

A Tribute to Lynn Festa's *Fiction without Humanity*

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Rebecca asked that I speak to the resonance of Lynn Festa's book beyond the realm of eighteenth-century British literary studies for other literatures and fields. One of Festa's extremely bold moves is to have envisioned a prequel not only to her own *Sentimental Figures of Empire in Eighteenth-Century Britain and France*, but to Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. The works that assume the status of "precursor texts" span the fields of art history and natural history and the genres of the riddle and the fable that operate at the nexus of thing theory and animal studies. These precursors are by no means restricted to the British Isles but rather encompass Ancient Greece and Rome, and, in the early-modern period, Northern Europe and France. By not just citing original nor contemporary fables, riddles, anecdotes, and experiments, but rather charting them throughout their successive versions, considering their philosophical and theoretical relevance at every turn, Festa considerably expands the cross-cultural and transhistorical reach of her work.

Far from being haphazard, Festa's choice of fields and genres privileges those that encourage us to assume a perspective, or eye-view, as she calls it, that is not our own, an ability and inclination, she argues, that is what makes us human. By "making" us human, she means wresting us into the potentially unsettling, hitherto unoccupied, position that will come to be designated as such, a "making," "forming," or "fabrication" she associates with the etymological origin of the term "fiction." This shift in perspective is something that becomes quite palpable while reading Festa's text, which acts upon us much as she claims the works she analyzes affected their readers and viewers. Introducing us to the finer distinctions between a still life and a *trompe l'oeil* (or – better yet – a still life nested in a *trompe l'oeil*), Festa not only invites us to contemplate the works themselves, in gorgeous full-color reproduction, but initiates us into the interpretation of their intricacies, leaving no implication unexplored, and enabling us not only to comprehend but to sustain their full effect. Festa's deftness and wit often give us the impression that we are looking at a *trompe l'oeil* or responding to a riddle when reading her prose—what is the difference between anthropomorphism and personification, how is a painting like a microscope, when is a pot not just a pot—but therein lies the pleasure and the shift in perspective. As we are invited to assume the "eye-view" of the bird, the louse, the flea, the fly, or any other fable or riddle-creature in turn, we are given to understand that our very delight in doing so is what defines us as none of the above, and is how, in a sense, we become personified in turn.

"In placing *Robinson Crusoe* in relation to such a smorgasbord of genres," Festa asserts, "I am not trying to argue that the novel is the misbegotten love child of the fable and the riddle." And yet, the choice of *Crusoe* as the unlikely progeny featured in her book gives it far more cross-channel resonance than would, say, the more intuitive choice of *Gulliver's Travels*. For there are two "livres de chevet" or bedside table books, insofar as eighteenth-century France is concerned, both of which are showcased in Rousseau's *Emile*. While Sophie reads Fénelon's *Télémaque*, Emile, and indeed, Rousseau as well as his non-fictional protégé, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, read *Crusoe*. Festa has thus, in effect, written a prequel with as much cross-channel resonance as her *Sentimental Figures of Empire*. Its resonance includes implications for class, gender, and race relations as well as for environmental studies, as the "fiction of humanity" it interrogates and interpellates emerges from its deep imbrication in the surrounding world of

other “eye-views,” rendering her work as engaged as it is engaging and lending a poignant timeliness to her study.