

**‘How like a King I look’d’:
Nature and sovereignty in the illustrated Robinson Crusoe,
as influenced by Thomas Hobbes**

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Abstract: Daniel Defoe was, amongst other things, a political pamphleteer, and he thread into the narrative of his travel novel Robinson Crusoe a variety of recognisably distinct political theories as he charted the physical and mental development of his hero. He drew on Sir Robert Filmer’s ‘Divine Right of Kings’ theory, which served to justify the sovereignty of Charles I, John Locke’s emphasis on the virtue of labour and private property, and, most notably, Thomas Hobbes’s ‘nasty brutish and short’ view of the natural condition of man living without strong government. These competing political perspectives are revealed in the multitude of illustrations to the novel since its publication in 1719, but two stand out. One is called ‘I was King and Lord of all this Country’ (a line in the novel) by J. Ayton Symington in the 1905 edition. Previous commentary has focussed on the colonial aspects of the depiction but what is striking is the similarity of the Crusoe figure to Charles I - echoing the face, dress and pose in the court portraits of Van Dyck - which reveals the ‘absolutist’ nature of Crusoe’s sovereign power on the island. The other is on the frontispiece to the first edition by John Clark and John Pine, whose iconic image of Crusoe standing alone, armed to the teeth and looking fearful, offers a fresh interpretation in the light of the political theories underpinning the novel, in particular that of Thomas Hobbes.

Daniel Defoe’s novel *Robinson Crusoe* has undergone numerous editions since its original publication in 1719, many of which have been illustrated. All such illustrations seek to assist and even enhance the process of reading the text, but in order to understand how they do so we must place them in the context in which they were made. Two particular examples, the frontispiece to the first edition in 1719 by John Clark and John Pine (Figure 1), and the drawing ‘I was King and Lord of

all this Country' by J. Ayton Symington in a 1905 edition (Figure 2), explore and enrich the political aspects of the novel. The philosophical theory about nature and sovereignty espoused by Thomas Hobbes is particularly interesting in the context of these illustrations.

Throughout his life Daniel Defoe was engaged in political debates; he produced many pamphlets and was well read in the theoretical arguments which underpinned them. For although the popularity of his novel *Robinson Crusoe* may be primarily attributed to the sea-faring antics of the hero, Crusoe, and his death-defying adventures on his deserted island, the novel is also concerned with moral, social, economic and political progression. Shipwrecked alone on a desert island, having previously been a self-proclaimed material hedonist, Crusoe experiences a gradual religious self-awakening in which he progresses through the stages of superstition, and fear of God's punishment, to a final repentance and trust in God's mercy. In conjunction with and assisted by this Christian conversion, he moves away from his state of isolation and builds the foundations of a social community. He retrieves guns and swords from the shipwreck and constructs a fortress to protect himself and store the crops he has cultivated and the animals he has captured, thus undergoing the economic development from hunter/gatherer (with no property) to a farmer, where land is private property. When Man Friday and, later, sailors land on the island and start co-operating and trading goods with Crusoe and accept him as their absolute leader, he has formed a basic political society and government, before his departure from the island after 28 years.

But why did Man Friday and the sailors accept Crusoe as their absolute leader? The answer is largely to be found in the political theory of Thomas Hobbes, as embodied in the predicament, actions and language of Defoe's hero Crusoe. For although Rebecca Bullard is correct to suggest that *Robinson Crusoe* is not 'the articulation of any single particular political doctrine, but [is] rather a polyphony of political ideas', nonetheless it is the theory of Thomas Hobbes which underpins his novel.¹ Elements of Sir Robert Filmer's absolutist 'Divine Right of Kings' doctrine in *Patriarchia, or,*

¹ Bullard, Rebecca, 'Politics, History, and the *Robinson Crusoe* Story' in *The Cambridge Companion to "Robinson Crusoe"*, ed. by John Richetti, John (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2018), p.87.

The Natural Power of Kings - published in 1680 but written in the 1640s in justification of the Stuart claim to the throne – can be discerned in Crusoe’s language of indefeasibility (or unconquerable) hereditary succession. Likewise Crusoe’s reflections on the relationship between labour and political power echoes John Locke’s *Second Treatise of Government* (1689) where, as Bullard says, ‘Locke affirms that the natural world becomes valuable property only through human labour’.² However, as Carol Kay says: ‘Of all the canonised eighteenth-century English novels, Defoe’s fiction comes closest to central features of Hobbes’s theory’.³

Hobbes had been developing his political theories throughout the 1640s but they received their fullest articulation in 1651, two years after the execution of Charles I, in his work *Leviathan*. In it Hobbes contemplates what life would be like for people if they were not organised under a sovereign political power. He looks at them in this ‘state of nature’ and sees that they are driven by a common passion: a desire to be superior to others for the dual purpose of self-gratification and self-protection. This is of course impossible to achieve: all men cannot dominate all other men; so they find themselves in a perpetual conflict with a restless anxiety about the future. It is a bleak world where there is: ‘continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short’.⁴

How do men escape this predicament? Hobbes tells us that the only way is for them to ‘confer all their power and strength upon one man, or upon one assembly of men’.⁵ Entering into this voluntary contract forces people to keep their promises and act in a trustworthy manner because they know that to deflect from it will be met with punishment from the sovereign power. It is only by vesting all political power in the hands of one political body that men can be assured a peaceful life, one in which they can acquire private property and develop their land economically.

² Ibid., p.90.

³ Carol Kay, *Political Constructions: Defoe, Richardson, and Sterne in Relation to Hobbes, Hume, and Burke* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1988) p.66.

⁴ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Penguin, 1981), p.186.

⁵ Ibid., p.227.

Further, in voluntarily conferring upon one body all power to rule over them, people recognise that the sovereign not only makes the law but is itself above the law. Its powers are therefore unlimited, except in one respect: given that the absolute ruler has been created to protect its people from each other or foreign dangers, it follows that if it fails in its task the people can resist it, and even replace it with another sovereign who is capable of protecting them.

Crucially, for Hobbes, this description of the human condition is not chronologically progressive: once men have obtained a degree of peaceful stability and prosperity they can still return to a state of 'continual fear', because the only thing that is preventing that is the protection of an absolute sovereign. In that sense the Hobbesian depiction of the human predicament is timeless – the underlying anxieties and isolation of men are never resolved; they are merely managed during periods of strong and successful government.

This Hobbesian vision of man and his surroundings is pronounced in *Robinson Crusoe*, ranging from Crusoe's articulation of his fears on his arrival on this island, to a confidence that he has established peace and economic prosperity, which is then undermined when he discovers the human footprint in the sand. Finally, he repulses the cannibals and persuades Man Friday and the sailors to voluntarily consent to his absolute rule as their protector. Aspects of this Hobbesian world view are, I believe, also reflected in the Clark/Pine and Symington illustrations



Figure 1. Unknown artist (1719). Frontispiece. Etching by Clark and John Pine. *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, volume 1. (London: W.Taylor, 1719) © British Library Board, Shelf mark C.30.f.6.

Like the front cover of a paperback today, John Clark and John Pine's 1719 frontispiece served as a marketing tool and a pledge to the readers of what they could expect from the text that follows. It thus confronts the tension between the linearity of a book (and reading time) and the simultaneity of a picture, which either captures a particular moment in the text, or in Clark and Pine's case, constructs a composite set of representational images which reflect key themes which are drawn out in the novel. Like all illustrators, Clark and Pine cannot possibly capture the whole narrative of the novel in a single drawing, so it is interesting to see what they choose to emphasise, especially given that this a frontispiece to the first edition, so only a very few people know at this point what the story is. The only clue a first reader has is the brief description on the adjoining title page, which

refers to the shipwreck and the length of time he lived on ‘an un-inhabited island’. So, what do we see? Conventionally we tend to read pictures from left to right, so the image of the ship on turbulent waters on the left strongly suggests the physical event of the shipwreck (although it could also refer to the sailors landing later). In the centre stands Crusoe, which is apt given that he is the hero and the central character of the novel. But *when* is he standing there – what stage and time does this depict? The text provides some clues: Crusoe tells us that the guns and sword were retrieved from the shipwreck, and he describes how he dressed when he was alone on the island, saying that ‘Every creature I killed I took off the skins and preserved them’ (p.62). He also explains that the ‘castle’ on the far right was his own work. From this we can ‘read back’ into the illustration that this is some time into his sojourn on the island, though it remains unclear exactly when. Crusoe is alone on the island for over 20 years before he meets any other human, by which time the shipwreck would have disintegrated and the ‘castle’ may have needed repair. Interestingly, the most detailed description of Crusoe as depicted in the illustration comes towards the end of the novel, when he and Man Friday confront the mutineers who have landed: ‘I had my formidable Goat-Skin Coat on, with the great Cap I have mention’d, a naked Sword by my side, two Pistols in my Belt, and a Gun upon each Shoulder’ (p.213).

However, in the text Crusoe continues “my figure was very fierce” (p. 213) and that “I fitted myself up for battle” (p.213) but in the illustration his face is downcast and preoccupied, suggesting that his thoughts are on his lonely plight and precarious situation, which would suggest a far earlier period before his Christian redemption and the establishment of his ‘community’ of animals and Man Friday. What he describes as “a melancholy Relation of a Scene of a silent life” (p.55) with no companionship.

Clark and Pine’s illustration, then, cannot be understood as a temporally specific or fixed moment in the novel. Rather, as David Blewett points out, it conforms with ‘the practice, still common in the eighteenth century, of compressing various events into a single picture, particularly appropriate

in a frontispiece, in order to emphasise the work's meaning and unity'.⁶ Further, Blewett continues: 'The portrait ... is diachronic and synoptic and is intended to sum up the experience of Crusoe – his strange costume, his solitude, his melancholy existence, his desire for rescue'.⁷ As such, it hasn't any specific reality: for instance the ship symbolises his arrival and possible departure, and the dangers and possible salvation that represents. As Blewett says, Crusoe stands 'not [in] an actual moment but [as] the timeless figure of a castaway, strangely dressed thinking about his fate and his deliverance, symbolised by the background ship. Even the uncertainty of his fate seems to be suggested by the two clouds, one on either side of him, dark and bright, emblematic of an unknown future'.⁸

The elements of isolation, fear and uncertainty which are represented in this illustration can be seen as a composite representation of Hobbesian man in his 'state of nature'. He stands in furs, armed to the teeth, and although he has built a basic 'castle' to protect himself, he looks anxious and preoccupied about the future dangers that may confront him. He remains alone and disconnected from any specific time, just as, in the narrative, he can never be fully at peace and free from future threat. As Crusoe says: 'I that was reduced to a meer state of nature, found this to my daily discouragement' (p. 100), a predicament not conducive to peace or prosperity. In this regard Crusoe represents Hobbesian man, as well as the 'timeless figure of a castaway'. Hobbes, as Carol Kay points out, 'deliberately chooses to write a science of generalised tendencies rather than a handbook for the study of particular individuals'.⁹ For Hobbes: 'He that is to govern a whole Nation, must read in himself, not this or that particular man; but Man-kind'.¹⁰ Crusoe is Mankind confronting his anxieties: doomed to what Hobbes calls 'a perpetuall and restlesse desire of Power after power'¹¹, and that condition which 'consisteth not in actuall fighting; but in the known disposition thereto,

⁶ David Blewett, *The Illustration of Robinson Crusoe: 1719-1920* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Symthe, 1995), p.29.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.29.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.30.

⁹ Kay, p.25.

¹⁰ Hobbes, p.83.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.161.

during all the time there is no assurance to the contrary'.¹² Crucially, for Hobbes, these anxieties are never fully resolved because the risk of returning to a state of nature always remains, and we can see the ebbs and flows of Crusoe's peace of mind in the text. Most strikingly, he is horrified when he sees the human footprint in the sand, because although he is not yet in 'actuell fighting', he knows that 'Fear of Danger is ten thousand Times more terrifying than Danger it self'(p.135). That Clark and Pine's illustration is not temporally specific reflects this sense that Crusoe's position on the island will always be potentially precarious. As Kay summaries: 'In Defoe's state of nature, humankind is fearful and weak. Self-preservation is the first law of nature [...] Crusoe's anxious condition on his island was a state of war in Hobbes's sense because it was not just a determinate time of battle but a "continual state of mind"'.¹³

As we have seen, Hobbes believed mankind could only quell their fears by consenting to be governed by a strong sovereign. In fact it is Crusoe himself who becomes this absolute ruler, and he adheres to this absolutism in both language and action. Although in the early years Crusoe merely has apparent control of his island and his animals, it is noticeable that he describes this achievement in politically absolutist terms. He describes the island as 'all my own[...] I was King and Lord of all this Country indefeasibly, and had a Right of Possession' (p.85), and when he dines surrounded by his animals, Crusoe refers to 'me and my little family', with him as 'Majesty the Prince and Lord of the whole Island; I had the Lives of all my Subjects at my absolute Command. I could hang, draw, give Liberty, and take it away, and no Rebels among all my Subjects'(p.125).

¹² Ibid., p.186.

¹³ Kay, p.68.

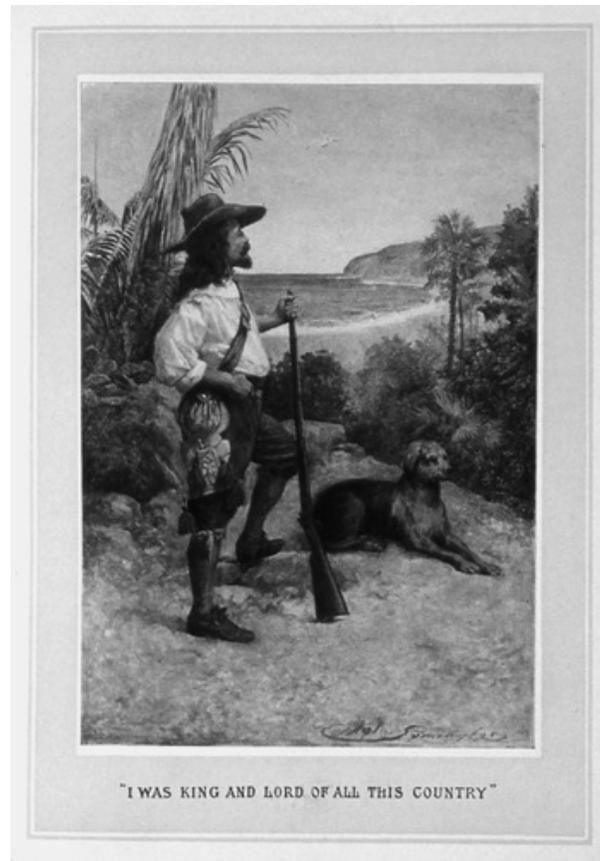


Figure 2. J. Ayton Symington (1905) I was King and Lord of all this Country. *The Life Adventures of Robinson Crusoe of York, Mariner*: Vol 1 (London: J.M. Dent & Co., 1905) facing p72, © British Library Board, Shelf mark 012612.ee.9.

This sense of control is evident in the Symington illustration, as Crusoe gazes confidently across his land, and we also notice how well dressed he is. The title of the image is taken from the passage discussed above, but the detail of the illustration makes it clear that this shows a later period when Crusoe has command over both Man Friday, his father, a Spaniard and the English sailors: ‘My Island was now peopled...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 Domination. *2dly*, My People were perfectly subjected; I was absolute Lord and Law-giver’ (p.203). Crusoe also explains that the Captain of the English ship had ‘brought me six clean new Shirts, six very good Neck-cloaths, two Pair of Gloves, one Pair of Shoes, a Hat, and one Pair of Stockings[...] In a Word, he cloathed me from Head to Foot’ (p.230-1). What is the purpose of Crusoe’s dress? Crusoe reveals that ‘I came thither dress’d

in my new Habit, and now I was call'd Governour' (p.231), and Blewett observes that Crusoe now has 'something of an attitude of the colonial administer [sic]'.¹⁴ However, there is something grander in Crusoe's dress than political administration – he himself acknowledges 'How like a king I look'd' – and what is most striking is the similarity in face, clothes and stance to a Van Dyck portrait of Charles I. The characteristic long flowing hair and pointy beard, the confident, even arrogant face, the 1600s Court attire, including buckled shoes, stockings and sash, and even a large hound which suggests that Crusoe is short, all point towards an image of Charles I. This could have been deliberate on Symington's part, reflecting the fact that Charles I was a firm believer in the 'divine right of kings'. Further, Charles I was executed in 1649 and, as Bullard says, 'Defoe puts dates on Crusoe's journey: he arrived on his island in 1658 and returned to England in 1687'.¹⁵ Unlike Charles I, of course, Crusoe succeeds in retaining political control over his subjects and quelling revolt or invasion, without losing his head in the process.

In discussing the political aspects of *Robinson Crusoe*, Manuel Schonhorn points out that it is assumed that 'The State is ordered for the best when it is instituted and maintained by a warrior-statesman. Law originated in some single will and such a will was the possessor of sovereignty... Violence is the condition of human society, to be quelled by a warrior-prince'.¹⁶ Further, of Crusoe as a 'warrior-prince', he says: 'His custom is to go nowhere without his arms'.¹⁷ We see this most clearly, of course, in the Clark/Pine illustration, where Crusoe is dressed as a warrior with his 'naked sword by my Side, two pistols in in my Belt, and a Gun upon each Shoulder', but it is telling that even when Crusoe is depicted as a statesman in the Symington illustration, he carries a musket. In both illustrations there remains the sense of 'continual fear' and the threat of force, without 'actual fighting', which is so prevalent in Thomas Hobbes's view of nature and sovereignty.

¹⁴ Blewett, p.158.

¹⁵ Bullard, p.84.

¹⁶ Manuel Schonhorn, *Defoe's Politics: Parliament, Power, Kingship, and Robinson Crusoe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p.154.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.154.

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