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The Obstacles to and Solutions of Female Characters' Speech: Beatrice in Dante's *Vita Nuova* and *Purgatorio* and Susan in J. M. Coetzee's *Foe*

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AND
HARVEY MUDD COLLEGE

**THE OBSTACLES TO AND SOLUTIONS OF FEMALE CHARACTERS' SPEECH: BEATRICE IN
DANTE'S *VITA NUOVA* AND *PURGATORIO* AND SUSAN IN J. M. COETZEE'S *FOE***

SUBMITTED TO

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AND
PROFESSOR ISABEL BALSEIRO (HMC)
AND
DEAN NICHOLAS WARNER (CMC)

BY

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Introduction: Speaking and Silencing

Context

“In every story there is a silence, some sight concealed, some word unspoken, I believe. Till we have spoken the unspoken we have not come to the heart of the story” (*Foe* 141), says Foe, the Daniel Defoe-like character of J. M. Coetzee’s postcolonial reimagining of *Robinson Crusoe*, *Foe*. It is this “sp[eaking] the unspoken” that I am interested in, so that I may “come to the heart of the story,” or in this case, stories; my study will focus on the speaking and silencing of two female characters, Beatrice in Dante’s *Vita Nuova* and *Purgatorio* and Susan Barton in Coetzee’s *Foe*. I will examine their relationships to speaking, silence, authority, male characters, revision, stories, truth, and meaning.

Both authors wrote with an acute awareness of the political, cultural, and literary climates of their respective times. Dante’s *Divine Comedy* is the pilgrim’s account of his journey through Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise. The shades, penitents, and saved souls that the pilgrim meets come from his own time, history, literature, and religion. This epic poem is a political, theological, and literary work. *Foe* can be interpreted in light of the political, historical, cultural, and literary contexts in which it was written—its very title the unadulterated surname of the author of *Robinson Crusoe*, Daniel Defoe, and this just the beginning of the intertextuality of the novel. Coetzee, a white South African who was part of the generation that was supposed to benefit most from apartheid (Attwell), seems to be concerned with the stories of those who are often forgotten, ignored, or intentionally erased from canonical history. While works of fiction, all three texts have implications in the real worlds of the authors—and this search for

verisimilitude is encouraged by the texts. In analyzing what Dante and Coetzee do in their fictions, I will draw conclusions that move into the sphere of each author's reality.

Works under Consideration

The *Vita Nuova*, a series of poems annotated by Dante's own interpretation and analysis of the events described therein, is his attempt to make sense of his experiences on earth with Beatrice, the beautiful and virtuous woman who irrevocably changed him and gave him *vita nuova*, new life (*VN* 1). The *Vita Nuova* was written in the tradition of courtly love poetry, and Beatrice's character is described as women in such poetry typically are. She is characterized by Dante's carnal, earthly love for her, her virtue and the virtue she inspires in others, her link to God and heaven, and most importantly, the fact that she does not speak. She is a demure and silent woman. Dante's love for her passes through stages: first, it is largely an earthly, carnal love, then it becomes a love for her virtue, and lastly it resembles godly or heavenly love. However, in the final chapter, Dante does not seem to be entirely satisfied with what he has written, and he "resolve[s] to say no more about this blessed one until [he] would be capable of writing about her in a more worthy fashion" (85). This potential future work Dante refers to is often considered to be the *Divine Comedy*.

Beatrice appears again in *Purgatorio*, the second canticle of the *Divine Comedy*, in which the pilgrim climbs the seven terraces of the mountain (each corresponding to one of the cardinal sins), witnesses the penance of penitent souls, and records what he has seen. Once he reaches earthly paradise at the summit, he meets Beatrice again for the first time in ten years and neither the pilgrim nor the reader are prepared for her powerful voice. Instead of a warm welcome, she berates the pilgrim for his past transgressions and for misunderstanding and misrepresenting her

in his earlier work (the *Vita Nuova*). Dante the poet takes this opportunity to give the pilgrim his own confession and perform penance for the sins Beatrice accuses him of, and she is the reason for his subsequent revision of his earlier work and his understanding of her. This Beatrice, in sharp contrast to the Beatrice of the *Vita Nuova*, has a potent voice that she is by no means shy about using and she takes on various roles of authority.

Coetzee's *Foe* is often described as a postcolonial retelling of *Robinson Crusoe*. While this offers a pithy description, it is not entirely accurate. While Daniel Defoe's adventure tale features Crusoe as the hero, the protagonist of this story is Susan Barton, an Englishwoman who does not appear in the canonical text. Defoe is recast as a character, the renowned professional author Foe, who actively imposes his desires on Susan's story in an attempt to shape it into something resembling Defoe's novel. Friday is present in both tales, although he is a speaking character and cannibal who is "civilized" in Defoe's novel and a mute slave in *Foe*. The story begins when Susan has been cast away on a deserted island with Friday and the rough, enigmatic Cruso. Upon her rescue and return to England, Susan, followed by Friday, locates Foe to have him produce her account as a novel. In *Foe*, each character holds his or her own silence: Friday's tongue has been cut out and Susan faces obstacles in her quest to have her story told. Although Susan sought out Foe, she realizes that he means to embellish and change her tale, even though she wants to tell only a particular story. The novel ends with Susan's story unpublished—and possibly untold.

Although the works differ greatly in genre, content, and publication date, additional insight can be gained through studying them in concert. This project considers both Dante's and Coetzee's works through the lenses of feminism and postcolonialism, drawing particularly on contemporary ideas of native tongues, the Other, and the power of speech. While these concepts

are appropriately applied to *Foe*, they are anachronistically applied to Dante's works; however, they help provide insight into Beatrice's character and her relationship with Dante. Beatrice and Susan, while quite different characters, have similar relationships with speaking, silence, and the male characters. Both women take on a variety of roles in order to assert their authority, independence, and desires. And, as I will discuss, problems arise in the three works when the male characters speak for these female characters.

Dante and Coetzee are also concerned with revising or revisiting earlier writing—Dante his own work and Coetzee a canonical work. These updated works allow the readers a new understanding of what the authors intend and the significance of the texts. A revision directly implies that there was something wrong with the first attempt and that it required modification. What, then, was wrong with Dante's earlier work? What did he want to correct and why? What is the significance of using *Robinson Crusoe* as a source text, only to shunt its protagonist aside in favor of a character who did not appear in the original text? How does Foe's desire to rewrite Susan's story influence our understanding of the novel? These are questions I will attempt to answer in my analysis.

The Female Struggle for Speech

Having a voice means having the power, ability, and opportunity to express ideas about culture, gender, and identity, but more fundamentally, to express thoughts, ideas, and opinions. It is also a means of defending those ideas. Robert Post, a postcolonial critic, asserts that speech is “one of the most powerful implements for securing freedom and expression” (143). Ngugi wa Thiong'o, a Kenyan writer, asserts, “Language, any language, has a dual character: it is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture” (439). By corollary, not having a voice—being

silent—represents a lack of all these things. To be silenced, then, suggests the attack of an outside agent on one’s voice. The imposition of silence or overwhelming of a voice is then one of the worst types of oppression because it robs one of her means of communication and the ability to defend her ideas—losing a voice is the first step toward losing rights, identity, and agency. There are two sides to the power of speech: it can be used to assert agency, freedom, and independent thought or it can be used to oppress and speak for others. G. Scott Bishop, a postcolonial scholar, says it is important to “recognize[e] language as the tool of oppression it can be” (56).

The female struggle to find a voice and speak has become prominent in literary scholarship in recent decades. This struggle results from the oppression often attributed to patriarchal forces acting on women to silence them and deny them speech and authority. Simone de Beauvoir, in her seminal feminist work *The Second Sex*, first articulated the idea of the feminine Other—the idea that women are seen as inferior deviations from men, reduced to objects, and denied subjectivity. In addition, de Beauvoir writes that when women are seen as mysteries, men interpret them as incomprehensible, that is “to say, not that she is silent, but that her language is not understood” (1268). This incomprehensibility “justifies all [of men’s] privileges and even authorizes their abuse” (de Beauvoir 1267). Viewing women as objects without agency and without comprehensible language relegates and subjects them to a place beneath men in the patriarchal hierarchy. By claiming that women have an incomprehensible language, men absolve themselves of the responsibility of listening to them. In *Orientalism*, one of the first works to describe the same type of phenomenon in a cultural context, Edward Said describes a cultural rather than a gendered Other in the form of those colonized by the British Empire and “the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to

manage—and even produce—the Orient” (3). Said’s framework can also be used to see that the patriarchal structure of eighteenth and nineteenth century colonialism performed this same domination over women and their speech to “produce” restrictive ideas about what women are allowed to do and say. These ideas antecede Brian Macaskill and Jeanne Colleran’s notion of the “phallogentric [culture’s] insistence on woman as bearer rather than maker of meaning” (441)—while women may be capable of interacting with meaning, they are deemed unable to create it themselves. This idea, coming from political, cultural, and historical reality, is also reflected in literature—both the oppression and women’s resistance to it.

Native Tongues and Types of Truth

In postcolonial studies, the debate about the use of the language of the former colonizers lingers and may never be resolved to anyone’s entire satisfaction. Central to this discussion are native tongues and the language chosen for writing. Among African novelists, there are two primary schools of thought; writers debate whether they should tell stories in English, a language that many can understand but is a language that recalls oppression and colonialism or in their native tongues, which fewer people speak yet that convey their unique cultural identities. These positions are exemplified by Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe in “The African Writer and the English Language” and Ngugi wa Thiong’o in “The Language of African Literature,” respectively. Achebe writes, “... I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings” (434). He argues that it is possible to colonize English and appropriate it as a legitimate means of expression of the previously colonized, saturated with indigenous culture and claimed as one’s own. In contrast,

Ngugi writes, “African literature can only be written in African languages” (450) (he terms what Achebe writes “Afro-European literature,” which is literature written by Africans in European languages). He sees using English as surrendering to the colonizer by using his language: “The bullet was the means of the physical subjugation. Language was the means of the spiritual subjugation” (Ngugi 437). He argues that cultural identity can only be expressed using the native tongue of that culture.

The parts of this debate of most concern to my project are how using a language that is not one’s native tongue can change the story being told and how a language can be appropriated and used by a non-native speaker. Under Ngugi’s more strictly defined version of a native tongue, if speaking in one’s native tongue means telling one’s true story, then not speaking in one’s native tongue means not telling one’s true story. Using Achebe’s more flexible version, one can still speak with authority and authenticity and tell a true story in a language that is not one’s native tongue, as long as it is appropriated and imbibed with a new culture. Considering a gendered native tongue instead of a cultural native tongue, the female characters face similar problems to the ones articulated above by Achebe and Ngugi. In this thesis, I’ll use “speaking in her own voice” to indicate a female character who is speaking autonomously and with authority, whether that is using Ngugi’s idea or Achebe’s idea of which language can communicate a person’s unique experience. As I will show, *Foe* and *Susan* align with Ngugi’s definition, while *Purgatorio* and *Beatrice* align with Achebe’s definition.

Both Dante’s and Coetzee’s works claim to be true. Dante the poet claims that he is really Dante the pilgrim and that the pilgrim really journeyed through Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise. As Hollander writes in his footnote to *Purgatorio* XXIX.105: “Dante’s claim here mirrors the pretext of the entire poem; his experience of the otherworld is to be treated as actual and not as

imagined” (pp. 660). Although the reader knows that the poet did not actually travel through the three realms, the fiction demands that we believe the pilgrim did. Similarly, *Foe* is allegedly the tale of Susan Barton, but Coetzee calls into question the extent to which Foe has influenced the novel. The first two sections of the novel are given quotation marks, but it is not possible to be sure that it is Susan speaking—it could be Foe, Coetzee, or someone else. Who, then, has the authority to tell, write, or speak a story? Whose claim to authorship is most valid, and who will be acknowledged by the masses as the writer of the most authoritative account? What is true, and what does that mean?

Throughout my research, I have found that scholars assume their readers share their ideas about what the truth is. Said, when discussing depictions of the Orient, refers to “so-called truthful texts (histories, philological analyses, political treatises)” (3), Bishop thinks that Susan believes that “there is a rightful authority, someone who knows the Truth” (55), and Macaskill and Colleran see “the confessional enterprise” equally “as one of *finding* the truth as of *telling* the truth” (433). Here, I’ll describe what I mean by various forms of truth. In discussing these works, it will be helpful for me to distinguish between three types of truth, which I developed as a way to differentiate between different perspectives and recordings of experiences. Here, I’ve accepted that there can be no objective truth. While this may exist, it is something that cannot be known and thus is not particularly relevant to my argument. Instead, what I’m interested in describing are perceptions of the truth, and if these are subjective truths, so be it. I’ll use the following terms as shorthand for these different types of truth.

The first is what I’ll term “experiential truth.” This is the set of events that a person or character experienced or lived through. It is the type of truth closest to the elusive objective truth. The experiential truth is the “what happened” truth, viewed through one individual’s eyes. This

type of truth is what happened to Susan on the island, what Dante the pilgrim saw and heard on the mountain of Purgatory, and what Friday experienced before the beginning of *Foe* and how he came to be tongueless.

The second type of truth is what I'll term "narrative truth." This is a character's story told in his or her own, unadulterated voice. It is a meaning-making structure, one in which the person who experienced an event speaks or writes about their experiential truth in a way that gives it meaning to him or her. A narrative truth can only be told by the person with the corresponding experiential truth; the experience can most truthfully be expressed by the person who experienced it. This narrative truth is what Susan relentlessly pursues throughout *Foe*, her quest to give her island experience meaning by writing down her account and having it published so others can read it. This is what Dante created as he wrote the *Vita Nuova* and his interpretation that meeting Beatrice gave him *vita nuova*.

The third type of truth is what I'll term "historical truth." This is what has been written down (not necessarily and not often by the person whose experiential truth it is) and accepted by the masses as a largely objectively true telling of events that transpired in the past. A historical truth is emphatically not objectively true; it is a commonly held myth that what has been written in history books and accepted for long periods of time by scholars and students is "what happened," or is a fair or accurate record thereof. This type of truth often presents only one perspective, that of the side with the most force, which can dominate and assert historical truths about another (seen to be inferior) culture. Historical truths are present in and perpetuated by literature. Many canonical texts, among them *Robinson Crusoe*, contain such historical truths about colonialism, imperialism, and who is civilized, and they relegate women to token roles. As

Said describes in *Orientalism*, historical truths that have been accepted as canonical cannot just be incorrect and untruthful but also oppressive.

Problematizing Males Speaking for Female Characters

How are female characters produced, authorized, and colonized by male characters? Male voices act to oppress, silence, and speak for the female characters—as if they have been colonized and spoken for as the Orient was. By speaking for the female characters, the male characters usurp their voices. The British dominated the Orient “by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, teaching it, settling it, ruling over it” (Said 3). This silencing and speaking for constrain women in an externally imposed framework and keep their narrative truths from being told. Dante does not give Beatrice a voice in the *Vita Nuova*, and this will be viewed as a sin once the pilgrim reaches *Purgatorio*. In *Foe*, Foe’s voice takes over Susan’s narrative, desiring to rewrite it and change it from her own story into something resembling *Robinson Crusoe*. This project will describe the ways in which Beatrice and Susan are silenced and (attempt to) speak, and the implications of this speech (or lack thereof) for the ideas of authority, authorship, and truths.

The two primary male characters involved, Dante the pilgrim and Foe, perform the roles of male oppressors (intentionally or not) of the female characters. There are problems with a male character speaking for a female character. Dante first portrayed Beatrice as a woman of the courtly love tradition, silent, passive, and virtuous, despite the effects she has on him. Susan is trying to tell her story through her own words, but faces many obstacles, the largest being Foe’s masculine voice and his power (due to his gender and the culture) to transmute her story into something it is not. In order to know the narrative truth, we must hear Beatrice’s and Susan’s

stories from their own voices and without the influence of the male characters. How does the filter of a male character's voice change a woman's story? In what ways can these female characters speak or attempt to speak for themselves? What role does revision play in writing and rewriting their stories? How might a male author's voice change the female characters' stories?

Two Different Solutions

The solution in *Purgatorio* is to turn Beatrice from a silenced character into an authoritatively speaking character and give her use a very powerful voice. This transition from non-speaking to speaking character corresponds to the agency and power she gains between the two works. In *Purgatorio*, Beatrice metamorphoses from a silent, demure, ideal courtly woman (in the *Vita Nuova*) to an authoritatively speaking character who not only has the power to point out Dante the pilgrim's sins, but also give him absolution. She successfully speaks with many types of authority in different roles. Importantly, the pilgrim bows to her spoken authority, even gives up some of his own, and revises his understanding of her with her approval. Beatrice facilitates Dante's correction and the correction of his account of their relationship and eventually approves of his account. She has the power and authority to demand that he change his narrative. Dante corrects his earlier mistake of presenting Beatrice as silent by re-presenting her as a character with an authoritative voice. Dante's is a medieval solution—he gives her a God-like authority to change his account to make it reflect reality.

The solution in *Foe* is the lack of a solution; Susan cannot overcome the obstacles that bar her from telling her story. Despite Susan's many attempts to tell her story and the different roles she takes on to do so, ultimately her attempts to tell her story in her own voice fail. She is never able to turn her experiential truth into her narrative truth. Foe's desire to speak for Susan

and change her story present an insurmountable obstacle to her desire to publish her narrative truth and have it read. Although Susan tries in many different ways to be heard, the forces of the phallogentric culture always succeed in overcoming her. As a colonial woman, she has been successfully barred from this enterprise by the phallogentric culture. Coetzee's is a postcolonial solution—Susan is unable to tell her story, reflecting the reality of a colonial Other.

Chapter 1: Two Beatrices in Two Works

The *Vita Nuova*

The Tradition of Courtly Love

In the tradition of courtly love poetry, the poet writes love poems to a lady, but he does not need to interact with her in order to feel the beneficial effects of loving her. This tradition is one in which the feelings of the poet are paramount and those of the lady are not taken into consideration. Only the poet, who observes her from afar, is important. Teodolinda Barolini, in “Notes Toward a Gendered History of Italian Literature, with a Discussion of Dante’s *Beatrix Loquax*” writes, “Poetry based on a courtly logic is always fundamentally narcissistic and centered on the male lover/poet; the female object of desire serves as a screen on which he projects questions and concerns about himself” (362). Shifting the focus of the poem from the lady to the poet trivializes and objectifies the lady for the sake of the poet—even makes her Other. Courtly ladies are portrayed as perfect exemplars of beauty, grace, and virtue, and the speaker-poets are improved merely by thinking about them. Women are interchangeable because they are seen as objects instead of characters with subjectivity; any woman will do, as long as she has the qualities the poet desires.

A woman in courtly love poetry is relegated to the role of a passive object of desire. The speaker-poet-centric approach to female figures objectifies them (turning women into objects instead of characters), regardless of the good intentions of the speaker-poet, and this condemns them to passivity. Barolini describes this style of poetry as one that “projects [the poet’s] own fears and desires, without exploring the subjectivity of the lady ... there is no ... assignment to her of moral agency” (*Encyclopedia* 190). This means that their only roles are to stand and

receive the poet's praise. In addition to the passivity of the courtly lady, there is a profound distance between the lover and the object of his love. The lady is viewed from afar and often has little interaction with the poet, which also serves to distance her from both the reader and the poet and makes her mysterious and Other. While the lady is not seen as an inferior being, she is seen as less important than the poet writing about her—the poet writes for himself, not for her. Barolini also points out that the women of Dante's early poetry all have one thing in common: they do not speak (*Encyclopedia* 191)—they are perfect courtly ladies characterized by passivity and silence. Zygmunt G. Baranski also notes that Beatrice is a passive, humble, and beautiful woman without a voice (15). This role of passive object of desire is the only one available to women in courtly love poetry. Not allowing the lady to speak, or seeing her speech as unnecessary, could be deemed the medieval analogue of female Othering. Instead of colonizing, speaking for, and making generalizations about an entire culture, poet would do the same to women in the tradition of courtly love poetry.

Beatrice could be called an object of love instead of an object of desire due to the theological trappings that accompany Dante's earthly love for her, but her role is still that of an object and not a subject. Mark Musa, in the introduction to his translation of the *Vita Nuova*, writes, "No other poet had exalted and idealized his lady to the extent that Dante does" (xvi). However, despite her positive portrayal as virtuous and humble, she is still silent and passive. While Dante does update the courtly love tradition by praising a specific woman and portraying not only carnal but also divine love, he does not move past the portrayal of the silent, passive object of desire. He departs somewhat from the courtly love topos in his more theologically oriented poetry, but the distance from and Otherness of the lady in question are still evident. While Beatrice is not seen as inferior (as the Other often is) to the poet, her agency is removed

by the way Dante writes about her. The reader does not hear her speech or see her act virtuously; we are given Dante's secondhand account of her actions and speech and even this is dominated by how her speech or actions made him feel. Beatrice never speaks in her own voice or acts on her own—we see her only through the filter of Dante's lovestruck and worshipful gaze.

Beatrice as Object of Love

The *Vita Nuova* begins with Dante informing his reader that they are about to read what is recorded in the “book of [his] memory (1). He writes, “It is my intention to copy into this little book the words I find written under [the chapter heading ‘Here begins a new life’]—if not all of them, at least their significance” (*VN* 1). Thus the *Vita Nuova* is Dante's first attempt at a narrative truth, one that records the experiential truth of his meeting Beatrice as a young man in Florence. Dante seems more concerned with recording the significance of the words, rather than the words themselves—the meaning, not the words used to convey it, is paramount. This work could also be considered a historical truth—it was published and read before the *Divine Comedy*, and before Dante's revised Beatrice appeared in the *Purgatorio*, the *Vita Nuova* presented the definitive version of Beatrice.

Dante's love for Beatrice in the *Vita Nuova* is variously described by scholars as being both earthly and divine, being either earthly or divine, or as transitioning from earthly to divine. Michelangelo Picone argues that the *Vita Nuova* takes Dante from his initial, sensual love to the final triumph of spiritual love (84). He casts Dante as believing in the possibility of (completely) transforming his “eros into caritas” (Picone 90), that is, of loving Beatrice in a fundamentally different way at the end of the *Vita Nuova*. P. J. Klemp sees the *Vita Nuova* as Dante's journey toward an understanding of love as traced through a series of concentric, allegorical circles that

must be progressed through in the “proper order,” with the outermost circle containing an earthly love and the center containing the ultimate real love, God (though embodied by Beatrice) (188). After Beatrice’s death, Dante is led toward God by Amore, but a “clear awareness of divine love” (Klemp 192) evades him at the end. I see Dante’s love for Beatrice as a love that changes from earthly love to something resembling divine love—but divine love that yet retains earthly elements. At the end of the *Vita Nuova*, he does not fully understand Beatrice, her significance, or the significance of his love for her (as Dante himself will admit in *Purgatorio*).

Dante’s love for Beatrice begins with an infatuation—he is so enamored that he feels love physically; Beatrice is treated as a typical object of desire in a courtly love poem. This is the earthly or carnal side of Dante’s love for her. He often describes himself as “trembling” and experiencing “ecstasy” in his encounters with Beatrice—once he even feels “unbearable bliss” (*VN* 18) when he thinks of her. He presents her as a carnal, sensual figure, such as when the Lord of Love appears to Dante in a dream, holding Beatrice: “In his arms there lay a figure asleep and naked except for a crimson cloth loosely wrapping it” (*VN* 6). The image is sensuous, but she is kept at a distance; Dante is not interacting with her (and she is not even awake), only viewing her from a distance. However, even at this early point in his new life, there is the conflation of the carnal and the divine—we see Beatrice associated with heaven when in his dream, “[Love and Beatrice] seemed to ascend towards the heavens” (*VN* 7). At this stage of his love for her, Dante views her as an object to be intensely admired but an object without agency.

Beatrice is beautiful in both body and soul, and Dante does not skimp on his praises of her virtues any more than he does on her physical beauty; Dante begins to see her more as an object of love. Theological and moral elements begin to enter his poetry as he moves from praising her beauty to praising her virtue. He says, “And when she was near someone, such

modesty filled that one's heart that he dared neither to raise his eyes nor return her greeting" (*VN* 56). Beatrice is "crowned and clothed in humility" (*VN* 36), and Dante advises that any lady "who aspires to graciousness / should seek her company" (*VN* 36). Dante is still writing in the courtly love mode, but he has generalized from how Beatrice makes him feel to how Beatrice makes others feel—this helps move the emphasis of the poetry away from the poet and onto his lady, although not entirely, and not in a way that gives her agency. Beatrice inspires him to "Write words in which [he] would explain her praiseworthy and beneficent influences ... so that all would know" (*VN* 36). While the reader does not see her speak, she does inspire Dante to write poetry that explicates his love for her and her virtue, poetry in which he converts his experiential truth into his narrative truth. However, Dante is still not writing Beatrice's words, only about her words and their effects.

Beyond virtue, Dante associates Beatrice with divinity; in this she has a role as an object of godly love. Her heavenliness is stated in one of Dante's sonnets, where he writes that she "seems a creature come from heaven to earth, / a miracle manifest in reality" (*VN* 57). He associates her not just with heaven but with the Trinity: "This lady is accompanied by the number nine so that it may be understood that she was a nine, or a miracle, whose root, namely of the miracle, is the miraculous Trinity itself" (*VN* 61). For Dante the two are enmeshed, and loving Beatrice is akin to loving God. Paul Colilli notes Dante "promote[s] Beatrice on the ontological scale from typical woman of the courtly tradition to a specular image of Christ" (3). Dante does progress past some of the elements of the courtly love tradition, but I would not go so far to say that Beatrice is an image of Christ in the *Vita Nuova* because Dante still describes her in a way that shows that he retains his earthly feelings for her: he says, "so gracious is each gesture" that he "sigh[s] in an ecstasy of love" (*VN* 57) when he watches her. Thus Dante's love

for Beatrice is both earthly and divine, and she plays the roles of object of earthly desire and object of divine love. But however exalted Beatrice may be, she is still only portrayed as an object, not a subject.

After Beatrice's death, Dante seems to stray from her and her influence. He becomes involved with the *donna gentile*, a woman who feels compassion for him, and he allows Beatrice to fade from his memory. Dante knows that he has strayed from Beatrice's memory after her death: "The sight of this [other] lady brought me to the point that my eyes began to delight too much in seeing her; I often became angry with myself about it, and I felt very contemptible indeed" (*VN* 74). However, he removes himself from the blame by making his eyes the agents of his straying: "As a result, many times I would curse the wantonness of my eyes, and ... say to them: '... it seems that you wish to forget... the glorious lady for whom you used to mourn' " (*VN* 74). The following poem is addressed to this other lady, after an internal "battle," in which "those [thoughts] won who spoke in the [other] lady's favor" (*VN* 76). However, in the very next poem his thoughts return to Beatrice: "... my heart began remorsefully to repent of the desire by which it had so unworthily let itself be possessed for some time contrary to firm reason; and once I had rejected this evil desire, all my thoughts turned back to their most gracious Beatrice" (*VN* 78). Dante writes his straying (or at least that of his eyes) into this version of his narrative truth. These moments of Dante's straying and the beginning of his return to Beatrice will resurface in *Purgatorio*.

When Dante refers to Beatrice's speech, there is the same amalgamation of earthly and divine attributes that is present in his love for her. Dante describes receiving Beatrice's greeting: "... with that indescribable graciousness that today is rewarded in the eternal life, she greeted me so miraculously that I felt I was experiencing the very summit of bliss" (*VN* 6). His earthly love

is shown by the “summit of bliss” he experiences upon hearing her greeting, her virtue shown by her “indescribable graciousness,” and her divinity shown by her “miraculous” greeting. Even though Dante attaches a divine level of significance to Beatrice’s speech, we never hear her voice or hear Dante speaking with her. He praises her smile: “The image of her when she starts to smile / breaks out of words, the mind cannot contain it, / a miracle too rich and strange to hold” (*VN* 41). Note, however, that it is her smiling mouth and not her speaking mouth that entrances Dante. Her ineffable smile captures his heart and his imagination, but he is unable to describe it, like he is unable to record her speech. Beatrice and her speech are later aligned directly with God: “Whoever speaks with her shall speak with [God]” (*VN* 36). Dante only makes a reference to her speech, but does not give his reader her words, as powerful as they are portrayed to be. Even with her divine association, Beatrice does not seem to actively or completely lead him to God, suggesting her lack of agency. In this way, Dante is unable to completely move past the courtly love tradition in his poetry, the tradition in which women are speechless and passive. He exalts his lady and describes her beneficial influence on himself and on others and even aligns her directly with God, but she is still silent and removed from the reader, who will have to wait for *Purgatorio* to hear her voice.

At the end of the *Vita Nuova*, Dante seems dissatisfied with what he has written, and his final words suggest that he is far from finished with understanding Beatrice. In the final chapter, he writes, “After this sonnet there appeared to me a miraculous vision in which I saw things that made me resolve to say no more about this blessed one until I would be capable of writing about her in a more worthy fashion” (*VN* 85). On some level, Dante recognized that he had not done Beatrice justice or been as faithful to her and his experiential truth as he should and could have been. As John Freccero notes, “a glance backward is more likely to be a sign of transcendence

rather than of return, of self-critique rather than self-satisfaction” (186). Something in his writing has yet to fully come to fruition, and the reader is left with the sense that something has been left incomplete or undone. He admits that he has not written about her in a “worthy fashion”—something about how she has just been portrayed is insufficient, or even incorrect—possibly her portrayal as only taking on the role of object of love. It is interesting to note that while Beatrice inspired him to write down the words in his memory and their significance, her silence in this work could be the reason for Dante’s own (at least temporary) silence at the end of his work. This reflection on his past project seems to have brought about a reconsideration of his experiential truth. Whether Dante had already conceived of the *Divine Comedy* at this point is unknown, but it seems that he already knew that he would say more about Beatrice, even if he did not know that he would be revising his earlier work.

The Pilgrim/Poet Divide

Scholars agree that there is an imaginative speaker of the *Divine Comedy*, Dante the pilgrim. The pilgrim is a fictionalized (to what extent is debated) version of Dante the poet, the non-fictional writer who wrote the epic poem. However, in the *Divine Comedy*, Dante the poet insists that the pilgrim is actually the one who is transcribing his experiences: the poet claims that the pilgrim is the poet, that the pilgrim journeyed through the three realms, and that the *Divine Comedy* is a factually true account of this journey—the narrative truth is essentially a transcription of the experiential truth. Robert Hollander, in his and Jean Hollander’s translation of the *Divine Comedy*, writes in a footnote to *Purgatorio* XXIX.105 (the verse in which Dante tells his reader which of two versions of a story in the Bible is the correct one based on what he saw): “Dante’s claim here mirrors the pretext of the entire poem; his experience of the other

world is to be treated as actual and not as imagined. As a result, his authority as a teller of the tale is absolute, and even biblical testimony is secondary to his own” (pp. 660). While the Dante that is in the *Vita Nuova* could be considered a dramatic speaker and the events based on the poet’s own experiences, there is not the same pilgrim-poet divide. Retroactively, however, the poet decides that the same pilgrim who experienced the *Divine Comedy* is the person who wrote the *Vita Nuova*, even though there is no real insistence on this in the text. This revision of the pilgrim-poet divide gives Dante (the pilgrim and the poet) the opportunity in the *Divine Comedy* to point out the pilgrim’s errors in the *Vita Nuova*. In *Purgatorio*, Beatrice herself berates Dante for his misunderstanding in the *Vita Nuova*; we see her chastising him in earthly paradise (and what more appropriate place for this than on the mountain of Purgatory?). Beatrice’s actions and words also call into question whether, as Hollander asserts, Dante’s “authority as a teller of the tale is absolute.”

Purgatorio

The Character of Beatrice

Barolini writes, “In teaching the *Commedia* over the last thirty years, I have found that there is no figure more difficult to make interesting, appealing—or indeed comprehensible—than Beatrice ... the figure of Beatrice remains blurry” (363). While I object to Barolini’s claim that Beatrice is difficult to make interesting and appealing on aesthetic grounds, I will attempt to more rigorously address her complaint that it is difficult to make Beatrice’s character comprehensible. Both Beatrice’s character and the way she interacts with Dante change radically and dramatically from the *Vita Nuova* to *Purgatorio*. Why did Dante change her character so

radically from his earlier work to his later one? What are we, the readers, supposed to understand about her this time that we did not or could not the first time? What meaning are we supposed to draw from this transformation? These questions will guide my analysis of her character.

I will first briefly examine relevant scholarship surrounding Beatrice's character. Dantists have almost innumerable ways of understanding and interpreting Beatrice. However, they often seem to limit their studies to one aspect of Beatrice's character: to pigeonhole her as Dante's object of love, his guide, or a stand-in for Christ, instead of seeing her as a multi-faceted character in her own right. Another common method of analyzing her character is to treat her as completely allegorical—to allegorize her character out of existence. Beatrice becomes merely the embodiment of an idea instead of a character with a story and agency—she is allegorized as transcendence, virtue, theology, the church, or “whatever abstraction the critic finds most worthy and compelling” (Barolini 363). On the other hand, there are scholars who think of Beatrice as a real person (not necessarily the Beatrice Portinari who existed in Florence, but at least that she is a character in her own right and not just the manifestation of an abstract idea). It is less often that her character and character's traits, actions, and speech are actually examined and analyzed, less often that she is treated as a character in her own right—I will strive do both of these things in my analysis.

In recent decades, scholars have started to write about feminist representations of Beatrice and how this gives us new perspectives on her character, her actions, her speech, and her relationship to Dante in the *Divine Comedy*. The courtly love tradition of viewing female characters as objects, passive, and silent follows a long tradition, and Joan M. Ferrante was among the first to take a feminist approach to medieval literature. By doing this, saw the images of women viewed as Other in the works of male authors. Ferrante's *Woman as Image* (published

in 1975) posits that the more abstract a female character is, the more exalted she will be—male authors have tended to turn women into “abstractions, rather than real people with real problems” (Ferrante 11). Women were seen as earthbound and playing very limited roles: childbearer, sexual temptress, or symbols for “problems that trouble the male world” (Ferrante 13). Ferrante points out that Dante is the exception to this tendency among male authors—in the *Divine Comedy*, he “looks beyond himself in order to . . . find a deeper significance in [Beatrice’s] existence and in his love for her” (Ferrante 129). Ferrante argues that Dante moves beyond the *stil novo* in significant ways: by allowing the pilgrim to love a woman without it conflicting with his love for God and for finding a female side to an androgynous God (Ferrante 141). She also emphasizes that women can be viewed positively as an intermediary between man and God, and that man can serve the same purpose for women (Ferrante 152). While this is a much more egalitarian view of the male-female relationship than that presented in courtly love poetry, Ferrante does not spend much time on the interpersonal relationship itself—the relationship between Dante and Beatrice as characters. I agree that Beatrice helps lead the pilgrim to God, but I will add that the love he has for Beatrice as a woman must be corrected from an earthly love to a godly love—godly in the sense of Christian friendship and compassion, not merely as a link to God.

I am interested in the nature of Beatrice and Dante’s relationship through the lens of the changes made in Beatrice’s character from the *Vita Nuova* to *Purgatorio*. In this sense, Baranski’s self-proclaimed “admittedly non-canonical” (17) reading of the *Vita Nuova* seems to be the correct one. Baranski says that in *Purgatorio*, Beatrice is no longer a passive, humble, and beautiful woman without a voice. She is “instead a psychologically complex and authoritative individual who, tellingly, after being reduced to silence in the *libello*, discovers a powerful and

personal voice” (Baranski 8). Baranski believes that Dante the character admits to his faults while Dante the poet uses the unquestionable authority of Beatrice in *Purgatorio* to revise his youthful work: he “humbly acknowledges the veracity of her version” (Baranski 12). By doing so, the pilgrim confessed to having betrayed his beloved, but also to having written “bad, because dishonest, literature” (Baranski 12). He says that Beatrice (through her speeches to Dante) gives “an impressive new version . . . of the main events depicted in the *libello*. Looked at from a slightly different perspective, what Beatrice does is to rewrite the *Vita Nuova*” (Baranski 11). I disagree with him here—the confession and penance the pilgrim goes through is important: he must correct his own text guided by Beatrice, instead of Beatrice rewriting his narrative for him. This gives Beatrice the authority to tell him what to correct in his account, but leaves the actual correction up to the pilgrim. In addition, Baranski neglects to describe how Beatrice is given authority—he merely says that she revises and gives the pilgrim a new version of his story.

Barolini sees Beatrice as a hybrid of the silent woman in Dante’s earlier *stil novo* poetry and a supreme being who “possesses an absolutely unprecedented and masculine authority” (Encyclopedia). She discusses *Paradiso* and largely passes over Beatrice’s arrival in earthly paradise. Where I diverge from Barolini is in describing Beatrice as equal parts a woman of the courtly love tradition and this new authoritative figure. She calls Beatrice a “catalyst for much of the lexicon of desire that is the *Commedia*’s basic linguistic engine” (Barolini 365) and that “the dominant register of Dante’s portrayal of Beatrice is erotic” (366). But she says Beatrice is also “a courtly lady who speaks—who indeed speaks like a man . . . free from the content of modality normatively assigned to female discourse” (Barolini 369). As I will discuss, the pilgrim’s perception of Beatrice must be corrected from the former to the latter, and he must correct his narrative truth to reflect this. Hollander describes in his footnote to *Purgatorio* XXXII.9 that this

is also part of the poet-pilgrim divide: “Having seen Beatrice as God loves her, [the pilgrim] still contrives to think she is that pretty girl from Florence. The poet records her “holy smile;” the protagonist remembers his earthly feelings (pp. 726).” I believe that the pilgrim eventually (if not completely) understands that he should not view her in this way, and this is part of his correction.

I will take Achebe’s point of view with respect to Beatrice’s ability to speak in her own voice. Achebe writes, “I have indicated somewhat offhandedly that the national literature of Nigeria and of many other countries of Africa is, or will be, written in English. This may sound like a controversial statement, but it isn’t. All I have done has been to look at the reality of present-day Africa ... At present it may be more profitable to look at the scene as it is” (429-30). While she has a native feminine tongue, Beatrice is still able to speak effectively and with authority when she takes on masculine roles and speaks with a man’s voice. This is a reflection of the reality of the era in which Dante was writing (as Achebe describes the “reality of present-day Africa”): in the early fourteenth century, women simply did not hold positions of power and were expected to be silent. Positions of leadership and authority were virtually exclusively the domain of men—women were not priests, admirals, or leaders. Thus, Beatrice necessarily must speak in her masculine voice in order for Dante’s medieval audience to recognize her authority. The *Divine Comedy* is still the pilgrim’s narrative truth and not Beatrice’s, but she is successfully able to speak with authority in her different roles. Beatrice is still a woman, but by speaking in her own voice with a masculine tongue, the pilgrim and the audience recognize her authority. Speaking in her masculine voice can then be seen as Beatrice becoming un-Othered, as she now speaks in the voice of the dominant and powerful group.

Dante gives Beatrice’s speech masculine attributes and authority, but not at the expense of her feminine voice. Beatrice first appears, “regally, with scorn still in her bearing, / [and] she

continued like one who, even as he speaks, / holds back his hottest words” (*Purg.* XXX.70-2). Here, Beatrice is given a feminine pronoun and a masculine pronoun in the same line of poetry. Using a feminine pronoun in the second instance may not even have occurred to the poet—no woman would have spoken this way, and despite her harsh words, she could have spoken even more scathingly. “She continued” indicates that she speaks and acts as herself, but “like one who, even as he speaks...” indicates that the masculine authority is transferred to her in the analogy. Only men would have been allowed to speak in such a way.

I’m going to advocate for viewing Beatrice as a complete, multi-faceted character who speaks in her own powerful, authoritative voice. The radical change in her character from the *Vita Nuova* to *Purgatorio* indicates that both the pilgrim and the reader should radically change their perceptions of her. Compare her portrayal to that of Virgil. Virgil is identified variously as the author of the *Aeneid*, Dante’s teacher and guide, a pagan, and a parental figure for the pilgrim. He is a historical figure but also a character in Dante’s poem with attributes beyond that of his historical significance as the author of the *Aeneid* and a poetic forbearer of Dante. Why is there such resistance to view Beatrice much as Virgil is viewed? I am advocating that we view Beatrice in a similar way: she is able to take on various roles of authority, as a confessor, a reviser, an admiral, and theologian. Instead of seeing Beatrice as an allegory for one thing or another, I see her as taking on different roles, while still remaining a person—her roles add to and complement one another and coalesce into her full character. By examining the various roles Beatrice takes on, I will show how these roles give her authority, and how her authority is expressed in her words.

Beatrice's New Voice

Using her new, powerful voice, she takes on roles of power, authority, and influence, and her words carry the same power, authority, and influence. We do not just get to hear (through Dante) that she greeted him; here she issues her own words from her mouth; he now cowers in fear. She announces herself: “Look over here! I am, I truly am Beatrice” (*Purg.* XXX.76). Instead of seeing (and hearing) her through the filter of Dante’s gaze, Beatrice commands him to look at her while she names herself. This perspective also serves to reduce the distance between Beatrice and the reader. Instead of seeing her only as Dante saw her, the pilgrim has now been moved aside and Beatrice has been moved to the foreground—as Dante cowers in front of her speech, the reader is given a direct view of Beatrice. In the *Vita Nuova*, her elevated position did not come with a corresponding level of authority. This dynamic is reversed in *Purgatorio*, in which Beatrice is on the ground in earthly paradise but has a much higher level of authority and power (the highest level, akin to that of God). Bringing Beatrice to the foreground instead of viewing her from afar also serves to un-Other her, to make her less the object Dante admired in the *Vita Nuova* and more the subject who interacts with him as a superior. Her words are heard and her commands are obeyed, and she succeeds in gaining authority in these roles, as the pilgrim accepts her authority and revises his narrative truth accordingly. With Beatrice’s guidance, he revisits his experiential truth and sees it the way he was supposed to see it—and then has the reader witness his correction and read this corrected version in *Purgatorio*.

We see this new, authoritative Beatrice right away. Her previously unheard voice is a shock to readers primed by the *Vita Nuova* to expect a gracious welcome from Beatrice (the pilgrim certainly does). But instead, we (and he) get this new Beatrice who descends to earthly paradise with her words like weapons: “Dante, because Virgil has departed, / do not weep, do not

weep yet— / there is another sword to make you weep” (*Purg.* XXX.55-7). Her speech is the instrument of her power: “the venom in her words” (*Purg.* XXXI.75) makes Dante unable to look at his own reflection, “such shame weighed on [his] brow” (*Purg.* XXX.78). The pilgrim notes she is standing “regally, with scorn still in her bearing, / she continued like one who, even as he speaks, / holds back his hottest words” (*Purg.* XXX.70-2). This indicates to the reader that something fundamental has changed about Beatrice. She still affects him deeply, but now with her words instead of her presence, and causes him to feel pain where he used to feel bliss and ecstasy. The image of a towering Beatrice and the humbled pilgrim indicates to the reader where the authority and power reside in this relationship, and it is certainly in Beatrice. The pilgrim now faces this new conception of Beatrice, one full of powerful, influential speech and authoritative commands. Joy Potter notes that “to cure Dante of any possible tendency to view her through the veil of Eve, she must take strong steps, and she does” (Potter 100). Beatrice’s arrival indicates that she will now be speaking in her own voice, and that she will speak with the authority to command. No longer silent, passive, and viewed from afar, she is immediate, assertive, and does not need Dante to approach her slowly or to distance himself and the reader from her—she is a subject rather than an object.

Beatrice as Confessor

When the pilgrim first sees Beatrice in earthly paradise, he still perceives her the way he did ten years before, in a carnal, earthly way. He says, “And in my spirit, which for so long a time / had not been overcome with the awe / that used to make me tremble in her presence” (*Purg.* XXX.34-6), which is a direct allusion to the *Vita Nuova* and his feelings for her contained therein. Dante turns to Virgil to say: “Not a single drop of blood / remains in me that does not

tremble— / I know the signs of the ancient flame” (*Purg.* XXX.46-8), the ancient flame being that which Dido spoke of when she realized her love for Aeneas. His diction here is reminiscent of the *Vita Nuova*, such as his “trembling,” and his reference to the *Aeneid* and Dido’s *eros*-love for Aeneas indicates that the pilgrim still views Beatrice in much the same way he did in the *Vita Nuova*.

Beatrice wastes no time in correcting his misconceptions and berating him for misunderstanding her love and her significance. She first describes Dante’s sins. She chastises him for his pursuit of other women, when he should have remained faithful to her because of what she represented, godly love: “In your desire for me / that guided you to love that good / beyond which there is nothing left to long for” (*Purg.* XXXI.22-4). Despite Beatrice’s best efforts, “...he took himself from [her] / and gave himself to others” (*Purg.* XXX.125-6), oblivious that her death made her lovelier and closer to God: “When I had risen to spirit from my flesh, / as beauty and virtue in me became more rich, / to him I was less dear and less than pleasing” (*Purg.* XXX.127-9). Dante instead “Set his steps upon an untrue way, / pursuing those false images of good / that bring no promise to fulfillment” (*Purg.* XXX.130-2), falling from the true path that through Beatrice leads to God and instead pursuing earthly women, who cannot offer him the salvation that Beatrice can. She accuses him of the straying he wrote of at the end of the *Vita Nuova*, and chastises him for pursuing things other than God. Beatrice says, “This man in his new life potentially was such / that each good disposition in him / would have come to marvelous conclusion” (*Purg.* XXX.115-7). Beatrice recalls the *Vita Nuova* here, and declares that the pilgrim had the potential to correctly understand her and his experiential truth, but he did not.

After Beatrice berates him for his transgression and misunderstanding what she offered him, she tells him what he should have done: “Indeed, at the very first arrow / of deceitful things, you should have risen up / and followed me who was no longer of them” (*Purg.* XXXI.55-7). Beatrice first tells how she attempted to steer Dante in the correct direction while she was still on earth, as he should have recognized and written into his narrative truth in the *Vita Nuova*. Beatrice says, “For a time I let my countenance sustain him. / Guiding him with my youthful eyes, / I drew him with me in the right direction” (*Purg.* XXX.121-3)—she knew what she was doing on earth, but he did not. Dante should have been able to correctly portray Beatrice, but was unable to do so. She also accuses him of not understanding her correctly and for misrepresenting her; the pilgrim should have recognized that Beatrice was there to guide him to God, not to be his object of desire. This misguided understanding of her must be corrected, not just because he misunderstood Beatrice but because of her link to God, he also misunderstood God. Beatrice tells him: “ ‘So that you may come to understand,’ she said, / ‘the school that you have followed / and see if what it teaches follows well my words / and see that your way is as far from God’s / as that highest heaven, which spins the fastest, / is distant from the earth’ ” (*Purg.* XXXIII.85-90). Here Beatrice is accusing him of straying from God, and it is her own words that provide the guide for what he should have been doing. She commands the pilgrim to “Stop sowing tears and listen. / Then you shall hear just how my buried flesh / should have directed you to quite a different place” (*Purg.* XXXI.46-8). The conditional here shows that the pilgrim should have understood what Beatrice meant in the *Vita Nuova*, but he did not. Thus how he portrayed Beatrice in the *Vita Nuova* was incorrect, as he did not properly understand her yet.

Beatrice as Confessor

Beatrice has the authority to take on the role of Dante's confessor—a right that is reserved for Catholic priests (all male, even today) and God himself. Beatrice performs the act of eliciting his confession, the same way a priest might ask a penitent sinner about his sins. Beatrice commands him to "... say it, / say if this is true. To such an accusation / your confession must be joined" (*Purg.* XXXI.4-6). She is demanding that he admit that her version is the correct one, and importantly, this admission of guilt must come from him, as it is his narrative and experiential truth. She tells him, "Should Lethe ... not be tasted without payment of some fee: / his penitence that shows itself in tears" (*Purg.* XXX.144-5), indicating that this process will not be a pleasant or easy one; she tells him how it will take place, and it is so. Since his confession is what allows him to be cleansed in the River Lethe, Beatrice is also his means of salvation. In the role of confessor, Beatrice knows the steps that must be taken in order for the pilgrim to be absolved of his sins.

Before Dante can move forward to correcting his narrative truth, he first must admit what he did wrong. Dante confesses that the "Things set in front of [him], / with their false delights turned back [his] steps / the moment that [Her] countenance was hidden" (*Purg.* XXXI.34-6), and these "false delights" were what caused him to falter from the true path. In addition to whatever "false delights" he partook in, Dante is also implicitly accused of false writing: his first narrative truth did not contain his experiential truth, as he should have understood it. He is then pulled through the River Lethe, and is finally able to "[taste] the food that, satisfying in itself, / yet for itself creates a greater craving" (*Purg.* XXXI. 127-9); the pilgrim has turned back to God and Beatrice. The pilgrim understands that what he did in the *Vita Nuova* was incorrect: "The nettle of remorse so stung me then / that whatever else had lured me most to loving / had now

become for me most hateful” (*Purg.* XXXI.85-7). Dante now understands that his incorrect action was straying from Beatrice and God.

Contrapasso, or fit punishment, is depicted on the terraces of the mountain—the gluttonous are starved, the slothful race, the lustful burn in cleansing fire, the prideful carry boulders on their backs. On the terraces, Dante avoided being viewed as a penitent himself. But in earthly paradise, it appears that Dante might need to close his mouth as Beatrice opens hers and this might be part of his penance, to see what it is like to not have a voice (if momentarily). As his sins involved Beatrice not speaking, it is now Dante’s turn to be silent, and even have the privilege and power of speech revoked. He can only mouth the words to his confession: he says, “My faculties were so confounded / that my voice struggled up but spent itself / before it made its way out of my mouth” (*Purg.* XXX.7-9), “... flooded with tears and sighs, / My voice came strangled from my throat” (*Purg.* XXX.20-1), and “After heaving a bitter sigh / I hardly had the voice to give the answer / my lips were laboring to shape” (*Purg.* XXXI.31-3). Beatrice also tells him, “Had you stayed silent or denied what you confess, / your fault would not be any less apparent / since it is known to such a Judge” (*Purg.* XXXI.37-9). This is a reminder that it is the acknowledgement of the sins must come from the sinner himself. This scene shows the pilgrim’s contrition and penance for his sins.

Beatrice as Reviser

Once past his confession, Beatrice then facilitates Dante’s correction and he acknowledges her authority over the correct version of his narrative truth. She helps him understand his experiential truth in this new, correct way. She is in command, and now Dante takes on the role of listener while she takes on the role of speaker and announcer of truths,

corrections, and revisions. Dante defers to her authority, and thus her corrections. He at first speaks in a “failing voice” and says, “My lady, You know what I lack / and exactly how You may provide it” (*Purg.* XXXIII.28-30). Here, Dante is deferring to the authority of Beatrice’s words—through which she can provide knowledge—the pilgrim’s growth is evident here, as he now recognizes this. “[Dante], overwhelmed, / prostrate at the feet of her commands, / gave [his] mind and eyes to what she wished” (*Purg.* XXXII.106-8), having been cleansed of his sins (although he has yet to act on her commands). Note that he is prostrate at the feet of her commands, not just at her feet. He is not worshipping her as an object of desire as he did in the *Vita Nuova*; he is acknowledging that she is a speaking source of authority and a person in her own right with this action. It also shows that he knows that she has authority over him, as he is “prostrate” in front of her. With this gesture, the pilgrim also shows that he agrees to her version and acknowledges that in his first version of his narrative truth he did not understand her in the correct way, and now he will attempt to do so.

Dante begins to see Beatrice as she should be seen, as an agent of God’s love and as someone he loves with a brotherly love. Beatrice sets the example for him here, calling him “My brother” (*Purg.* XXXIII.23). This is the sort of love Dante should have felt and written about in the *Vita Nuova*, not his earthly passion for her. The angels say to Beatrice: “ ‘Turn, Beatrice, turn your holy eyes / upon your faithful one’—thus ran their song— / ‘who, to see you, now has come so far’ ” (*Purg.* XXXI.133-5). He is her “faithful one,” now that he understands that what he did in the *Vita Nuova* was incorrect and now must be corrected. He begins to understand her correctly and love her with a divine and not earthly love: “Would not even he appear to have his mind confounded, / attempting to describe you as you looked, / Heaven with its harmonies reflected in you, / when in the wide air you unveiled yourself?” (*Purg.* XXXI.142-5). It is now

heaven and heavenly beauty that is reflected in her, and not earthly beauty. He is attempting to see her now as the opposite of what he did in the *Vita Nuova*. This is the kind of narrative truth that Beatrice wants him to write down.

Beatrice guides him toward his revised narrative truth with authority, but the writing must come from the pilgrim. She tells him explicitly to record her words with fidelity in his narrative truth: “Mark them, and, as they come from me, / set these words down for those / who live the life that is a race to death” (*Purg.* XXXIII.52-4). The origin and authority of these words is Beatrice herself, and her injunction to the pilgrim is to write them “as they come from [her],” in her own voice. She also commands him to “keep in mind, when you shall write them, / not to conceal the story of the tree/ that now not once but twice has here been plundered” (*Purg.* XXXIII.55-7). Beatrice tells him what to write, and he does. We as readers see that Dante has obeyed her, as we have the “story of the tree.” She then commands him that in order to “... serve the world that lives so ill, / keep [his] eyes upon the chariot and write down / what now [he] see[s] here once [he] ha[s] gone back” (*Purg.* XXXII.103-5). His narrative truth should not just serve as his own correction, but also the correction of all those on earth. Three times in sixty lines she instructs him to write down with fidelity what he has experienced—to ensure that his narrative truth faithfully reflects his experiential truth. He has been given the task of writing the correct version as it came from Beatrice’s mouth. Dante is supposed to be her faithful scribe—he is given this injunction by Beatrice herself.

However, the pilgrim’s perception of her is still not perfect, even after his confession. He speaks in a way that is troublingly reminiscent of his language in the *Vita Nuova* when he describes his state when Beatrice smiles: “My eyes were fixed and so intent / to satisfy ten years of thirst / that all my other senses were undone” (*Purg.* XXXII.1-3). The virtues notice that his

eyes are “Too fixed!” (*Purg.* XXXII.9) on Beatrice—and not with approval. While the pilgrim is beginning to learn to view and write about Beatrice in the correct way, he still has yet to fully and correctly comprehend her at the end of this canticle. When the pilgrim looks at her, “A thousand desires hotter than any flame / bound my eyes to those shining eyes, / which stayed fixed upon the griffin” (*Purg.* XXXI.118-120). He might burn with desire for her, but he also notices that she is intent on the griffin, a symbol for Christ. His vision of her, nonetheless, is much better than it was in the *Vita Nuova*. The virtues ask of Beatrice: “Of your grace do us a grace: unveil / your mouth to him so that he may observe / the second beauty that you still conceal” (*Purg.* XXXI.136-8). Her mouth is again beautiful, but this time it is a speaking mouth, and not a silent, smiling mouth. And her mouth is still beautiful despite the pain it has caused Dante, since it enabled him to see what was wrong with his narrative truth in the *Vita Nuova*.

Beatrice as Theologian

Barolini claims that since Beatrice is put on a pedestal of virtue in the *Vita Nuova*, this limits her character because not all actions are available to her: “Beatrice does not have the option of erring, of sinning, or for that matter of fully living” (368). Unlike Barolini, I do not think that a lack of mistakes is much of a constraint on Beatrice. In fact, this is another means of giving her authority—she is essentially infallible, unlike other humans. Portraying her as sinless places her on par with Jesus and Mary, the only other sinless humans. Mary and Jesus were elevated above other humans by God much in the same way Beatrice is elevated to a moral plane above other humans by Dante. By making her sinless, Dante the poet has already begun to give her theological authority.

She takes on the role of theologian, one who can engage in religious discourse, an area that was exclusively male. As Aquinas wrote, women were not thought to possess the intellectual capacity for such discussion and debate: “because of her privation of reason and her grave bodily defect woman cannot receive ordination nor preach the word” (quoted in Colilli 5). However, Beatrice successfully takes on the role of theologian. She says, “Broken would be the high decree of God / should Lethe be crossed and its sustenance / be tasted without payment of some fee: / his penitence that shows itself in tears” (*Purg.* XXX.142-5). Beatrice knows what the “high decree of God” is, and she is able to enforce this decree. Beatrice is powerful enough to protect the church from the fox of heresy; she “drove it back” (*Purg.* XXXII.122) when it threatened the Church. She also knows what sort of penance Dante must offer in order to be absolved of his sins: “his penitence that shows itself in tears” (*Purg.* XXX.145). Beatrice even knows who is and who is not going to be saved: “Here for a time [Dante] shall be a woodsman / and then forever a citizen with [her] / of that Rome where Christ Himself is Roman” (*Purg.* XXXII.102-4).

By aligning Beatrice with God, Dante gives her the ultimate authority—that of God himself. Many scholars have noted the obvious parallels between Beatrice and Christ. The poet almost unequivocally aligns Beatrice with Christ when he writes, “Even as the sun in a mirror, not otherwise / the twofold beast shone forth in [her eyes], / now with the one, now with its other nature” (*Purg.* XXXI.121-3). Christ was a preacher, one who speaks, gives sermons, and professes religious truths, as Beatrice does. As the son of God, Christ is elevated above other humans and given divine authority by God to spread the Gospel. By seeing Beatrice as a Christ parallel due to not just the symbolism and imagery that makes her a Christ-like figure but also as a speaking preacher and messenger of God, she has the same kind of authority to speak about religious matters. Christ is a conduit to God for all mankind, in the same way that Beatrice is a

link to God for Dante. Christ was also the ultimate proponent of loving one's neighbor—this is the type of brotherly love that Dante should have for Beatrice. In his footnote to *Purgatorio* XXX.19, Hollander says, “It seems clear that the poet wants his reader to realize that her meaning, her eventual identity, is totally involved with Christ. And thus she comes as Christ, not as herself” (pp.678). I agree with the first assertion, but not the second. While being a Christ-figure is an important part of her identity and gives her authority, she is not Christ himself. This view negates the aspect of Beatrice's character that is a woman who was written about incorrectly and has now arrived to supervise the necessary revisions being made. Beatrice is also able to transfer some of this theological authority to Dante—she commands him to watch the procession so he can record it accurately so others back on earth can know of it: “Therefore, to serve the world that lives so ill, / keep your eyes upon the chariot and write down / what now you see here once you have gone back” (XXXII.103-5). Beatrice's authority comes from God, whose authority is unquestionable, which also makes the definitive version of Beatrice the one presented in *Purgatorio*.

She knows that Dante “... sank so low that every instrument / for his salvation now fell short— / except to make him see souls in perdition” (*Purg.* XXX.136-8). Beatrice is able to intercede on his behalf in order to offer him salvation. She knows what the proper “instrument” is that will ensure that Dante still has a chance at salvation. As Christ's actions opened heaven for all mankind, Beatrice's intercession for Dante opens heaven to him: he will be “forever a citizen with [her]” in heaven. She is also Christ-like because of her salvific powers—she has given Dante a chance to revise and correct his earlier work and atone for his sins. Having the authority to offer him salvation also elevates her to the level of God, since no one else can make this offer.

Beatrice as Admiral

Dante also presents Beatrice as an admiral to his reader: she is “Just like an admiral who moves from stern to prow / to see the men that serve the other ships / and urge them on to better work” (*Purg.* XXX.58-60). In the same way an admiral of a ship leads and encourages his (or her) men to “better work,” Beatrice is urging Dante on to better work in his narrative truth. She will facilitate this revised and corrected version: she says, “Follow me / more closely, so that, if I should speak to you, / you will be able to hear me better” (*Purg.* XXXIII.20-1). And Dante, “...obeying, drew up near her” (*Purg.* XXXIII.22). These lines can be taken both literally and figuratively. Literally, Beatrice is instructing the pilgrim to follow her at a distance at which he can clearly hear her voice. Figuratively, remembering her earlier comment about how Dante should have “risen up and followed [her] / who was no longer of them,” this can be seen as the pilgrim following her teaching and following her in her role as the one who will lead him to God and teach him how to properly love and understand her. She says to him, “Free yourself at once, / from the snares of fear and shame, / no longer speaking as a man does from his dream” (*Purg.* XXXIII.31-3). She both expresses that what he had done before could be characterized as confused and muddled, “speaking as a man does from a dream,” and now that he has been corrected, she thinks he has been equipped to write the correct version of his narrative truth.

The pilgrim acknowledges that if he cannot set the correct words down, he at least thinks he understands her and her meaning now: he says, “And I: ‘Even as wax maintains the seal / and does not alter the imprinted image, / my brain now bears Your stamp’” (*Purg.* XXXIII.79-81). Dante’s comment can be interpreted as Beatrice’s meaning and significance imprinted on Dante’s mind. This represents his understanding of the experiential truth he should have understood before, and even admits that he still may not

be able to set his (and her) words down correctly. We can see that the pilgrim has learned, at least in this moment, that he may not be able to do Beatrice justice. If there is a failing in the next iteration of his narrative truth, it is not because there was something wrong with the stamp (Beatrice), but with the wax (Dante and his ability to understand her and write about her). Beatrice says, “I wish that, if not written, then sketched out, / you carry what I’ve said inside you, just as / a pilgrim brings his staff back wreathed with palms” (*Purg.* XXXIII.76-8). She puts her faith in Dante to do a better job and tells him that if he cannot accurately describe what she tells him, he should do his best to “sketch out” a likeness. This is quite a radical change from the Dante of the *Vita Nuova* who presumed to understand and write about Beatrice when he was actually very wrong. This may be another part of the pilgrim’s *contrapasso*—as he presumed to write down an incorrect narrative truth, he is now unsure of himself and his understanding of Beatrice and acknowledges that she may be beyond his understanding.

At the end of this canticle, there is a sense of incompleteness, of moderation, of things not finished, left unsaid, or that cannot be said. Many scholars have analyzed and failed to come to a consensus about Dante’s final lines of this canticle. He writes, “... but, since all the sheets / made ready for this second canticle are full, / the curb of art lets me proceed no farther” (*Purg.* XXXIII.139-41). He is speaking, specifically, about not having enough poetic space for his description of the taste of the River Eunoe, although he conceivably could have stretched this canto to the length of his longest one. However, I’m interpreting this more broadly as a comment on what Dante has been doing in the previous four cantos, and his new understanding of Beatrice. Even after the pilgrim’s confession, contrition, and satisfaction, he cannot fully understand Beatrice’s words, or even her meaning as a character to him and his story. Here,

instead of the presumption he showed in most of the *Vita Nuova*, he is instead moderate and restrained. The pilgrim has learned something, it seems, even if that is only how much he does not know. He is instead admitting that there may be things he does not or cannot know, premeditating the postcolonial tendency to shy away from speaking for another, an Other.

Chapter 2: Susan and (her) Foe

While Beatrice gained a powerful, authoritative voice and thus overcame her silence, Susan's situation is the opposite: she fails to overcome the silence forced upon her as a colonial Other. In *Foe*, Susan's failure to overcome Foe's desire to change her story indicates that the phallogocentric forces win out. Her failure to tell her story reflects the reality that she is part of an oppressed group. Her failure is not for lack of trying. The forces of patriarchal colonialism (as embodied by Foe) act to oppose and oppress her by overwriting her narrative truth. Susan takes on various roles in order to tell her narrative truth, but she does not gain authority, in contrast to Beatrice, who succeeded in gaining authority through all of her roles. These are roles that should confer authority on the actor but in her case do not. While Beatrice successfully takes on her roles, Susan can neither gain the authority of her roles nor take them on without losing the identity she needs in order to tell her narrative truth in her own voice.

Scholarly Debate

Returning to the idea of native tongues, although Beatrice was able to gain authority by speaking in a language that is not her native tongue, Susan's case is different. In *Foe*, the phallogocentric culture has imposed a foreign masculine tongue on Susan and demanded that she use it in order to be heard and legitimized. Since men are the ones with power in colonialism, the language that issues from the mouths of men is recognized as more authoritative. Ngugi writes, "Culture transmits or imparts those images of the world and reality through the spoken and the written language, that is through a specific language" (441). Thus Susan's own story is what needs to be communicated as Susan, not Foe, would write it, so it can reflect her "images of the

world and (her) reality.” Ngugi further asserts that “To control a people’s culture is to control their tools of self-definition in relationship to others” (441). Invalidation of the language, then, is tantamount to invalidation of the culture and of the people it belongs to, and this is what Susan experiences. As Ngugi believes that Africans writing in English are surrendering to the powers of colonialism, for Susan to write or speak in a masculine tongue would be for her to accept the phallogentric culture and surrender to it. More generally, Susan must speak in her own tongue—choosing the words that most naturally come to her in order to tell her narrative truth and forcing her to speak in a language that others want her to speak in will change it.

Ngugi’s stricter definition of speaking in one’s own voice aligns with the text itself. This idea is the one defined within the novel through the rhetorical question Susan asks Foe: “Who but Crusoe, who is no more, could truly tell you Crusoe’s story?” (*Foe* 51). A person’s narrative truth must come from them and from them alone, no one else has the ability to tell their story as he or she would tell it. In addition, a character must speak in his or her own voice (using Ngugi’s position). Susan exclaims, “The only tongue that can tell Friday’s story is the tongue he has lost!” (*Foe* 67). The physical lack of Friday’s tongue is here used to mean that his native tongue has been lost with his ability to speak it; therefore, he cannot tell his narrative truth. Susan’s words, as the one who experienced the island, will be different from Foe’s, no matter how vividly and accurately she might describe the events to him.

The melding of sexual and written production is prominent throughout the novel. Friday has no tongue, but Susan also observes that he might be castrated. She says, “. . . I confess I wondered whether he might not be employing a figure, for the sake of delicacy whether the lost tongue might stand not only for itself but for a more atrocious mutilation; whether by a dumb slave I was to understand a slave unmanned” (*Foe* 119). Friday cannot speak to tell his story, and

he is also unable to reproduce biologically. This means that Friday's story ends with him, as he has no way of telling it. As Friday's biological line ends, so is his experiential truth is also lost, and his narrative truth cannot be told because of his lost tongue. This conflation of sexual and narrative production is also present in Susan's actions and in the roles she takes on.

Macaskill and Colleran discuss who is the titular foe of the novel and whether Susan is able to overcome this foe. One of Susan's adversaries is Foe himself, "who threatens Susan...and attempts to shape her story into a popular adventure tale" (Macaskill and Colleran 440). Foe is certainly one of Susan's foes in the novel, as he tries to embellish her tale and make it into the story he desires. Ultimately, they decide that the titular foe of the novel is silence (Macaskill and Colleran 454)—although I will add that Susan's foe is silence by way of Foe—his imposition on her causes her final silence and inability to publish her story. They assert that Susan "moves from a position of sexual and hermeneutic dependence ... to one of sexual and authorial independence (Macaskill and Colleran 440-1). However, they do think that Susan has been only partially successful in overcoming this foe: "By confessing her story, Susan has sought and has partly achieved her freedom from patriarchal authority" (Macaskill and Colleran 445). I disagree with Macaskill and Colleran here—although Susan attempts in many ways to tell her story, none of these attempts are successful, and she is ultimately unable to escape Foe's influence on her tale and fails to tell her story in her own voice.

Macaskill and Colleran term the silencing force on Susan the "phallogentric" culture of colonialism, a culture characterized by an "insistence on woman as bearer rather than maker of meaning" (441). It is this insistence that Susan is resisting and trying to overcome. While the culture has relegated her to the role of bearer of meaning, she is attempting to take on the role of creator of meaning. Susan has a great desire and need to tell her tale in her own voice and

actively pursues this goal, but is unable to achieve it because of her status as Other. This idea of women as merely the bearers and not creators of meaning is the reason Susan lacks the authority to tell her tale and have it read. She tries to resist the idea that “her story is determined not by herself but by the culture within which she seeks an identity” (“Politics of the Canon” 223), which shows the bias in the society—it only recognizes certain kinds of people as having authority, and it certainly does not accept the authority of an Other.

Derek Attridge describes Susan as being “barred from the domain of authorship by her gender, her social status, her economic dependence and her unfamiliarity with the requirements of the canon of published narratives” (*Ethics* 76). He views Susan as having an “aura of insubstantiality” because of the “canonic success and consequent power of Defoe’s novel” (*Ethics* 77). This idea of who or what is a “substantial body” is present in the text. A substantial body seems to be someone who exists in the world of the novel; Susan declares that she and Foe are both substantial: “I am substantial; and you too are substantial, no less and no more than any of us. We are all alive, we are all substantial, we are all in the same world” (*Foe* 152). Susan is substantial and uses her substantiality to validate her existence, her experience, and her story. She tells Foe, “To no one, not even to you, do I owe proof that I am a substantial being with a substantial history in the world” (*Foe* 131). While Defoe’s novel and Foe’s authority in the novel are immediately recognized as authoritative and powerful, Susan must overcome this insistence that she does not have a story worth telling and is not worth being listened to. However, there is a difference in being a substantial body and being recognized as a body with the authority to tell a tale.

Gayatri Spivak, a feminist and postcolonial scholar, discusses *Foe* in her section on literature in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*. In

her analysis she questions whose book *Foe* is. Spivak points out that Foe describes to Susan the five-part tale he envisions using to tell her story, which centers around Susan's search for her daughter, but says "we do not read this projected novel in *Foe*" (185). This does not mean that Susan has somehow succeeded just because Foe has not managed to make *Foe* into exactly what he wants—Foe has still influenced her story enough to distort it from the story she wants to tell. She also dismisses the idea that Susan's "daughter" is Foe's fabrication since by "common sense, [since] Susan Barton's credibility or sanity would here be thrown into doubt" (183). I view the "daughter" a different way—she is Foe's fabrication, but one that shows that his influence is reflected in *Foe* itself, not that Susan may not be a reliable narrator—the "daughter" indicates that her story has been changed by an outside influence.

Foe as Oppressor

Foe is representative of the phallogocentric culture that imposes its demands on Susan's narration. He tries to usurp her tale and turn it into something it is not, or "convert ... her novel essay of that which has never before been recorded, into history, his story, a story that suspends and subjects" (Macaskill and Colleran 440). Dominic Head points out that the novel "represents a repression of female experience which is rechanneled according to the desires of the patriarchal author" (115). Foe colonizes her story when he imposes his own desires on a narrative this is not his—he has no right to do this. By doing so, he changes the voice telling it, stopping Susan from telling her narrative truth in her own voice. Foe wants a story that will sell books—and the book that will sell is the one that panders to the phallogocentric colonial culture. He attempts to change her story by embellishing it with cannibals and also by changing Susan's story to her search for

her daughter. Susan's story is shaped by Foe's desire to change it—he tries to transmute her tale into something more to his liking, and in doing so he speaks over her voice.

Susan believes that Foe, through whatever authorial powers he has, can and will give her story meaning when she cannot, that he can both tell her story truthfully and reliably and make it more interesting and appealing to the audience. Susan has a dependence on Foe; she thinks that he tell her story better than she can. She tells Friday, "...the renowned Mr. Foe...is engaged in writing another story, which is your story, and your master's, and mine...I have given Mr. Foe the particulars of you and Mr. Cruso and of my year on the island and the years you and Mr. Cruso spent there alone, as far as I can supply them... Mr. Foe is weaving [these] into a story which will make use famous throughout the land, and rich too" (*Foe* 58). Susan does not think her story is interesting enough to be published as she has written it, hence she puts her trust in Foe to have him reshape it into a story that the public (of the phallogentric culture) will want to read. She thinks that Foe can do what she cannot: "More is at stake in the history you write," she tells him in one of her letters, "I will admit, for it must not only tell the truth about us but please its readers too" (*Foe* 63). Susan wants to tell her true story, but she does not understand that it has to come from her and not from someone else. The narrative truth Susan is searching for needs an internal, not external, source. This makes her dependent on Foe for her narrative truth—which cannot come from him—and also his knowledge of writing sellable books. Susan writes in one of her letters to Foe, "... I may gather my strength and send out a vision of the island to hang before you like a substantial body, ... so that it will be there for you to draw on whenever you have need" (*Foe* 53). She thinks she can transfer her story to him somehow, and have him tell the unadulterated truth but also tell it in a way that makes it more sellable to the phallogentric audience.

The phallogocentric culture is one that accepts as authoritative and wants to read historical truths such as *Robinson Crusoe*. The problem is with the contemporary culture, not Susan's narrative. Foe says, "The island is not a story in itself . . . It is like a loaf of bread. It will keep us alive, certainly, if we are starved of reading; but who will prefer it when there are tastier confections and pastries to be had?" (*Foe* 117). This is another aspect of the phallogocentric culture. It may accept Susan's story, but even if she gets it published, will likely not read it in favor of the "tastier confections" it offers, such as *Robinson Crusoe*. Susan defends her tale but acknowledges that it is not a standard adventure tale, saying "It is not dull so long as we remind ourselves it is true. But as an adventure tale it is very dull indeed" (*Foe* 127). Her story is something other than an adventure tale, but it is just as valid (and her experience is just as valid), but the phallogocentric culture rejects this idea. Foe trivializes and invalidates her experience by saying that no one will care to read it; it necessarily must be changed in order to be read ("Politics of the Canon" 221). As Susan knows, the audience of the phallogocentric culture does not want to read about "a woman cowering in the wind" (*Foe* 94). She understands that she will "never make [her] fortune . . . by being merely what [she is]" (*Foe* 82). Foe, as the embodiment of the desires of the phallogocentric culture, "pricked up his ears when he heard the word *Cannibal* . . . [and] longed for Cruso to have a musket and a carpenter's chest" (*Foe* 82-3).

Susan as Castaway, Scribe, and Authoress

Susan's first role is that of the woman who experienced the island and is the owner of that particular experiential truth. In this way, her identity is "the woman washed ashore" (*Foe* 99). She is the woman who lived on the island for a year with Cruso and Friday, who could not stand the wind or the boredom or manage to learn Cruso's story. She is also the only one from

the island who can tell the experiential truth, and she wants to write the narrative truth so her tale has meaning. Susan is the one who wants “to tell of the island, of [her]self and Crusoe and Friday and what we three did there: for [she is] a free woman who asserts her freedom by telling her story according to her own desire” (*Foe* 131). However, she is not truly free to tell her story as a woman because of the forces of the phallogocentric culture.

Susan is committed to having her narrative truth be a faithful telling of her experiential truth, much as Beatrice wanted Dante’s narrative truth to be a faithful reflection of his corrected understanding of her. Susan tells Foe, “All I say is: What I saw, I wrote” (*Foe* 54). In this way, she takes on the role of scribe and authoress of her tale. I’ve used the gendered term “authoress” to reflect the idea that there are differences in male and female speech. As authoress, Susan is telling her story in her own (feminine) voice. Susan asks Foe, “If I cannot come forward, as author, and swear to the truth of my tale, what will be the worth of it?” (*Foe* 40), indicating that she believes that an untrue tale would be worthless and meaningless. It will only have value if she can swear that it is true (and this necessitates that she has to be the one to tell it). She wants to be a faithful scribe and transfer the events of her experience onto paper. Susan first resists the idea of someone changing her story while speaking to the captain on her rescue ship: he tells her that “...the booksellers will hire a man to set your story to rights, and put in a dash of colour too, here and there” (*Foe* 40). Susan responds: “I will not have any lies told” (*Foe* 40). Susan insists that her narrative truth be told and is explicitly opposed to the idea of embellishment.

Susan as Owner of Her Silence

Another role Susan takes on is the owner of her silence; she tries to appropriate the silence and use it to her advantage. Withholding parts of her story is another way of attempting

to assert her power and authority—she is asserting that she is the one who has the final word on what her story contains. She refuses to tell Foe about certain parts of her story (such as her daughter and her time in Brazil) because those parts are not the story she is trying to tell. Her silence is “chosen and purposeful: it is [her] own silence” (*Foe* 122). Foe insists on asking her about other events so he can embellish her tale. Susan resists his attempts to do this, telling him “Bahia is not part of my story” (*Foe* 114) and, “As for Bahia, it is by choice that I say so little of it” (*Foe* 120). She asserts that she is in control of what goes in her story and what does not: “Once you proposed to supply a middle by inventing cannibals and pirates. These I would not accept because they were not the truth. Now you propose to reduce the island to an episode in the history of a woman in search of a lost daughter. This too I reject” (*Foe* 121). Despite this, Foe ignores her wishes and decides to speak over her.

Susan, however, still believes that she has some power and authority to determine how her tale will be told. She says that she will not be like the criminals Foe hears confession from and then are borne away to prison, “leaving [him] to make of their stories whatever [he] fanc[ies]” (*Foe* 123). Instead, Susan says, “It is still in [her] power to guide and amend. Above all, to withhold (*Foe* 123). However, the problem with this is that when Susan withholds part of her story, Foe then assumes the prerogative to invent what he likes. Foe is assuming the authority to tell Susan’s experiential truth by inventing events. Foe seizes her narrative truth and does what he likes with it, with no regard to what she wants or for her experiential truth. He completely ignores her authority as the experiencer of this truth. Even Susan’s silence cannot be powerful or authoritative; it is not within her ability to definitively say what will appear in her account, now that Foe’s voice, who is above her in the patriarchal hierarchy, has overruled her choice. Susan is

constrained by the paradox of wanting to tell her own story and wanting to write a story that will sell, which appear mutually exclusive.

Susan as "Free Woman"

Susan tries to appropriate negative views of women and turn them into something positive. She says of the prostitutes in Bahia, "A woman who goes freely abroad is thought a whore. I was thought a whore. But there are so many whores there, or as I prefer to call them, free women, that I was not daunted" (*Foe* 115). Whores exist on the periphery of acceptability, something not quite covert but still not acceptable. Although they may be solicited in droves, they are not free to do what they choose. Susan's overly optimistic view of these women suggests that she cannot grasp the problem with attempting to tell her story. In a way, she is prostituting her story (and perhaps herself) to Foe, by selling it out to him and acquiescing, ultimately if unwillingly, to his demands, in the same way a prostitute is not free to accept or decline a client. Once she decides to get into bed with Foe, she is stuck there and has relinquished her hold on her story. She believes she needs Foe in order to survive; she is beholden to him to produce a tale that will sell at the same time she resists his attempts to distort her tale.

However, just because a woman has a form and a body and her existence is acknowledged does not mean that she has a voice or will be listened to or acknowledged as valid. Susan says, "... Such a life is abject. It is the life of a thing. A whore used by men is used as a substantial body" (*Foe* 126). In the same way Susan imagines whores have more agency than they do, she imagines she also does, since she is also a substantial body. But this revision of her earlier thought of whores as "free women" reverses the position of power and authority: the

whores are now objects instead of subjects, and to be a substantial body does not mean that one cannot be misused. These women that Susan terms “free women” are really not such, as they too exist in the phallogentric culture that demands the existence of prostitutes but at the same time deems them not respectable. Thus when Susan says that she is “ a free woman who asserts her freedom by telling her story according to her own desire” (*Foe* 131), if a “free woman” is in reality far less autonomous and empowered than Susan would like to believe, it is much more difficult for her to tell her story according to “her own desire.”

Susan as Muse

Susan takes on the role of the Muse—the inspiration of poets. The Muse, however, is the inspiration but not the source of stories, again relegating Susan to the role of bearer rather than maker of meaning. As the Muse, Susan is involved in the process of writing, but she is not the owner of the product, she is merely a tool for getting Foe’s pen to flow, no more. Susan “straddles him (which he did not seem easy with, in a woman). ‘This is the manner of the Muse when she visits her poets,’ [she] whispered, and felt some of the listlessness go out of [her] limbs” (*Foe* 139). She is trying to transfer her story to Foe, to have him produce what she desires. Instead, she has no control over what the author writes once he has been visited by the Muse; he can (and will) do as he wishes with her story. In this act, she removes herself from having experienced the story, becoming merely the inspiration for the poet. The poetry decidedly comes from him, not from her. She may draw it out of him, but it originated in him and belongs to him. By comparing herself to the Muse, Susan has relinquished her hold on her experiential truth, leaving it to Foe to turn into something that others will read, the tried and true adventure tale.

As Muse, Susan takes the sexual position of the man, attempting to also take Foe's position as the male creator of her story. Writing and speaking are men's roles, and she takes on the man's role in sexual relations, hoping this position will also give her the male prerogative of authorship. Susan says that the Muse "must do whatever is in her power to father her offspring" (*Foe* 140). By using "father" as the action of creation, Susan is trying to appropriate the creative and (re)productive power of the male gender. But this attempt also fails. Implicitly, this development in the novel suggests that the only way to successfully tell her story is for Susan to acquiesce to what the phallogentric audience wants and to tell her narrative truth using a masculine tongue that this audience will acknowledge the authority of. Susan's attempt to appropriate Foe's voice, instead of using her own fails. The next morning, Foe gives Susan sixpence for her and Friday's breakfast, to which she thinks, "though no great payment for a visit from the Muse, I accepted" (*Foe* 145). By turning the Muse into a prostitute, she becomes as imprisoned by the patriarchal society as the "free women" are.

Susan as (Unsuccessful) Author

When Susan is unable to be the authoress of her tale, she then attempts to be the author—one who fathers a tale, instead of mothers it. Susan attempts to take Foe's position as both man and author, as a male author is the one that the phallogentric culture will accept. Macaskill and Colleran (441) and Bishop (55) suggest that she must speak in a foreign masculine tongue if she is to be heard, and while this is true, this will no longer be her narrative truth as she is no longer speaking in her own voice. Speaking in this masculine tongue changes her narrative truth, but the phallogentric culture demands that she speak in such a voice in order to be heard. The roles she takes on change her voice and thus her narrative truth. Thus in this way, despite the many roles

Susan takes on, she is not successful in telling her story in her own voice. The imposition of the phallogocentric forces, via Foe, succeeds in colonizing her story and usurping her right to tell it in her voice. While she attempts to appropriate the masculine voice and power that will get her story read, she is also implicitly accepting this power dynamic by wanting to take on this role and thinking it will give her authority. Susan recognizes that in order to tell her tale, she must take the position of a male author, not the authoress who experienced it.

Foe's constant attempts to colonize her story seem, in fact, to actually come to fruition. Susan's alleged daughter (I'll refer to her as Susan's "daughter") is a figure of Foe's imagination that has forced its way into her story. He inserts this "daughter" into Susan's tale, but Susan realizes that her "daughter" is actually Foe's daughter—he is the one who produced this manifestation of his invasion of Susan's story. Susan tells her "daughter," "What you know of your parentage comes to you in the form of stories, and the stories have but a single source" (*Foe* 91), and this single source is none other than Foe. Susan also calls her "father-born" and says she "had no mother" (*Foe* 91). Susan insists that this "daughter" is not her daughter. The "daughter" has been inserted into Susan's narrative truth by Foe, who presumed to create this being and change Susan's narrative truth to his liking. The ability of Foe to produce a story he should not be able to and Susan's inability to produce a story that is her own show the imbalance of power in who can and cannot produce stories. Foe's imaginative invasion of Susan's account overrules her own. His creation quite literally takes on a life of its own in the "daughter," and she is not even cognizant that she is a creation. The "daughter" tells Susan, "I know no Mr. Foe . . . I come only to see you" (*Foe* 73). As Susan and Friday are traveling, they come upon a "dead babe" by the side of the road (*Foe* 104). As Susan walks away from it, she asks, "Who was the child but I, in another life?" (*Foe* 105). Susan is associated with nonproductive reproduction—the child she

finds is dead, but the one Foe creates is very much alive. As one with male prerogative, Foe has an easier time producing writing and having it “come alive.”

While Susan struggles (and fails) to successfully take on other roles, Foe does not face the same problem, as he is male in a phallogentric society. He tells Susan, “Before you declare yourself too freely, Susan, wait to see what fruit I bear.” Susan herself says, “I was intended not to be the mother of my story, but to beget it. It is not I who am the intended, but you” (*Foe* 126). In this statement, she takes on the role of the man, the one who begets a child and gives Foe the role of the woman, the vessel. She casts herself as the one who experienced the events, and now needs Foe to be the vessel that will take her story out into the world. But she also gives Foe the role of “the intended” teller of her story. Even when Foe takes on the role of scribing her account, he still has more authority to do so than she does since he is a male in the phallogentric culture. Foe is cast as the vessel; however, this is one that bears fruit (the “daughter”? *Foe*?), and this is fruit that sells, regardless if it is true or not. While Susan cannot appropriate the role of maker of meaning in this culture that bars her from doing so, Foe can do it easily. Regardless of whether the story is really his or not; his story is the one that will be read and accepted as historical truth. Thus taking on different roles does not harm him in the same way it does Susan, even when he takes on a feminine role. This again shows that the power and authority lie with Foe, and not with Susan. Foe is still a man, one who is listened to and validated by the phallogentric culture, the same way in which the culture is such an oppressive force that Susan cannot overcome it no matter how or how well she might try to disguise herself in order to tell her story.

Susan ultimately succumbs to Foe’s demands on her story, by admitting explicitly that her “daughter” is indeed a substantial being. Foe asks her: “You touch her; you embrace her; you

kiss her. Would you dare to say she is not substantial?" to which Susan replies, "No, she is substantial, as my daughter is substantial and I am substantial" (*Foe* 152). Although Susan still holds that the child before her and her real daughter are two different people, by admitting that her "daughter" exists and is substantial, Susan has completely surrendered her story to Foe. He now has usurped the authority to change Susan's story at will, since he has succeeded in creating a completely false figure and turning into reality. By Susan's admission, Foe has created something in her tale that now is substantial, and this acceptance of his power and authority over her tale represents her ultimate failure to tell her narrative truth and have others read it and accept it on her own authority. That Foe actively desires and successfully attempts to embellish and change her tale means that he has gone from changing her narrative truth to changing her experiential truth. He thus attacks her on two levels, both from the authority of telling her tale and her lived experience. This changing of her experiential truth is even more insidious than changing her narrative truth, as it invalidates not just her voice but her very existence. In the true spirit of imperialism and colonialism, Foe is not satisfied with merely changing how her story is told, he has to change her story itself to one that he prefers.

Conclusion: Into the Sphere of Reality

Susan says to Friday, “This is no game in which each word has a second meaning” (Foe 79). Considering this sentiment in the context of the enterprise of literature and these particular texts, however, it is difficult to deny that there is a meaning (or multiple meanings) below their surfaces. I’m considering it to be a given that writers write because they have something to say and they think the medium of fiction is the best way to express it—“If there were a better, clearer, shorter way of saying what the fiction says, then why not scrap the fiction?” (Attwell). These texts encourage us to immerse ourselves below these surfaces and find deeper meanings. In this conclusion, I will extrapolate from the worlds of the works to the world of reality. This means taking the *Purgatorio* I hold in my hand as proof that the pilgrim came to understand Beatrice and the shortcomings of his earlier work and re-presented her to his readers. *Foe* is not the “real” story of Robinson Crusoe, but neither is it the “real” story of Susan Barton. It instead represents what could have been had the phallogocentric culture of colonialism not silenced Susan and countless women, slaves, and Others.

In the three works under consideration, speech is a tool of extraordinary power. The Beatrice of *Purgatorio* demands vociferously that Dante revise his understanding of who she is and what she means—and that the reader do the same. She is successful in her endeavors to correct Dante’s (and our) perception of who she is because of her powerful, authoritative voice. Susan, however, is ultimately denied this tool and its concomitant power. Her inability to tell her narrative truth reflects the reality of the colonial Other. Revision is another tool of enormous power, and it can be used negatively, to oppress, or positively, to correct—the difference is in the way it is used. Dante uses revision to rectify his incorrect portrayal of a woman so his audience

would know her real character. Coetzee uses revision to show how it has been used in reality to obscure and perpetuate oppression. Dante the pilgrim is told to revise his account by Beatrice, and he does—or rather, the poet does, giving the reader the corrected portrayal of Beatrice in *Purgatorio*. Foe’s revision and embellishment of Susan’s tale usurp her voice and replace it with Foe’s own. Taking Foe as the colonizer and Susan as the colonized, this is precisely what happened in history, and why we have so many historical truths that praise the colonizer instead of condemn him for his treatment of Others.

Spivak writes that “feminism is necessarily resistance” (112). Ngugi writes that “A writer who tries to communicate the message of revolutionary unity in the languages of the people becomes a subversive character” (453). The tongue of the colonizer is the only acceptable tongue to the colonizer. This naturally imparts to the colonizer the authority to speak. Any Others, then, must attempt to usurp, appropriate, or otherwise fight to obtain the authority to speak and be listened to. Beatrice and Susan both embody a resistance to their respective male character’s desires to speak for them, and thus their authors also ally themselves with this resistance. Although Susan is not successful in her attempts to tell her story, she is a subversive character merely by trying to do so and as one who does not want to acquiesce to the demands of the phallogocentric culture. Dante wrote in the *Vita Nuova* that he “hope[s] to write of [Beatrice] that which has never been written of any other woman” (*VN* 84). Beatrice’s voice is unparalleled by that of any female character in literature before her, and in this way Dante subverted the norms of literature to make a woman the most authoritative figure in his definitive work.

Barolini says that “Although the poet’s use of a young Florentine woman as his vehicle to God may reflect positively on the female sex, fundamental limitations are built into the representation of Beatrice” (*Encyclopedia* 191). Achebe, despite his acceptance and use of an

appropriated English, says that it is the “language which history has forced down our throats” (431). But he continues, “But for me there is no other choice. I have been given this language and intend to use it” (Achebe 434). He knows that he has “been given” this language, and it has been dictated by circumstance that he use it. I respond to Barolini in the same way. Beatrice, too, must be given a voice by Dante the poet, but the events of the text allow us to divorce her from any dependence on the pilgrim for her voice and authority. Although the poet took her voice, he then rectified this and returned it, and she reclaims it in *Purgatorio*. Here, I think intention is important. Dante saw that he had done something wrong, and he corrected it. What better way to repent, revise, and correct than to have his character (who, suggestively, shares his name) suffer an ersatz confession, contrition, and satisfaction at the hands of the one he wronged? To have her correct, berate, and even silence him? For a writer who also hints that he will spend time on the terrace of pride, this was likely not an easy admission to put in print. To expect Dante to write a perfectly feminist text centuries before the rise of feminism is unrealistic. This is not to say that we should not interpret such texts through a feminist lens (as both Barolini and I have done) or that we should not criticize their authors for not treating women as subjects with agency, but to expect Dante to conform to modern standards is not entirely fair.

Coetzee responds to his speaking for Susan and Friday in a different way. He refuses to interpret his own work in interviews: “I tend to resist invitations to interpret my own fiction” (Atwell). Although he has spoken for his fictional characters in his novel, his silence in interviews is a way of not speaking for the oppressed groups that they represent that he is not a part of. Susan is still given a voice by Coetzee, but at the same time he acknowledges that what he has done is inadequate as he has not experienced colonial oppression. The silences in *Foe* represent the lost narrative truths of real Others, and we cannot grasp their true meanings unless

the silences are filled by those who have experienced them. All we have is the silence's "present absence, or its absent presence" (Dovey 374) because we (the readers) know there is a missing piece, but we cannot fill it in. He is an ally of the oppressed, but can only access their stories by acknowledging them, not recording and disseminating them, hence the silence in his novel and in his interviews. He resists interpreting his work and refuses to speak for Susan and Friday and thus refuses to take the position of Foe, the colonizer.

The literature of postcolonialism is directed (assuredly not its only purpose, but the most relevant here) toward rectifying the wrongs of past accepted historical truths as they are embodied and have been accepted in the literary canon, exposing them as, if not completely false and biased, in no way representative of the experiential and narrative truths of the people they portray. In this spirit, Dante's solution of giving Beatrice a voice is successful—he was righting a wrong he had committed in his literature. Coetzee's solution in *Foe* is to give ownership of the silence to the silenced and to acknowledge that the author cannot give a voice to the silenced characters—this turns the silence into a vacuum for external representation. We cannot fault Dante and Coetzee for creating and speaking for their characters and demand that they never speak for anyone but themselves—this line of thinking would quickly lead us to the conclusion that no one should write anything but nonfiction. We cannot bar male writers from writing female characters and giving them female voices, or just as absurdly, bar female writers from writing male characters. We can, however, address and criticize appropriative and silencing literature, historical truths that create and perpetuate the oppression of the Other.

It is also important to acknowledge the male authors' dependence on the female characters. Susan imagines Foe murmuring to himself, " 'Better only Crusoe and Friday ... better without the woman.' Yet where would you be without the woman?" (*Foe* 71). Foe is dependent

on others to provide the raw material for his embellishments—they provide the stories he cannot invent himself, as good as he is at embellishing tales that have already been provided. Coetzee is perhaps acknowledging his own indebtedness to the groups he is writing about as he includes their silence, a sort of silent salute to those whose stories have been lost before they could be told. And where would Dante, both the pilgrim and the poet, be without Beatrice? I do not think it too much of a stretch to say that the Beatrice the poet knew in reality served as the inspiration for much of his poetry. While the male authors may write the female characters, there is also an interdependence that is often quietly ignored.

These works can be seen as ethical or moral in nature. Many writers mention the ethical or moral aspect of Coetzee's work (Attridge, Marais, Bishop, Said), and Dante's is moral by way of religion, through the ideas of redemption and penance present in the pilgrim's confession. Susan muses, "In a world of chance, is there a better and a worse? ... We yield to a stranger's embrace, or give ourselves to the waves; for the blink of an eyelid our vigilance relaxes; we are asleep; and when we awake, we have lost the direction of our lives. What are these blinks of an eyelid, against which the only defence is an eternal and inhuman wakefulness? Might they not be the crack and chinks through which another voice, other voices, speak in our lives? By what right do we close our ears to them? The questions echoed in my head without answer' " (*Foe* 30). Susan's last question here is central to the text—even as readers who have no personal connection to the oppression of Susan or Friday, we cannot, as citizens of the world, close our ears to the voices of others without silencing them. Dante recognized at the end of the *Vita Nuova* that he had closed his ears in this way to Beatrice. However, he reopened them in *Purgatorio* and deliberately revised Beatrice's portrayal the *Vita Nuova* because he saw that it needed correction. Dante is operating within the context of his own wrongs and Catholic ideas of

confession, penance, and forgiveness. He sinned against Beatrice and by doing so he sinned against God. However, he repents for his sins and is forgiven in the *Divine Comedy*.

Foe says to Susan: “I read in an old Italian author of a man who visited, or dreamed he visited, Hell. There he met the souls of the dead. One of the souls was weeping. ‘Do not suppose, mortal,’ said this soul, addressing him, ‘that because I am not substantial these tears you behold are not the tears of true grief’ ” (*Foe* 138). This *Inferno* allusion in *Foe* cements the idea that fiction is not entirely removed from reality—quite the opposite, in fact. This speaks to the reader’s responsibility to take what the literature says and applying it to life—Coetzee’s Susan may be fictional, but we easily can imagine that there were colonial women who felt just as powerless and silenced. Coetzee’s work demands that we interrogate a canonical text and question the values it contains. At the close of *Foe* we are offered a choice: we must choose between “the assertion and renunciation of authority” (Marais 14). By offering a choice, Coetzee ensures that reading *Foe* is not a “safe, passive act, removed from imperatives of the historical present” because it is the story of colonialism that we do not hear: the story of those silenced by colonialism (Marais 10). As we have gradually started to question the historical truths that have been taught in classrooms for centuries and started to perceive as valid the experiential and narrative truths of women, people of color, the poor, and Others, our historical truths have become closer to the experiential and narrative truths of these silenced and marginalized groups. Coetzee’s work demands that we acknowledge have an ethical responsibility *in real life* to overcome our ignorance and acknowledge the injustices and silences that he addresses in his fiction.

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