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SAVAGE EUROPEANS AND GENTLEMANLY SAVAGES

Capitalism and Blurred Identity in *Robinson Crusoe*

Susan Lydon

While Ian Watt has viewed Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* as an unflinching portrayal of capitalist self-interest, Defoe's attitude toward capitalism is more complex than Watt's reading allows. Rather than simply depicting or celebrating the modern economic man, Defoe seems to recognize the necessity of exploiting others for economic success in capitalistic society but he is also fully aware of the inhumanity of the process. Defoe blurs the boundaries between civilized Europe and savage lands, conflates Crusoe with his savage companion, and collapses the differences between the beginning of time and his modern day era as a commentary on life in capitalist England. In highlighting the affinities between Europeans and savages, early men and contemporary Europeans, Defoe suggests that economic man is not as advanced as he might think himself to be. Through his depiction of capitalist Crusoe's affinity with savages, Defoe explores the complexity of existing in a capitalistic society. White men exploit savages who exploit them in return. In capitalistic society is it difficult to find a middle ground between

the exploiter and the enslaved. In Defoe's novel, he demonstrates the necessity of becoming a self-serving, self-sufficient economic man, but he also points out that this process reduces Europeans to the very savages they claim to have raised themselves above.

On the surface, Defoe's story seems to depict the necessity and difficulty of personal survival in adverse conditions. We are made to feel that Crusoe must become as self-sufficient and economical as possible in order to survive the harrowing ordeal of being shipwrecked on a deserted island. Many critics believe that Defoe's tale was drawn from an actual account of a shipwrecked man, Alexander Selkirk, who was marooned on Juan Fernandez Island for four years. His tale appeared in print in 1712, shortly before *Robinson Crusoe* was published.¹ Like Crusoe, Selkirk was reputed to have survived resourcefully, fashioning a coat and cap of goatskin, stitching shirts together using a nail as a needle.² The realistic roots of Crusoe's tale emphasize the necessity of becoming a self-serving, economic man rather than perishing of hunger and thirst.

Similarly recognizing this necessity for survival, Ian Watt has famously interpreted Crusoe as an uncritical depiction of an economic man, a capitalist, an emerging figure in early eighteenth-century society. Watt defines his notion of economic man as people who approach life from "the rational, asocial, and antitraditional standards of individual self-interest."³ Watt claims that "the dignity of labor is the central creed of the religion of capitalism," and Crusoe labors in a capitalistic idyll of a remote island, free from competitors, with a complete monopoly of the island's resources.⁴ Watt also points out that we encounter Crusoe's self-interested, economic utilitarianism not just in his ability to survive on an uninhabited island but also in his relationships with other people. Crusoe sells his loyal boy Xury for financial gain, and only laments his loss when he misses the labor Xury might have provided on his plantation. He saves Friday in hopes that he will facilitate his escape. Women are only mentioned when they are useful to Crusoe. According to Watt, Defoe's story is a depiction of a self-interested capitalist. Indeed this is

¹ Michael Shinagel, ed., "Preface," in *Robinson Crusoe* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1975), vii.

² Woodes Rogers, "Account of Alexander Selkirk's Solitary Life," in Michael Shinagel, ed., *Robinson Crusoe* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1975), 234.

³ Ian Watt, "Robinson Crusoe as Myth," in Michael Shinagel, ed., *Robinson Crusoe* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1975), 303.

⁴ Watt, *Robinson Crusoe as Myth*, 295.

one valid aspect of Defoe's story, one valid aspect of his view of capitalistic society. Yet, Watt's reading seems a bit reductive.

Calling Watt's interpretation of the novel into question, Maximillian Novak points out that "any view of Crusoe as the embodiment of the capitalistic spirit must take into account his penchant for traveling and his hatred of a steady life."⁵ Novak claims that Crusoe disobeys his parents out of a romantic desire to see foreign lands, not in the name of free enterprise. Novak claims that if prospering financially is Robinson's chief end that he could have done this just as well at home or on the plantation in Brazil. While Novak does not go so far as to propose what else *Robinson Crusoe* could be besides an embodiment of the capitalistic spirit, he offers a complication to the view of Crusoe as simply a capitalist.

Keeping Novak's views in mind, it is interesting to note further inconsistencies in Defoe's tale. A close examination of the passage where Defoe discusses Crusoe's selling of Xury reveals that Defoe was aware of the contradictions in capitalist Crusoe's behavior. Crusoe states "I was very loath to sell the poor Boy's Liberty, who had assisted me so faithfully in procuring my own."⁶ In mentioning the two events: Xury's loss of freedom at Crusoe's hands and Crusoe's attainment of freedom at Xury's hands, in direct conjunction, in the same sentence, he positions these facts in such a way that he appears to be subtly pointing to the disjunction between the events. It also seems a bit jarring that Defoe mentions that Xury was happy to be sold, further emphasizing the disparity between Crusoe's freedom and his subsequent enslavement of someone else. Yet, Defoe never overtly critiques his hero for his callous treatment of another human being. Unlike Watt's interpretation of Defoe as simply depicting and possibly celebrating capitalistic man, Defoe seems to simultaneously recognize the necessity of using others for economic success but also the inherent contradictions of the process.

Likewise, Defoe's depiction of Crusoe's treatment of women also seems to point to Defoe's awareness of the asocial aspects of capitalistic society at the same time as Defoe never overtly criticizes his hero for embodying them. In the final chapters, we learn that Crusoe marries and sends women to the island. However, the only thing we learn about his wife is that she dies and the seven women who are sent to the island seem to be fairly indistinguish-

⁵ Maximillian E. Novak, "Robinson Crusoe's 'Original Sin,'" *Studies in English Literature* 1 (1961): 29.

⁶ Daniel Defoe, "Robinson Crusoe," in Michael Shinagel, ed., *Robinson Crusoe* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1975), 26.

able from the "good Cargoe of Necessaries" and pregnant animals that are shipped along with them.⁷ It is somewhat unsettling that the only time Crusoe feels emotion for a woman is when he finds out that the captain's widow has preserved his money well. Defoe's tale contains a pointed lack of emotion and a pointed link between Crusoe's good will toward people and their usefulness to him. Yet again, Defoe offers no overt critique of Crusoe's practice, recognizing the callous behavior capitalism sometimes entails. Defoe also seems to treat Crusoe's religious feelings inconsistently. Hans Hauserman sees Robinson Crusoe's tale as a religious allegory with a pious end in view. It seems as though Crusoe is being punished in an oceanic prison for neglecting his father's wishes and God's that he remain in the station of life into which he was born. Indeed, Crusoe often shows regret for not following God's wishes. However, many of Robinson's religious feelings seem a little materialistic. Right after Robinson assures us that he is removed from the wickedness of the world on the island from "the Lust of the Flesh, the Lust of the Eye, or the Pride of Life" he discourses on the pride he feels in being the complete sovereign of his island.⁸ When Crusoe looks for tobacco in the chest, finds Bibles, and feels he was "directed by Heaven no doubt," he somewhat irreverently conflates heavenly inspiration with his urge for tobacco.⁹ It is slightly humorous that Crusoe seems to abandon his religious fervor for the most part of the novel and it revives with his appetite for tobacco, suggesting that Crusoe's religious fervor merely stems from contentment with material prosperity. For Puritans, economic prosperity was supposed to be a sign of God's favor, but not the only reason to think about God. Defoe seems to point to the tendency of capitalists to get Puritan religion backwards and put more of an emphasis on material prosperity and less of an emphasis on God. In spite of his rather irreverent behavior, Crusoe prospers. Defoe realizes the humor and the necessity of Crusoe's using religion to bolster his economic prosperity. Defoe seems to be fully aware of the contradictions involved in life in his capitalistic society.

Crusoe's contradictory psychology signifies the complexity of existing in life in capitalistic society. Crusoe is not just an erring sinner who repents; he is a capitalist who treats religion in a utilitarian manner. He is a man who feels compunction and a man who wants to kill. He laments the death of his goat; yet knocks a parrot on the head when it suits him. He often exploits other

⁷ Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, 220.

⁸ Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, 94.

⁹ Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, 69.

people around him. He sells Xury into slavery. He saves Friday in order to save himself. He carts off women who remain nameless to his island to serve as breeders. He shuns women in running off to sea. Yet the money he earns there is used to help his two sisters who are victims of patriarchal society; one a helpless widow, the other, a misused wife. Defoe's novel explores the necessity of becoming a self-serving, self-sufficient man in capitalistic society and simultaneously explores the human cruelty it sometimes engenders.

Defoe's treatment of Crusoe's experiences on the island also seems to embody contradictions. Crusoe seems to be a kind of Adam figure for Defoe since both Defoe and Crusoe's idea of history would have been based on the Bible. Crusoe even has an idyllic garden abode on the island. Crusoe continually calls our attention to the fact that this island has never been touched by civilization, linking it to the beginning of the world. He says after firing a gun on his island, "I believe it was first gun that had been fired there since the Creation of the World."¹⁰ He later says of his island home, "I firmly believed that no human Shape had ever set foot in that place."¹¹ Crusoe needs to make everything from scratch as though no civilization existed before him. On the one hand, Defoe seems to liken his English capitalist to Adam, suggesting that God placed Crusoe on the earth and that he exists in prelapsarian innocence. On the other, Defoe seems to suggest that life in capitalistic society is as asocial as life in the beginning of time. Crusoe needs to make everything from scratch since he has a tendency to distance himself from and compete with others. Defoe also seems to suggest that capitalistic life is not as advanced as one might think in linking capitalistic England to the beginning of time.

As well as linking Crusoe to Adam, Defoe also seems to link him to a feudal lord. Crusoe refers to his pets, Friday, and later the Englishmen who land on the island as subjects who are completely subordinate to his wishes. He mentions that he told Friday to labor for him so he will not have to. The description of the fortress that Crusoe builds recalls a feudal fortress. He refers to his dwelling as "my Castle" linking him further to a feudal king or lord.¹² His fortress is comprised of an inner sanctum, and outer layers of protection, recalling a walled castle with a moat. If Crusoe is a capitalist, he also very much resembles a feudal lord. On the one hand, Defoe seems to suggest that capitalists are as omnipotent as feudal lords. On the other, Defoe seems to suggest that the idea of free enterprise in capitalistic society is just

¹⁰ Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, 40.

¹¹ Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, 72.

¹² Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, 112.

an illusion. Labor is still controlled in capitalistic society as much as it is in feudal times; capitalists are always subject to each other in the market and to their employers. Again, Defoe suggests that capitalistic society is somehow backward at the same time as he lauds its achievements.

Over the course of his novel, Defoe not only collapses the difference between time periods but the difference between capitalist England and other less civilized locales. When Crusoe is far away in Brazil, his neighbor just happens to be English. He notes of his toil in Brazil "I could have done this as well in *England* among my friends."¹³ He also conflates Brazil with a less civilized place. "I used to say, I liv'd just like a Man cast away upon some desolate Island, that had nobody there but himself."¹⁴ Through Crusoe's comment about the interchangeability of these three places, Defoe suggests that Crusoe's island could be representative of a different island, namely England.

Indeed, Crusoe repeatedly likens life on his island to life in England. His abode on the island is complete with a cellar, a kitchen, and a back door. He likens himself to "any Lord of a Mannor in England" and refers to his two homes as a seacoast house and a country house.¹⁵ He likens marauding crows to "notorious Thieves in *England*."¹⁶ He even executes them in the same manner, by hanging. He philosophizes in a civilized manner about the rights of men when thinking about the rights of savages. When marshalling his thoughts, he describes the endeavor in European business terms. "I call'd a Council, that is to say in my thoughts."¹⁷ He makes pottery, glaze, clothes and an umbrella. He likens his supply filled shelves along the side of his cave to a store in England "it look'd like a general Magazine of all Necessary things," linking his island pursuits with enterprise in England.¹⁸ The link between the civilization he creates on the island and England is firmly cemented as the island is complete with a monument, the canoe that was built too far from water, and a holiday, the anniversary of his setting foot on the island.

Defoe not only blurs the boundaries between the geographic locales of England and the island but there are also many places in the novel where he collapses the differences between savages and Europeans. The comparison Crusoe and Friday make between the Christian god and Friday's pagan God

¹³ Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, 27.

¹⁴ Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, 27.

¹⁵ Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, 73.

¹⁶ Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, 85.

¹⁷ Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, 40.

¹⁸ Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, 51.

reveals that the pagan religion is actually more rational. The savages have allowed for the fact that God could not really hear people praying from far away, though the Christian religion fails to take this into consideration. Perhaps elements of the Christian religion are as ridiculous as the name of Friday's Benamuckee. While Christians might not see it as a problem that God technically could not hear prayers from far away, the link that Defoe establishes between the pagan customs and the Christian customs remains. Friday's inability to comprehend aspects of the Christian religion, a concept Crusoe fails to explain, parallels Crusoe's inability to comprehend cannibalism.

Crusoe's desire to murder the savages is not much more civilized than the savages' desire to eat one another. He describes his antipathetic feelings toward the savages as his "murthering Humour."¹⁹ His use of the term "murder" suggests that he is not just an Englishman acting in self-defense. Also, eight pages previously, Crusoe realizes that his desire to kill the savages would have been "wilful Murther" but then contemplates killing them anyway.²⁰ Defoe suggests that Crusoe's crime is greater than the savages who are probably less enlightened and educated than Crusoe and never philosophically analyzed their cannibalism.

Handsome and intelligent, Friday is no stereotypical cannibal. He even has the "Sweetness and Softness of an *European* in his Countenance."²¹ Far from eating Crusoe, he embodies "simple, unfeigned honesty."²² In many ways he seems to be a more sensitive and loving person than Crusoe. He is overjoyed when he finds his father on the island; and Crusoe has left his behind in England without much remorse. While Crusoe exploits Friday for his labor, "Friday was able to do all the work for me," Friday repeatedly tells Crusoe he would rather die than leave him, much like Xury, the other kindly savage Crusoe encounters, whom Crusoe considers drowning on first encounter.²³ Crusoe says of Friday, "never Man had a more faithful, loving, sincere Servant than *Friday* was to me."²⁴ Both Xury and Friday seem to be at least as intelligent as Crusoe. Crusoe notes, "Xury's Advice was good."²⁵ He describes the savage, "Xury, whose eyes were more about him than it seems mine

¹⁹ Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, 133.

²⁰ Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, 125.

²¹ Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, 148.

²² Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, 154.

²³ Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, 154.

²⁴ Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, 151.

²⁵ Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, 20.

were."²⁶ Crusoe thinks that if given knowledge of God that savages would "make much better use of it than we did."²⁷ When Friday cuts off one of the cannibal's heads, Crusoe claims that his skills surpass those of Europeans, "no Executioner in *Germany* could have done it sooner or better."²⁸ Crusoe states of Friday's use of a gun "Friday took his aim much better than I."²⁹ Crusoe marvels at Friday's dexterity in handling a boat and his ability to carve out a canoe. The savages in Friday's tribe seem more civilized than Englishmen. Instead of exploiting the labor of members of another race, Friday notes that "we save the white mans from drown...make Brother with them."³⁰ This stands in sharp contrast to Crusoe's self-interested rescue of Friday. Crusoe chief motive in saving Friday seemed to be the hope that Friday might help him escape from the island. Friday speaks of the Spanish as being cruel slave traders, in the same manner an Englishman might speak of a cannibal. Friday also seems more physically appealing than Crusoe. While Crusoe has overgrown whiskers, hideous fur garb, and all kinds of weapons hanging off him, Friday is a "comely, handsome savage."³¹ In many ways, Friday seems to be more of an intelligent, civilized gentleman than Crusoe.

Oddly enough, Friday seems to excel more than Crusoe in Europe with his skillful killing of the bear and Crusoe excels more than Friday on the island making a castle. We are made to feel that island life is more civilized than one might think and that Europe is less civilized than one might suppose. The harrowing experience with the bear and the wolves that Crusoe undergoes near the French Alps seems to take place in much more of a wilderness than the island he has just come from. Crusoe refers to French soldiers as two legged wolves, the bear as a gentleman and the wolves as an army of officers. Defoe suggests that the French prey on the English like animals. This link further reinforces Defoe's conflation of capitalist Europe and savage lands.

If life on Crusoe's island is representative of life in England, Defoe suggests that life in England combines as much savagery and civility as life on Crusoe's island. Indeed Crusoe embodies traits of both savages and Englishmen. He regresses to the life of a savage in many ways. He wears rudimentary clothes, forages for food and contemplates killing others when it

²⁶ Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, 22.

²⁷ Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, 151.

²⁸ Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, 148.

²⁹ Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, 169.

³⁰ Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, 161.

³¹ Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, 148.

suits him, yet he also achieves skillful economic prowess and lives in a fairly civilized manner, pottery glaze and all. His hybrid nature signifies the hybrid nature of all Englishmen whom Defoe would suggest similarly have one metaphorical foot in savage lands and the other in England.

Crusoe's relationship with the savages seems to echo the relationship between any two men in capitalistic society who are similarly out for gain and similarly exploit each other. Throughout the book, Defoe blurs the boundaries between capitalists and savages or exploiters and enslaved, suggesting that in capitalistic society, it is hard to find a middle ground between the exploiter and the enslaved. Crusoe gets shipwrecked and imprisoned on the island while he engages in slave trade, in an attempt to imprison others. Turks capture him and exploit him while he is in the process of trying to exploit savages for wealth. When Crusoe is enslaved in Morocco, he hopes that a Spanish or a Portugese ship will capture his master's ship so he can be set free, highlighting the fine line between the exploited and the enslaved. When Crusoe sees an English ship heading toward his island he speculates that it may be full of "Thieves and Murderers."³² He suspects the English of practically the same ill motives of which he suspects the savages, emphasizing the connection between savages and anyone who threatens a capitalist's wealth and the interchangeability of the savages and Englishmen.

When the wreck of Crusoe's ship drifts back to the island, Crusoe seems to be linked to an English enemy such as a pirate or a savage or a thief in his ransacking of English property. When the second English ship wrecks off the shore of his island, Crusoe pillages from the actual body of an Englishman. Defoe makes it clear that Crusoe must pilfer from English property in order to survive but it is eerie that his behavior replicates that of a thief or a savage in doing so, further highlighting the complexity of trying to survive in capitalistic society without infringing on the rights of fellow men. Also, Crusoe's need to focus on survival makes him unable to afford time to lament the fates of his fellow shipmates, indicating that capitalistic society renders its members incapable of concern for their fellow men, not so different than cannibals. Crusoe's social isolation highlights the asocial, self-interest of capitalists. Indeed, the death of his fellow Englishmen has permitted Crusoe to exist in what Ian Watt has called a capitalistic utopia free from competitors with sole access to all the island's wealth. Crusoe's experience draws connections between financial opportunists and marauders, savage or otherwise.

³² Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, 180.

There is another curious blend of the exploiter and enslaved when the Englishmen come with prisoners to the island, an eerie reenactment of the savages' landing on the island with prisoners. Friday exclaims, "*You see English Mans eat Prisoner as well as Savage Mans.*"³³ Though these Englishmen do not eat their captives, we are made to feel that the possibility that they will murder them is not much more humane. Within the English crew, some of the men have mutinied and forced the other English men into a sort of slavery. Within the group of men who come ashore, some of them are convinced to mutiny again against the people with whom they have mutinied the first time. The identities of the exploiters and enslaved seem to blend in this circle of mutiny. Friday, a savage, is put in charge of guarding two English prisoners, another example of a slave turned captor. In the end, Robinson leaves his kingdom to the two men who mutinied and are being punished by being left behind. He wonders how they will treat Friday's father and the Spanish people who are on their way to the island, indicating that the enslaved may again become the exploiters. When Crusoe promises to help the captive men gain freedom, he demands that they obey him completely and owe their lives to him. So the newly freed men again become, in a sense, enslaved. In this scene, Defoe elucidates the connection he makes between capitalists and savages. He shows savages and Englishmen exploiting each other in tangent to Europeans exploiting each other. Defoe seems suggest that an equal amount of exploiting and enslaving goes on in capitalistic society as on the high seas.

In Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, Defoe collapses the differences between his capitalist castaway and the savages whom Crusoe finds himself stranded among. Crusoe does not evince much more emotion for his fellow men than do the cannibals, and he demonstrates far less than his devoted and loving savage companions, Friday and Xury. Defoe reveals that aspects of the Christian religion are actually less rational than Friday's pagan religion. With his conflation of capitalistic Europe and savage lands and his blurring the boundaries between the denizens of each, Defoe reveals the difficulty of finding a middle ground between the exploiter and enslaved. If Crusoe does not kill the savages, he stands a chance of being eaten by them. If he does not serve his own interests, someone else might come along and enslave him. We are made to feel throughout the novel that Crusoe must become a self-serving, self-sufficient man in order to survive in capitalistic society, but Defoe points out that it is folly to think him any more than a savage when he does so.

³³ Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, 181.