



থ্যেপিয়ান
THESPIAN
An International Refereed journal
ISSN 2321-4805

THESPIAN

MAGAZINE

An International Refereed Journal of Inter-disciplinary
Studies

Santiniketan, West Bengal, India

DAUL A Theatre Group©2013-15

Editor

Bivash Bishnu Chowdhury

Title: The 'sumptuous spoils of foreign soils': Wealth and Acquisition in *The Rape of The Lock* and *Robinson Crusoe*

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.63698/thespian.v3.2.AUGM3036>

Published: 23 December 2015

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Yr. 3, Issue 6, 2015

Autumn Edition
September-October



**The ‘sumptuous spoils of foreign soils’: Wealth and Acquisition
in *The Rape Of The Lock* and *Robinson Crusoe***

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To ev’ry Part of the Globe we roam,
And bring the Riches of each Climate home;
With Northern Furs we’re clad and Eastern Gold,
Yet know not India’s, nor Russia’s cold,
We taste the Winds, that sultry Soils produce,
Free from the Scorching Beams, which raise the noble Juice;
Knowledge and Plenty fetch from ev’ry Shore,
With Arts our Minds, with Wealth our Coffers store.

Henry Needler “A Sea- Piece” (Line 67-76)

— The eighteenth century witnessed the massive growth in overseas trade, navigation, plantation and slave trade which led to the concomitant consolidation of “Great Britain” as an Empire, both at home and abroad. The “sumptuous spoils of foreign soils” (Edward Young



232, 305-6) which flowed in unceasingly as a result of the mercantilist exploits of the British traders aroused in the hearts of the British people a libidinal desire for ‘wealth’ and ‘acquisition’ — and this shall be our subject of discussion primarily confining our analysis to *The Rape Of The Lock* (1712) and *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), the two representative texts of this era.

English imperialism did not begin in the eighteenth century. It began as early as 1650, but especially after 1713, it underwent a rapid expansion and an increasing orientation toward the trade or commercially based version that serves the interests of a pre-industrial capitalist society. The wars of this period fought by England, were essentially commercial struggles, out of which England emerged as the dominant commercial power in the extra- European world. By the early eighteenth century, the East India Company was England’s biggest business, and its mercantilist strategies served as a prelude to future colonization and the setting up of exclusive monopolies and administrative control over the exotic East. By the ‘Peace of Utrecht’ of 1713, the War of the Spanish succession concluded and England attained equality with France in trade with Spain. It supplanted France in holding a monopoly contract to supply slaves to the Spanish New World. As a result of these, England replaced Holland as a major European slave-trading nation. No wonder trade, the praise of trade and the effects of trade became a dominant motif in the major texts of this time.

In an age of unprecedented expansion, the discovery of new worlds fostered by the technologies of the telescope and the microscope, echoing with the strains of – “Rule, Britannia, rule the waves” (Thompson 5) one cannot help but ascribe the talismanic objects on Belinda’s dressing table to the huge importation of goods accompanying overseas



expansion and trade. In such a social scenario, an exchange value comes to usurp use value, and relations between things replace relations between people, human beings themselves here come to be redefined as objects, and in such a world one can well imagine that ‘mighty contests’ cannot rise for the love of a woman but for ‘trivial Things.’

By taking on the characteristics of mercantile imperialism, by painting herself into a socially prescribed and acceptable text, Belinda becomes a walking commodity herself. According to Laura Brown “The poem identifies her in terms of the products of mercantilist expansion, and it begins to develop a rhetoric of the commodity through which she and her culture can be described — a language of commodity fetishism where objects become the only reality” (13). Hence Belinda’s beauty can be measured in terms of the commodities she endorses, how far she is actually beautiful remains a mystery yet to be unravelled.

The Marxian concept of the fetishism of commodity is particularly relevant in this regard. It refers to the tendency to replace inter-human relationships with relationships between humans and objects, where objects acquire their value not from their utility but by being exchanged for other objects. Here labour, becomes a commodity itself which can be exchanged for the universal equivalent of money. Thus the objectification of a culture and people result in a universal leveling of things where objects and human beings become synonymous and mutually interchangeable. So the labour that is necessarily exploited overseas in order to procure the ‘glitt’ring Spoils’ on Belinda’s dressing table is essentially obliterated, and the Sylphs in charge of Belinda’s beauty and honour, had to be inevitably be ‘invisible’ and the ‘inferior priestess’ Betty had to be inevitably be ‘prais’d for Labour’, ‘not her own’. Belinda, as Commerce personified was decked with ‘all that Land and Sea afford



(5:11)', and 'The various Off'rings of the World (1:130)'. For her, religion and mercantilism became synonymous and so she worshipped the 'Cosmetic Pow'rs' and wore a cross, merely as a decorative piece which 'Jews might kiss, and Infidels adore'. Hence the exchangeability of 'Puffs, Powders, Patches, Bibles, Billet-doux (1:138)' suggests the moral disorder of Belinda's world, or the creation of a new, amoral kind of order in a universe where commodities have taken over all meaning. The orderly progression of words within the line "from one-to-two to three-syllable units" has a systematic cumulative effect, conforming to the ethic of acquisitiveness of this century. The image of Belinda when she emerges from the dressing room dressed in the white robe with the sparkling cross at her breast symbolically represents the British nation embellished with the colonial spoils, and her journey towards the Hampton Court is her symbolical journey towards the heart of the British politics.

Belinda's dressing table crowded with the bathetic collection of things, has no material history, has no makers.

"The Tortoise here and Elephant unite,

Transform'd to Combs, the speckled and the white" (1: 135-36)

— the huge efforts of hunting then killing elephants and turtles, cutting off their tusks and removing their shells, transporting the ivory and tortoise shells and marketing them, has been reduced to a single word 'Transform'd', and Arabia captured and contained within the confinement of a single 'box'. But Belinda has a "dual-status" in the poem, she is not only a consumer of commodities but a commodity herself. So a Lord Peter, fetishized not a flesh and bone woman but 'He saw, he wish'd , and to the Prize aspir'd (2:30)', and in his altar of



love, which was furnished with ‘all the Trophies of his former Loves (2:40)’ he longed to contain Belinda’s beauty and chastity through a mere castration of her locks. And Belinda, after the loss of her lock fought not for her honour but for the public reputation of it, once again conforming to the new, amoral ethic of the time.

The use of the mirror and the heroic classical materials, simultaneously reveal Pope’s narcissistic appraisal of the age, his celebration of the colossal ‘wealth and acquisition’ of the imperialist mission, and also his demystification of the false grandeur of Belinda’s trivial, commodified world by placing it in sharp contrast to the magnificence of the classical age. Hence Pope did not restrict himself by glowingly evoking only the ‘glitt’ring Spoils’ on Belinda’s dressing table, through Umbriel’s visit to the ‘Cave of Spleen’ he also talked of the import of pain, misery, ruthlessness, distress and fetishism, the bi-products of mercantile expansion ---

“There she collects the Force of Female Lungs

Sighs, Sobs, and Passions, and the War of Tongues.

A Vial next she fills with fainting Fears,

Soft Sorrows, melting Grievs, and flowing Tears (4:90-93)”.

Since Pope was half in love with the creature he condemned his ambiguous affection is mirrored in his ambiguous treatment of the frivolous Belinda and the debased imperialist ethic. Pope, a product of the imperialist ideology, could not act above it and so he himself engaged in an act of imperialist mercantilism in importing styles, phrases, archetypes and the Rosicrucian Doctrine from other states, requisitioning their materials and taking them for his



own in his creation of *The Rape of The Lock*.

The infinite treasures in the distant Orient crying out for appropriation and use find a proper guide in the person of Daniel Defoe, who through all his works attempted to convince the English people how that exotic east can be with ease, “Possess’d, Planted, Secur’d to the British Nation ... and what Immense Wealth and Increase of Commerce might be Rais’d from thence (qtd. in Alam12),” and how the emptiness of the unpossessed space can be converted into potentiality. Thus *Robinson Crusoe* narrates the story of this conversion of space, the story of the colonization of the east, the story of the making and circulation of wealth, the story of the transformation of subsistence economy to profit-oriented economy and finally the story of the consolidation of the Empire.

Crusoe is the representative of the ‘homo economicus’ or the economic man who enjoys the exploitation of the resources of the island and regrets his solitude only when he needs a helper in his labours. He is a representative of the capitalist ideology, driven to acquire, control and dominate. He is the self sufficient hero who does not go and settle in an environment that suits him rather settles anywhere and creates an environment to suit him. Crusoe’s identity as an economic man is reflected in his treatment of Xury, the young slave who saves his life. Whenever the opportunity arises Crusoe does not hesitate to sell him for forty pounds. In Crusoe’s text human relationships are often dominated by economic concerns. Thus he may quibble about his ‘original sin’ in traveling out from his ‘middle station’ but the fact remains that it is in this departure to new spaces and new territories that the mercantile-colonial project thrives.



Islands have always been objects of desire for the questers who have ever longed to bring the blank spaces under the cartographic system of the map and render them amenable for control and exploitation. So the ‘Island of Despair’ in *Robinson Crusoe* though apparently a wasteland, held the promise of immense wealth and riches for the mercantile imperialist Crusoe. His quest for the ‘sumptuous spoils’ and his desire to rise beyond his station carried him half round the globe to the African shores where his initial commercial success was followed by his temporary enslavement by the Moorish pirates. But this did not stop a Crusoe, he still believed with Defoe in the hidden potentialities of the blank spots, in the ‘prophecy of the Empire’ — “Africa is so large in its extent, and the country on the Coast everywhere so good that there is enough to satisfy every Pretender, and let everyone keep what they conquer (qtd. in Alam 15)”. This belief carried Crusoe, though by chance to the desolate island, which became for him the location for settlement, for colonization, for civilization, for exploitation, and for administration. Thus through *Robinson Crusoe*, Defoe presents a microcosmic representation of the macrocosmic phenomenon of colonialism where Crusoe, the arch colonizer extracts the maximum profit and wealth from the available natural and human resources, and generate a civilization from bogs. His ambitious mind was always contemplating and calculating moves to create more wealth, to reap the highest benefits from the available raw materials — “Having now secur’d my Habitation as I thought fully to my Mind... I began to take a more particular Survey of the Island itself... I had a great Desire to make a more perfect Discovery of the Island, and to see what other Productions I might find (72).”

The mercantilist opportunist Crusoe, through his extreme power of observation and



resourcefulness transformed the uncared, wild island into ‘a planted Garden’. It is striking how full of resources the island was. It had fowls, hares, goats, fish, turtles, and even penguins and seals. More important than the fauna of the island was its extraordinarily fertile soil, the evidence of which was found when Crusoe noticed “perfect green Barley of the same kind as our European, nay, as our English Barley”, and next to it “some other straggling Stalks, which proved to be Stalks of Ryce (58-9)”, which were the outcome of Crusoe’s unthinkingly spilling of some husks on the ground, a month earlier. He also discovered tobacco, “large Plants of Alloes”, several sugar canes, melons, grapes, cocoa, orange, lemons, citron trees and “Savanna Fields sweet adorn’d with flowers and Grass, and full of very fine Woods (113-23)”. In such an Edenic environment it is no wonder that Crusoe, not even for once, did lament the absence of his parents or the comforts of his home, rather he contemplated other ways to improve his own living conditions and felt ‘a secret kind of Pleasure’ in being the ‘king and Lord of this Country (73)’.

Crusoe’s credit laid not in the production of things but in the circulation and the proper utilization of the available resources. Mercantilism precisely dealt with this circulation of commodities in the eighteenth century. The mercantilist discourse on wealth was thus not the production but the circulation of commodities. The mobility of things is manifested in *Robinson Crusoe* in the description of lengthy and detailed lists, used to capture the transfer of things from one location to another — “I brought away several things very useful to me; as first, in the carpenter’s stores I found two or three bags full of nails and spikes, a great screw-jack, a dozen or two of hatchets, and above all, that most useful thing called a grindstone; all these I secured together, with several things belonging to the gunner, particularly two or three



crows, and two barrels of musquet bullets, seven musquets, and another fowling piece, with some small quantity of powder more; a large bagful of small shot, and a great roll of sheet lead (41).”

Crusoe’s fetishism of things is not the industrial fetishism for commodities, it is rather an act of mercantile fetishism where circulation is prioritized over production. Crusoe made an astounding forty-two visits to the wreck, neurotically collecting all the available items from the ship - transforming them into his necessities and erecting his empire from the ruins. Unlike the Marxian concept of commodity fetishism where exchange value dominates over use value and where labour is obliterated, Crusoe’s empire was built by the sole efforts of his own hands and because use value dominated his solitary life, all the relations between Crusoe and the objects were simple and transparent. Crusoe’s text is thus a validation of human labour and it’s proper harnessing under supervision to create the phenomenon of Empire.

Crusoe’s compulsive transfer of things was not a mere removal of objects from one place to another, it was more importantly the filling of the ‘vacant’ space of the island and the transformation of the “confused heap of goods” into the luxuries of an empire. Hence the enumeration, circulation, acquisition and mercantilism in *Robinson Crusoe* is a micro narrative of the larger socio-economical world. Crusoe’s acquisitiveness is typified in the passage where he reflects on the uselessness of money on his island, and then decides to keep it. Space itself becomes for Crusoe something to be tasted and treasured, and so he consumes the different parts of his island, labeling them his home, bower, country house, plantation, kingdom, and colony.



Crusoe's hunger is not quenched by merely consuming things and spaces, he further goes on to consume human freedom by successively taming the Carib Friday and his father, the Spaniard and his companions, the English Captain and the defeated Mutineers, taking advantage of their sense of obligation and establishing himself as the "absolute Lord and Law-giver" of the island. The increasing population in the island gave rise to an increasing production and circulation of wealth, thereby slowly transforming a subsistence economy into a profit-oriented economy. The 'foreign soils' of the island became the homeland for a Crusoe, who thoroughly exploited the natural and the human resources to procure the 'sumptuous spoils'. Thus *Robinson Crusoe* is the story of the archetypal European adventurer exploring, exploiting, and mastering a hitherto uncharted land, subjecting other races and putting them to work, and becoming prosperous in the process.

Robinson Crusoe is thus the cause and also the process behind the subsequent manufacturing of a walking commodity like Belinda. Both Crusoe and Belinda fetishize things but in their own individual ways. But both are nonetheless, the outcome of the imperialist mercantile ethic of the eighteenth century society. And one cannot be much surprised if in such a social scenario, one gets to hear a Belinda, the synecdochic representation of the British Empire, echoing the words of Alexander Selkirk in the solitude of an alienated commodified culture —

"I am monarch of all I survey;

My right there is none to dispute;

From the centre all round to the sea

I am lord of the fowl and the brute (Cowper 1-4)."



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