

The Representation of The Other:

The Tempest and Robinson Crusoe

Reaching a definitive understanding of what constitutes utopian literature is impossible in that texts are often multi-layered, ambiguous, and open ended. John Carey's claim that 'the utopia is the most divisive of literary forms'¹ indicates the complexity of definition. The idea of utopia is slippery and evasive, the actual word means 'nowhere'. Ferns notes that 'the very concept of utopia itself is fraught with contradictions and ambiguity².' Yet it is a concept that has preoccupied thinkers and writers as far back as Plato and still has relevance today, it continues to grip our imagination. Ferns discusses the wide range of critical and contradictory responses to utopian writing, highlighting not only the vast scope of possible interpretations but also the freedom that such scope brings to the critic and reader alike.³ Thus, it is evident that no single definition is possible, the vast range of utopian writing has generated a bewildering and somewhat confusing array of critical discussion. Perhaps we can do no better than bear in mind Sargent's basic premise that 'utopianism is a philosophy of hope, and it is characterized by the transformation of generalized hope into a description of a non-existent society'.⁴

If the utopian impulse is, broadly speaking, concerned with seeking a better form of society, how do we reconcile this with the inclusion of slavery, with the marginalisation and subjugation of indigenous peoples and cultures, themes that we find in many utopian texts? We must ask the question who is deciding on this better way, whose authority and legitimacy is at play, as far as is possible we need to peel back those layers to reach a

¹ John Carey, ed., *The Faber Book Of Utopias*, (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1999), p. xii.

² Chris Ferns, *Narrating Utopia*, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999), p. 1.

³ Ibid., pp. 2-13

⁴ Lyman Tower Sargent, *Utopianism A Very Short Introduction*, (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2010), p. 8.

meaningful understanding. In his analysis of the psychological impact of colonialisation, Fanon states, 'A man who has a language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language'⁵. In this essay I will explore this idea, that the acknowledgement and acceptance of indigenous language and culture is tied in with a sense of being and existence, of validation. And that to deny and/or appropriate language and culture necessarily dehumanises and negates. I will focus on two texts from the early modern period, namely *The Tempest*⁶ and *Robinson Crusoe*.⁷

The Renaissance saw a massive shift in established beliefs. An increase in power of the Ottoman Empire resulted in greater migration from East to West, bringing with it new ideas and intellectual debate. It was an age of huge anxiety and uncertainty surrounding the question of legitimacy and the divine right of kings, eventually leading to religious reform and secularisation. Although there was a schism in religious thought, God was still the ordainer; it was still a theocentric society. There was no challenge to the concept of the Great Chain of Being, a medieval hierarchical structure whereby everything had its place with God at its head. It was this dominant ideology that colonisers used to justify their settlement of the New World.⁸

Greenblatt identifies the increasing imperial aggression waged against indigenous peoples of the New World. Between Columbus' first voyage in 1492 and his third in 1498, there had been a shift in the Western ideological framework concerning the colonial imperative. There

⁵ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, (London: MacGibbon & Kee Limited, 1968), p. 18.

⁶ William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, ed. by Frank Kermode (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1986).

⁷ Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, (London: Vintage, 2008).

⁸ Jerry Brotton, *The Renaissance A Very Short Introduction*, (New York, Oxford University Press Inc., 2006); Michael Halvorson, *The Renaissance*, (London, Hodder & Stoughton, 2014); Kincaid, Paul, 'Utopia in Context', *Foundation* (Dagenham), 124.124 (2016), 5–; Jill Kraye, *The Cambridge Companion To Renaissance Humanism*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013).

was a move towards expansive land appropriation regardless of pre-existing habitation. To satisfy medieval law that decreed rightful possession can only be made of uninhabited lands, the native population had to be demonized, thereby moving them beyond the westernised accepted notion of humanity. Thus, it was judged that these 'newly discovered lands' were now terra nulla and could be legitimately used, exploited, and possessed.⁹

English settlement of the New World began in 1584, Elizabeth I having issued letters to Raleigh and other explorers instructing them to seek out and take possession of any lands uninhabited by Christians, the concept of divine providence justifying a rightful claim on the land. The settled land was renamed Virginia (the indigenous name being Wingandacoa) in honour of Queen Elizabeth, any question of prior possession of the land disregarded under the guise of religious dominance and truth. Although the question of legitimacy and rightful sovereignty was of great significance, what was perhaps of greater import was economic power and the need to enter the race for global expansion. As Louis Montrose notes, 'Queen Elizabeth participates in an emergent colonialist discourse that works to justify and, symbolically, to effect the expropriation of what it discovers.'¹⁰

In *The Tempest*, the question of legitimate rule and rightful ownership of the island preoccupies many of the characters. Gonzalo wistfully imagines establishing a commonwealth state which he 'would with such perfection govern, sir, /T'excel the Golden Age'¹¹ and Stephano plots to overthrow Prospero and rule with Miranda in his stead, installing Trinculo and Caliban as his subordinates. When Miranda questions how they came to be on the island, Prospero's short response is telling and underlines his assumed right of

⁹ Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

¹⁰ Louis Montrose, 'The Work of Gender in the Discourse of Discovery', *Representations*, 33, (1991), 1-41 (p.8) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2928756> [accessed 28 November 2021].

¹¹ Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, 11.11.163-164.

ownership, 'By Providence divine.'¹² The relationship between Prospero and Caliban is central to the play, a possible interpretation being one of coloniser and colonised and we can see how it fits with the model of the early settlers of the New World. Initially, Caliban is willing to share the island with Prospero, showing him all its resources, only to be cheated and exploited. Caliban is clear that the island was rightfully his and has been unjustly taken by Prospero, 'This island's mine, by Sycorax my mother/Which thou tak'st from me.'¹³ Prospero educates Caliban alongside his daughter, and there is evidence of a harmonious, paternalistic relationship, which is reciprocated by Caliban. 'When thou cam'st first/Thou strok'st me, and made much of me...and teach me ...and then I lov'd thee'.¹⁴ Due to the alleged rape of Miranda¹⁵ their relationship sours, and Caliban now inhabits the position of a slave.

In *Robinson Crusoe*, divine providence also informs Crusoe's claim on the island. He overcomes his initial fears at being shipwrecked, at 'being reduced to a meer State of Nature'¹⁶ and, through theological reflection, accepts his presence on the island as an opportunity to atone for his previous sinful existence. His thoughts turn increasingly towards ownership, 'to think that this was all my own, that I was king and lord of all this country indefeasibly, and had a right of possession'.¹⁷ Christine Rees notes that, whilst prior inhabitation of the island is not an issue for Crusoe, the question of legitimacy still needs to be addressed and points to the theory of property rights as outlined in John Locke's 'Two

¹² Ibid., 1.11.159

¹³ Ibid., 1.11.333-334.

¹⁴ Ibid., 11.334-338.

¹⁵ The alleged rape of Miranda has been much debated and contributes to our ambivalent response to Caliban's character. Kim Hall notes a possible link to European unease regarding interracial relationships. Hall, Kim F., *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018).

¹⁶ Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, p. 99.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 83.

Treatises of Government' (1690).¹⁸ The need for self-preservation validates Crusoe's ownership of the island but this comes with the proviso of not overusing resources; whilst Crusoe frequently deliberates on this issue, he clearly believes in his right of dominion of the island and all that it offers. He becomes godlike, his rule over his menagerie foreshadowing that of Friday and the later occupants of the island. In his mind he is a justifiable, absolute monarch,

how like a king I look'd. First of all, the whole country was my own meer property; so that I had an undoubted right of dominion. 2dly, my people were perfectly subjected: I was absolute lord and lawgiver; they owed all their lives to me.¹⁹

With the rise in European global exploration and the emergent colonialisation of the New World came greater contact with the unknown and put the problematic relationship with the 'other'²⁰ at the forefront of philosophical enquiry. The travel narrative became hugely popular as explorers told of encounters with fantastical creatures from unknown lands. There was an ambivalence to such narratives; some were tales of wonder and marvel, but others related abhorrent practices and customs, in turn informing the ongoing debate surrounding nature vs nurture, and the very notion of civilization in humanist circles. That these tales were highly influential is without doubt, many images passed into folklore and myth, whilst others became stock literary characters. That Shakespeare was familiar with the travel narratives is clear; in *The Tempest*, encountering Caliban for the first time, Stephano and Trinculo imagine him to be such a strange creature, 'This is some monster of

¹⁸ Christine Rees, *Utopian Imagination and Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, (New York: Longman Publishing, 1996).

¹⁹ Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, p. 203.

²⁰ Montrose fixes the construct of the 'other' firmly with the emergent colonialization of the New World in the Elizabeth era, noting 'the symbolic and material destruction of the indigenous peoples of the Western Hemisphere, in systematic attempts to destroy their bodies and their wills, to suppress their cultures and to efface their histories'. Montrose, 'The Work of Gender in the Discourse of Discovery', p.3.

the isle on four legs'.²¹ From a modern perspective we know these tales were works of fabrication and exaggeration and yet, as Greenblatt notes in his discussion of 'Mandeville's Travels', they have had a far-reaching impact. Mandeville was perhaps the greatest traveller of his age and, even after his work had been questioned and discredited, he was still a figure of commanding authority, influencing later explorers such as Columbus.²²

The importance of the travel narrative should not be overlooked as it is tied in with the idea of representation of the 'other'. Broadly speaking there was a twofold view of primitive man that informed European thinking. Firstly, we have the medieval figure of the Wild Man or salvage, a being who lives at the edges of civilisation, and is thus innocent and uncorrupted. The Wild Man is a largely romanticised figure who would later become synonymous with the idea of the primitive or noble savage. On one level Caliban can be seen to be representative of this figure; he is introduced as a 'salvage' in the *dramatis personae* and it is telling, as Kermode notes, that Shakespeare only uses this spelling in *The Tempest* even though he uses the character of the 'savage' in other plays.²³ Secondly, we have the more pervasive idea of the 'barbarian' or subhuman figure in need of civilising, of the redeeming hand of the white man. This dominant ideology of Western superiority provided justification and authority for colonialism and subsequent conversion of indigenous peoples to Christianity. When Crusoe rescues Friday from the barbarian practice of cannibalism, the message is one of salvation and deliverance into civilisation. Friday is a willing subordinate, placing his head under Crusoe's foot and making, 'all the signs ... of subjection, servitude, and submission imaginable'.²⁴ This echoes Caliban when he switches allegiance from

²¹ Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, 11.11.66

²² Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions*, p.30-32.

²³ Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, 11.11.59.

²⁴ Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, p. 173.

Prospero to Stephano, 'I'll kiss thy foot; I'll swear myself thy subject'.²⁵ With the suggestion of companionship, Friday comes closer to an equal relationship with Crusoe than Caliban does with Prospero, but ultimately it remains one of master and servant, the power and control firmly resting with Crusoe.

Postcolonial critics see both views as flawed as each rest on a Eurocentric model and centre on alienation, marginalisation, and presumption; indigenous peoples and cultures have been overlooked, ignored, and demonised. Edward Said establishes the negative influence of the travel narrative, claiming that it perpetuated mythologies which became accepted truths, essentially informed by Eurocentric bias. These truths are passed on unquestioningly and uncritically through the centuries, thus informing and establishing discourse without any authority and creating stereotypes which have proved difficult to overturn. Thus, whilst the noble savage motif may seem to be a positive representation of the 'other', tied in with Rousseau's idea of the perfectibility of man and alluding to a paradisaical Eden, it is essentially negative in that it is still a European construct, based on prejudice and assumption. In Said's view, imperial power goes beyond mere conquest, it involves redefinition and creation of a culture within its own mindset.

It is Europe that articulates the Orient; this articulation is the prerogative, not of a puppet master, but of a genuine creator, whose life-giving power represents, animates, constitutes the otherwise silent and dangerous space beyond familiar boundaries.²⁶

The representation of the 'other' is tied in with the philosophical dialogue concerning the meaning of civilisation in the Renaissance. Interestingly, not all thinkers followed the

²⁵ Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, 11.11.152.

²⁶ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2003), p.57.

dominant ideology of western superiority; the fact that other viewpoints were being discussed underlines the complexity and anxiety that surrounded this question of the nature of man. In his essay, *On The Cannibals*, Montaigne highlights the cruelty and violence displayed by the cannibals of the Brazilian coast, but he sits this alongside the cruelty and violence within European society,

It does not sadden me that we should note the horrible barbarity in a practice such as theirs: what does sadden me is that, while judging correctly of their wrong-doings we should be so blind as to our own.²⁷

Montaigne's essay is relevant to both texts as it calls into question the position of western man in relation to the 'other'. Crusoe's discovery of the naked footprint and the terror that it unleashes in his mind brings this position into sharp focus. Having believed that he was alone on the island, Crusoe now must contemplate living alongside savages who practice 'barbaric' rituals, leading him to question God's purpose in allowing such atrocities to take place. Crusoe does show some cultural curiosity and awareness, questioning his moral right to wage war on the cannibals, to some extent echoing Montaigne in his reasoning. However, as Rees notes, Crusoe shows his limitations, bound as he is by Eurocentric bias, unable to move away fully from the western model of civilization.²⁸ It is important to Crusoe to distinguish himself from the savages; his journal entries meticulously detailing his material possessions signal this distinction. Thoughts of escape from the island overcome any misgivings he has regarding the killing of the cannibals, his suggested open-mindedness undermined by self-interest, 'after many great disputes with myself ... the eager prevailing desire of deliverance at length master'd all the rest; and I resolved ... to get one of those

²⁷ Michel de Montaigne, *The Essays: A Selection*, (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 2004).

²⁸ Rees, *Utopian Imagination*, p.88.

savages into my hands'.²⁹ This echoes Crusoe's earlier relationship with Xury; then it was the opportunity for economic gain that eased his troubled conscience concerning the selling of his friend back into slavery, only regretting this later when he is short of labour. His relationship with both Xury and Friday is at times paternalistic, but this is undermined by the fact that they are basically commodities to him, to be exploited for his gain. It is widely accepted that Shakespeare used *On The Cannibals* as the source material for 'The Tempest'; Gonzalo's 'commonwealth' speech is recognisably borrowed from the essay, but Kenji Go argues that its influence was much broader, possibly accounting not just for the name of Caliban but also that of Sycorax.³⁰

Caliban is largely portrayed as bestial, subhuman, and unnatural; Prospero and Miranda discuss him in such terms before he is seen, reinforcing the idea that this is his true nature. Prospero's crude reference to his birth is indicative of Caliban's description throughout the play, 'save for the son that she did *litter* here/A freckled *whelp* hag-born'.³¹ His mother, Sycorax, practiced black magic, and so is representative of the anxiety surrounding witchcraft at the time of James I.³² A marginalized character, she is devoid of virtue and civilization and, by association, Caliban is of that world and all that it entails. There is an obvious parallel with the good magic practiced by Prospero, whose Art represents higher learning, virtue, and civility. However, Caliban's character is complex and the fact that he largely speaks in verse reveals that he is not one dimensional. His use of language throughout the play is not evenhanded, again signalling his complexity. His speech is often

²⁹ Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, p. 168.

³⁰ Go, Kenji, 'Montaigne's "Cannibals" and "The Tempest" Revisited', *Studies in Philology*, 109.4 (2012), 455–73

³¹ Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, 1.11.282, my emphasis.

³² Anxiety surrounding witchcraft did not originate in the early modern period, but it did intensify with several laws being passed by Parliament against its practice. James I considered himself to be an expert, having written 'Daemonologie' in 1597. Malcolm Gaskill, *Witchcraft: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

coarse and vulgar, littered with curses and profanities, yet at other times it is lofty, imaginative, and speculative, revealing a sense of self and interiority,

The isle is full of noises,
Sounds and sweet airs, that give delight, and hurt not.
Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments
Will hum about mine ears; and sometimes voices,
That, if I then had wak'd after long sleep,
Will make me sleep again: and then, in dreaming,
The clouds methought would open, and show riches'
Ready to drop upon me; that, when I wak'd,
I cried to dream again'.³³

In both *The Tempest* and *Robinson Crusoe*, the idea that the representation of the 'other' is problematic is played out through the themes of education and language, themes that are significant within utopian literature as a whole. Fanon talks of the importance of language, how it is a gateway to culture and validation of the self, that 'to speak means ...above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization'³⁴. Reflecting on Friday's education, Crusoe places paramount importance on his acquisition of language. By giving no consideration to existing language and culture, the colonising impulse is destructive, based on a principle of negation and eradication; the indigenous population must identify 'with the explorer, the bringer of civilization, the white man who carries truth to savages – an all-white truth'.³⁵

³³ Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, 111.11.133 – 141.

³⁴ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 17-18.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 147.

Although Greenblatt identifies that there was some favourable reporting of native languages, noting that communication must have taken place in order to facilitate the trade of goods, the dominant view regarding these languages was negative. They were seen to be meaningless, gibberish and satanic, a view which projects onto the western understanding of the indigenous peoples themselves. Such a view is necessary for the imposition of English, and other European languages, in what Greenblatt describes as 'linguistic colonialism'. Language and education are tools of control, essential to the colonial enterprise.³⁶ In *The Tempest*, when Miranda reminds Caliban that she taught him to speak, she equates this with giving him a sense of meaning, of self; thus, without language he was, in effect, non-existent. This idea is further reinforced when Miranda fails to include Caliban when she thinks about the men she has known in her life.

I pitied thee,
Took pains to make thee speak, taught thee each hour
One thing or another: when thou didst not, savage,
Know thine own meaning, but wouldst gabble like
A thing most brutish, I endow'd thy purposes
With words that made them known.³⁷

Similarly, Friday is portrayed as a savage who is culturally void, with no name or language of his own and ready for the stamp of Western civilization, whose meaningful existence begins at the point of his salvation and subsequent education. That Friday shares with Crusoe details of his own religious practice reveals that he does have a culture, his people have a sense of spirituality and worship their own god called Benamuckee. Crusoe readily

³⁶ Stephen Greenblatt, *Learning to Curse*, (Oxford: Routledge, 2007).

³⁷ Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, 1.11.355-360.

disregards this believing Friday should be educated properly, enlightened, 'in the knowledge of the true God'.³⁸ Friday is immediately receptive to this teaching, eager to dismiss his 'God' as less important. Crusoe accepts that the cannibals had practiced religion but significantly interprets it as fraudulent, casting Benamuckee as a cheat and reiterating that Christianity is the only true faith. He systematically dismisses Friday's culture, effectively alienating him and reforming him in his own image. Crusoe is playing both the coloniser and missionary; he has a firm belief that he is Friday's saviour whose religious conversion is essential if he is to be delivered from his previous barbaric and demonic existence. Asking Friday if he has any yearning to return to his homeland, Crusoe wonders if he would return to his savage ways, forgetting all that he has been taught. Friday's reply shows that his education is complete and that his salvation is secure, in his turn he would play the missionary, alienating his people from their culture just as Crusoe has alienated him, 'No, no Friday tell them to live good, tell them to pray God, tell them to eat corn bread, cattle-flesh, milk, no eat man again'³⁹.

As with much utopian literature,⁴⁰ both *The Tempest* and *Robinson Crusoe* can be said to have moved beyond the original text in that they have been rewritten and adapted many times, influencing other writers and moving across art forms. Corina Kesler discusses Aime Césaire's *A Tempest* (1969), a reworking of *The Tempest*, giving voice to the marginalised character of Caliban.⁴¹ Césaire cleverly plays with the characters of Caliban and Prospero, subverting their roles from the original play to reinforce his message that accepted history

³⁸ Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, p. 182.

³⁹ Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, p.189

⁴⁰ Such is the imaginative power of some utopian fiction that most people are aware of the characters, concepts, and imagery from works such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, without having actually read them.

⁴¹ Corina Kesler, "Postcolonial Utopias or Imagining 'Brave New Worlds': Caliban Speaks Back", *Spaces of Utopia: An Electronic Journal*, 2nd series, no. 1, 2012, pp. 88-107 ISSN 1646-4729.

needs to be challenged, in this case the history of an oppressed people. Kesler highlights how, by foregrounding the importance of language, the text displays the complex but essential process of unpicking this history and reconstructing a more meaningful and truthful discourse. In *Foe* (1986), J M Coetzee similarly plays around with the original narrative of *Robinson Crusoe* to dramatic effect. By silencing Friday, his tongue has been cut out but we are not told by whom, the author highlights the link between power and language; Friday has no voice and so has no power, he cannot tell his story. That Caliban and Friday are powerful characters is clear from these reworkings, they have become part of our imaginative landscape and have huge cultural significance for the postcolonial audience.

Sargent notes the importance in the growth of the postcolonial utopia in that it affords indigenous peoples a platform on which not only to reclaim their cultures, challenge accepted myths and overturn stereotypes but also to formulate their ideas for a better world. He writes, 'utopia is still a powerful and effective dream for the dispossessed.'⁴² However, some critics have argued against postcolonial readings of texts such as *The Tempest* and *Robinson Crusoe*, claiming that they distract from the context in which they were written. Goran Stanivukovic repositions *The Tempest* as a humanist play, arguing its focus is more on themes such as legitimate rule, rhetoric, and education rather than on the settlement of the New World.⁴³ Clearly, Shakespeare was a Renaissance dramatist, firmly rooted in humanist debate and enquiry. The play is ambiguous as it does engage with the discourse surrounding the emergent colonisation. The actual location of the island is unclear, Ariel alludes to the New World, the 'still vexed Bermoothes',⁴⁴ which references the

⁴² Lyman Tower Sargent, 'Colonial and Postcolonial Utopias', in *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, ed. By Gregory Claeys (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 200-222 (p. 213).

⁴³ Stanivukovic, Goran, 'The Tempest and the Discontents of Humanism', *Philological Quarterly*, 85.1/2 (2006), 91–

⁴⁴ Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, 1.1.229.

shipwreck on the Bermudas of 1609. And yet, the island seems to be located in the Mediterranean, between Tunis and Naples. Pinpointing authorial intent is impossible, we can only surmise what Shakespeare and Defoe thought of colonialism and slavery and thus I would argue that there is room, and the need, for multiple interpretations. As modern readers and critics, we can be aware of the historical context in which texts were written, whilst at the same time we can read and interpret them from a contemporary viewpoint. The legacy of colonialism for indigenous peoples, alienation and denial leading to marginalisation, seems to undermine the governing principle of the utopian impulse, that of seeking a better society, highlighting an inherent paradox within utopian literature. The 'brave new world'⁴⁵ that Miranda speaks of only includes Europeans, thereby negating Caliban and all that he represents. It becomes apparent that what is utopian for one person is dystopian for someone else, the two are intrinsically linked and we are back to Ferns' claims that, 'utopia is fraught with contradictions and ambiguities'.⁴⁶ However, the emergence of the postcolonial utopia has broadened the scope, refiguring the utopian landscape and challenging the dominant ideology informed by Eurocentric bias, pointing to future inclusivity and diversity. Maybe we do not need to reconcile the paradox in utopian writing, perhaps it is simply more important to listen to the many voices that we find there.

⁴⁵ Ibid., V.1.183.

⁴⁶ Ferns, *Narrating Utopia*, p.1.