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Preprint of

Studies in the English-language Robinsonade at the Crusoe tercentenary

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As befits the publication anniversary of the literary wonder that Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) was and still is, the tercentenary of 2019 was appropriately packed with celebratory events and related scholarly outputs. A number of international conferences focussing on Crusoe and his afterlives were organized, for example, in Lyon, Mexico City, York, Mainz and London, and much writerly energy was put into both public-facing and research-oriented publishing ventures, including popular magazine articles (*The Conversation*), BBC podcasts (*The Forum*), special journal issues (*Études Anglaises 2019*, and *Comparisons 25 2019*), edited volumes (Kinane, 2019b; Lipski, 2020b; Mueller & Ridley, 2020; Peraldo, 2020), and a number of book chapters and journal articles. The year before, *The Cambridge Companion to 'Robinson Crusoe'* (ed. Richetti, 2018) was published, marking Defoe's novel as one of the selected few that have deserved a focused, single-text 'Cambridge Companion'. By natural extension, in any of these outputs, much attention is invariably paid to the adaptations of the Crusoe story, Robinsonades, with some of these prioritizing the afterlives over the source text itself. The following overview of criticism will locate the main spheres of interest in the Robinsonade today in the context of earlier work in this area of research. It demonstrates that Robinsonade studies is a vibrant field of interdisciplinary inquiry and does justice to the complexity and plasticity of the form, its critical and popular appeal, as well as its enduring up-to-dateness.

A fundamental question regarding the scope of scholarly investigation into the Robinsonade, though one that has admittedly not dominated recent criticism, concerns the parameters of the genre itself. What is the Robinsonade? In narrative terms, it is a work of fiction including some recognizable plot elements, such as shipwreck (or a different kind of travel accident), an island (literally or metaphorically speaking), the challenges of castaway existence, an encounter with Others and rescue. But the pertinence of this question lies in the fact that while the term itself

makes a straight-forward allusion to the ur-text, thus indicating that a Robinsonade is an adaptation or imitation of Defoe's novel, the critical practice typically goes beyond this relationship, and indeed reaches out for texts written long before *Crusoe*. The paradox is tellingly captured in Susan Reid and David Stuart Reid's *Men as Islands: Robinsonades from Sophocles to Margaret Atwood* (2015). Why label such texts as Sophocles' *Philoctetes*—or more typically, Henry Neville's *The Isle of Pines* (1668)—Robinsonades? The separation of this body of work from the ur-text is sometimes taken for granted, to the point that the authors of *Men as Islands* do not even consider it necessary to explain why they use the term *robinsonade* and not, for example, *castaway narrative* or *desert island narrative*, with reference to texts that are not adaptations of *Robinson Crusoe*. *300 Years of Robinsonades* (ed. Peraldo, 2020) introduces some conceptual ordering by indicating that the sources of the myth of Robinson, including works that would have directly inspired Defoe ('Robinsonades before Robinson'), constitute the vast literary architext that has been generating Robinsonades just as *Crusoe* itself has done, but—again—no attempt is made at differentiation. This taxonomical standpoint was also taken by Artur Blaim (2016), who used the three terms synonymously, and its merits stem from the obvious flaws and limitations of genological essentialism: being too strict about delineating a genre is always at the cost of unnecessary pedantry and self-imposed limitations. That said, a seemingly more restrictive approach has also been adopted, and the prerequisite here is some sort of direct or indirect intertextual connection with *Robinson Crusoe*. From this point of view, the castaway narrative is a broader category that encompasses, rather than being synonymous with, the vast corpus of adaptations, imitations, rewrites and, more generally, works inspired by Defoe's novel. The difference between the broader and the narrower approach is accurately summarized by Rebecca Weaver-Hightower in her seminal *Empire Islands: Castaways, Cannibals, and Fantasies of Conquest* (2007). Defining her scope, she writes:

Though these [that is, castaway narratives] are often called 'Robinsonades', after their progenitor novel, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), I prefer 'island narrative' or 'castaway narrative', since this project includes narratives set on islands that aren't strictly speaking *Robinsonades*, including those (such as *The Tempest*) written before *Robinson Crusoe*, and others (such as H. G. Wells's *The Island of Dr. Moreau* and Edgar Allan Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*) that, while set on islands, don't explicitly respond to Defoe's story (2007, p. ix).

This standpoint has recently been adopted by Lipski (2020a, pp. 1–2) and Kinane (2017, p. 3, 2019a, p. 5), who quotes Carl Fisher's classic introductory essay 'The Robinsonade: An Intercultural History of the Idea' and the author's succinct definition of the genre as encompassing any narrative that 'repeats the themes of *Robinson Crusoe*' rewriting 'specific physical aspects of Crusoe's existence' (Fisher, 2005, p. 130 after Kinane, 2019a, p. 5). However inclusive, Fisher's take does nevertheless open up a space for still narrower approaches, and there have been attempts to concretize Fisher's 'specific physical aspects'. For example, Maximilian Novak, attempting to distinguish the Robinsonade from other types of castaway narrative, such as the utopia or 'quest for a new paradise', considers 'struggle against the forces of nature and ultimate success' (Novak, 2015, p. 112) to be the generic prerequisite.

Highlighting the themes of conquest, and by extension the encounter with the Other, in Robinsonade criticism, and especially raising them to the status of a generic invariant, has been at the core of postcolonial approaches to the Robinsonade, which gathered momentum in the 1980 and 1990s, at least partially in response to the success of Derek Walcott's *Pantomime* from 1978 to 1980 and J.M. Coetzee's *Foe* from 1986—the two iconic counter-Robinsonades, writing against the genre's imperialist message. More recently, Weaver-Hightower (2007) and Ann Marie Fallon (2011) have offered far-ranging monograph readings from this perspective. Informed by insights from psychoanalysis, Weaver-Hightower interpreted conquest as projection and incorporation, while Fallon demonstrated how theories of transnationalism can help combine traditional comparative and intertextual approaches with a postcolonial standpoint. The legacy of postcolonial readings of the Robinsonade today is unquestionable, and this refers to scholarly work on both the so-called imperial Robinsonades from the 19th century (such as Frederick Marryat's *Masterman Ready* from 1841, R. M. Ballantyne's *The Coral Island* from 1857 or Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* from 1883) and counter-canonical Robinsonades with a postcolonial agenda. Recent studies of the Robinsonade's imperial discourse, adding to the now classic readings of Susan Maher (1988), Diana Loxley (1990) and Richard Phillips (1997), to give but three notable names, include Julie Gay's discussion of how empire is problematized in late-19th-century narratives by Joseph Conrad, H. G. Wells and Robert Louis Stevenson (2020), Márta Pellérdi's analysis of the subversive potential of Stevenson's *Kidnapped* (2020), and Robert Clark's essay on the shadowy presence of the imperial Robinsonade ideology behind the Brexit campaign (2020). Counter-canonical Robinsonades, such as Coetzee's *Foe* and Walcott's *Pantomime* continue to receive attention, especially the former, given the still burgeoning status of Coetzee criticism. These texts have also been juxtaposed with the work of non-Anglophone authors, such as Patrick Chamoiseau,

whose *L'Empreinte à Crusoe* has yet to be translated into English (see Cook, 2021; Fallon, 2018).

The Robinsonade's imperial discourse has also been commonly interpreted with reference to gender, in particular, with how the construct of imperial masculinity, central to 19th-century adventure fiction, is combined with disempowered or absent femininity, or, conversely, with how revisionist Robinsonades prioritize female agency. Coetzee's *Foe* has also here emerged as a 'canonical counter-canonical' narrative, with its entanglement of racial and gender power structures, and as such it has recently been read by Teresa Pinto Coelho (2019). But the critical tradition of studying 'Female Crusoes' goes far beyond Coetzee's Susan Barton. As C. M. Owen (2010) has demonstrated, 18th-century Robinsonades featuring a female castaway appeared shortly after *Crusoe* itself, and merit attention as hybrid constructs reconciling conservative values with subversive and anti-patriarchal ideas. An extremely useful bibliographic tool to research these is the database compiled by Anne Birgitte Rønning, which includes female Robinsonades from the 18th and 19th centuries (2011–2020).

The single female Robinsonade that has garnered most critical attention in the 2010s is *The Female American*, published anonymously in 1767, which sees half 'Indian' and half English Unca Eliza marooned on an American island, where she survives by following the manuscript advice of her solitary predecessor on the island and converts the Natives to Christianity. In 2016, a special issue of *Women's Studies* was dedicated entirely to this novel, addressing a wide array of topics, including 'genre convention, the role of the domestic sphere, identity construction, religious conversion, and social justice' (Collins-Frohlich & MacNeil, 2016, p. 2). The progressive ideology of the text has also been problematized, if not questioned, by Chloe Wigston Smith (2017) and Przemysław Uściński (2020), who point to the inevitable imperial undertones of the novel, despite its counter-hegemonic elements, while Emelia Abbé (2019), applying the concept of it-narrative to the novel's representation of 'Indians', has made an even stronger claim for this work's colonial message.

The female Robinsonade is also extensively discussed in Kinane's *Didactics and the Modern Robinsonade* (2019b), since, as editor Kinane puts it in his Introduction, 'The increase in female writers adopting the Robinsonade form, as well as the attendant push to redress the genre's problematic colonial biases, suggests that the genre has begun to move further away from its imperialist, masculinist origins than at any other time in its 300-year heritage' (2019a, p. 35). Accordingly, the issues of the female Robinsonade undermining patriarchal and imperial ideologies are taken up by Siwan M. Rosser (2019) and Amy Hicks (2019), whose reading of Libba Bray's *Beauty Queens* from 2011 is in dialogue with the long tradition of thematizing sex

and sexuality in the Robinsonade—a quality Daniel Cook has labelled as ‘sexing up’ *Crusoe* (2020, p. 166).

The potential of Robinsonades to serve as didactic texts for children, or more broadly young people, was already recognized in the 18th century, with the famous reference to *Robinson Crusoe* as a treatise on natural education in Jean Jacques Rousseau's *Emile* (1762) in the foreground. While Rousseau and his contemporaries saw the benefits of young people's exposure to Crusoe's inventiveness and perseverance in what was understood to be a state of nature, the imperial Robinsonade of the 19th century prioritized a social programming through which young boys grew up to become colonists. From the 20th century onwards, Robinsonades for young people have oscillated between conservative and progressive approaches, at times offering internally conflicted ideological constitutions. The fields of childhood studies and children's literature criticism have contributed substantially to the state of knowledge of this aspect of the Robinsonade genre (see Bristow, 1991, pp. 93–126; Horne, 2011, pp. 29–126; O'Malley, 2012) and some of the tercentenary publications recapitulate and elaborate on this tradition (Campbell, 2018). Most significantly, Ian Kinane's monumental introduction to *Didactics and the Modern Robinsonade* (2019a, pp. 1–52) is an excellent discussion of the changing approaches to the didactic potential of the genre and the corresponding critical approaches, especially from the 1980s onwards. The subsequent case studies that make up the collection are focused discussions of 20th- and 21st-century Robinsonades for young people and their alleged educational agendas. Animal Robinsonades, elaborating on the example set by Ballantyne in his *The Dog Crusoe* (1860), have been recognized as a significant subtype in this tradition, and the ways in which these texts explore the adaptive potential of the genre and problematize the crucial immersive politics have been addressed by Amy Hicks and Scott Pyrz (2020).

Given the Robinsonade's bend towards extra-textual relevance and its inevitable engagement with contemporary ideologies, it is arguably refreshing to see that recent work on this genre has also adopted a formal standpoint. Artur Blaim's *Robinson Crusoe and His Doubles: The English Robinsonade of the Eighteenth Century* (2016), a revised version of this author's survey published in *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* in 1990, is a nuanced discussion of the genre's recurrent themes and structures, and their transformations. This blend of historical and formal research has also been adopted by Jason Pearl (2017) and Rivka Swenson (2020), whose focused readings of Robert Paltock's *Peter Wilkins* (1750) and Peter Longueville's *The Hermit* (1727), respectively, have brought these popular 18th-century Robinsonades back to mainstream 18th-century criticism. The Robinsonade's formal transformations have also been

widely discussed by Patrick Gill, who has studied aspects of intradiegetic narration and omission of discourse in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, J. G. Ballard's *Concrete Island* and Michael Dudok de Witt's animated film *The Red Turtle* (2019); the use of counterfactuals in *Crusoe*, Muriel Spark's *Robinson* and Yann Martell's *The Life of Pi* (2020); and issues of textual authority from Defoe to Coetzee's *Foe* (2021). Approaches like Blaim's or Gill's have shown that while the Robinsonade has gained credibility as a field of critical investigation mostly due to its problematic ideologies, the formal complexity of this tradition merits attention, too. In this, these critics have followed the lead of, for example, Jordan Howell (2014), who in his survey of 18th-century abridgements of *Robinson Crusoe* has remedied the critical habit of dismissing this body of work on the grounds of formal derivativeness.

The Robinsonade has always been an interartistic and intermedial venture: from the early abridgements of *Crusoe*, illustrated with cheap woodcuts, and picturesheets, to comic books and picturebooks for children; from popular theatrical performances at the end of the 18th and throughout the 19th centuries to films and television shows in the 20th and 21st centuries; from early board and card games to their modern equivalents and video games. Research into the Robinsonade has thus accordingly appreciated its transmedial dimensions. Earlier work was typically concerned with visual afterlives, especially in the field of book illustration and cinema. Discussing illustrations to *Robinson Crusoe*, David Blewett (1995) showed how the different sets constructed their own meanings, often distanced from Defoe's implied message. He rearticulated some of his major points later (Blewett, 2018), and a similar approach to illustration sets has been recently adopted by Lipski (2019) and Sandro Jung (2020). Cinematic afterlives and adaptations of *Crusoe* have been extensively discussed by Robert Mayer. First, he evaluated the counter-hegemonic potential of Robinsonades that questioned *Crusoe*'s colonial discourse (2002). Then, in his 2015 'Defoe's Cultural Afterlife, Mainly on Screen', he comments on some of the Screen Age Robinsonade highlights, such as Patrick Keiller's Robinson trilogy (1994–2010), in the context of Defoe's other works on screen, but the focus is not necessarily on the Robinsonade genre, but rather on how Defoe's perceptiveness and realist observation can be adapted for present day purposes (Mayer, 2015, pp. 241–248). Mayer followed up with a survey discussion from silent film Robinsonades to Robert Zemeckis's *Cast Away* (2000), which, apart from its encyclopedic value, offers insight into the responsiveness of the cinematic Robinsonade to the dynamically changing circumstances of the 20th century (Mayer, 2018). Recent, more focused approaches (Carroll, 2019; Wilson, 2020) have done justice to the popularity of such films as Duncan Jones's *Moon* (2009), Alfonso Cuarón's *Gravity* (2013) and Ridley Scott's *The Martian* (2015), thus adding to the subfield of science-fiction Robinsonade criticism. While Andy Weir's *The Martian* (2009–2014), the source for

Scott's film, was a literary sensation (see Ridley, 2020), the first science-fiction Robinsonades were written in the 18th century (see Baines, 1995). Given the technicalities involved, it is only natural that the Screen Age has made much of this variant. While it is no wonder that such box office hits as *Cast Away* or *The Martian* have garnered much attention (see also Geriguis, 2020; Pivetti, 2017), the contribution of film studies to the field of Robinsonade criticism lies also in how it has been salvaging relatively obscure examples from critical oblivion (see, for example, Gill, 2019; Gomot, 2020).

The importance of TV Robinsonades, including reality TV shows like *Survivor* (2000–), lies in the possibilities of dissemination, large audiences and the pivotal role of television as a channel through which popular culture myths are reworked and constantly reenacted. Mythical thinking constitutes the essence of the Robinsonade genre, and the immediacy of experience, albeit vicarious, that television offers makes it a crucial medium for reactivating the myth of Robinson in contemporary society. TV Robinsonades, in particular the reality show *Survivor*, whose 42nd season premiered on 9 March 2022, and the enormously successful series *Gilligan's Island* (1964–1967) and *Lost* (2004–2010), are extensively discussed in Kinane's *Theorising Literary Islands* (2017), the most comprehensive and systematic theoretical study of the Robinsonade to date, using contemporary critical theory to place island landscapes offered by the genre in the centre of Western cultural imagination. The three TV Robinsonades mentioned were earlier also discussed by Mayer (2011), who argued for their ideological double-voicedness, showing how they 'do political work in the society for which they are produced, gesturing towards undermining socially and politically sanctioned practices and beliefs before finally endorsing the status quo' (p. 63). More recently, *Gilligan's Island* has been revisited by Kinane (2020), who compared its meanings with a postmodernist novel based on the series—*Gilligan's Wake* (2003).

The tercentenary publications paid due attention to the theatrical Robinsonade, adding to the previous work of Marty Gould (2011, pp. 31–89). Frederick Burwick (2020) surveyed the various embodiments of Crusoe and Friday on the London stage from the late 18th to the mid-19th century, from Richard Brinsley Sheridan's *Robinson Crusoe, or Harlequin Friday* (1781) to Isaac Pocock's *Robinson Crusoe; or, The Bold Bucaniers* (1817) and its later Victorian stagings. Burwick shows how the myth of Robinson was adjusted to the popular theatrical forms of the time, and a similar agenda lies behind Geoffrey Sill's discussion of 'Burlesquing Crusoe' (2020) in the 19th-century theatre, and in particular, of how the popular form of the burlesque featured female Crusoes, both affirming and playing with the received notions of femininity. The first Crusoe-themed board games and card games appeared in the early 19th century, and this tradition has continued into the digital age as a phenomenon related, though not exclusively, to juvenile Robinsonade fiction (O'Malley, 2012, pp. 135–136). Indeed, Crusoe's celebrated

inventiveness and *ab ovo* thinking processes are particularly translatable into the realm of interactive culture, and the burgeoning field of game studies has recently duly accounted for this potential of the Robinsonade. *Minecraft* has inevitably come to the fore in this respect, and its various implications for how we understand and perform creativity, individuality and selfhood have been discussed in the context of the Robinsonade tradition by Joseph Nguyen (2021) and Phillip Lobo (2019). The virtual reality game *Robinson: The Journey* (2016), in turn, has been briefly analysed by Andreas K. E. Mueller against the wider panorama of Crusoe's iconicity in popular culture (2020, pp. 190–191), while the relatively recent Robinsonade board games—*Robinson Crusoe* and *First Martians*—have been discussed by Geoffrey Engelstein (2020, pp. 37–40). Highlighting the participatory and interactive dimension of the Robinsonade, game studies remind us about the readerly immersion that has been at the core of the genre ever since Defoe managed to reorient the romance patterns of shipwreck and rescue into the paradigmatic reality effect that *Crusoe* produced. The games also draw attention to the transmedial nature of what might be termed the Crusoe universe, given how they expand, often in surprising ways, on the literary material.

A peculiarity of contemporary Robinsonade criticism is its engagement with arguably the most topical critical discourses of the time—ecocriticism and post-humanism. And while such entries in the Robinsonade history as Michel Tournier's *Vendredi ou les limbes du Pacifique* (1967, published in English as *Friday* 1969) show that today's ecological sensitivity and reevaluation of traditional understandings of agency is nothing new, the space given to these revisionist approaches in the tercentenary publications indicates that, like before, both the Robinsonade and the critical writing about the genre are invariably produced in response to their cultural, social and political contexts. As a matter of fact, Tournier's *Friday* has dominated the scope of the most recent approaches (see Adrahane, 2020; Bataillé, 2020; Skonieczny, 2020), but non-radical or less radical Robinsonades, including those written in the 18th century, have also been studied from these perspectives (Blaim, 2018; Dobrin, 2021; Geriguis, 2020). It is true that Defoe's *Crusoe* did not offer much in this respect, but such texts as Peter de Longueville's *The English Hermit* or Robert Paltock's *Peter Wilkins* show how 18th-century castaways were capable of going beyond the paradigm of conquest and appreciate a different approach to their environment. A comparative doctoral thesis on *An Ecological Turn in the Contemporary Robinsonade: Haushofer, Tournier, Ballard, Martel* by Tsung-hua Yang, defended at National Taiwan Normal University in 2018, suggests that the present preoccupation with ecocriticism has effected in 'an ecological turn' in the Robinsonade tradition. There is clearly no coming back to the early paradigms of conquest and mastery, and

the genre's key 'contact zones' have been redefined: the relationship between the castaway and the Friday figure, as well as the one between the castaway and their environments, including the animal world. The development of human-animal studies has both invited new readings of *Crusoe*, which concentrated on how the novel problematises the castaway's understanding of 'animality' and the human-animal divide (Chow, 2018; Gregg, 2013), as well as inspiring changes to the character arrangement in the Robinsonade. While animals did play the 'Friday' role in the past, for example, in Longueville's *The English Hermit* or Jules Verne's *The Mysterious Island*, the casting as a rule served a racist agenda, whereby the monkey 'Fridays' were meant to highlight the animality of the Other. The animal 'Fridays' in *The Life of Pi* or *The Red Turtle*, on the other hand, draw attention to the issues of agency, communication and perspective, and undermine the genre's traditional anthropocentrism, as Gill has demonstrated about the latter (Gill, 2019, pp. 151–153). If one were to risk pointing to one area of research that is the most likely to garner attention in the near future, Robinsonade's ecologies would be the safest choice. Another, and related one, would be the postapocalyptic Robinsonade (see Curtis, 2020), which poignantly shows how the genre is attuned to current concerns. With the diversity of theoretical and critical standpoints that the Robinsonade welcomes, one does not risk much assuming that the genre's history will continue well beyond the 300 years that have been so extensively celebrated in recent criticism.

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