

**The Fate of the Supercivilized:**  
*The Tempest versus Robinson Crusoe*

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The Enlightenment era segments civilization into four main stages. At the very bottom, there is found the vilest of human beings, the savage, who is hardly distinguishable from wild beasts and evolves in the state of nature. He elicits his food from the bare productions of the land: he is a hunter and gatherer. The next stage concerns the barbarian, a pastoral nomad. Taming and breeding animals elevate him above sheer savagery, but he still does not have a settled abode. The latter characterizes the third stage, that of the civilized who, as the etymology of the term signals (Latin civis, which means literally 'he who lives in a city'), resides in a home, the fixed starting point of all his social, economic, and political enterprises. The civilized is in possession of skills that allow him to develop agriculture, and his community is organized into a society. In the final stage of civilization, man is enshrined as the supercivilized, whose sphere of action is planetary, as commerce and trade on a wide scale epitomize his occupation (Novak 130-63). Globalization would adequately define this fourth and highest stage of civilization.

From at least the sixteenth century, intellectuals have thought of the island, because of its seclusion and utopian virginity, as a suitable starting point for civilization. In this essay, I would like to argue that Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* both stage the advent of the supercivilized on a barren island. In the former, Prospero rules the land and its inhabitants by means of his civilized skills; in the latter, Robinson, aided by a few tools and weapons, goes through the four stages of civilization. However, the outcome of the supercivilized is antagonistic: Prospero nobly and willingly surrenders his power at the close of the story, whereas Robinson goes on to build his empire beyond the bounds of his island without any restraint.

The plots of both *The Tempest* and *Robinson Crusoe* are staged within the confines of an island, “a world both autonomous and autarchic” (Hamm 111), a virginal land, exempt from external influence and fertile enough to welcome the seed of civilization. The mediator of the latter and ruler of the island will consequently be an outsider, and he will not settle for good on the isle. Robinson’s sojourn is long — twenty-eight years long (*Robinson Crusoe* 271) — but it does come to an end. Whether its outcome be felicitous or infelicitous, the irruption of the civilized alters the political and economical equilibrium of the island, forces his values onto the environment and leads him to some sort of conflict with the locals (Hamm 111).

In *The Tempest*, the characters may be divided into three categories: Caliban epitomizes the first stage of civilization. He is but a hunter and a gatherer. For instance, he “pluck[s] berries,” “dig[s] pig-nuts,” goes fishing, catches “crabs” and “snare[s] the nimble marmoset” (*The Tempest* 2.2.34-43). Though the island is a source of nourishment, Caliban does not boil down his view of it to mere economic considerations. He is the only character sensitive to the beauty of the landscape (“all the qualities o’ th’ Isle, / The fresh springs, brine-pits” (1.2.22)). He considers its natural state positively (“barren place and fertile” (1.2.25)) and is not offended by its heterogeneous fertility.

Further, Caliban views his possession of the island not in exclusive terms. He is an autochthon, born from the earth, which is a supreme goddess called Setebos (1.2.63). He merely lives on the island, being his own king and subject. As he puts it, “[I] first was mine own King” (1.2.145). Clearly he is not a proper landowner and therefore remains uncivilized.

The second party on the island consists of the shipwrecked Europeans, except for Prospero. These may be qualified as ineptly and passively supercivilized. Most of them deem the island barren (2.1.24, 2.2.86) — speaking of it in economic terms. Yet the wiser Adrian and Gonzalo express a more clement opinion, which is summed up by Gonzalo: “Here is everything advantageous to life” (2.1.46). However, though they belong to the highest sphere of civilization owing to their origins, manners and values, they do not domesticate the island.

It is the domestication of the island that sets apart the former group from the third category, composed of Prospero. The latter is a paragon of the potent, bustling supercivilized, who subdues the isle. An apparent token of his belonging to the highest sphere is his fine raiment — praised at length by Trinculo and Stephano (4.1.83-84) — whose inherent symbolism or wealth Caliban bluntly overlooks: he interjects: “Let it alone thou fool, it is but trash” (1.1.83). Another symbol of Prospero’s station lies in his settled place of abode, which contains the insignia of civilization, including his attire and the key to his supernal power and dominion, namely his books (3.2.68-69). Significantly, the undisputable power over the island stems from the supercivilized’s imported tools — his books.

Domestication equates dominion and that is the way Prospero, contrary to Caliban, envisages his possession of the island. Not does not see himself as lord of the isle nor does he ever question his claim to the land, as though he had inherited it from Fortune or God: he “was landed [on the island] / To be the Lord on ‘t” (5.1.90); this attitude calls to mind many colonists who felt commissioned by God to civilize the savages.

Prospero's interaction with the savage Caliban is paradigmatic. Similarly to the reaction of Native Americans to the first European explorers, Caliban jocosely welcomes Prospero, "show[ing him] all the qualities o' th' Isle" (1.2.54). In return, Prospero educates him, "teach[ing him] how / To name the bigger Light, and how the less / That burn by day, and night" (1.2.67-69). This matches the purportedly peaceful, civilizing role of the colonist (Vaughan 102) until he openly turns into a tyrant (Vaughan 108), reducing Caliban to slavery, and threatening him with harsh, physical punishments if he does not comply with his master's orders (1.2.38-39; Hamm 114). Prospero vociferates against Caliban: "Thou most lying slave, / Whom stripes may move, not kindness" (1.2.66-67). Pointedly, Prospero's benevolence towards Caliban is but recalled by the latter, with a touch of utopian nostalgia (1.2.70-72). In the story, the supercivilized deals with his slave in a way that unequivocally testifies to his deeming him a monster. Caliban's monstrosity is fourfold (Hamm 115). First, his origin, of crucial import in a feudal society: Prospero holds it that Caliban was begotten of "the devil himself" (1.2.89) and "a witch" (5.1.94). Second, his monstrosity is physical (Hamm 115). The numerous descriptions of his look are derogatory. For instance, he is called "earth" (1.2.77), which emphasizes his chthonian, base origin. Expressions like "beast" (2.2.57), "mooncalf" (2.2.110) and "abominable monster" (2.2.134) liken Caliban to a wild beast, hence making a clear distinction between him and civilized human beings, in a manner similar to Robinson's stance on the cannibals he faces on his island (*Robinson Crusoe* 163-67). Third, Caliban is unable to be civilized, in that none of either Prospero's or Miranda's diligent efforts at educating him achieves anything (1.2.38-9). Fourth, if the aforementioned aspects did not suffice to certify his monstrosity, Caliban is accused by Prospero of having sought to rape his daughter,

Miranda (1.2.38). Note that Prospero states that Caliban's odious inclination has triggered Prospero's punitive, harsh treatment of Caliban. The master says to the slave: "I have us'd thee / [...] with humane care, [...] *till* thou didst seek to violate / The honour of my child" (1.2.44-49; italics added).

Prospero outshines the model of the supercivilized. His dominion hyperbolically embodies the subjugation of a wild land, a prospective colony. Apart from subduing Caliban, the indigenous savage, and directing his peers (the inept supercivilized), he is in control of supernatural powers, acting as a secular god (Hamm 113, 120). Indeed, he masters the weather (*The Tempest* 1.2.25, 5.1.86) as well as fairies or spirits like Ariel. Further, he can rule people's bodies, not only by meting out physical punishments to Caliban (1.2.89), but also by raising people from the dead (5.1.96). The pervasiveness of Prospero's power is symbolized by music, which may be heard all over the island (3.2.70). Though it produces "sweet airs, that give delight" (3.2.74), this music is addictive (3-2-78). As Vaughan suggests (18), Prospero employs music to civilize his island's discordant elements. Only unredeemable characters such as Stephano and Trinculo, along with Sebastian and Anthonio, do not hear it (2.1.13). Significantly, Prospero's demiurgic capacities are not intrinsic, that is, nature has not endowed him with those — they do not belong to the sphere of the savage. Rather, they are inherent in civilization, insofar as they constitute an art (1.2.25) that has been dutifully learned (1.2.29). Their exertion is perfectly controlled and their effects are minutely circumscribed (1.2.26). The art is attached to one of the hallmarks of civilization, books (1.2.31), without which the supercivilized is powerless (3.2.68-69).

Yet, there is, at first glance, a paradox in Prospero's absolute dominion. Why does he, the omnipotent, need a slave like Caliban? The answer may lie in the story

abiding by the cliché of the colonizer who rules the savage to whom he delegates the vilest chores. More convincingly, work is to be equated with punishment (Hamm 113): for instance, Caliban is to work because he presumably tried to rape Miranda (1.2.38) and Ferdinand's chores are qualified as a punishment by Prospero himself (4.1.75).

Despite his at times rough treatment of others, and especially Caliban, Prospero works out very noble designs, as the final act of the play attests. He refuses to take revenge on his brother, whom he even pardons, and restores justice. He sets all his subjects free, be it Ariel, Caliban, or the rest of the party. With kingly grace, he even forgives his slave, Caliban. Looking to the future, he secures the prosperity of his daughter by wedding her to Ferdinand.

What makes Prospero really extraordinary is the willing surrender of his absolute power (*Epilogue*). He does so when all his projects are fulfilled. From this vantage, he uses his hegemonic powers to reach a goal that is profitable to his society; when it is attained, he resigns them. Note that Prospero's surrender is chiefly evoked in the *Epilogue* and not in the body of the play. Further, the "*Epilogue* takes on the form of a prayer which suddenly involves the audience" (Hamm 111). Prospero's fate ultimately depends on the benevolence of another, of a higher instance; he is no more the all-powerful, decision-making supercivilized. This ending may question the perennial supremacy of the supercivilized or stress the impotence of a man deprived of all civilized skills, which is emphatically depicted in *Robinson Crusoe*, when Robinson is stranded onto the island (before he repatriates all sorts of tools from his ship). All in all, the ending is not conclusive.

Like *The Tempest*, *Robinson Crusoe* depicts the arrival of a supercivilized on an uninhabited island, who will, thanks to imported, civilized goods and skills, eventually

dominate and exploit his new territory, by going through the four stages of civilization. In Birdsall's terms, "Crusoe is always attempting to bring the wild, the threatening, the chaotic under rational control—that is, to subject it to his own mastery" (Birdsall 27). This colonial vantage matches Robinson's view of the island, which is described in terms of its productions (*Robinson Crusoe* 64); very few comments are made on its beauty (99, 101, 102, 110).

When he is cast onto the shore by the raging sea, Robinson is reduced to the condition of the savage. Not only is the island "barren" (56), but it offers him "a dreadful deliverance" (51), in that no drink or food is at his disposal. The sole prospect he may envisage is that of "perishing with hunger or being devoured by wild beasts" (50). From the second day of his sojourn on the island on, Robinson acts as a savage, hunting and gathering to secure his sustenance (56-57). His condition corresponds to that of the natural man who merely yearns to satisfy basic needs, such as feeding and sleeping (Novak 28). Being isolated from his peers, fear of death prevails in him (Novak 25; *Robinson Crusoe* 69), often hindering him from acting wisely. Despite the rich productions of the island, Robinson is not quite satisfied with his condition, deprived of all commodities. The good and evil account (69) summarizes his equivocal opinion which mostly depends on his mood. It is significant that the evil column stands on the left whereas the good one stands on the right: in a way, the profitable features of Robinson's condition are weak compensations for its dreads.

Robinson does not dwell for long in the sphere of the savage or in the state of nature. The island has no grip on his need for domestication or civilization. Even God's influence is trivial: Robinson epitomizes "the man who survives and is saved by his own efforts" (Birdsall 26). He applies "his ingenuity to reproduce the arts and



inventions of civilization and by transforming his environment rescues himself from the state of nature” (Novak 50). Similarly to Prospero and his books, Robinson rescues from his ship all that may be profitable to him, including various tools, weapons, gunpowder, food and even coins (60-1) — that is, all that may be *useful* to him (61, 67), whether at present or later (like money). Thus, it would not be far-fetched to consider Robinson as the embodiment of capitalism. Robinson is clearly “driven by the profit motive,” which is evidenced by his obstinacy with “usefulness” (67), “a desire for self-aggrandizement,” seeking “not merely self-preservation,” as a mere savage would do, “but prosperity” (Birdsall 24-5). Work is viewed as the “natural condition of human behaviour” (Hamm 121), whereas, in *The Tempest*, it is considered as punishment. Such a capitalist drive is so intense and all-pervasive that it is even mirrored by the continuous flow of the narrative, which has only been segmented into chapters in later editions of the novel.

Robinson’s rise to the second and third stages of civilization is described in minute detail in the novel. To avoid a mere and lengthy paraphrase, I shall merely pinpoint the major steps taken by the protagonist. The elaborate depiction of Robinson’s skills and their application testifies to the importance — even the necessity — of civilization in instilling harmony on a wild island. At times it seems to be a eulogy of craftsmanship in the face of the brutal savages, the cannibals, who have almost inexorably strayed from nature and hence the possibility to be civilized (*Robinson Crusoe* 164).

The first step in establishing civilization consists in Robinson’s seeking to appropriate the unknown island and its wild fauna by naming or labelling them. The island is divided into “valleys” versus “rocks” (64). The “*low* grounds by the seaside”

(62; italics added) are located in relation to Robinson's dwelling place on the "green" (62) higher up. Understandably and significantly, he names the animals he spots on the basis of the taxonomy that prevailed in the civilized world from which he originates (56). For instance, he shoots "a large bird" which he takes "to be a kind of a hawk, its colour and beak resembling it" (56). Of course, the motive of such labelling is that of determining the usefulness of the animals: as for the hawk, "its flesh [is] carrion and *fit for nothing*" (57; italics added). Note the categorical nature of his statement. Another reason for naming everything is that of telling the tame from the wild. What is qualified as wild is that which is not profitable (like certain sorts of fowls and wild cats (64)) and / or dangerous (cf. "wild beasts," 56).

The seeds of civilization are all the items that Robinson rescues, avidly and at a great cost, from the ship (56-61, 67). All those, combined with the skill that their usage requires — knowledge that seems innate in Robinson, as he has no manual at hand, as opposed to Prospero —, allows Robinson to instil agriculture (106, 116, 124, 135, 179) and to tame and breed animals (58, 78, 65, 112-3, 117, 144-6, 160-1, 178). What is of peculiar interest is the building of his home, which stands for the centre from which civilization will expand. The setting up and expansion of his abode is motivated by the same greed for agrarian possessions. It is at first a tent and a cave (61), which reaches the status of a hut, a house (77) and eventually a "castle" (164). Like an aristocrat, even a "prince" (253), Robinson erects a second dwelling place, so that he possesses both a "castle" and a "country seat" (164) — one place within the city and another one in the country. By barricading his house, he tells apart the tame from the wild, being sheltered from bad weather and protected from ravenous beasts (61-62). Interestingly, his urge for expansion is mitigated by his desire for settlement (Seidel 125). Indeed Robinson builds

a house composed of several rooms (*Robinson Crusoe* 64, 76), which he makes cosy (71-2) and where he feels both safe and at peace (72). Having done so, he sets out to explore the rest of the island, where he discovers pleasant places (99-104). However, his discoveries do not match the comfort and cosiness of his home, which he revels in when he returns from his expedition, calling his home a “perfect settlement” (112). Definitely, wild nature, regardless of its beauty, cannot hold a candle to homely, settled civilization.

Like Prospero, Robinson does not abide in the third stage for very long. His accession to the sphere of the supercivilized is emblemized by his rise from a solitary lord to an emperor. Robinson sees himself as “king and lord [of the island] indefeasibly” (101), and he equates his dominion with that of “any lord of a manor in England” (101), his reference for a properly constituted society. On the same occasion, Robinson claims the island his own, owing to the implicit “right of possession” (101; cf. Novak 15-16). Being a landlord and especially a king is of crucial import to someone like Robinson who belongs to a feudal society, as it testifies to his social achievement and renown. Yet, the excess of such situation is underscored by the ridicule of being a lord of but a few tamed animals, whose lives Robinson has “at [his] absolute command. [He] could hang, draw, give liberty, and take it away” (147). Admittedly, his station is not as honorific as that of a real king, who has to “dispute sovereignty or command” (129) with others; Robinson has “no rivals”, “no competitor” (147), whom he may subdue.

Realizing that he is not alone on the island discomposes Robinson for a while, when he notices the footprint in the sand (152) and bones spread on the shore (163). At that time, he is overcome with anxiety (193). The resumption of the fear of the enemy, characteristic of the state of nature or the first stage of civilization, jeopardizes the

civilization established by Robinson, who thinks of destroying all signs of civilization (*Robinson Crusoe* 157; Novak 34); Robinson channels all his energy towards preserving his life, instead of making economic improvements, because the fruit of his labour is dubious on account of a likely assault by the enemy (*Robinson Crusoe* 172; Novak 35). Hence, one sees the importance of a stable political situation in preserving the economy and its evolution.

In this context, Friday's arrival restores Robinson's peace together with his industry (Novak 36). Whereas Caliban is forced to become Prospero's slave, Friday immediately subordinates himself to Robinson, who has saved his life by delivering him from the cannibals (*Robinson Crusoe* 199-200). Contrary to Caliban's marked monstrosity, Friday's physiognomy is very agreeable to Robinson (202-04) and it counterbalances the negative portray of the brutal cannibals (163-65). The latter are the vilest form of savages, by no means redeemable, whereas Friday stands higher in the social hierarchy. As Robinson sounds out Friday's personality, he discovers, to his dismay, that he is endowed with the same capacities as Europeans and that savages like him would have made better use of them, had they been given opportunity to do so (206). However, despite this seemingly equalitarian statement, which is nowhere to be found in *The Tempest*, Robinson's superiority to Friday is never challenged. Robinson leads Friday through the various stages of civilization he has been through himself (206-14). Though Friday is likened to a "European" (202), his need of help to reach a decent state of civilization makes him inferior to his mentor, who has accessed the highest stage of civilization on his own. For instance, Friday cannot get rid of his poor accent (which paradoxically cannot be fairly derived from his master's *proper* pronunciation). Further, Robinson does not seek to make Friday his equal. Rather he applies himself to

shaping him into a “faithful, loving, sincere *servant*” (205; italics added). Usefulness is again at stake. Robinson makes him “useful, handy and helpful” (206). His assistance will be decisive, since he will largely contribute to Robinson’s escape from the island (210, 212). Notably, Friday, as opposed to Caliban, unquestioningly accepts all of his master’s values (Novak 48) and finds them of such worth that he even suggests that Robinson likewise civilizes other savages (Birdsall 46).

Friday is the first human subject that Robinson acquires, but not the last. It appears that all those who set foot on Robinson’s island eventually yield to his authority. Otherwise they are killed, like the cannibals (*Robinson Crusoe* 232). The other Europeans that arrive on the isle not only comply with Robinson’s orders but are also willing to do far more than what he requires from them (250-51). On this matter, Novak opines that Robinson is not a tyrant because all his subjects have submitted to him of their own free will (Novak 50-2). This argument may be countered by pointing to the absolute right Robinson has on the lives of his subjects (*Robinson Crusoe* 255), whom he may slay at his leisure. Anyway, Robinson is very pleased by his subdued people, “like a king” (236), and he speaks of it in terms of richness, in a similar way to his wealth: I th[ink] myself very *rich* in subjects” (236; italics added). But he is more than a king: the English captain wonders whether he is God or an angel (249) and appears as a saviour figure (Birdsall 29, 33). Robinson deepens the mystery surrounding his identity by becoming an invisible power, acting both as the “governor” (*Robinson Crusoe* 262) and the governor’s aide-de-camp (265).

Being lord of the island does not fully satisfy Robinson, who makes of it a colony, the starting point of his Empire. He places some of his faithful servants as stewards over his isle. He shows them how to live well and passes his knowledge down

unto them (270, 298). Looking forward to commerce and globalization, the supercivilized leaves his island to expand his empire overseas, driven by his unremitting lust for material possessions, whether land or goods. The open ending of the narrative, evoking “new adventures” (298) and the possibility of “a further account” (298) thereof, attests to Robinson’s unrelenting, capitalistic greed and drive.

As plenipotentiary supercivilized, Prospero and Robinson civilize and rule their respective islands. One may opine that Prospero outshines Robinson, owing to his supreme command over nature and human beings. Indeed he uses magic — supernatural powers — to reach the exalted status of a secular god, whereas Robinson does not. However, Robinson’s island is an enchanted place to the savages, because of the mystery surrounding his actual might and identity, and he is taken for God himself or an angel by the English captain. But what constitutes his unequalled power, independent of magic, is his unfailing reasoning faculty.

The chief difference between Prospero and Robinson does not lie in their power but rather in their use thereof. Prospero is the epitome of the ideal monarch, who is able to surrender his absolute power and let his descendants take the lead. By contrast, Robinson is too greedy to yield his power. He emblemizes the fierce colonist and capitalist by ever seeking to expand his dominion both in economic and in geographical terms. Since doubt, passion, irrational behaviour, and, more generally, uselessness are banned from his referential frame, Robinson may well stand for a forerunner of technocrats. Yet, he remains subject to one thing: lust. He cannot help seeking to increase his wealth. The bottom line is that a supercivilized cannot rule forever: either he surrenders his power for the benefit of his posterity (like Prospero), or he is enslaved by his own power (as is Robinson).

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