

*The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (1719) may seem a curious point of entry for thinking about Anglo-American views of Morocco. Everyone knows the novel is focused on colonialism: the oppression-through-adoption of the silenced native, Friday, who does not even rate a name separate from the occasion of his entry into service. But *Robinson Crusoe* is one of those books as notable for what we forget from it as for what we remember. *Robinson Crusoe*'s first volume recounts a whole series of actions that precede his shipwreck on an apparently abandoned island. As eighteenth-century scholars know, the book's larger plot connects it to the genre of the providential tale, charting the action of providence in the life of an erring sinner. I want to suggest, though, that this broader action also offers something like a parable for the Western development of colonialism: Crusoe's career as a nascent colonialist begins with some entrepreneurial seafaring which leads in turn to a two-year experience of slavery in Salé or Sallee. Our eponymous hero frees himself and goes on to prosper as a slave plantation owner in Brazil before being wrecked while on a slave-trading expedition. This plot outline frames Western colonialism in relation to different models of slavery: "old-world slavery," a conceptually temporal status based on capture and the possibility of redemption and return; "new-world slavery," a permanent status based on racial hierarchies in the process of being created; and colonial occupation, in which local inhabitants (Friday) are presented as acceding to something like slave status, ostensibly in return for protection from other threatening forces. Crusoe's time as a Sallee slave underscores a kind of apprenticeship in slavery over the course of the novel as a whole.

Let's imagine that Daniel Defoe did not just skate over those two years his hero spent in the Salé-Rabat area. Let's imagine, if we can, a more detailed account of "Rabati Crusoe."

Even within the existing text, there are significant hints about Crusoe's experience. We know from earlier captivity narratives that the experience of slavery in the Maghreb varied significantly from captive to captive. As Crusoe notes right at the start of this episode, "The usage I had there [in Sallee] was not so dreadful as at first I apprehended; nor was I carried up the country to the emperor's court, as the rest of our men were." During the reign of Mulay Ismail (1672-1727), the capital city of Meknes was home to tens of thousands of European captives. Indeed, the man largely responsible for launching the present-day Alawite dynasty and bringing Morocco into existence as a modern nation-state had, according to Arabic historians,

"more than 25,000 captives from among the infidels, who served in building his palaces. Some were marble cutters, decorators, stone cutters, ironsmiths, builders, carpenters, architects, astrologers, doctors, and many others." [qtd by Matar]

Nabil Matar elaborates on this claim:

There were so many captives in Meknes, Ismail's capital, that the inner part of the city, al-Qunayatar, became their exclusive living quarters, with separate residences designated for the various nationalities—British, French, Portuguese, and Spanish—and for women, clergy, and the wealthy. Captivity brought about an intermixing of peoples, races, and

religions that was rarely seen during this period of history. [Nabil Matar, intro to *Piracy, Slavery, and Redemption*, 5]

To those readers familiar with earlier Barbary captivity narratives, Defoe both signals his familiarity with that genre and suggests that he will be telling a different story: a tale not of cosmopolitanism but of isolation, perhaps in preparation for the isolation to come. His master, captain of the pirate ship responsible for his capture,

left me on shore to look after his little garden, and do the common drudgery of slaves about his house; and when he came home again from his cruise, he ordered me to lie in the cabin to look after the ship.

For the first two years of his captivity, Crusoe suggests, he had almost no communication with his master, and also no communication from home, no redemption. He points to his father's warning, that there will be none to rescue this scapegrace young man, far from his own community. Crusoe's isolation here prefigures his coming isolation on the supposedly deserted island; it also stands in striking contradiction to the centrality of community in his temporary Barbary home. It even contradicts the most common British experience of captivity.

Isolation leads to imaginings, which Crusoe contrasts with rationality:

Here I meditated nothing but my escape, and what method I might take to effect it, but found no way that had the least probability in it; nothing presented to make the supposition of it rational; for I had nobody to communicate it to that would embark with me—no fellow-slave, no

Englishman, Irishman, or Scotchman there but myself; so that for two years, though I often pleased myself with the imagination, yet I never had the least encouraging prospect of putting it in practice.

The thought of escape is not rational but imaginary; fellow slaves apparently only count if they are English, Irish, or Scottish. Perhaps the ability to communicate in English is central here. But Crusoe also insists that the thought of escape is only rational if one has a community within which that thought can be shared. Still, what was Crusoe really doing for these two years? Surely, without anyone to speak English with, he was learning some Darija—enough so that when his master returns for a more extended period of time, Crusoe is able to communicate both with him and with the Maresco boy Xury who frequently accompanies them on fishing trips.

Crusoe's escape becomes more rational when his master runs short of cash and stays on shore for more extended periods—but not because Crusoe communicates his thoughts to others. The construction of a cabin for the fishing boat, like Crusoe's careful deconstruction of his later ship after it's wrecked off the island, is central to the merchant-slave's escape. His master

ordered the carpenter of his ship, who also was an English slave, to build a little state-room, or cabin, in the middle of the long-boat, like that of a barge, with a place to stand behind it to steer, and haul home the main-sheet; the room before for a hand or two to stand and work the sails. She sailed with what we call a shoulder-of-mutton sail; and the boom jibed over the top of the cabin, which lay very snug and low, and had in it room for him to lie, with a slave or two, and a table to eat on, with some small lockers to put in some bottles of such liquor as he

thought fit to drink; and his bread, rice, and coffee.

Where did that English carpenter-slave come from? I think Defoe specifies the nationality of the carpenter as a way of suggesting a certain willfulness to Crusoe's isolated individualism. Given Crusoe's insistence that the solitary thought of escape is imaginary rather than rational, one might have expected him to leap at the prospect of connecting with a fellow English slave, but instead, he continues to plot and dream in isolation. The details about the ship's construction almost stand in place of co-conspirators with whom Crusoe could plot an escape.

In fact, when Crusoe does escape with the new and improved fishing boat, he does so in the company of a Moor and the "Maresco" youth Xury. The Moor's presence may well help Crusoe clear the harbor; once they are well away from shore, Crusoe throws the Moor overboard and tells him to swim for land. Xury, by contrast, he keeps with him, as a servant and a companion. The distinction here is interesting. Xury is Morisco, one of a community of Muslims in Spain forced to choose between conversion to Christianity or expulsion under Ferdinand and Isabella (1502). Despite having agreed to convert to Christianity, Spanish Moriscos remained separate from Spanish culture: their Christianity was doubted and they were frequently blamed for the predations of Barbary pirates. From 1609-1614, Moriscos were formally expelled from Spain. Many of them settled in the Rabat-Sale region, where they were received suspiciously because they had converted. Thus Crusoe could assume that Xury's own status in Sallee would be somewhat ambiguous; the boy would have less to lose than the Moor in accompanying Crusoe.

Indeed, this young Marisco seems to adopt Crusoe as an acceptable member of his small community. When they run short of water, Xury offers to risk his life to acquire more.

Xury said, if I would let him go on shore with one of the jars, he would find if there was any water, and bring some to me. I asked him why he would go? why I should not go, and he stay in the boat? The boy answered with so much affection as made me love him ever after. Says he, "If wild mans come, they eat me, you go wey."

By contrast, Crusoe's affection (loving Xury ever after) is hard to distinguish from the most heartless self-interest. When they encounter a Portuguese ship and manage to be taken aboard, the captain asks no monetary reward from Crusoe, but offers to buy his boat and his companion. Crusoe claims to hesitate, but he settles for a compromise that serves his interests over those of Xury.

He offered me also sixty pieces of eight more for my boy Xury, which I was loth to take; not that I was unwilling to let the captain have him, but I was very loth to sell the poor boy's liberty, who had assisted me so faithfully in procuring my own. However, when I let him know my reason, he owned it to be just, and offered me this medium, that he would give the boy an obligation to set him free in ten years, if he turned Christian: upon this, and Xury saying he was willing to go to him, I let the captain have him.

Claims of English love have little to do with English notions of liberty here. But the Portuguese and the English together agree to replay the Morisco's forced conversion.

The difference is that this time, there's little choice involved: Xury does not choose between slavery and conversion; he can only accede to a combined fate of [time-limited] slavery and conversion. Crusoe's two or three years of slavery are parlayed into ten years of slavery for his self-sacrificing companion.