claims herself as Susan Barton’s daughter; the last part of her writing shows her instruction to Friday in writing and also her meeting with Foe, who is interested in her story of her lost daughter rather than the island story. Susan Barton’s epistolary writing is addressed to Foe because she wants him to write these things down, first of all, to “set [her] free of Cruso and Friday” (66) and secondly to “make [them] famous throughout the land, and rich too” (58); however, neither does Foe reply Susan Barton’s letters nor does he write down the story Susan Barton wants him to write. Foe becomes a “cannibal who devours the woman’s story, robbing her narrative voice and her ability to write herself into history” (Wright 23). Susan Barton says:

“I forgot you [Foe] are a writer who knows above all how many words
can be sucked from a cannibal feast, how few from a woman cowering from the wind. It is all a matter of words and the number of words, is it not?” (Coetzee, Foe 94)

As Susan Barton points out, being a receiver and a reader of the letters, Foe “devours” all “the particulars of [Friday] and Mr Cruso and of [her] year on the island and the years [Friday] and Mr Cruso spent there alone” (58) and wants to develop a new story of Susan Barton’s quest for her daughter. The true stories of Cruso, Friday and Susan Barton on the island are the ones that Susan Barton wants to be known. This is the focal point which Susan Barton keeps mentioning to Foe in her letters.

In the process of Susan Barton’s writing, Cruso and Friday play inseparable parts because they are the medium-companion figures in her writing to Foe; they, as Gräbe argues, are the participating actors rather than mediating agents of writing. Cruso and Friday, as a matter of fact, do not own either the desire or the power to write. Cruso, different from Robinson Crusoe, is not the narrator of his own story and there is no clue which shows how he wants his story to be written, either. Or, to be more specific, Cruso does not care about this at all because he kept no journal…because he lacked the inclination to keep one, or, if he ever possessed the inclination, had lost it. I searched the poles… but found no carvings, not even notches to indicate that he counted the years of his banishment or the cycles of the moon. (16; emphasis mine)

Different from Susan Barton who regards the story as “a storing-place of memories” (59), Cruso lacks neither the inclination nor the desire to write because he thinks that the terraces and walls he leaves behind on the island are enough to prove that he has lived (18) and his “act of ‘writing the land’ hones the colonialist acquisition of space: fruitlessly staking out his territory, Cruso asserts his dominion rather than
Friday, on the other hand, owns neither the dominion nor the productivity. Since words and language stand for the signs of authority, Friday’s inabilities to speak and write keep him far away from dominating and produce things. However, on the issue of writing, Friday, fascinated with Foe’s robes and wig, seems to show more inclinations than Cruso. In the end of the third part of the novel, when Susan Barton steps into Foe’s room to speak to him, she finds out that

[t]he man [sitting] at the table was not Foe. It was Friday, with Foe’s robes on his back and Foe’s wig, filthy as a bird’s nest, on his head. In his hand, poised over Foe’s papers, he held a quill with a drop of black ink glistening at its tip. […] ‘Let him be, Susan,’ [Foe] said in a tired voice: ‘he is accustoming himself to his tools, it is part of learning to write.’ (151; emphasis mine)

Friday’s act of wearing Foe’s robes and wig and holding the quill in his hand as if he is writing can be interpreted as his potential inclination to replace Foe’s place as the author by wearing the “robes of authorship” (Poyner 104), which does not happen to Cruso. Even though Friday has this little inclination, he only writes down something like the letter “o”, which is interpreted by Susan Barton and Foe as a way of learning to write the letter “o”; nevertheless, Friday can never explain the true meaning of his writing since he is silenced. Apparently, Cruso and Friday here are not the mediating agents of writing, unlike Susan Barton and Foe; they are more like the participating actors who keep company of their heroine.

Cruso and Friday are Susan Barton’s male companions in the novel. But, Cruso and Susan Barton’s relationship is not merely a relationship between an island owner and an island dweller; she appears more like Cruso’s mistress or wife. When Susan
Barton is sleeping, she feels that

[a] hand was exploring [her] body. So befuddled was [she] that [she] thought [herself] still aboard the ship, in the Portuguese captain’s bed.

But then [she] turned and saw Cruso’s wild hair; [...] [she] pushed his hand away and made to rise, but he held [her]...He has not known a woman for fifteen years, why should he not have his desire? So [she] resisted no more but let him do as he wished. (Coetzee, *Foe* 29-30)

When Cruso’s hand moves around her body, Susan Barton thinks that it is the Portuguese captain’s hand and then she reminds herself of the days when she was the captain’s mistress. But she is more than Cruso’s mistress; she considers herself as Cruso’s wife. Susan Barton is known as Mrs. Cruso (42) when she is aboard the ship and she till regards herself as his wife even after his death; she thinks that “[i]f Cruso had a widow, I am she” (99). After Cruso’s death, Friday is Susan Barton’s only companion, so she takes him with her to England. Wherever Susan Barton goes, Friday follows her and gradually he becomes her shadow (115). However, Susan Barton does not totally enjoy Friday’s company; she seems to be getting tired of Friday, who becomes her burden. Susan Barton describes herself as the Sinbad of Persia and Friday as the tyrant riding on her shoulders and if she cannot get free of him, she will stifle (148). In *Foe*, it is clear that “Susan Barton/Cruso-Friday/Foe” form a triangular “narrator-writer/medium-companion/narratee-reader” structure and it is not hard to figure out that this structure is constructed around Susan Barton’s writing. By means of writing, characters build interdependent relationship with each other. More intriguingly, characters in *Age of Iron* also form this “narrator-writer/medium-companion/narratee-reader” structure.

In *Age of Iron*, “Mrs. Curren/Vercueil/Mrs. Curren’s daughter” constructs

Mrs. Curren is the narrator-writer figure, the vagabond Verucueil is the medium-companion figure and Mrs. Curren’s daughter is the narratee-reader figure.

The whole novel is narrated by the old classic professor Mrs. Curren (Elizabeth Curren), whose letter-diary writing is addressed to her daughter living in America now. In the first part of her writing, Mrs. Curren tells the readers that on the day she is diagnosed of terminal cancer, she meets the homeless Verucueil and then she asks him to help send this long letter to her daughter after her death. In the second part, Mrs. Curren introduces Verucueil to Florence, who helps her with domestic chores, and describes how Florence’s son Bheki and Bheki’s friends are hurt seriously in a car accident that the policemen plot. In the third part, Mrs. Curren reveals the cruel and inhuman treatments of the black people in the apartheid period; particularly, the brutal death of Bheki brings a tremendous shock to Mrs. Curren. The last part of Mrs. Curren’s writing begins with her dreaming of Florence and ends with a scene of how Mrs. Curren’s “breath [goes] out of [her] in a rush” (196) with Verucueil’s mighty embrace; Mrs. Curren ends her life with an embrace echoing the very beginning of the novel that she firmly says she will “embrace death as [her] own” (6).

Moreover, Mrs. Curren’s long letter to her daughter has various functions. First of all, Mrs. Curren writes this letter because she wants her daughter, who escapes from the cruel apartheid system to America, to witness and experience the ghastly events which happen frequently in Cape Town. She says to her daughter:

“It is through my eyes that you see; the voice that speaks in your head is mine. Through me alone do you find yourself here on these desolate flats, smell the smoke in the air, see the bodies of the dead, hear the weeping, shiver in the rain. It is my thoughts that you think, my despair that you
Seemingly, Mrs. Curren wants her daughter to know everything happening here, but as a matter of fact, she is accusing her daughter of leaving her alone here in the South Africa to suffer the unbearable horror and sorrow by herself. Actually, Mrs. Curen’s letter is an accusation. She states:

“Is this an accusation? Yes. *J’accuse*. I accuse you [Mrs. Curren’s daughter] of abandoning me. I fling this accusation at you, into the northwest, into the teeth of the wind. I fling my pain at you.” (140)

Mrs. Curren shows her understanding for her daughter’s decision to leave South Africa, but it seems that she could not stop thinking of her, especially now she does not have much time to live in this world; therefore, this letter becomes Mrs. Curren’s “call into the night, into the northwest, for [her daughter] to come back to [her]” (139). In fact, she has always been longing for her daughter’s company; she wants her daughter “to be here, to hold [her], comfort [her]” (5) and also wants her daughter “to come and bury [her] head in [her] lap as a child does, as [she] used to” (139). Most importantly, this letter is Mrs. Curren’s confession, which shows her reluctance to die and her desire to find a way of salvation. She says:

“This is my first word, my first confession. I do not want to die in the state I am in, in a state of ugliness. *I want to be saved. How shall I be saved?* By doing what I do not want to do. This is the first step: that I know. I must love, first of all, the unlovable…” (136; emphasis mine)

To love the unlovable is Mrs. Curren’s means of salvation and this might be the reason that she gradually treats Bheki’s friend John in a better way, and she even tries to protect him when the police comes to her house to arrest him. In addition, this might also be the reason why Mrs. Curren chooses Vercueil to help her send the letter
to her daughter. She states:

“I give my life to Vercueil to carry over. I trust Vercueil because I do not trust Vercueil. I love him because I do not love him. Because he is the weak reed I lean upon him.” (131)

Vercueil is the only person Mrs. Curren relies on. She wants him to be her messenger (32), mailing the letter to her daughter in America.

But why is writing the way Mrs. Curren chooses to reach her daughter? Mrs. Curren points out that “[she] must reach out to [her] daughter in words” (9). Consequently, she asks for Vercueil’s help to send these “private letters” (31) to her daughter. She says to him:

“There is something I would like you to do for me if I die. There are some papers I want to send to my daughter. But after the event. This is the important part. That is why I cannot send them myself. I will do everything else. I will make them up into a parcel with the right stamps on it. All you will have to do will be to hand the parcel over the counter at the post office. Will you do that for me?” (31)

Somehow Mrs. Curren seems to have a special attachment for Vercueil (but we do not what brings this special attachment), so she gives him the most precious thing she has now: her letter to her daughter. However, Mrs. Curren does not merely consider Vercueil as a trustworthy messenger; she affectionately relies on Vercueil in every way. He is Mrs. Curren’s close companion and a substitute husband (which will be under further discussions later), who accompanies her to drive around, to take care of her when she is weak and even comes to help her when she is in need. Obviously, “Mrs. Curren/Vercueil/Mrs. Curren’s daughter” forms a very clear triangular “narrator-writer/medium-companion/narratee-reader” structure by means of Mrs.
Curren’s writing.

The two sets of the “narrator-writer/medium-companion/narratee-reader” structure in *Foe* and *Age of Iron* clearly present how characters build connections under the presupposition that characters in the novels are categorized as either the mediating agents of writing or the participating actors. In addition, characters in the novels have even closer connections. In the following parts of this chapter, I shall argue that within the context of family relationship, characters build quasi father-mother-daughter relationships in both *Foe* and *Age of Iron*.

“Foe-Susan Barton-the mysterious daughter” in *Foe* and “Verceuil-Mrs. Curren-Mrs. Curren’s daughter” form quasi father-mother-daughter relationships (see Fig. 2). Interestingly, the father-mother-daughter relationship in the two novels is not
Fig. 2 The quasi father-mother- daughter relationship in *Foe* and *Age of Iron*

totally built upon characters’ blood relationships; on the other hand, like the
“narrator-writer/medium-companion/narratee-reader” structure, the parent-child
relationship is built on the female protagonists’ writings. I shall start my discussion of
the father-mother-daughter relationship in *Foe* first and then examine how the same
relationship appears in *Age of Iron*.

“Two years ago my only daughter was abducted and conveyed to the New
World by an Englishman…I followed in search of her…,” explains Susan Barton to
Cruso how she encounters the shipwreck on the first day they meet (Coetzee, *Foe* 10). According to Susan Barton, her daughter is lost, but in the second part of *Foe*, a
mysterious girl appears, who claims to be Susan Barton’s lost daughter and reveals
her name as Susan Barton as well. Nevertheless, Susan Barton does not admit that she
is her daughter because first of all women do not “drop children and forget them as
snakes lay eggs” (75) and secondly because

[t]he world is full of stories of mothers searching for sons and daughters
they gave away once, long ago. But there are no stories of daughters
searching for mothers. There are no stories of such quests because they
do not occur. They are not part of life (78).

Susan Barton resolutely denies this girl as her daughter no matter how strongly this phantom-like girl tries to persuade her. The mother-daughter relationship is unbalanced; the girl unilaterally claims their blood relation but fails. The closer the girl wants to get to Susan Barton, the more alienated she feels from this girl. Susan Barton claims:

“I start at the two hands side by side. My hand is long, hers [the girl’s] short. Her fingers are the plump unformed fingers of a child. Her eyes are grey, mine brown. What kind of being is she, so serenely blind to the evidence of her senses?” (76)

Susan Barton does not think that they look like each other, and moreover this girl “resembles [her] daughter in no respect” (132). The existence of this girl is questionable and the fact whether Susan Barton really has a daughter or not is even more doubtful. Foe asks:

“Before you declare yourself too freely, Susan, wait to see what fruit I bear. But since we speak of childbearing, has the time not come to tell me the truth about your own child, the daughter lost in Bahia? Did you truly give birth to her? Is she substantial or is she a story too?” (152)

Foe here raises an intriguing question. No clues show that Susan Barton’s daughter does exist, but no clues either indicate that her daughter does not exist. Susan Barton doubts that this girl is sent by Foe though she does not know why he does so, so she tells Foe: “She [the girl] is more your daughter than she ever was mine” (75). And, she also tells the girl that her “father is a man named Daniel Foe” (91). There is a conversation between Susan Barton and the girl:

“My name is Susan Baron,” she [the girl] whispers.
“That is small proof. You will find many Susan Barton in this kingdom...what you know of your parentage comes to you in the form of stories, and the stories have but a single source.”

“Who is my true mother then?” she says.

“You are father-born. You have no mother....” (91; emphasis mine)

Susan Barton here points out to this girl straightforward that she is Foe’s creation and refuses to claim this daughter as her own. The relationship between Susan Barton, the mysterious girl and Foe is complex. On the one hand, Foe is the fictionalized character of the real eighteenth-century writer Daniel Defoe; Susan Barton is the character created by Coetzee (who might borrow this character from Daniel Defoe’s another novel *Roxana*); this mysterious daughter is described by Susan Barton as “a substantial ghost” (132) created by the created character Foe. To some extent, these characters form a quasi father-mother-daughter relationship. What is worth noting here is that this quasi father-mother-daughter relationship is a challenge to the patriarchal system. Cixous in “The Laugh of Medusa” stresses:

Begetting a child doesn’t mean that the woman or the man must fall ineluctably into patterns or must recharge the circuit of reproduction. If there’s a risk there’s not an inevitable trap: may women be spared the pressure, under the guise of consciousness-raising, of a supplement of interdictions. Either you want a kid or you don’t—*that’s your business*. Let nobody threaten you; in satisfying your desire, let not the fear of becoming the accomplice to a society succeed the old-time fear of being “taken.” And man, are you still going to bank on everyone’s blindness and passivity, afraid lest the child make a father and, consequently, that in having a kid the woman land herself more than one bad deal by
engendering all at once child—mother—father—family? No; it’s up to you to break the old circuits. (890)

Under the patriarchal system, women are given the responsibility of reproduction and it seems to be a common phenomenon for women to get married and then bear children. Susan Barton’s refusal to claim the girl as her own daughter challenges the patriarchal sovereignty and breaks down “the old circuit” that binds women. She firmly rejects to be caught into the “trap” that the patriarchal system sets for her by rejecting Foe’s arrangement of the daughter episode. Coincidentally, the daughter myth and the quasi father-mother-daughter relationship continue in *Age of Iron*.

Mrs. Curren’s daughter never appears in a substantial form; she only appears in the photograph. Mrs. Curren tells Vercueil:

“‘This is my daughter…The one I told you about, who lives in America.’
And through his eyes regarded you in the photograph: a pleasant-faced, smiling woman in her thirties, against a field of green, raising a hand to her hair, which is blown by the wind. Confident. That is what you have now: the look of a woman who has found herself. (Coetzee, *Age of Iron* 31)

Feeling sick and disappointed of the apartheid in South Africa, Mrs. Curren’s daughter moves to America, gets married and owns her family there. She tells Mrs. Curren that she will never come back as long as this cruel system still exists. Though she misses her daughter desperately every day and night, Mrs. Curren never lets her daughter know her longing because she thinks that

[the comfort, the love should flow forward, not backward. This is a rule, another of the iron rules. When an old person begins to plead for love everything turns squalid. Like a parent trying to creep into bed with a
Mrs. Curren thinks that a mother should not ask her child for love and comfort; it is the child who should come to the mother. Her idea is different from Susan Barton’s because Susan Barton thinks that it is always the mother who finds the child. However, the existence of Mrs. Curren’s daughter, like that of Susan Barton’s daughter, is doubtful too. What Mrs. Curren gets is only a photograph, which she considers as “a picture of you [her daughter], but not you [her daughter]” (197). Obviously, a photograph could not represent her daughter, so Mrs. Curren tries to connect her to her daughter through “the idea of words, the idea of breath, coded, transmitted, decoded” (129). As I mentioned before, this is the reason why Mrs. Curren writes this letter since only the idea of words can reach her daughter. Mrs. Curren explicitly or implicitly indicates how she longs to get closer to her daughter while Susan Barton does not give the hints of her desire for her daughter. Mother-daughter relationship, for Mrs. Curren, is very important because she keeps mentioning her relationship with her own mother:

I [Mrs. Curren] cling so tightly to the memory of my mother. For if she did not give me life, no one did. I cling not just to the memory of her but to her herself, to her body, to my birth from her body into the world. In blood and milk I drank her body and came to life. (110)

Mrs. Curren wants her daughter to do the same thing like what she used to do—clinging to the memory of the mother—and hopes she will live inside her daughter as her mother still lives in her.

Mrs. Curren values parent-child relationship a lot; she strongly holds the idea that “[t]here are always mothers and daughters” (39), so it might be hard for her to leave this world without a husband and a daughter. Verceuil becomes a husband figure
for Mrs. Curren because she calls herself as “Mrs. V” (190). Vercueil is Mrs. Curren’s “shadow husband” (189) who directs her to drive, like “a husband giving a driving lesson” (29). Mrs. Curren even compares she and Vercueil to “a couple married too long” (70), who “share a bed, folded one upon the other like a page folded in two, like two wings folded: old mates, bunkmates, conjoined, conjugal” (189). In addition to the imagination of a love-making scene with Vercueil, Mrs. Curren even says that if she “was younger [she] might have given [herself] to him bodily” (131). Vercueil becomes an inseparable part in Mrs. Curren’s life. What is more, Vercueil has a special connection to Mrs. Curren’s daughter. When Verceuil is sleeping, Mrs. Curren...

Vercueil’s resemblance to Mrs. Curren’s daughter makes him much closer to Mrs. Curren. And he becomes a surrogate husband and his existence provides Mrs. Curren a way to reach her daughter. As a matter of fact, Mrs. Curren has already considers Vercueil as one of her family members by saying that “I do not leave behind a numerous family. A daughter. A consort [Verceuil] and his dog” (195). Therefore, Vercueil, Mrs. Curren and Mrs. Curren’s daughter form a quasi father-mother-daughter relationship but this relationship only exists within the context of Mrs. Curren’s writing, of course.

In Foe to Age of Iron, characters not only form certain relationships but also share continuing themes and common issues. First of all, both novels are written in letter-diary forms and narrated by white female protagonists (changing from the
young flower-like Susan Barton to the old dying Mrs. Curren). Secondly, each of the female protagonists has a mysterious daughter (whose existence is doubtful), a substitute husband and/or a male other as her companion. Last but not least, the male companions’ relationships with the heroines (Susan Barton-Friday and Mrs. Curren-Vercueil) share continuing similarities from *Foe* to *Age of Iron*. Susan Barton meets the male other, Friday, on her first day of arriving on the island. She says:

“A dark shadow fell upon me, not of a cloud but of a man with a dazzling halo about him. ‘Castaway,’ I said with my thick dry tongue. ‘I am cast away. I am all alone.’… He was black: a Negro with a head of fuzzy wool, naked save for a pair of rough drawers. (Coetzee, *Foe* 5-6)

Friday then carries Susan Barton on his back to Cruso’s hut and prepares food for her; Friday is like a saviour (13) or he could be seen as an angel—an angel of life—in a sense. On the other hand, Vercueil, the male other, is the first person Mrs. Curren meets on the day that she is diagnosed of cancer. For her, Vercueil is like “an angel [who] come[s] to show her the way” (Coetzee, *Age of Iron* 168). The angel Vercueil resembles

is wordless. The angel goes before, the woman follows. His eyes are open, he sees; hers are shut, she is still sunk in the sleep of worldliness.

That is why [she] [keeps] turning to [him] for guidance, for help. (168)

Both Friday and Vercueil are angel figures, but the difference is that one is the “Angel of Life” and the other is described by David Attwell as the “Angel of Death” (qtd. Poyner 116). Intriguingly, since Friday and Vercueil are angel figures, they are presented in the novels as the ones who are alive while other are dead. The last part of *Foe* presents an undersea scene; an anonymous person addressing himself/herself as the “I” dives into the wreck in the deep sea and recognizes three people who lie there:
Susan Barton, the captain and Friday, but Friday is the only one who is alive and gains his rebirth. Similarly, Mrs. Curren’s dream about Vercueil also gives an indication of rebirth. She says to Vercueil:

“The man in my dream didn’t have a hat, but I think it was you… We were at the seaside. He was teaching me to swim… He was drawing me out, backing into the sea, fixing me with his eyes. He had eyes like you. There were no waves, just a ripple of water coming in, glinting with light… Where his body broke the surface the oil clung to him with the heavy sheen oil has.” (*Coetzee, Age of Iron* 167)

This seaside scene reminds us of the undersea shipwreck scene in *Foe*. Vercueil returns to sea, like his old days of being a sailor. He seems to overcome his fear of sea and swims as easy as the fish in Mrs. Curren’s dream. His act of breaking the surface of the water can be regarded as a symbol of rebirth from the water, which echoes what happens to Friday in the last scene of *Foe*. Both Friday and Vercueil, the marginalized male others, are the ones that survive in the end of the stories while their heroines die.

By giving life to the marginalized others, Coetzee voices for these silenced ones and his act is very similar to what Susan Barton and Mrs. Curren do to Friday and Vercueil. On the one hand, Friday is forced to learn how to write because Susan Barton hopes that he could tell his own stories one day; therefore, teaching Friday how to write is Susan Barton’s way of making the silenced speak someday. On the other hand, Vercueil voluntarily asks Mrs. Curren to teach him Latin. Mrs. Curren mentions that teaching Latin is her way of “[g]iving voice to the dead” (192); Mrs. Curren’s motivation here, to some extent, echoes to Susan Barton’s behavior of teaching Friday language because she also wants to give voice to the silenced Friday, for whom the language is dead.
Tellingly, the “narrator-writer/medium-companion/narratee-reader” structure and the quasi father-mother-daughter relationship characters in both *Foe* and *Age of Iron* are built within the context of the female protagonists’ writings. The former one shows how characters build relationship by playing either the roles of the mediating agents of writing or the roles of the participating actors in writing and the latter one shows how characters build personal or interpersonal relationship by playing the roles of a parent or a daughter. These two structures clarify and simplify the complicated relationships between characters and provide the base of a comparative reading of *Foe* and *Age of Iron*. Since these two structures are both set upon the female protagonists’ writings, in next chapter I shall provide further analysis of Susan Barton’s and Mrs. Curren’s writings; as I have pointed out in the beginning of this chapter, the issues of life and death are intertwined in the female protagonists’ writings, which reflect Hélène Cixous’s concept of *feminine writing*. Accordingly, in Chapter Two, focusing on the female protagonists’ writings, I shall provide a Cixousian reading of *Foe* and *Age of Iron*. 
Chapter Two: “When I do not write, it is as if I had died”

“Now you may do with me as you wish. For I have escaped your prison; all you have here is the husk of me.”
(J. M. Coetzee, *Foe* 125)

“A white moth, a ghost emerging from the mouth of the figure on the deathbed.”
(J. M. Coetzee, *Age of Iron* 129)

“[I]f I, this mortal shell, am going to die, let me at least live on through my creations”
(J. M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* 17)

In the third part of *Foe*, Foe tells Susan Barton two stories, one of which is about the death penalty of a woman who commits a crime. This woman does not fear death and the only thing she is worried about is who is going to take care of her infant daughter. When a gaoler agrees to adopt this girl, this woman finally feels relieved, saying: “Now you may do with me as you wish. For I have escaped your prison; all you have here is the husk of me” (Coetzee, *Foe* 125). The woman describes herself as the husk that her daughter leaves behind after she is born; since the mother is compared to the husk, Foe points out here that the child could be thought as the butterfly (125). Lucy Graham points out that the image of the butterfly breaking itself from the husk can be connected to the idea that “authorship is also figured, via the image of childbirth, as a means of attaining immortality” (221), which echoes Foe’s

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^5 I borrow the line from Cixous’s interview with Jean-Louis de Rambures as my title of Chapter Two. In that interview, Cixous responds to the issue of being described as “a writer who produces in abundance,” saying: “For me, writing is the breath, the respiration, it is a necessity as imperious as the need to wake up, to touch, to eat, to kiss, to progress. *When I do not write, it is as if I had died*” (Cixous, *White Ink* 57; emphasis mine). I am impressed by Cixous’s answer here and find out that her thoughts can be connected to Susan Barton’s and Mrs. Curren’s ideas of the relationship between writing and life; therefore, I use part of Cixous’s answer here as the title of my second chapter.
idea that “[t]here are more ways than one of living eternally” (Coetzee, *Foe* 125).

Similar husk-butterfly scene appears in *Age of Iron*. In the third part of the novel, Mrs. Curren tells her daughter:

“It is the soul of you that I address, as it is the soul of me that will be left with you when this letter is over. Like a moth from its case emerging, fanning its wings: that is what, reading, I hope you will glimpse: my soul readying itself for further flight. A white moth, a ghost emerging from the mouth of the fire on the deathbed.” (Coetzee, *Age of Iron* 129)

Mrs. Curren describes herself as “the mouth of the fire on the deathbed,” and this white moth emerging from her has two interpretations: one refers to “a figure of the text itself” (Graham 222), which is instilled with Mrs. Curren’s soul getting ready to fly, and the other refers to Mrs. Curren’s daughter since Mrs. Curren has depicted herself as “the shell [her] child has left behind” (Coetzee, *Age of Iron* 76). Mothers are the embodiments of “the husk” or “the shell” their children have left behind, and their children are the embodiments of “the butterfly” or “the moth”; the image of the butterfly/moth breaking from the husk/shell is closely related to childbirth. More interestingly, in both *Foe* and *Age of Iron*, childbirth is further linked to literary creation and Susan Barton and Mrs. Curren live on through writings, like what Elizabeth Costello says: “If I, this mortal shell, am going to die, let me at least live on through my creations” (J. M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* 17). The connection between childbirth and writing reflects Hélène Cixous’s idea of *écriture féminine*. Nevertheless, since Cixous terms it as “feminine writing”, how could Coetzee, as a male author, present this idea through Susan Barton’s and Mrs. Curren’s writings? Could a male author narrate women’s stories well? This chapter intends to, first of all, provide a discussion of Cixous’s idea of *écriture féminine* and sympathetic
imagination, and secondly to examine how Cixous’s idea of *écriture féminine* is presented by Coetzee in *Foe* and *Age of Iron*.

Cixous is well-known for her “theory” of *écriture féminine*. Here I put emphasis on the word “theory” because as Susan Sellers points out, there are “dangers in attempting to ‘theorize’ *écriture féminine*” (1). For Cixous, it is impossible to define a feminine practice of writing, and this is an impossibility that will remain, for this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded—which doesn’t mean that it doesn’t exist. But it will always surpass the discourse that regulates the phallocentric system; it does and will take place in areas other than those subordinated to philosophico-theoretical domination. (Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa” 883)

Cixous points out that she finds the impossibility of theorizing *écriture féminine* but more importantly, she meanwhile emphasizes that *écriture féminine* does exist. As Ian Blyth and Susan Sellers suggest, Cixous “encourages the non-theoretical, empirical aspects of *écriture féminine*” and “wishes to assert a claim to a degree of independence, to highlight the difference of *écriture féminine* from other, more traditional forms of theory” (19). Nevertheless, both Ian Blyth and Susan Sellers have doubts about Cixous’s assertion here. Sellers confronts a difficulty of “the discrepancy between Cixous’s insistence in the impossibility of theorizing *écriture féminine* and the very powerful and detailed descriptions of this she is able to give” (5). Seller and Blyth finally draw a conclusion that although she does not offer a (potentially restrictive) formula-to-be-followed, Cixous does give various hints and suggestions about the nature of *écriture féminine*. Initially difficult to unpack and
decipher, these hints and suggestions prove to be very illuminating—much more illuminating in fact than a common or garden definition would ever have been. (19)

Cixous confuses Seller and Blyth with her contradiction between what she claims and what she shows in her writings. Though Cixous says that *écriture féminine* should not be put into the theoretical framework for discussion, “hints and suggestions about the nature of *écriture féminine*” can be traced in many of her writings. Therefore, by following Seller and Blyth’s arguments here, I regard *écriture féminine* as “something that is still related to theory” (Blyth and Sellers, 18-19). In the following paragraphs, on the one hand I shall provide a discussion of how *écriture féminine* is explained by Cixous as well as her critics and on the other I aim to explore how the “hints and suggestions about the nature of *écriture féminine*” are presented in Susan Barton’s and Mrs. Curren’s writings by Coetzee.

As Cixous suggests, *écriture féminine* is “a dangerous and stylish expression full of traps, which leads to all kinds of confusions” (Cixous, “An Exchange with Hélène Cixous” 129); therefore, Cixous herself gives the explanation of *écriture féminine* as “femininity in writing” or “so-called feminine writing” (Cixous, *White Ink* 22) and she also says that “it is simple to say ‘feminine writing’” (Cixous, “An Exchange with Hélène Cixous” 129). But, Cxious thinks that saying “a writing said to be feminine” is more appropriate because she does not want to “mark the distance [between feminine writing and masculine writing]” (Cixous, “An Exchange with Hélène Cixous” 129). Diana Holmes indicates that *écriture féminine* refers to “writing the body” (221) and it “[designates] a writing that emerges from and celebrates the specific nature of women’s sexuality, thought and imagination” (216); Doris Rita Alphonso argues that *écriture féminine* “[describes] that which has been erased
through the privileging of the (masculine/speech) one over the (feminine/writing) other” (254); Abigail Bray believes that écriture féminine is “an attempt to let the other exist without imposing a definition of the self” and it “[provides] a space for the material and ontological specificity and autonomy of the other to exist” (71). Briefly speaking, écriture féminine is a feminine practice of writing that “[seeks] new relations between the subjects and the other” (Sellers 5), challenges the existing masculine hegemony and advocates women to free themselves through writing.

Nevertheless, what is worth noting is that feminine writing is not limited to women only; instead, she “[speaks] of a decipherable libidinal femininity which can be read in a writing produced by a male or a female” (129). Feminine writing is not determined by the anatomical sex because

[b]oth men and women, according to Cixous, can suppress the reduction of the erotic to the phallus, and through the practice of writing a feminine, diffuse erotogeneity. (Alphonso 254)

Therefore, feminine writing does not necessarily exist in women; it also exits in men. However, though feminine writing is not determined by the anatomical sex, Cixous thinks that women are much closer to feminine writing because of their sex-specific experiences than men. To further demonstrate Cixous’s descriptions of the nature of feminine writing, I shall focus my analytical perspective on her four famous writings “The Laugh of Medusa”, “Castration or Decapitation?”, “Coming to Writing” and The Newly Born Woman.

In “Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays,” the second part of The Newly Born Woman, Cixous “deals with the necessity to break free, to transgress, to cross over or traverse old lines” (Penrod 27) because in the long history, man and woman are put in many “dual, hierarchical oppositions” (Cixous and Clément, The
Newly Born Woman 64):

Where is she?
Activity/passivity
Sun/Moon
Culture/Nature
Day/Night

Father/Mother
Head/Heart
Intelligible/Papable
Logos/Pathos.

Form, convex, step, advance, semen, progress.
Matter, concave, ground—where steps are taken, holding- and dumping-ground

Man
----------
Woman

(63)

“She” is always found in the inferior and passive position while “he” is always put in the superior and active place. As Cixous indicates that “all these pairs of oppositions are couples...related to ‘the’ couple, man/woman” (64). Woman has always been living under the oppression of patriarchal supremacy and could hardly flee from this big cage. Therefore, Cixous suggests

[t]here has to be somewhere else....That is writing. If there is a somewhere else that can escape the infernal repetition, it lies in that direction, where it writes itself, where it dreams, where it invents new
writing creates a new world for woman to escape from “woman’s abasement and subordi-
nation of the feminine to the masculine order” (Penrod 28). Nevertheless, what is worth our attention here is that woman is not the only victim under this binary hierarchical oppositions created by the patriarchal system. The patriarchal system has put too many confinements on woman and tells her what to do and what not to do. For example, when the patriarchal system asks woman to be passive and papable, meanwhile it expects man to act active and intelligible. Amusingly, when the patriarchal system places restrictions on woman, at the same time it also puts bounds to man, asking man how he should act like and how he should not. Accordingly, woman is not the only victim under the oppression of the patriarchal system; man is, as well, this very victim. Like woman, man should free himself from the fetters by means of writing.

Yet, for Cixous, writing is put in the feminine economy, different from the masculine economy which “consists in making sexual difference hierarchical by valorizing one of the terms of the relationship, by reaffirming what Freud calls phallic primacy” (Cixous and Clément, The Newly Born Woman 80) and “[aims] for glorious phallic monosexuality (85). Cixous claims that today, writing is woman’s. That is not a provocation, it means that woman admits there is an other. In her becoming-woman, she had not erased the bisexuality latent in the girl as in the boy. Femininity and sexuality go together....It is much harder for man to let the other come through him.

(85)

Cixous here emphasizes that it is not a provocation by saying writing is woman’s; the reason why she says so is because woman has the sex-specific experience of
conceiving “the other” during her pregnancy and lets this other come through her when she gives birth to it. On the other hand, man does not have this peculiar experience of conceiving the other and letting the other come through him, so that is why Cixous claims that woman is much closer to writing than man is. But, we may bear these questions in mind: Are those women who do not have the experience of getting pregnant away from feminine writing? Are men excluded from the field of feminine writing? As a matter of fact, the image of pregnancy here is better to be understood as “a metaphor of creation” (which will be put to further analysis later). By doing so, all people, regardless of their gender, race, class or age, are capable to practice feminine writing.

Accordingly, Coetzee, though as a man, is not excluded from feminine writing. As a matter of fact, Cixous gives us the examples of men producing feminine writing, some men who are able to produce feminine writing, two of whom are Kleist and Shakespeare being seen as “men who are capable of becoming woman” (98) because they are those who let something different from tradition get through at any price—men able to love love; therefore, to love others, to want them; men able to think the woman who could resist destruction and constitute herself a superb, equal, “impossible” subject, hence intolerable in the real social context. (98)

Cixous especially indicates that we have to avoid the confusion man/masculine, woman/feminine: for there are some men who do not repress their femininity, some women who, more or less strongly, inscribes their masculinity. (81)

As what I have mentioned, the images of pregnancy and childbirth should be regarded
as a metaphor of (literary) creation. Therefore, feminine writing should not be trapped by its name. Actually, in Greek mythology, there is an interesting example of man giving birth to his child. Athena the goddess

was the daughter of Zeus alone. No mother bore her. Full-grown and in full armor, she sprang from his head…, she is a fierce and ruthless battle-goddess, but elsewhere she is warlike only to defend the State and the home from outside enemies. […] She was Zeus’s favorite child. […]

In later poetry she is the embodiment of wisdom, reason, purity.

(Hamilton 29-30; emphasis mine)

The birth of Athena is a very special one. Athena does not have a mother; she springs directly from Zeus’s head, full-grown and fully armed. Athena’s springing from Zeus head can be vividly delineated as the “ideas” coming out of Zeus head since Athena is regarded as the goddess of wisdom. Tellingly, it is very clear that Zeus’s “childbirth” of Athena is a metaphorical act and this childbirth has a great relation to the process of producing ideas, which echoes Cixous’s main idea of feminine writing.

But, how does Coetzee practice feminine writing? Why is he qualified to voice from women’s perspectives? As a matter of fact, Coetzee is one of the men “(all too few) who aren’t afraid of femininity” (Cixous, “The Laugh of Medusa” 885). In Foe and Age of Iron Coetzee particularly chooses female protagonists to be the narrator-author figures and uses his imagination to delineate the ingenious metaphorical act of childbirth as producing ideas. Therefore, here we acquire a lucid idea that pregnancy and childbirth are not the necessary means to produce feminine writing; instead, they should be seen as tools for us to better understand and deeply explore the field of feminine writing. In the following parts, I shall present how Coetzee’s “sympathetic imagination” corresponds with Cixous’s concept of feminine
writing in *Foe* and *Age of Iron*.

How can a writer write down the stories which are not of his own experiences? Coetzee in his *The Lives of Animals* gives us the answer through Elizabeth Costello’s narrative. Costello provides the discussions of what it is like for X to be X (32). Being a corpse and a bat are her examples. She says:

“Do I know what it is like for me to be a corpse or do I know what it is like for a corpse to be a corpse? The distinction seems to be trivial. What I know is what a corpse cannot know: that it is extinct, that it knows nothing and will never know anything more.” (32)

This assertion is an interesting one. How could one know what it is like to be a corpse? Does he/her need to be a corpse first and then know the feeling of being a corpse? This seems to be impossible because one could not die and then revives to tell us the feeling of being a corpse. We could only “think our way into death only when we are rammed into the face of it” (32). And, Costello makes further assertion that “if we are capable of thinking our own death, why on earth should we not be capable of thinking our way into the life of a bat?” (32-3). The point is, we do not necessarily become someone or something if we want to experience his/her/its life. Costello states:

“What is it like to be a bat? Before we can answer such a question, Nagel suggests, we need to be able to experience bat-life through the sense-modalities of a bat. But he is wrong; or at least he is sending us down a false trail. To be living a bat is to be full of being; being fully a bat is like being fully human, which is also to be full of being.” (33)

Accordingly, being a bat is not different from being a human being because both of them are the ones full of being—to be more precise, they are all embodied souls (33). The feeling of thinking ourselves as other beings is what Coetzee calls “the
sympathetic imagination” (35). This sympathetic imagination allows us to share at times of being of another. Sympathy has everything to do with the subject and little to do with the object, the ‘another’, as we see at once when we think of the object not as a bat (‘Can I share the being of a bat?’) but as another human being. There are people who have the capacity to imagine themselves as someone else. There are people who have no such capacity (when the lack is extreme, we call them psychopaths), and there are people who have the capacity but choose not to exercise it. (35)

Since it is possible for someone to think himself/herself as a bat or a corpse, it is possible for Coetzee to imagine women’s experiences. Coetzee is exactly the person who has this capacity and chooses to exercise his sympathetic imagination. Because the sympathetic imagination is boundless, there is no limit set for his imagination. Therefore, in Foe and Age of Iron, Coetzee could use his sympathetic imagination to delineate women’s sex-specific experiences of pregnancy and childbirth. That the male author writes a woman’s story is no longer a problem.

Cixous in “The Laugh of Medusa” strongly calls for all women to write themselves; she says:

I shall speak about women’s writing: about what it will do. Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies—for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal.

Woman must put herself into the text—as into history—by her own movement (875).

Cixous indicates here that woman has always been driven away by the patriarchal
system and is left without any space for her to write her body since “writing is at once too high, too great for [her], it’s reserved for the great—that is, for ‘great men’” (876). Therefore, Cixous advocates woman to write her self because by “writing herself, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her” (880). For woman, writing is “the moment of liberation” (880), an act “[realizes] the decensored relation of woman to her sexuality, to her womanly being, giving her access to her native strength” (880) and “[a]n act that will also be marked by woman’s seizing the occasion to speak” (880). Accordingly, women must “break out of the snare of silence” (881), and “write through their bodies” (886) because “it is the body that talks” (Cixous, “Castration or Decapitation” 49). Coetzee’s female protagonists Susan Barton and Mrs. Curren “[take] up the challenge of speech which has been governed by the phallus [and]…which is reserved in and by the symbolic” (Cixous, “The Laugh of Medusa” 881). When Susan Barton first meets Foe, he tells her that he is much more interested in the “loss-quest-recovery” (Coetzee, Foe 117) story of Susan Barton and her lost daughter than the island story. Susan Barton says:

All of which makes up a story I do not choose to tell. I choose not to tell it because to no one, not even to you, do I owe proof that I am a substantial being with a substantial history in the world. I choose rather to tell of the island, of myself and Cruso and Friday and what we three did there: for I am a free woman who asserts her freedom by telling her story according to her own desire (Coetzee, Foe 131; emphasis mine).

Claiming that “I am a free woman who asserts her freedom by telling her story according to her own desire”, Susan Barton bravely challenges Foe’s authority and “endeavour[s] to be the father to [her] story” (123). Mrs. Curren, though she does not directly show her desire to write in Age of Iron, insists on writing down everything in
her daily life and mailing this long letter to her daughter. Being treated in a way of misunderstanding by the black people because of her problematic role as a white female professor in the apartheid South Africa, Mrs. Curren still wants to reveal the true facts to her daughter through writing. Both Susan Barton and Mrs. Curren “[I]et nobody threatens [them]; in satisfying [their] desire, let not the fear of becoming the accomplice to a sociality succeed the old-time fear of being taken” (Cixous, “The Laugh of Medusa” 889). To briefly conclude, Susan Barton and Mrs. Curren have “the desire to write: a desire to live self from within, a desire for the swollen belly, for language, for blood” (881), and their roles as mothers bring them closer to Cixous’s feminine writing because “a woman is never far from ‘mother’…[and] [t]here is always within her at least a little of that good mother’s milk. She writes in white ink” (881). Woman’s sex-specific experience as mother, who keeps the other in her body and brings the other to life, puts writing into the feminine economy on the one hand and on the other metaphorically provides close connection between writing and childbirth.

Cixous in both *The Newly Born Woman* and “Coming to Writing” makes vivid comparisons between writing and childbirth. She says:

> Writing is the passageway, the entrance, the exit, the dwelling place of the other in me—the other that I am and am not, that I don’t know how to be, but that I feel passing, that makes me live—that tears me apart, disturbs me, changes me, who?—a feminine one, some?—several, some unknown, which is indeed that gives me the desire to know and from which all life soars. (*The Newly Born Woman* 85-6)

Writing: as if I had the urge to go on enjoying, to feel full, to push, to feel
the force of my muscles, and my harmony, to be pregnant and at the same time to give myself the joys of parturition, the joys of both the mother and the child. To give birth to myself and to nurse my self. Life summons life. (“Coming to Writing” 31)

The process of writing is metaphorically related to woman’s experiences of pregnancy and childbirth. Woman’s body can be seen as the place of writing. Ideas enter woman’s body and she keeps these ideas alive; when the right time comes, she squeezes words out of her body. Writing, to some extent, is very likely to give birth to another “baby” because woman’s body is also “the passageway, the entrance, the exit, the dwelling place” of the living other during her pregnancy and parturition. When the sperms enter the cervix (entrance and passageway) and arrive at the oviduct, and one of them meets the ovum and fertilizes it, a new life starts. This new life grows in a mother’s womb (the dwelling place) and when the baby is mature enough, the mother pushes it “through the gates of bone” (the exit) with the force of her muscles and this baby leaves the mother’s body to “the radiance outside” (Coetzee, *Age of Iron* 59). Interestingly, during woman’s pregnancy, she writes life with red ink (blood) and after her parturition, she writes life with white ink (milk). Therefore, like a real baby in a woman’s body, writing is also the living “baby” within, waiting to be delivered through the writer’s body. Both writing and childbirth write/create life.

In *Age of Iron*, Mrs. Curren starts an analogy between childbirth and (literary) creation by saying:

> [W]hen you bear a child from your own body you give your life to that child. Above all to the first child, the firstborn. Your life is no longer with you, it is no longer yours, it is with the child. That is why we do
not really die: we simply pass on our life, the life that was for a while in
us, and are left behind. (76; emphasis mine)

Mrs. Curren stresses when a woman is pregnant, she gives her life to that child and
passes on her life in this certain child. So, Mrs. Curren does not really die; she lives
on in her daughter, who is “flesh of [her] flesh, blood of [her] blood” (64). Childbirth
is Mrs. Curren’s way of living on. However, Mrs. Curren says that “[she] cannot live
without a child. [She] cannot die without a child” (139). Since Mrs. Curren’s
daughter lives far away from her in America, how could Mrs. Curren live and die
without a child? Cixous says: “You want to produce a text when you are incapable of
producing a child properly?” (“Coming to Writing” 31). Interestingly, Mrs. Curren
states that “[f]or twenty years [she has] not bled, bleeding every month into foreign
soil” (Coetzee, *Age of Iron* 64). Tellingly, Mrs. Curren is incapable of producing a
child because she does not have menses anymore. Therefore, like what Cixous says,
Mrs. Curren turns to writing, longing to produce another child. She tells her
daughter:

So day by day I render myself into words and pack the words into the
page like sweets: like sweets for my daughter, for her birthday, for the
day of her birth. Words out of my body, drops of myself, for her to
unpack in her own time, to take in, to suck, to absorb (9).

This is my life, these words, these tracings of the movements of crabbed
digits over the page. These words, as you read them, if you read them,
enter you and draw breath again. They are, if you like, my way of living
on (131; emphasis mine).

As Cixous points out that “[l]ife becomes text starting out from [her] body” (“Coming
to Writing” 52), Mrs. Curren’s body becomes the text and her act of writing vividly
echoes the image of childbirth in a metaphorical way. She lives on through these
words. Her breath of life inhales and exhales in every word she writes; her every drop
of blood changes into every drop of ink she uses in her letter; her every string of soul
changes into every line of the letter; her every inch of flesh changes into every page of
the letter. She is fully present in this letter. She exists in writing and this is exactly her
way of living on. With this “childbirth-writing-life” connection, Mrs. Curren passes
on her life through childbirth/writing.

Also, the idea that writing creates life and keeps a person alive appears in Foe.
When Susan Barton finds out that Cruso does not keep any records of his life on the
island, she asks him:

                                 Would you not regret it that you could not bring back with you some
records of your years of shipwreck, so that what you have passed through
shall not die from memory? (Coetzee, Foe 17)

Susan Barton considers writing as a way to prevent all the memories from dying. In
addition, there is another clue showing writing is a means of living one’s life on.
Susan Barton asks Friday: “Is writing not a fine thing, Friday? Are you not filled with
joy to know that you will live forever, after a manner?” (58) Susan Barton here points
out that writing keeps a person alive forever. Also, in one of her letters to Foe, Susan
Barton tells him:

                                 I have your table to sit at, your window to gaze through. I write with your
pen on your paper, and when the sheets are completed they go into your
chest. So your life continues to be lived, though you are gone. (65)

Evidently, Writing makes one’s life continue even this person is gone. Here is an
example of how writing lives on even the writer is dead. In the last part of Foe, when
the anonymous character dives into the wreck, he/she discovers the scripts of Susan Barton’s handwriting to Foe, which says: “Dear Mr Foe, At last I could row no further” (155). Here, we can clearly see that although Susan Barton dies, her writings still remain undestroyed. When the future comers visit the wreck under the sea, they will easily figure out that these writings belong to Susan Barton and her name and life will be known to the public. Since writing creates life, writing keeps death away. Like what Cixous says, “writing is endless. Everlasting. Eternal” (“Coming to Writing” 23). She also claims that she “[writes] to bar death” (5) and thus she becomes “the enemy of death” (25):

> My voice repels death; my death; your death; my voice is my other. I write and you are not dead. The other is safe if I write.

> Writing is good: it’s what never ends. The simplest, most secure other circulates inside me. Like blood: there’s no lack of it. It can become impoverished. But you manufacture it and replenish it. In me is the word of blood, which will not ease before my end. (4-5; emphasis mine)

Cixous suggests that writing is her strong weapon to repel death and as long as she writes, her “other” will not die. The notion that writing circulates in Cixous’s body like blood reminds us again the relation between writing and life. Writing creates life and repels death. Mrs. Curren also has this similar idea because she thinks that “[d]eath may indeed be the last great foe of writing, but writing is also the foe of death” and “writing [holds] death at arm’s length” (Coetzee, Age of Iron 115-6).

However, writing’s relationship with death is amusing. Writing repels death but death brings writing; their relationship is interdependent. Cixous puts great emphasis on the inevitable but necessary quality of death when it comes to writing. She states:
Without it—my death—I wouldn’t have written. […] Writing is, in a certain sense (I don’t believe I’m mistaken in thinking that there are certain universal traits in our passage to death), first of all the difference of a last sigh, of a phrase seized with terror; and simultaneously already the headlong flight, the shudder of horror—for in death we know the greatest, the most repellent suffering—and the turning back again, the unspeakable, undisclosable nostalgia of what one has known in this moment of marriage with death. (37)

Cixous indicates that we discover the suffering, the unspeakable and the undisclosable when we face death. Interestingly, what is worth noting here is that the function of writing is exactly to free oneself from the suffering, the unspeakable and the undisclosable. Without death, writing will not live. Further, Cixous elaborates that you must have been loved by death to be born and move on to writing.

The condition on which beginning to write becomes necessary—(and)—impossible: losing everything, having once lost everything. […] And so when you have lost everything, no more roads, no direction, no field signs, no ground, not thoughts able to resist other thoughts, when you are lost, when you become the panicky movement of getting lost, then, that’s when, […] (38)

Like what Cixous has suggested, Susan Barton and Mrs. Curren are the ones loved by death. Susan Barton survives from a deadly shipwreck and has once lost everything; Mrs. Curren is approaching to her death and going to lose everything. After they lose/are going to lose everything, they come to writing; and, when they come to
writing, they have everything. For Cixous, the end is the beginning:

In the beginning, there is an end. Don’t be afraid: it’s your death that is dying. Then: all the beginnings.

When you have come to the end, only then can Beginning come to you.

(41)

The end creates another new beginning because writing brings Susan Barton and Mrs. Curren new lives; they are not really dead since it is the death that is dying. In sum, writing/childbirth creates life, life keeps death away, death brings writing, and writing carries life again; Cixous and Coetzee illuminatingly reveal the close connections between writing, life and death.

Coetzee’s biological sex as a man does not exclude him from the field of feminine writing. Clearly, Cixous in her writings keeps emphasizing that biological sex is definitely not the core to determine feminine writing. She says:

*Great care must be taken in working on feminine writing not to get trapped by names:* to be signed with a woman’s name doesn’t necessarily make a piece of writing feminine. It could quite well be masculine writing, and conversely, the fact that a piece of writing is signed with a man’s name does not in itself exclude femininity. *It’s rare, but you can sometimes find femininity in writings signed by men: it does happen.*

(“Castration or Decapitation?” 52; emphasis mine)

Feminine writing cannot be trapped by the author’s biological sex; a work signed by a woman’s name does not guarantee that it is feminine writing and vice versa. Men can still practice feminine writing as long as he breaks down the traditional confinements of the binary concept of sex, which is a dangerous trap because a lot of writers are stuck in the man/masculine and woman/feminine labyrinths. Coetzee ingeniously uses
female protagonists to be the story tellers to voice for themselves and to free them from their suppressed positions in history. In addition, Rachel Gutierrez in her article “What Is a Feminist Biography?” states that when writing a woman’s biography, the male author must be very careful because he “has not gone through the oppression and discrimination that women have experienced, thus his insight has to result from a deep study of and full commitment to his subject” (53). Actually, Coetzee’s ingenious delineation of women’s sex-specific experience such as pregnancy and childbirth in a metaphorical way provides him a better insight into men’s participation in feminism.

As a matter of fact, feminism is not only for women alone; men have the responsibility to involve themselves in it because all people, regardless of gender, race and class, are under the control of the patriarchal system. As for this issue, Stephen Heath says:

_Feminism is also a subject for men, _what it is about obviously concerns them; they have to learn to make it their affair, to carry it through into our lives. Feminism speaks to me, not principally nor equally but _too_, to me too: the definitions and images and stories and laws and institutions oppressive of women that it challenges, ends, involve me since _not only_ will I find myself _playing some part in their reproduction_ but _I too am caught up in them, given as ‘man’ in their reflection, confined in that place which is then presented as ‘mine.’_” (9; emphasis mine)

When the patriarchal system oppresses how women should act like, it at the same time expects what men should do. Therefore, this rigid and ridiculous system should be broken. In the next chapter, I shall present how Coetzee breaks down the traditional binary man/masculine and woman/feminine stereotypes by creating the fluidity gender in the main characters.
Chapter Three: The Chiasmatic Infiltration of the Sexual Stereotypes

In our work, we are motivated by the inscription of these differences which cannot be contained by the labels man/woman, masculine/feminine. Difference transcends, it traverse everything that exits.

Hélène Cixous, 149

In a conversation with Susan Sellers, Cixous points out what she and other members of the Centre d’Etudes Féminines are concerned about in writing is to transcend the traditional binary labels of man/masculine and woman/feminine. For Cixous, men are not necessarily masculine and women are not necessarily feminine; for some men, femininity in them is not repressed and for some women, masculinity is not excluded from their physical and/or psychological make-up. Coetzee’s female protagonists in *Foe* and *Age of Iron* do not hide their masculine sides and neither do their male companions veil their feminine sides. Accordingly, sometimes Susan Barton and Mrs. Curren appear to be more masculine than their male companions while Cruso, Friday, Foe and Vercueil are more feminine than their heroines. This chapter aims to present how Coetzee breaks down the dichotomy of man/masculine and woman/feminine in *Foe* and *Age of Iron*. Providing the possibility of the characters’ fluid and multiple identities, Coetzee reveals the masculine sides of the two female protagonists and the feminine sides of the male characters. In addition, after examining the chiasmatic infiltration of the traditional sexual stereotypes, this chapter further provides a brief discussion of the features of feminine texts, in which *Foe* and *Age of Iron* are included.

Before delving into the chiasmatic infiltration of the traditional sexual stereotypes, I shall start a concise discussion about the issue of castration. Why is this
issue so important? What is castration’s relation to the chiasmatic infiltration of the traditional sexual stereotypes I want to discuss in this chapter? My purposes are to break down the rigid binary concept of man/masculine and woman/feminine and to provide a possible space for the fluidity of sexual stereotypes. I argue that man can be feminine and woman can be masculine. Accordingly, I shall break down the traditional patriarchal expectation of how man and woman should act like.

Nevertheless, here comes a problem: if a man does not act like a man that the patriarchal system sets for him, he is castrated, in a sense. On the other hand, if a woman acts like a man rather than acting like a woman, is she castrated too? What is the definition of castration? Toril Moi provides three definitions for castration:

In Freudian and Lacanian theory, *castration* is used in three different senses, namely, (1) to signify *lack* as a general human condition, (2) to signify *sexual difference* or *femininity*, and (3) to signify the discovery of our own “one-sexedness,” that is to say, the discovery that we can only ever be one sex, in the sense that we can only ever have one body. (870)

Obviously, from the statement above, we can find out that, first, having a lack is considered as castration. Second, being castrated means being feminine. Third, the idea of sex seems to be fixed; one should act according to his/her sex. However, these implications are not very satisfactory ones. Moi raises some questions: “But how do we get that idea? Why is that which is castrated *defined* as feminine? Why not call it masculine…?” (868–69). These are interesting questions because for a long time we have been living in a world constructed by the patriarchal system. As a matter of fact, castration is the very product of the patriarchal system. The notion of castration forbids any possibility and space of the fluidity of two sexes. To be more concise, there is no castration at all because the term castration is coined by the patriarchal
system, which uses this to place restrictions on both man and woman. Therefore, Frann Michel suggests that it is vitally important to “[subvert] existing systems of signification, the phallogocentrism they signify, and the patriarchy that phallogocentrism supports” (35).

More importantly, we should keep in mind that the relationship between body and sexed subjectivity is neither necessary (that would be biological determinism) nor arbitrary (that would be a form of idealism, a denial of the material structure of the body) but contingent. It is contingent and not necessary because not all women will take up a feminine position, just as not all men will take up a masculine position; it’s not arbitrary since there is a general expectation that women on the whole will take up a feminine position. (Moi 856)

Importantly, one’s biological/anatomical body does not necessarily represent his or her psychosexual identities. Both man and woman have their free will to choose how they would like to display themselves. By following this assumption, in the following parts I shall focus my analytical perspective on how the male characters display the feminine and how the female characters display the masculine. My focus is not how these characters demonstrate the biological or physical characteristics of the opposite sex; instead, what I am concerned about is how characters present their psychosexual identities through the interactions with the opposite sex. I define their interrelations as “chiasmatic infiltration” (see fig. 3 and 4) because what I intend to show here is how

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Fig. 3
characters’ latent masculine or feminine sides are aroused and/or influenced by the opposite sex through their interactions. But, I want to emphasize that the chiasmatic infiltration of the masculine and the feminine does not mean man totally loses his masculine sides and woman entirely loses her feminine sides. The point is, man still has his masculine sides and woman still acquires her feminine sides; it is through the interactions of the opposite sex that characters reveal their latent opposite sides.

Gender in *Foe* and *Age of Iron* is not fixed; woman can be a masculine female and man can be a feminine male. To reveal the latent/psychological sides of the characters regardless of their manifest/physical appearance, I shall start my discussion of Susan Barton’s interrelations with Friday, Cruso and Foe first. Then, I shall provide another discussion of Mrs. Curren’s interrelations with Vercueil.

Peter E. Morgan in his article suggests that “Friday is the closest thing in the story to a traditional ‘feminine’ role model, appearing as he does as a sort of male domestic, passive and grateful, simple and devoted” (84). Friday, living on the island with Cruso alone for quite a long time, has been tamed to be Cruso’s submissive male domestic and an obedient servant. He obeys whatever Cruso orders and takes care of the domestic chores such as cooking and doing the laundry. Friday, like a housewife, helps manage Cruso’s habitation. Friday does not change his submissive position even after Susan Barton’s appearance on the island. Here exists a strange yet interesting phenomenon. Susan Barton says that after arriving on the island, she “[becomes] [Cruso’s] second subject, the first being his manservant Friday” (Coetzee, *Foe* 11),
but the truth is she is not treated as a servant at all. Instead, she is more like Friday’s hostess. She says:

“At first I was ashamed that [Friday] could see me abed, but then I reminded myself of how free the ladies of Bahia were before their servants, and so felt better.” (14)

At this time, Susan Barton might not dress properly abed, but she does not care Friday’s appearance at this private place. More interestingly, Friday, a man who has not known any woman for many years, does not show any desire for Susan Barton. Actually, Susan Barton bears this question in mind:

[W]hy did you [Friday] not desire me, neither you nor your master? A woman is cast ashore on your island, a tall woman with black hair and dark eyes, till a few hours past the companion of a sea-captain besotted with love of her. Surely desires kept banked for many years must have flamed up within you. Why did I not catch you stealing glances from behind a rock while I bathed? (86)

Obviously, Friday does not show even a little bit instinctual desire for Susan Barton. Therefore, Susan Barton concludes that Friday “is very likely a virgin” (80), who “are even unacquainted with the parts of generation” (80). However, displaying the feminine does not mean that Friday’s masculine sides are totally eliminated. For example, Susan Barton asks Friday for taking a look at what he has drawn on the slate, Friday refuses to show it to her. He “[puts] three fingers into his mouth and [wets] them with spittle and [rubs] the slate clean” (147). Being not obedient and passive like what he used to be, Friday reacts against Susan Barton’s order for the very first time. From here, we can see that Friday is not actually a man without desire—any desire, broadly speaking. Friday still has his own will and has something that he wants to
insist on.

Also, Susan Barton points out that, like Friday, Cruso does not have the desire, either. But, the “desire” here does not merely refer to Cruso’s sexual desire since he has sexual intercourse with Susan Barton once (or is it because he desires Susan Barton for only one time, he is described as a man lack of desire?). On the other hand, Cruso’s lack of “desire” refers to his lack of enthusiasm for life; to be more precise, as Susan Barton says, Cruso has “too little desire to escape, too little desire for a new life” (88). There is a conversation between Susan Barton and Cruso, which shows his “too little desire to escape”:

“May I ask, sir,” said I, after a while: “Why in all these years have you not built a boat and made your escape from this island?”

“And where should I escape to?” he replied, smiling to himself as though no answer were possible.

“Why, you might sail to the coast of Brazil, or meet a ship and be saved.”

“Brazil is hundreds of miles distant, and full of cannibals,” said he. “As for sailing ships, we shall see sailing-ships as well and better by staying at home.” (13; emphasis mine)

Cruso’s “indifference to salvation” (14) and inclination to be “his dying day king of his tiny realm” (14) can be easily seen from this conversation. As Jo Alyson Parker keenly observes that “[y]et instead of a Crusoe whose industrious labor over a 28-year span enables the (re)creation of civilization, Coetzee imagines a Cruso disinterested in time-keeping or progress and whose life lacks the forward development and revelatory instance upon which narrative is predicated” (19). Indeed, there is no clue showing Cruso’s act of time-keeping because he “lack[s] the inclination to keep one”
And, more importantly,

[T]he desire to escape [has] dwindled within him. His heart was set on remaining to his dying day king of his tiny realm. In truth it was not fear of pirates or cannibals that held him from making bonfires or dancing about on the hilltop waving his hat, but indifference to salvation, and habit, and the stubbornness of old age. (13-4; emphasis mine)

Unlike Daniel Defoe’s masculine, adventurous and ambitious Crusoe, Coetzee’s Cruso has a narrow vision, who is passive towards everything and is content with his dull life on the island. Ironically, guarding his “tiny realm” without “[escaping] to civilization” (16) seems to be the most important thing Cruso cares about. No progress is made in his island life. Actually, as for the island, Susan Barton tells the reader that this island is not “a garden of desire” but “a garden of labour” (86).

However, the mighty labor Cruso makes on the island is “seemingly futile task” (Parker, 21) because Cruso digs out with great efforts are not for his own sake but for the future planters. He says: “The planting is reserved for those who come after us and have the foresight to bring seed. I only clear the ground for them” (Coetzee, Foe 33). Amusingly, Cruso’s “foresight” of clearing the ground for the future planters seems to be an unrealistic and foolish idea. Cruso is more like a daydreamer. Why does not Cruso do this for his own benefit of getting a better life? How does he know that there will be future comers? How does he know that here is nothing to plant? Cruso’s statement that “[w]e have nothing to plant” (33) is not a satisfactory answer because he could explore the island to find plants to plant or animals to keep like what Crusoe does; what is more, at least he should save some useful tools from the ship wreck to “[contrive] a less laborious life” (16). None of these does Cruso do. Coetzee subverts the eighteenth-century masculine hero Robinson Crusoe by exposing Cruso’s
feminine sides. Nevertheless, though Cruso acts more feminine in the novel, his masculine sides are not erased. For example, when Cruso knows that Susan Baton explores the island without his permission, he says angrily: “While you live under my roof you will do as I instruct” (20). Here, we can see that Cruso still has the desire to control things and wants everything to be done according to his will.

In addition, the island Cruso and Friday live on is a garden lack of desire and is a place lack of productivity as well. No plants are cultivated and no animals are kept on the island; this island is a barren one. Friday and Cruso are barren, too. Writing (literary creation) in *Foe* and *Age of Iron* is metaphorically related to the image of childbirth but neither Cruso nor Friday produces any writings. To a certain extent, they lose the ability and/or the desire to produce. Friday’s tongue, according to Cruso, is cut off by the slavers (23) but we will never know the truth because “the only tongue that can tell Friday’s secret is the tongue he has lost!” (67). Friday can neither speak nor write; therefore, our perceptions of Friday come from Susan Barton’s delineations of him. Susan Barton says: “No matter what [Friday] is to himself (is he anything to himself?—how can he tell us), what he is to the world is what I make of him” (122). However, we might bear the following questions in mind: Does not Friday draw something when Susan Barton teaches him how to write? Does he not express himself through his drawing? Yes and no. Friday does draw something on the slate and the paper but what is worth noting here is that it is Susan Barton and Foe that give the interpretations of Friday’s drawings. For example, in the end of the third part of *Foe*, Friday draws something on the paper. Susan Barton and Foe thinks that he is drawing “the letter o” (152). Here is the conversation between Susan Barton and Foe:

‘Is Friday learning to write?’ asked Foe.
'He is writing, after a fashion,’ I [Susan Barton] said. ‘He is writing the letter $o$.’

‘It is a beginning,’ said Foe. ‘Tomorrow you must teach him $a$.’ (152)

The essential point is, how could Susan Barton and Foe know that Friday is writing the letter $o$? How could they be sure about this since it is very probable that Friday is writing something else? Again, here comes the issue of Friday’s muteness. As Richard Begam suggests

[t]hat this mut(e)ilation cannot be heard, that it can only be written, will become the pivotal point around which Coetzee’s entire novel turns. This means that the only way Friday’s story will be told is through Susan and Foe, which is to say, through the intercession of white writing. (119)

Sarcastically, Friday could not interpret his drawings by himself; sadly, he cannot represent himself but can only be represented. On the other hand, Cruso does not produce anything on the island. It is obvious that Cruso does not leave any marks in his habitation, not to mention his writings. Cruso cannot present his stories, either; his stories are represented by Susan Barton. Friday and Cruso have become “part of Susan Barton’s narrative” (Attridge 173); they only exist “in relation to Susan Barton” (179) and become Susan Barton’s attachments.

Among Susan Barton’s male companions, Foe is the only man who writes, but actually we know very few about his writings. What we know about him is that he is an author “who had heard many confessions” (Coetzee, Foe 48) and promises to write down the story Susan Barton wants. Susan Barton frequently mentions Foe’s acts of writing; for example, one day Susan Barton tells Friday:

“In it is a story written by the renowned Mr Foe. You do not know the gentleman, but at this very moment he is engaged in writing another story,
which is your story, and you master’s and mine.” (58)

And, one day when Susan Barton finds out that Foe leaves his house to flee from the pursuit of the bailiffs, she starts to worry if Foe will “be able to proceed with [his] writing in prison” (64). We are imbued with an idea that Foe seems to be occupied with his writing all day long; nevertheless, we never see his replies to Susan Barton and neither do we see the scripts of Susan Barton’s story he promises to write. What we get are Susan Barton’s “descriptions” of Foe’s acts of writing but we never see his real acts of writing. Foe is not productive in literary creation; he produces nothing. On the other hand, Sue Kossew demonstrates that there exists a “continual reversing of sexual stereotypes in [Susan Barton’s] relationship with Foe” (172); this “gender reversal” is especially pointed out in David Attwell’s writing (J. M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing 110), too. In the closing of the third part of Foe, Susan Barton says:

“It is not whoring to entertain other people’s stories and return them to the world better dressed. If there were not authors to perform such an office, the world would be all the poorer. Am I to damn you as a whore for welcoming me and embracing me and receiving my story? You gave me a home when I had none. I think of you as a mistress, or even, if I dare speak the word, as a wife.” (Coetzee, Foe 152; emphasis mine)

Susan Barton says that because Foe gives her a home for shelter, she considers him as her mistress, or a wife, to be more precise. Since Foe is a male, why does not Susan Barton consider him as her husband rather than a wife? My explanation for this intriguing phenomenon here is that Susan Barton psychologically sees herself more masculine than feminine. As a matter of fact, Susan Barton displays herself as more masculine than Friday, Cruso and Foe; this will be discussed later. But, just like
Friday and Cruso, Foe does not hide his masculine sides. For example, Foe shows his instinctual desire for Susan Barton. She says:

> Through all this talk Foe had stood stock still by the fireplace. I expected an answer, for never before had he failed for words. But instead, without preliminaries, *he approached me and took me in his arms and kissed me*; and, as the girl had responded before, I felt my lips answer his kiss (but to whom do I confess this?) as a woman’s answer her lover’s. (134; emphasis mine)

Clearly, Foe does not repress his masculine desire inside.

On the other hand, in *Age of Iron*, Vercueil, who is Mrs. Curren’s attachment, is a homeless drunken derelict. Like Friday and Cruso, Vercueil is presented as a man who is not as masculine as the traditional patriarchal system expects. His past experience at sea seems to change his attitude towards life. Here is a conversation between Mrs. Curren and Vercueil:

> “Don’t you miss the sea?” I asked.
> “I’ll never set foot in a boat again,” he replied decidedly.
> “Why?”
> “Because next time I won’t be so lucky.” (Coetzee, *Age of Iron* 186)

Actually, Vercueil lost the use of his fingers in an accident at sea (186) and after that accident he seems to be afraid of being at sea; he is not a man full of adventure and optimism anymore. He leads a passive and idle life, wandering in the street without doing anything “useful” to the society. But, acting more feminine does not mean that Vercueil’s masculine sides are obliterated. Vercueil is not always inactive in his interaction with Mrs. Curren. For example, when Vercueil and Mrs. Curren take a drive, he directs her which way to go. Mrs. Curren sees him as “a husband giving a
driving lesson” (Coetzee, *Age of Iron* 29). So, we can see that Vercueil still has the desire to control things.

Unlike those men who are not productive in literary creation, women (Susan Barton and Mrs. Curren) in the two novels take on the task of writing down the truths. They seem to replace men’s roles as writers, especially in the case of Susan Barton who has strong will to control what she wants to include in her story. As a matter of fact, both Susan Barton and Mrs. Curren are represented as more masculine than their male companions.

Even though Susan Barton is the only female on the island, she is not the one that shows the feminine sides the most. Interestingly, she shows more masculine sides than the men. For example, after Cruso knows that Susan Barton explores the island (which is against Cruso’s will), he is very angry:

> “While you live under my roof you will do as I instruct!” he cried, striking his spade into the earth, not even waiting till Friday was out of earshot. *but if he thought by angry looks to inspire me [Susan Barton] to fear and slavish obedience, he soon found he was mistaken. “I am on your island, Mr Cruso, not by choice but by ill luck,” I replied, standing up (and I was nearly as tall as he).”* (20; emphasis mine)

Susan Barton here retorts on Cruso and declares that she is an individual having her own will, so she does not have to obey Cruso’s order. She courageously challenges the traditional patriarchal system that woman must obey men like a slave. Also, she particularly stresses she is nearly as tall as Cruso, implying that she and Cruso stand in equal position and that she does not think she is inferior. Actually, Susan Barton describes herself as “exiled [queen] who come[s] to claim the [island]” who dismays Friday and Cruso (86). Compared with Friday and Cruso, Susan Barton shows more
masculine sides: she is independent, courageous and self-conscious, and more importantly, she has the desire. However, Susan Barton does not erase her feminine sides. For example, in her conversation with Cruso, Susan Barton will hold different points of views from his; sometimes she talks back but sometimes she chooses not to do so. There are two obvious examples. When they are discussing about whether a person should leave any record of his/her life, Cruso says he does not find it necessary; obviously, Susan Barton does not agree with him, but she finally chooses to hold her peace (18). There is another time that Susan Barton and Cruso have a discussion about his habitation, but she finds it difficult to let Curso accept her advice. Therefore, she holds her tongue (27). Susan Barton, though most of the time she displays her masculine sides, is passive sometimes.

Also, in *Age of Iron*, Mrs. Curren does not hide her masculine sides; or to be more precise, she has always wanted to show her masculine traits. For example, when she and Vercueil take a drive, Vercueil tells her that she is heading for the wrong way, she feels a little bit agonized. She thinks: “I hid my chagrin. I have always wished to be thought a capable person. Now more than ever, with incapacity looming” (Coetzee, *Age of Iron* 18). Mrs. Curren honestly reveals that she always wants to be a capable person and that she does not like the feeling of showing her incapability. Moreover, she is a woman who has a strong will of her own. After seeing Bheki’s dead body in Guguletu, a police is “going to send for an escort to take [Mrs. Curren] back to the road” (106). But she refuses: “I shook my head. I was in command of myself” (106). Tellingly, she firmly insists that she is her own commander. As a matter of fact, Mrs. Curren describes herself as a castrated man by saying: “I am like a man who has been castrated. Castrated in maturity. I try to imagine how life is for a man to whom that has been done” (120). Mrs. Curren here is disappointed with herself because she
always wants to be a capable and masculine person. In her psychological recognition, she regards herself as a masculine person and when she fails to act like this, she describes herself as a castrated “man” instead of “woman”. As I have always emphasized, a woman acting more masculine does not mean she loses her feminine sides. Mrs. Curren still has her feminine sides. For example, nursing has always been thought as a very important trait for woman. In the novel, Mrs. Curren shows her hospitality to Vercueil and gives him the food, money, job and care without any return.

Intriguingly, in *Foe* and *Age of Iron*, it is women that hold the pens to write while men stay unproductive. More importantly, women display more masculine sides than men, and vice versa. Coetzee’s ingenious performance of the chiasmatic infiltration of sexual stereotypes provides a open way for the fluidity of gender. Through the interaction with the opposite sex, the feminine is aroused in men and the masculine is aroused in women. But, we have to keep in mind that a man displays himself in feminine way does not mean that his masculine sides is erased. And, following the same logic, a woman’s feminine sides are not obliterated just because she displays herself in a masculine way. What Coetzee does is to make men act out the femininity hidden in their male bodies and makes women show the masculinity veiled in their female bodies. Through the representations of the characters discussed in this chapter, Coetzee breaks down the traditional binary concept of gender: men do not have to be masculine and women do not have to be feminine. Characters are instilled in multiple identities. Gender in Coetzee’s novels is unfixed, fluid and open to multiple possibilities.

In addition to the chiasmatic infiltration of sexual stereotypes, Coetzee leaves the endings of *Foe* and *Age of Iron* some open space for the readers’ imagination.
Interestingly, Coetzee’s practice of writing reflects Cixous’s idea of “a feminine textual body” (“Castration or Decapitation?” 53). She elaborates:

A feminine textual body is recognized by the fact that it is always endless, without ending: there’s no closure, it doesn’t stop, and it’s this that very often makes the feminine text difficult to read. For we’ve learned to read book that basically pose the word “end.” But this one doesn’t finish, a feminine text goes on and on and at a certain moment the volume comes to an end but the writing continues and for the reader this means being thrust into the void. These are texts that work on the beginning but not the origin. (53)

Obviously, Foe’s ending is an amusing case. It is not hard to find out that there is not a continuation between the third part and the fourth part. The third part ends with Susan Barton’s discussion with Foe about Friday’s writing, but suddenly, the scene switches to the undersea scene and ends with the unstopped and uninterrupted stream coming out from Friday’s mouth. Is this ending the ending? No. The story does not come to an end. The story flows with the stream, “washing the cliffs and shores of the island [and running] northward and southward to the ends of the earth” (157) and leaves some space for any possible interpretations. Similarly, the ending of Age of Iron also leaves some possible space for readers’ interpretations. This novel stops in a scene where Mrs. Curren dies in Vecueil’s strong embrace without further explanations of what’s going on next. There exist several insolvable questions. What happens to Mrs. Curren’s letter? Will Verceuil send it? Will Mrs. Curren’s daughter receive it? We never know the answers. The ending is open to various possibilities. Foe and Age of Iron belong to “the text[s] of the unforeseeable” (Cixous, “Castration or Decapitation?” 53); we can never predict the developments of the stories.
The chiasmatic infiltration of sexual stereotypes of characters and the open endings of novels provide us a better insight into Cixous’s conceptualization of feminine writing. Coetzee, though as a man, breaks down the traditional confinements which imprison both men and women and provides a chance for them to free themselves from this big cage of patriarchal system.
Conclusion

“I think of Norman Morrison
the Buddhists of Saigon
the black teacher last week
who put himself to death
to waken guilt in hearts
too numb to get the message
in a world masculinity made
unfit for women or men”
—Adrienne Rich, “Merced”

What Adrienne Rich tries to indicate in “Merced” is that the world is made by
the patriarchal system and “unfit for women or men.” Indeed, for quite a long time,
both men and women have been living in a world constructed by the patriarchal
values, with their thought and actions restricted. Both men and women are the victims
of the patriarchal system and both of them need to be freed from this rigid system.
And this is the reason why feminism is also very important for men because all people,
regardless of gender, age or class, are involved in this big issue. Feminism is for
everyone; all of us need to “move outside that male-centered, binary logic” (Jones
15).

In Foe and Age of Iron, Coetzee seems to “move outside that male-centered,
binary logic” and “[is] capable of crossing the divide of sexual difference” (Cixous;
qtd. in Thaïs E. Morgan 5) through his practice of feminine writing. Writing, as
Cixous suggests, is where femininity is often constructed; therefore, writing serves as
the most appropriate way to reconsider the problematic of the sexual difference. As a
man, can Coetzee fully represent women’s experiences? What are his limits? In terms
of the issue of men writing the feminine, Thaïs E. Morgan and Rachel Gutierrez have
raised some interesting questions. Thaïs E. Morgan asks:
What does it mean to say that a male author write the feminine? Is he writing as (identifying with) a woman? Or writing like (mimicking, and perhaps mocking) a woman? Or writing through a woman (an Other that confirms his own identity as the Same)? (1)

Thaïs E. Morgan is concerned about what it means for a male author to write the feminine. He shows three possible interpretations. One is that man writes to identify with a woman, another is that man writes to make a parody of feminism and the third is that man writes as an Other to confirms his identity as woman. Morgan’s focus here is that as a man and an Other, can a male author identify himself with woman? And how does he practice his identification with woman through writing? Similarly, in her article, Rachel Gutierrez also expresses her worry of men presenting women’s stories. She states that when writing a woman’s biography, the male author must be very careful because he “has not gone through the oppression and discrimination that women have experienced, thus his insight has to result from a deep study of and full commitment to his subject” (53). Indeed, Gutierrez here makes an important point. Men’s living experiences are greatly different from women’s, but Coetzee presents a great deal of women’s sex-specific experiences such as pregnancy and childbirth in his writings. As a man lack of women’s experiences, is Coetzee qualified to writing the feminine? If yes, then why? How does he do it?

Indeed, both Morgan and Gutierrez have pointed out the pivotal questions in Coetzee’s practice of feminine writing. Undeniably, as a male author, Coetzee does have his limits of writing the feminine; however, he finds his own ways to make his writings much closer to it. As I have mentioned, femininity is constructed in writing, so writing becomes the most appropriate way for Coetzee to consider the issue of feminine writing. Though not having women’s sex-specific experiences, Coetzee uses
his “sympathetic imagination” to overcome his biological differences from women. Elizabeth Costello states in *The Lives of Animals* that we do not have to be someone or something if we want to write about him/her/it. All we have to do is to use our sympathetic imagination because it is boundless (Coetzee 35); therefore, Coetzee can imagine anyone he desires to be or anything he wants to experience. The sympathetic imagination gives him “the capacity to imagine [himself] as someone else” (35) and allows him to “share at times the being of another” (34). In Coetzee’s case, “another” refers to woman’s pregnancy and childbirth; by delineating “another,” Coetzee finds his identification with this “another.” Accordingly, through his sympathetic imagination, Coetzee imagines woman’s experiences of pregnancy and childbirth and presents these experiences through his literary creation. By doing so, Coetzee overcomes man’s problematic position as a man when writing the feminine.

In addition, Coetzee further breaks down the rigid boundaries of man and woman in *Foe* and *Age of Iron*. Thaïs E. Morgan points out that “Cixous nevertheless implies that gender is negotiable and may be aligned with either of the two sexes (‘it’s up to him to say where his masculinity and femininity at’)” (2). As a matter of fact, gender is negotiable in these two novels. Coetzee does not set a fixed line between the masculine and the feminine; instead, he provides the characters an open space for them to perform or display their gender. And this is what I term as the chiasmatic infiltration of traditional gender sexual stereotypes. Through the interaction with the opposite sex, male characters’ feminine sides are aroused and female characters’ masculine sides are unveiled. Men are free to decide what they should be like and so are women. Men do not have to be masculine and women do not have to be feminine because one’s biological sex has no absolutely arbitrary relation to his/her psychological sex.
More importantly, Cixous keeps reminding us that feminine writing should not be trapped by its name. A work written in a woman’s name is not necessarily feminine and vice versa. We have to keep in mind that men are not excluded from feminine writing because biological sex is not the determinant factor. It is not surprising that man could still present feminine writing.

Coetzee is really an ingenious writer who presents his feminine writing in *Foe* and *Age of Iron* step by step. First of all, he provides his female protagonists Susan Barton and Mrs. Curren a means to voice for themselves through their letter-diary writings. And, through the female protagonists’ writings, characters share two geometric relationships. One is “narrator-writer/medium-companion/narratee-reader” structure, which clearly shows characters’ roles as “mediating agents and participant actors.” The other is the quasi father-mother-daughter relationship, which shows characters’ “personal relationships within the context of family.” Interestingly, the former relationship overturns the stereotypes of man being the author and the latter breaks down the cycle of family. This is Coetzee’s first step to challenge the patriarchal system. Coetzee’s second step is to use his “sympathetic imagination” to present women’s sex-specific experiences of pregnancy and childbirth. He makes a good example of how man overcomes his biological difference to delineate women’s experiences. Creating the fluidity of gender identities is Coetzee’s third step to break down the binary dualities of man/masculine and woman/feminine. He makes his male characters display their feminine sides and makes her female characters perform their masculine sides. It is undeniable that as a male author, Coetzee still has his own limits of presenting feminine writing to its fullest extent (but who can fully present it?); therefore, Coetzee’s *Foe* and *Age of Iron* can be legitimately considered as feminine writing.
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