
Whenever a new entertainment medium arises, an adaptation of Daniel Defoe’s most famous novel, The Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe of York, Mariner, suited for said medium inevitably follows. From stage to silver screen, from board game to video game to iPad app, the story of the castaway sailor, one of the touchstone secular myths of Western culture, is both familiar enough to evoke instant recognition in child or adult and flexible enough to accommodate the demands of ever-evolving cultural truths and the mediums through which we convey them.

The audiences that have proven the most welcoming to Crusoe’s reinvention are, surprisingly, not the ones for which he was originally created. Instead, as Andrew O’Malley points out in this ambitious, thought-provoking, and at times frustrating monograph, Crusoe has witnessed the widest circulation in two realms far from the halls of academia with which today he is primarily associated: children’s literature and popular culture. Why should this be so? O’Malley attempts to answer this question by taking these Robinson Crusoe adaptations as his subject. Analyzing children’s books, advertisements, chapbooks, and miniatures and toys based on the Crusoe story, O’Malley simultaneously reveals the affinities between the seemingly disparate cultural constructions of “the child” and “the people,” both newly emergent in the late eighteenth century, as discursive constructions functioning as the “other” to “a rational, educated, and forward-looking adult subject” (5).

O’Malley’s Introduction outlines the “discursive overlaps” between the two constructions, each of which often served as a metaphor for the other. Comparing “the folk” to children justified continuing elite interest in and benevolent stewardship of the plebeian classes in a period in which class boundaries grew increasingly
permeable, legitimizing “both a paternalistic attitude towards the people and a host of efforts to domesticate them” (10). Likewise, associating children with the “uncivilized” plebeian classes ensured that adults would continue to exert control over the young despite their increasing segregation from adult working culture over the course of the eighteenth century, as Europe moved from an agrarian to a commercial society.

Yet even as they served to support the superiority of that adult subject, during the nineteenth century both “the child” and “the people” increasingly came to serve as receptacles for said adult’s nostalgia, a longing for a lost “simplicity, personal authenticity and emotional spontaneity,” as Bryan Turner describes it (Turner 151). The two were “bound together in the Romantic imagination by the suture of nostalgia,” O’Malley asserts; “both were subjects who ‘belonged’ to and in another time, and who were therefore unsuited to the modern world, both rendered as remote from the adults who occupied it” (11). Each, then, became available to be packaged for consumption by Victorian, and later modern, adults.

How does Robinson Crusoe fit into this story of two overlapping discursive constructions? Almost from the time of its first printing, writers and critics pointed to the pedagogical merit of Defoe’s text; Rousseau’s praise of the book in Émile (1762), as well as its congruence with Lockean pedagogical theory, suggested its suitability for younger readers. O’Malley’s opening chapter explores the pedagogical uses to which Crusoe was put by writers of didactic children’s stories in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Though Rousseau recommended young readers focus only on the island sections of the novel, writers such as Joachim Campe, in Robinson der Jüngere (1779, translated as The New Robinson Crusoe in 1788), Madame de Genlis, in “The Children’s Island, A True Story” (1800), and Barbara Hofland, in The Young Crusoe: or the Shipwrecked Boy (1828) did just the opposite, stretching out the pre- and post-island scenes in order to mitigate the dangers of the original Crusoe’s alluring independence. Celebrating the return to home instead of the creation of a home on the island, these books simultaneously celebrate the benefits of society and of its social order, an order in which children are constructed as the naturally subordinate dependents of more knowledgeable adults. Readers more familiar with Defoe than with children’s literature might wonder if retellings of Crusoe perform different cultural work than other didactic fictions for the young of the period, a question O’Malley does not address.

In contrast to what O’Malley terms “didactic” Crusoe stories, other children’s robinsonades, discussed in Chapter 2, focus primarily on the island experience. (At least this is the difference I discerned between the books described in these two chapters; O’Malley never directly articulates why a specific text is discussed in one chapter versus the other.) But said experience is constructed quite differently from Crusoe’s solitary sojourn; each of the three texts O’Malley analyzes features child protagonists shipwrecked not alone, but with other family members. In their focus on
the more “masculine” aspects of the Crusoe myth—imperialism and adventure—previous critics have downplayed the prevalence of the domestic, O’Malley suggests. Examining the family robinsonade allows us to see the way the Crusoe story does not simply deploy the domestic to mask or distance imperial ideology but, instead, illustrates the “instrumentality of domestic ideology to the imperial project” (55). François-Guillaume Ducray-Duminiel’s Lolotte et Fanfan (1788, translated as Ambrose and Eleanor in 1796), Ann Fraser Tytler’s Leila; or, The Island (1839), and Catharine Parr Traill’s Canadian Crusoes (1852) bridge the colonial and the domestic, O’Malley contends, “by reconstituting, in whatever shape possible, not just the European home but its nuclear-style family as well on the island or other remote setting” (62). In the first two novels, however, it is fathers, not mothers, who serve as the agents of domestication, an intriguing contradiction O’Malley does not explore. Adding Jeanne Sylvie Mallès de Beaulieu’s Le robinson de douze ans (1818, translated as The Young Robinson in 1825), one of the few family robinsonades in which a mother, rather than a father, is the sole adult on the island, or Jefferys Taylor’s The Young Islanders (1842), in which boys’ attempts to recreate domesticity fail abysmally, to this mix of titles discussed would have added welcome nuance to a somewhat one-note analysis. The chapter also begs the question of whether the prevalence of domesticity in the children’s robinsonade is a historically-specific phenomenon, found primarily in castaway stories of the first half of the nineteenth century. Does domesticity play a role in Victorian adventure novels for boys such as Ballantyne’s The Coral Island (1858) or Stevenson’s Treasure Island (1883)? Or in twentieth-century children’s robinsonades, such as Carol Rye Brink’s Baby Island (1937)? In any of the myriad incarnations of the most popular family robinsonade, Johann David Wyss’s The Family Robinson Crusoe (better known today as The Swiss Family Robinson, but published originally as Der schweizersche Robinson [1812–13, English translation 1814])?

In the book’s third and strongest chapter, O’Malley turns to the other cultural construction—the people—analyzing eighteenth-century chapbook redactions of the original Crusoe tale. Previous literary critics have tended to read such works through the lens of the original novel, thus finding them deeply wanting, but O’Malley proposes we remove the blinders of our mimetic expectations and see what it is these texts actually accomplish. For while chapbooks may fail to meet elite readers’ expectations, their popularity (151 editions in the eighteenth-century alone) more than attests to their success in meeting the expectations of their intended audience, the common reader. As in didactic children’s books, chapbooks typically condensed the island portions of Crusoe’s story, but for an entirely different purpose: to shift the tale from survival story to sea story, aligning it with the chapbook tradition of heroic seafaring tales. The chapbooks include little in the way of pedagogical or moral lessons, though; their plots suggest that luck, rather than labor or hard work, leads to social and economic advancement, a fantasy, O’Malley speculates, far better suited to
their plebeian audiences than Defoe’s model of advancement through hard work and husbanding of resources. The chapbook Crusoe’s triumph thus becomes a communal, rather than individualistic, achievement, “a reiteration of the collective, projected hopes and desires of readers who knew hardship all too well, and who found comfort in the familiar story of an unlikely figure who suffers and struggles, then enjoys good fortune and rises to the rank and comforts of a gentleman” (95).

The two cultural constructions meet in Chapter 4, which discusses the shift in English stage pantomime versions of the Crusoe story. During the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Crusoe most often appeared in carnivalesque afterpieces whose stories focused on revenge and triumph over conventional authority (shades of the chapbook Crusoe). Lower ticket prices for the second half of an evening’s theater-going suggest the plebeian classes made up a large portion of pantomime’s audience during this period, although O’Malley acknowledges that elite adults and children also attended. But in the wake of 1843’s (not 1848’s, as O’Malley states) amendment of the Theatre Licensing Act of 1737, pantomimes became limited to the Christmas season (for a reason O’Malley does not explain). Tied now to a holiday increasingly associated by Victorians with home, heart, and children, pantomime became “domesticated,” an archaic cultural form whose earlier social functions of subversive class protest were erased, replaced by “a nostalgic invocation of the past.” For O’Malley, Leigh Hunt’s essays on pantomime are an apt example of this drive, a “nostalgic attempt to remake and re-experience the idealized past—of both childhood and the Arcadian state of innocent, traditional popular culture in which the pantomime had its roots” (126).

O’Malley notes in the book’s final chapter that children were invited to partake in Crusoe’s adventures not only through reading and theater performances, but also through toys made in his image. While many such toys continued to perform the ideological pedagogical work he outlines in Chapter 1, they also mapped “quite readily onto a world of miniature goods already associated with both childhood and an idealized folk culture, and acted as a site on which ideas of timelessness, distance from the ‘real’ world, and nostalgia could converge” (141). Though O’Malley claims that Robinson Crusoe toys proliferated in the period, he analyzes very few actual examples, a disappointment for those interested in Crusoe’s role in children’s material culture.

O’Malley’s discussion takes an abrupt turn away from toys to consumer goods for adults, a turn in which his key terms become frustratingly elusive. Is the child classless? Is “consumer culture” the same as “popular culture”? Is the consumer an adult? A child? Both? Of a particular class? Or of any class? Moving beyond these frustrations, a reader is rewarded by an insightful discussion of the ways the image of Crusoe was used as a marketing tool. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, figures and images of Robinson Crusoe, figured as a child, oddly enough, were used to sell goods as disparate as Jell-O, cigarettes, even pork and beans. Ironically, this child-like Crusoe, along with other nostalgic configurations of the
child, “was used to sell the moral validity of a consumer culture understood as potentially hostile if not antithetical to the prevailing ideas of childhood” (146), O’Malley argues.

The book concludes by asserting that the conflation of child and folk “need not always result in the kinds of dislocations of the child-as-past, separated from the adult-as-modern, that the nostalgic turn has hitherto tended to generate” (154). Indeed, nostalgia can signal not only sadness and loss, but also hope, hope that may be harnessed to “redress those very aspects of the modern condition that prompted the nostalgic sensibility in the first place” (156). Will the Mariner of York once again be called upon to aid those interested in undertaking such work? Only time, new storytelling mediums, and the creators who craft tales for them in the future, will tell.

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