

Abstract This article examines the circulation and reception of cheap nineteenth-century American abridgments of *Robinson Crusoe* (1719). This essay shows that the American canonization of Daniel Defoe's narrative was a function of commercial printing and the democratic reading practices it enabled, particularly where poor and working-class readers were concerned. *Robinson Crusoe's* circulation among economically marginalized audiences becomes especially important when we consider the frequency with which issues of upward mobility and wealth acquisition are foregrounded in American abridgments and the interpretive instability such invocations evince. The variety of ways in which *Robinson Crusoe* abridgments engage with or disavow money suggests that Crusoe's gold was among the most contested symbols in the antebellum literary marketplace.

Keywords Daniel Defoe, print culture, chapbooks, Robinsonades, economic history

When Herman Melville set sail from Tahiti in December of 1842 aboard the Nantucket whaler *Charles and Henry*, he gained access to its collection of thirty-seven books and two magazines (Heflin 1974; Yannella and Parker 1976). Most of the available texts were morality tales, religious narratives, and histories, but the ship's owners also saw fit to provide the young whalers with a children's edition of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*.¹ The volume aboard the *Charles and Henry* was quite different from what Defoe published in 1719, and Melville likely encountered other adaptations of the story during his youth.² In Albany, New York, where he spent his formative years, at least ten chapbook abridgments of *Robinson Crusoe* had been published between 1790 and 1823, some of which were probably still in circulation by the time the Melville family moved there in 1830 (Smith 1983: 13–14). If Melville encountered these abridgments, he did so in distinctly working-class and juvenile spaces, and in material forms designed for cheapness, accessibility, and ease of reading.

Melville's early encounters with abridgments of Defoe's story would not have been unusual for a young reader of his age and class position, but they were especially consequential for the way *Robinson Crusoe* would come to be absorbed into US literary historical consciousness. That the most famous writer of American maritime adventure fiction may have discovered the genre by way of repeated encounters with chapbook abridgments suggests that the question of Defoe's circulation and reception in the United States warrants a reconsideration. Rather than a stable urtext, nineteenth-century American readers knew *Robinson Crusoe* as a shifting plurality, as materially mutable as it was ideologically kaleidoscopic. As Andrew O'Malley (2011: 20) has argued, chapbook versions of *Robinson Crusoe* "make definite choices about what constitutes the essential elements of Defoe's text, not just deleting major events from the original narrative, but devoting often incongruously lengthy portions of their restricted space to . . . minor episodes." One such episode is Crusoe's argument with himself over the value of his gold. The variety of treatments this scene occasions demonstrates that US abridgers and printers were invested in retrofitting the novel's famous scenes to reflect particular (and often divergent) political-economic philosophies emerging during the period. Rather than functioning as a stable representative of *homo economicus*—as many critics have insisted—*Robinson Crusoe* operated as a bellwether for uncertainties about the future of the marketplace.

In attending to the destabilizing effects of abridgment and reprinting on the popularization and canonization of *Robinson Crusoe*, I join such scholars as O'Malley (2011) and Jordan Howell (2014), who have tied the many afterlives of *Robinson Crusoe* to the emergence of children's literature and popular literature more generally, supporting Teresa Michals's (2014: 1) broader point that the English novel was, even at its origins, "written for a mixed-age audience, one that was primarily imagined not in terms of age but of social status and gender." Such scholarship does not dwell on the popularity of *Robinson Crusoe* in the United States, though Karen Sánchez-Eppler (2013) has shown that Defoe's novel underwent the process of juvenilization in America much earlier and more thoroughly than in Europe. Thanks to the work of these scholars, we know that early examples of the realist novel often circulated in cheap, disposable forms, and thus bore great resemblance to children's books. Yet as significant as age is to the afterlives of novels like *Robinson Crusoe*, class remains a less recognized influence; Defoe's novel, in its various forms, became an unlikely tool of cultural inclusion for poor, working-class, and marginally literate readers, whether children or adults.

Robinson Crusoe's circulation among economically marginalized audiences becomes especially important when we consider the frequency with which issues of upward mobility and financial value are foregrounded in its US abridgments. Whereas some abridgments exaggerate Defoe's commitments to New World colonialism and global capitalism, others warn against economic greed. This malleability shapes not only interpretations of *Robinson Crusoe* but also, as I discuss in the first section, the novel's legacy in political-economic theory. The second section then offers a sample of the many interventions through which American abridgers and printers sought to alter the work's embedded economic lessons. The variety of ways *Robinson Crusoe* engages with or disavows money in American abridgments suggests that *Crusoe*'s gold was among the most contested symbols in the antebellum literary marketplace.³ As I argue in the third section, no one was more profoundly affected by this uncertainty than poor and working-class readers, some of whom succeeded in turning the ambiguity of *Robinson Crusoe*'s economic message into cultural—and actual—capital. The circulation of chapbook abridgments thus resulted in a splintering of *Robinson Crusoe*'s interpretive legacy. For some, it would remain a tale of bourgeois ambition while for others it would become an allegory of working-class struggle. Its unstable transformations at the hands of mass print, in turn, would result in the novel's emergence as a lodestone—all the more magnetic for its vexed significance—in antebellum debates about the future of America's poor and working classes.⁴

Homo Economicus: *Robinson Crusoe* in Economic Thought

Before *Robinson Crusoe* was enshrined in literary critical mythos as the progenitor of the novel form, it was put to more practical purposes. In the decades and centuries following its initial publication, it circulated in the guise of a hoax, a true story, a spiritual autobiography, and even a cautionary tale for children.⁵ But perhaps its most surprising use was economic. Beginning in the middle of the eighteenth century, *Robinson Crusoe* began to be deployed with increasing frequency in service of emerging theories of political economy (Ghosh 2006; Weber 1958).

Enlightenment-era educational philosophers were among the first thinkers to define *Robinson Crusoe*'s economic message. Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote in *Émile* (1762) that *Robinson Crusoe* was the ideal—in fact, the *only*—book appropriate for children because it would offer them a “natural education” and instill in them a desire to pursue “a

trade” (Rousseau 2010: 198). But rather than using the original 1719 version of the story, Rousseau suggests that he would provide his imaginary pupil Émile with an abridged version that, “divested of all its rubbish, begin[s] with the shipwreck of Robinson near his island, and end[s] with the arrival of the vessel which comes to take him away from it” (163). Rousseau also advocated for the removal of Crusoe’s “instruments of all the arts” (163)—the materials that, in Defoe’s original, he salvages from the ship. Such a version of the story would radically simplify problems of bourgeois ennui, colonial ambition, capitalist accumulation, and attachment to British society, transforming the novel into a hymn to the therapeutic effects of manual labor.

Rousseau didn’t have to write his revised *Robinson Crusoe* for his interpretation of the novel to take hold. His work inspired German educator Johann Bernhard Basedow to found an experimental school that replaced traditional rote learning with physical education, humanitarian values, and what he deemed useful pursuits—the sorts of things that Robinson Crusoe learned to do on the island. The Philanthropinum, as it was called, was founded in 1774 and admitted boys regardless of social class.⁶ Joachim Heinrich Campe, who taught there briefly in 1776, wanted to improve even further upon Rousseau’s plan to use *Robinson Crusoe* as the model of “natural education,” and so he wrote his own version of the story explicitly for children: *Robinson der Jüngere* was published in 1779 and shared many features of Rousseau’s imaginary abridgement. Campe smoothed out Defoe’s ambivalences and reimagined the novel as a cautionary tale about filial disobedience, narrated in a dialogue between the genteel Mr. Billingsley and his children. Billingsley tells the story of *Robinson Crusoe* in order to impress upon his children the importance of “work, and to teach [them] many agreeable and useful things” (Campe 1790: 5).

Rousseau and Campe were not the only thinkers to redeploy and revise *Robinson Crusoe* to suit their own ends. By the late eighteenth century, professional political economists had begun to illustrate their theories through scenarios in which men were stranded on islands with no tools. Though they did not always mention *Robinson Crusoe* by name, these economists conceived of the desert island as an ideal test case for economic behavior in its purest form. In 1854, Hermann Heinrich Gossen became the first to explicitly use Crusoe to illustrate his subjective theory of value, and from there ensued a veritable contagion (Gossen 1983).⁷ Matthew Watson (2017), Fritz Söllner (2016), and Michals (2014) have done the important work of tracing the full genealogy of *Robinson Crusoe* allusions in political-economic discourse,

but they take care to note that Gossen, who inaugurated this long tradition, was referring not to Defoe's original but rather to "Campe's tale for the young" (Gossen 1983: 54).

The vogue for using *Robinson Crusoe* to illustrate political-economic theories also caught on in popular writing, some of which predated invocations of Crusoe in professional political-economic discourse. Jane Marcet's 1816 *Conversations on Political Economy*, a children's book originally published in London and reprinted in 1817 by Moses Thomas in Philadelphia, covers topics from wage labor to foreign trade in conversations between Caroline, a school-aged girl, and her teacher, Mrs. B. In a lesson about the difference between money and wealth, Mrs. B. invokes *Robinson Crusoe*, asking Caroline, "Do you recollect in what estimation Robinson Crusoe held his bag of gold when he was wrecked upon a desert island?" (Marcet 1816: 21). Mrs. B. explains to her pupil that wealth is not money but rather "the things which we are desirous to procure with our money . . . such as landed estates, houses, the products of agriculture, those of manufactures . . . in a word, whatever can contribute to the welfare and enjoyment of men" (21). Because Crusoe can obtain these things without the exchange of gold, his wealth, according to Mrs. B, is constituted in the value of his property. What she doesn't explain is why, in the original novel, Robinson Crusoe decides to keep his gold anyway.

Something similar happens in an 1835 issue of *Mechanics' Magazine*. In an article entitled "Lessons on Political Economy: Of Value," the author lays out the fundamental principles of economics for an audience that might otherwise be excluded from theoretical discourse, in this case, men working in the mechanical professions. The article takes readers through the difference between the use value of an object—a precapitalist notion—and its exchange value—which depends, according to the author of the article, "upon the labor of procuring it." The two forms of value overlap under only one circumstance: if one were "living on a desert island, every thing would have value according to its actual use, as Robinson Crusoe valued every old nail he could find about the wreck, but threw away the gold."

Karl Marx recognized early on how profoundly misreadings of *Robinson Crusoe* were affecting political-economic thought. In his unfinished manuscript *Grundrisse*, Marx blames *Robinson Crusoe* for economists' fixation on figures of isolated productivity. But buried in Marx's critique is another insight: political economists, in constructing their models of isolated economic man, were relying not on Defoe's original text but rather on "the unimaginative conceits of eighteenth-century

Robinsonades, great and small” (Marx edited by Praver [1976: 178]). Ian Watt (1996: 178) seems to agree with Marx when he suggests that most nineteenth-century economists had likely read “mistaken versions” of *Robinson Crusoe* and taken their investments for that of the original. For Watt, such changes resulted from the long process through which the novel was loosed from its material fetters and transformed from text to myth. But it is also possible that both the cultural endurance of *Robinson Crusoe* and the plurality of interpretations it provoked were, at least in part, functions of the very material procedures that enabled it to proliferate, transform, and traverse the globe.

It is this insight—proposed by Marx, elaborated by Watt, but never pursued with archival rigor—that warrants a reconsideration of *Robinson Crusoe*’s importance in the antebellum United States. Rather than attributing the diversity of economic messages readers have extracted from *Robinson Crusoe* to the interpretation of a single, stable urtext, archival evidence suggests that diverging understandings of *Robinson Crusoe* were literalized, reflected, and disseminated through reprints and abridgements of the novel itself. The story of *Robinson Crusoe*’s entry into discourses about class and economics is, thus, inextricably connected to the story of its many afterlives in print. For this reason, understanding the circulation, reprinting, and abridgment of *Robinson Crusoe* is essential to a proper accounting of its participation in the formation of social and economic thought in the Atlantic world more generally and, for the purposes of this article, in the United States specifically.⁸

“Robinsonades, Great and Small”: *Crusoe*’s American Abridgments

In 1868, the Unitarian Minister Edward Everett Hale published an essay in *Riverside Magazine for Young People* explaining how to tell the difference between one of the “hocussed” *Robinson Crusoes* and the “true book”:

“All the boys who read the ‘Riverside Magazine’ have read ‘Robinson Crusoe’ . . . For my part, I read ‘Robinson Crusoe’ through about once a year, and as I first read it when I was eight years old, and as I am well-nigh a hundred and eleven, you can judge how much enjoyment I have had from it. I read, as I hope you do, in the full, unabridged, undiluted, original edition. If you have never read that, dear boys and girls, you hardly can judge of the real ‘Robinson Crusoe’” (Hale 1868: 187).⁹

Hale, in this essay, offers a stunningly concise encapsulation of both the popularity and endurance of *Robinson Crusoe* in America—all boys have read it! I've read it a hundred and eleven times!—and the interpretive instability evinced by its mass-print afterlives. For Hale, the multiplicity of forms and the range of purposes to which Defoe's novel had been adapted over the course of the nineteenth century represented a troubling degradation. Though he was in favor of cultural inclusion—he was a famous abolitionist and proimmigration reformer—he also objected to the idea that cultural standards should change to accommodate newcomers to the reading public.¹⁰ It should come as no surprise, then, that Hale opposed the proliferation of American *Robinson Crusoe* abridgments designed to be accessible to poor, working-class, and other newly literate people. These abridgments were cheap, small, short, written in simple language, and often accompanied by literacy aids like alphabets and illustrations.¹¹ Though they varied widely in terms of content and didactic purpose, many nineteenth-century *Robinson Crusoe* chapbook abridgments were meant to be accessible to America's poorest readers.

The first extant American edition of *Robinson Crusoe* was printed in 1774 in New York by Hugh Gaine (Brigham 1958: 138). Prior to that time, most copies of *Robinson Crusoe* available in the colonies had been British imports. As the Revolution approached, mounting political tensions made such imports more difficult to procure and printers adopted the practice of printing their own inexpensive chapbook versions of the story (138–39).¹² By the turn of the nineteenth century, though imported full-length versions of *Robinson Crusoe* were widely available, American-printed chapbook abridgements had become the norm.¹³ Estimates based on the work of bibliographers suggest that there were over a hundred American imprints of *Robinson Crusoe* printed between 1790 and 1830.¹⁴

Among the most commonly adopted abridgments of *Robinson Crusoe* were those based upon an English translation of Campe's *Robinson der Jüngere*, at least seventeen separate versions of which circulated in formats ranging from duodecimos to thirty-page chapbooks (Smith 1983: 17–18). But the most popular and widely reprinted source for American abridgments of *Robinson Crusoe* was an anonymously authored chapbook typically entitled *The Wonderful Life of Robinson Crusoe* and often introduced with an alphabet. Published for the first time in 1800, this abridgment circulated most widely in rural manufacturing towns—it was reprinted a total of twenty-eight times—and seems mainly to have been intended for working-class families (17–18).

Meanwhile, the earliest known authorized edition of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* was not reprinted in full in Philadelphia until 1819, and even then, it was adopted by fewer printers than its abridged counterparts (Howell 2014: 307).

This information suggests that printers and publishers were responding to emerging interest in new kinds of reading materials. Whereas importing expensive versions of *Robinson Crusoe* might have made sense in colonial British America, such costly editions would not necessarily have sold as well after the Revolution (Hall 1994). A better way to meet the growing demand for reading materials from the newly literate lower classes was to use emerging mass-print technologies to make cheap, portable, easy-to-read abridgements of novels that—like *Robinson Crusoe*—were not restricted by American copyright laws and that had immediately recognizable value to consumers (McGill 2010). These abridgements varied widely in length, size, content, and tone and were pitched to different segments of the reading public, but in spite of these differences they shared one aspect: they were cheap. In 1801, T. B. Jansen, a New York bookseller, advertised the *Life and Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* for \$0.87 (Jansen 1801: 31). In 1806, Charles Peirce listed *Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* for \$0.75 (Peirce 1806: 6), and on Warner and Hanna's 1806 exchange list, *Robinson Crusoe* was advertised for \$0.25 (Warner and Hanna 1806: 1–4). The cheapest version I've located is a thirty-one-page chapbook of *The Wonderful Life and Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, which was sold for \$0.03 by John Adams in Philadelphia in 1805 (Defoe 1805).

In many cases, *Crusoe* abridgements were intended for children—some were sold to schools as part of educational series, others were advertised as “toy books,” and others still were bound volumes given as gifts.¹⁵ The child whose parents responded to a bookseller's advertisement in the *Columbian Advertiser and Commercial, Mechanic, and Agricultural Gazette* or purchased a chapbook abridgment from a rural peddler, however, was different from the child whose parents purchased a duodecimo version of Campe's *The New Robinson Crusoe*. What this means is that wealthy or middle-class children often had access to completely different versions of *Robinson Crusoe* than their poor and working-class counterparts. Knowing that interest in *Crusoe* spanned such different segments of the reading public, some publishers produced multiple versions at once. Isaiah Thomas, in addition to selling Campe's *New Robinson Crusoe for the Youth of Both Sexes* (1790), published three editions of a 31-page chapbook entitled *Travels of Robinson Crusoe* (1786, 1789, 1794) and a 231-page edition of *The Life and Most Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe of York, Mariner* (1794),

which he further abridged to 144 pages a year later (1795).¹⁶ McLoughlin Brothers issued chapbook and toy editions of *Robinson Crusoe* in six pages, eight pages, twelve pages, sixteen pages, and twenty-six pages, as well as Lucy Aikin's *Robinson Crusoe in Words of One Syllable* (1868), a ninety-three-page abridgment for early readers.¹⁷

These differences in format also correspond to differences in content, particularly where economic issues are concerned. In Defoe's (2008: 50) original version of the novel, money exerts a narcotic grip on Crusoe's mind: "O drug!" he cries upon finding a stash of gold doubloons aboard the wrecked ship. He briefly considers throwing them into the sea—"go to the bottom as a creature whose life is not worth saving"—only to decide, moments later, that he has been too rash; he brings them to shore for safekeeping (50). His ambivalent relationship to the accumulation of wealth remains one of the central dramas of the novel, as powerful a motive as it is a source of guilt and regret. American versions of the story, however, reveal a deep discomfort with this ambivalence. Rather than allowing readers to judge for themselves what Crusoe ought to have done with his bag of coins, abridgers made powerful interventions in the story's economic message; some reinforced or exaggerated Defoe's interest in bourgeois ambition, while others recast the novel as a story about the importance of self-denial and the danger of material greed.

Of the 121 physical copies of American abridgments of *Robinson Crusoe* I have examined, only one faithfully recounts the scene in which Crusoe decides to keep the money he finds on the ship: "about thirty-six pounds Sterling in pieces of eight" (Defoe 1800b: 30).¹⁸ This version is a reprint of a 1734 edition originally published in London by Edward Midwinter, the preface to which promises that "a candid reader will find a sufficient return for his trouble and expense" (4–5). The abridgment retains much of the detailed financial accounting we find in Defoe's original, including the fact that Crusoe sells the young boy Xury for "sixty pieces" (21) and returns home after thirty years of exile to find that he is "worth 4000l" (88). But whereas Defoe's Crusoe is conflicted about his attachment to money, Midwinter's Crusoe makes a matter-of-fact acknowledgement of its uselessness and keeps it anyway: "considering my present circumstances, I concluded it was of small value; however, I wrapped it up in a canvass [*sic*] bag, and perceiving the storm began to increase, with all that I was able to carry with me, I made the best of my way to shore" (30).

Much more common are abridgments that turn Crusoe's encounters with money into a didactic opportunity. Abridgments that follow Campe's text, for example, typically remove scenes in which Crusoe is

able to recover resources from the wreck, thus requiring him to fashion all of his tools from things he finds on the island. Cut off from society, and thus denied the advantages of trade and shared division of labor, he nevertheless succeeds in extracting value from his surroundings. This is not to say that the Campe abridgments eliminate money altogether. On the contrary, Campe's Crusoe, rather than being shipwrecked en route to purchase enslaved people (as happens in Defoe's version of the story), is wrecked on his way to Brazil where he has heard of "so much gold and precious stones . . . [that] he conceive[s] the most ardent desire to go there, and load his pockets with those valuable articles" (Campe 1824: 11). Along with filial disobedience and general recklessness, material greed is one of the chief offenses for which Campe elects to punish Crusoe.

American variations on Campe's text, however, take several different approaches to resolving the problem of Crusoe's greed. Some reward his long suffering with the arrival of a second ship, on which he discovers a barrel of gold dust and a bag of diamonds. In some versions, he leaves the riches behind, reprising the "O drug!" moment that was excised from the beginning of the story, but in others he takes them to shore, believing that "it [is] his duty to take care of them in order to restore them to their right owner, should he ever be so fortunate as to meet with him" (Campe 1806: 108–9). Both of these choices depart radically from Defoe's rendering of this episode, in which Crusoe thinks to himself, "it was a great pity, as I said, that the other part of this ship had not come to my share: for I am satisfied I might have loaded my canoe several times over with money; and, thought I, if I ever escape to England, it might lie here safe enough till I come again and fetch it" (Defoe 2008: 163).

Often, in American abridgments, Crusoe's initial denials of earthly wealth are rewarded with later opportunities to accrue more lasting forms of capital. In the same version in which Crusoe leaves the diamonds and gold behind, he nevertheless finds his way to wealth; when attempting to dig out a hearth in his kitchen, he discovers a lump of gold "so thick that, had it been coined it would have produced upwards of one thousand pounds. But . . . instead of rejoicing for the treasure that he had found, he kicked it from him in contempt and said, 'Lie there, miserable metal, which men in general covet so greedily'" (Campe 1824: 30). Nevertheless, when he leaves the island, he is sure to take the gold with him, calling it "his property" (192). In one version of this abridgment he loses this gold, along with the rest of his personal effects, in a final shipwreck off the coast of England upon

his return, and he uses his skills as a carpenter—honed during his decades in exile—to start a furniture business with Friday. This Crusoe is the consummate entrepreneur, who has learned to prefer “industry and sobriety . . . to idleness or loose living” (Campe 1824: 197). In another variant, this development is cut from the story; Crusoe takes his lump of gold home and uses it to establish himself as an English gentleman (Teller 1849: 63).

American abridgers’ interventions in the debate about the value (or lack thereof) of Robinson Crusoe’s gold suggest not only a preoccupation with the moral consequences of wealth at the individual level, but also that the growing power of capital was exerting new pressures on the value of that money in the broader marketplace. Gold was, in the antebellum period, a signifier of wealth, but because America was on a bimetallic system, silver coinage competed with and destabilized its value (Elkwell 2011: 2). In 1834, in response to market volatility caused by the bimetallic system, Congress moved to standardize the value of gold and silver to a sixteen-to-one ratio and adjusted the actual amounts of gold and silver used to produce new coins accordingly (3). This act, however, reduced the exchange value of gold so significantly that it became cheaper to conduct domestic trade with gold than with silver. Silver, thus, became the currency of choice for the global marketplace, while the gold standard was adopted for domestic commercial purposes. Simultaneously, the growth of paper currency—itself a print culture phenomenon—and the emergence of new theories of value (the labor theory of value, for example)—further undermined the stability of gold. Though it was not until after the Civil War that the government issued legal-tender paper money, people nevertheless devised ways of trading without gold. Bank notes, treasury notes, promissory notes, and bills of exchange were all integral to the conduct of business during the period (4–5). Abridgers’ and reprinters’ insistent attention to the issue of gold, then, constitutes an intervention in vigorous debates about the negotiation of value in American capital markets. And the insistence with which abridgers differentiate the question of Robinson Crusoe’s money from the value of his labor suggests a nascent understanding among operatives of literary business that this new kind of capitalism would undermine the value of material currency and labor alike.

The purpose of Crusoe’s labor is thus even more confused in the Campe abridgments than the issue of money, and it is possibly of even greater significance to both the question of *Robinson Crusoe*’s legacy in political-economic discourse and its circulation among

working-class readers. The Campe abridgments that follow the dialogue between Mr. Billingsley and his children begin by pointing out that Crusoe “liked better to play than to work or learn anything” (Campe 1789: 27). His preference for leisure and enjoyment drives him toward travel and exploration without providing him with the necessary “stock of learning” required for a man to successfully “make his way in the world.” (28). But Campe also warns against labor for its own sake; Crusoe’s two older brothers both die because they are too willing to sacrifice their well-being for the sake of work. The oldest enlists in the military and is killed in the Battle of Fontenoy, and the second “entered the University of Oxford . . . but pursuing his studies with too much eagerness, he impaired his health beyond all possibility of recovering, and died of consumption” (26). This version of *Crusoe* is designed to teach children to work but only to the extent that their labor increases the advantages of bourgeois life.

Whereas the original Campe abridgment emphasizes attachment to British civilization, there is a subset of US “New Crusoe” abridgments that attempt to recast the story as explicitly American. In 1810, the New York printer Thomas Powers issued a new version of the Campe abridgment, and this time, not York but *New York* is identified as the “place of his nativity” (Campe 1810: 3). As in the original Campe version, Crusoe boards a ship traveling to “Brasil in America” in search of “gold and precious stones,” and he decides to join the expedition in order to “line his pocket with those valuable articles” (10). Once he is shipwrecked on the island, Crusoe’s interest in extracting wealth and resources from the land only grows. Whereas in Defoe’s version of the story, Robinson fumbles around on the island until he discovers he can salvage goods from the shipwreck, in Powers’s *The New Robinson Crusoe Designed for Youth*, the ship disappears immediately, and Crusoe sets about fashioning his new civilization using only the raw materials available to him on the island. After he overcomes the initial shock of being alone on a desert island, he gathers oysters, locates a small cave, begins planting willow trees around the entrance of his cave, and sleeps tied to the bough of a tree, “contented with the water he drank from the purling stream he had discovered” (Campe 1810: 17). When he awakes the next day, he enjoys a feast of “cocoa-nut” and more oysters and returns “cheerfully to his labor” collecting objects he can use to “accelerat[e] his business.” By the end of what seems to be his second day on the island, he has constructed a “palisade” of willow trees around his dwelling and takes

great satisfaction in “see[ing] his little plantation in a thriving condition, and very beautiful to the view” (19–20).

Powers’s *The New Robinson Crusoe Designed for Youth*, as these examples illustrate, reduces what began as a vexed—if ultimately optimistic—allegory for the economic practices undergirding New World settler colonialism to an unflinching endorsement of them. Crusoe’s life on the island is not about subsistence but rather about extracting as much value from the island as he possibly can. He does not simply eat the food he finds; he grafts his coconut trees until they yield the fruit of an entire forest. And when Friday joins his side, Crusoe starts to think of himself as a king: “the island was his kingdom, his lamas, his fruits, his treasures, a parrot his courtier, who was incapable of acting the part of a sycophant, and Friday his faithful subject” (19–20). What is more, as soon as Crusoe recognizes the value of the property he has amassed, he sets about protecting it “by throwing up intrenchments [*sic*] around it, and fortifying it with all the methods he could devise” (19–20).

Both the joy Powers’s Crusoe takes in his work and the ownership he feels over his island are notably absent from Benjamin Olds’s 1835 edition of the story, a first-person narrative in sixteen pages entitled *The Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*. Whereas Powers’s Crusoe is invested in the virtues of self-reliance, Olds, who published mostly educational materials—the back of *Adventures* lists spellers, portable bibles, School Testaments, and literary anthologies—likely intended his version of *Robinson Crusoe* as something closer to a cautionary tale about the dangers of disobedience. Even the image Olds chooses for his title page depicts labor as arduous: a sunken-eyed Crusoe in a tricornered hat and torn breeches trudges along the beach, carrying a bundle of salvaged cargo on his back. Rather than a rugged individualist rebuilding Western civilization with his bare hands, Olds’s Crusoe is a displaced urbanite who struggles merely to survive.

Unlike in the Powers edition, Olds allows his Crusoe to access the shipwreck, from which he is able to recover numerous useful provisions, including “bread, some dried goat’s flesh, and three Dutch cheeses . . . two fowling pieces, and two pistols, with some powder, and two old rusty swords” (Defoe 1835: 7). Rather than instructing young readers in the colonial paradigm of extracting natural resources from the land, Olds’s *Adventures* emphasizes Crusoe’s dependence on the modern, industrializing world from which he came. He returns to the ship eleven times in his first two weeks on the island,

and only after it has disappeared does it occur to him to construct a shelter. When he does begin to build, the structure he creates is only as functional as it needs to be: "I drew a half-circle, and drove stakes into the ground; I then put some boards across, covered them with the branches of trees, and stopped up the whole with clay" (8). There are no palisades, plantations, or kingdoms in this version of *Robinson Crusoe*; Olds's protagonist merely wants to be "safe" (8).

The differences between Powers's and Olds's versions of *Robinson Crusoe* appear to reflect the different audiences for which they produced materials. A search in the American Antiquarian Society's North American Imprints Program (NAIP) suggests that Powers printed everything from *The Cabinet of Genius* (1808), a fine arts manual; to Anna Letitia Barbauld's *Easy Reading Lessons for Children* (1810), an eighteenth-century British primer for child readers based upon the educational theories of John Locke; to a version of the novel *Griffith Abbey, or Memoirs of Eugenia* (1808) by Mrs. Charles Matthews in two volumes bound in gold-tooled leather. Many of Powers's imprints were designed for children and sold cheaply—the most common price he lists is twelve and a half cents—but it is clear that Powers set out to provide reading materials for New York readers who, though not necessarily educated and elite, sought entry for both their children and themselves into an existing transatlantic literary culture.

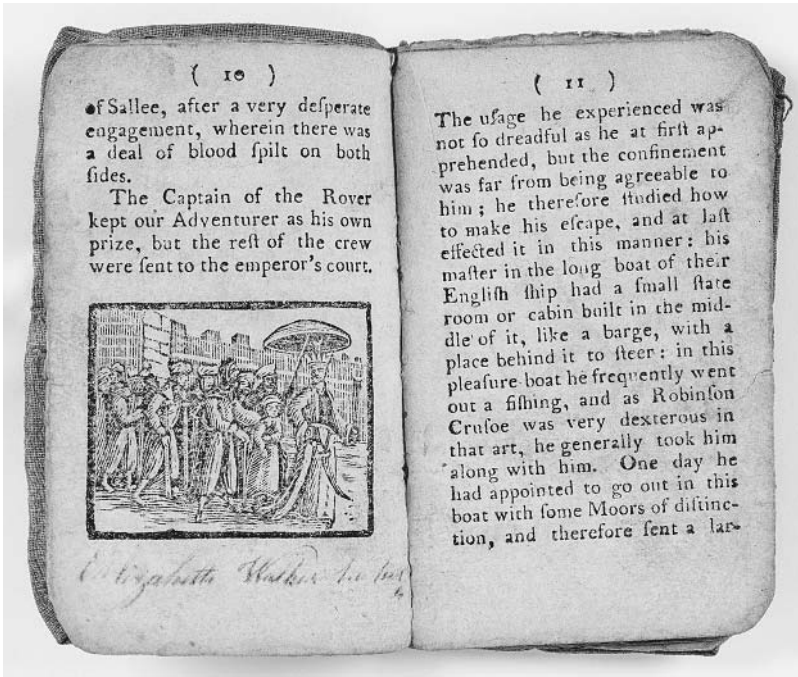
The books Olds published, by contrast, announced themselves much more straightforwardly as reading materials for the poor and working classes. In addition to his *Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, of which he released at least three editions, Olds sold a temperance cookbook called *Economical Cookery: Designed to Assist the Housekeeper in Retrenching her Expenses, by the Exclusion of Spiritous Liquors from her Cookery* (1839), as well as numerous almanacs, primers, riddle books, puzzle books, songsters, and school books. Though Olds did publish a conduct book entitled *Fashionable American Letter Writer: or, the Art of Polite Correspondence* (1828), many of the problems this manual helps the reader to solve involve negotiating from a place of financial precarity. There is, for example, a template for a letter "from a tenant to a landlord, excusing delay of payment" (*Fashionable American Letter Writer* 1828: vi).

Understanding both Powers's and Olds's positions in the literary marketplace helps us in turn to understand how both publishers were thinking about the generic status of *Robinson Crusoe*. For Powers, though it is a work of juvenile fiction, it is nevertheless a literary text—even a novel. The story of *Robinson Crusoe* becomes, in this

context, part of a larger project of cultural education, one that trains lower-class readers to be literate in—and by extension to navigate—the norms and values of the transatlantic, cosmopolitan elite. For Olds, by contrast, whose catalogues list no other novels, *Robinson Crusoe* operates as a cautionary tale about the pitfalls of capitalist ambition. Like *The Pilgrim's Progress* by John Bunyan (1678), the only other British steady-seller in his catalogue, Olds's version of *Robinson Crusoe* has been reimagined to suit readers of scant means and modest aspirations. Whereas Powers is interested in equipping his poor readers for the prospect of upward mobility, Olds offers readers a model for how to manage and accept difficult circumstances.

Of the cheap abridgments printed for poor and working-class readers, one in particular achieved especially wide circulation. According to bibliographic work conducted by Clarence Saunders Brigham (1958) and Leanne Beukelman Smith (1983: 18) and confirmed through my own archival research,¹⁹ a chapbook abridgment of *Robinson Crusoe* for which no British source has been located was printed twenty-eight times between 1800 and 1830. First printed in Hartford, Connecticut, by John Babcock in 1800, *The Wonderful Life and Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* was printed most often in agrarian towns and emergent manufacturing centers and thus was designed to suit readers in growing but still underresourced economies. In Babcock's version, the shipwreck is given hardly any narrative attention, but we learn a great deal about Crusoe's habits as a worker. Indeed, Crusoe's principle error in judgment is not leaving his bourgeois home but rather his choice to abandon his life as a planter, in which "having got tolerably rich, he might have lived in the happiest manner if his desire for a seafaring life had not again returned" (Defoe 1800a: 18). Once he is shipwrecked, we are told about the barley he grows, the goats he tames and breeds, the fruit he harvests, and the other various methods through which he "stock[s] himself with provisions" (27). Though these are all details that are included in the original *Robinson Crusoe*, it is worth noting that these scenes are included at the expense of numerous other significant episodes, including the details of Friday's arrival on the island.

Such material and paratextual features of these *Wonderful Life* chapbook abridgments tell us quite a bit about the sorts of audiences for which they were imagined. They are all roughly thirty pages long, and—like many of the other abridgments I've discussed here—quite small. Most do not appear to have been sold in any sort of cover, but some bear wrappers made of found scraps of pastepaper, fabric, or



Figures 1, 2, and 3. Elizabeth Walker's copy of *The Wonderful Life and Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*. Images courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society

discarded book pages applied by hand, which suggests that, despite their cheapness and disposability, readers wanted to protect and save them. A version printed by E. and E. Hosford of Albany in 1806, for example, was bound between overprinted pages of an eighteenth-century hymnal that had been marbled to obscure their status as printers' waste (Defoe 1806b). In Newtown, Pennsylvania, meanwhile, a reader named Elizabeth Walker wrapped her version of William Coale's chapbook reprint in a piece of pink fabric—perhaps cut from an old dress—sewed onto a scrap of wastepaper left over from a print run of a natural history book (see figure 2). She also wrote “Elizabeth Walker, her book” beneath the first illustration that appears in the book (see figure 3), an image of the emperor of Sallee's richly attired courtiers, suggesting that this book was just as visually interesting to her as it was narratively engaging (Defoe 1806a: 10). Though Walker only had a cheap, disposable version, she nevertheless found ways to transform it into a keepsake—something both beautiful and durable enough to claim as her own.

These *Wonderful Life* chapbooks circulated in communities in which literature was simultaneously cheap and scarce, and paratextual matter tells us quite a bit about the sorts of audiences for which they were imagined. All contain illustrations, and most are introduced with a printed alphabet (see figure 1); both features would have helped newly or partially literate readers navigate the story. In versions printed in Albany by E. and E. Hosford, the final pages of the chapbook are devoted to a short story entitled “Virtue Rewarded,” a morality tale about the importance of being honest when you are given more than you need (Defoe 1806b: 29–31). The story features a “poor woman” who asks the Cardinal for five crowns with which to settle her debts and is instead given fifty: “She, astonished at the meaning of it, and fearing this was only the steward’s trick to try her honesty, refus[e] to take above five, saying she asked of the Cardinal no more” (30). In return for her confession, the Cardinal awards her five hundred crowns as a “dower to give [her] daughter in marriage” (31). Though on the surface this appears to be a story about the virtues of self-denial, it is also a story about someone who understands class hierarchy to be extremely dangerous for those on the margins. The poor woman does not come forward because she believes in the virtues of honesty; she attempts to return the money, rather, because she knows her poverty renders her vulnerable to cruelty in a society driven by the logic of capital. In the end, though she receives far more wealth than she requests, both her perceived moral virtues and her daughter’s evident beauty are abstracted into financial valuations over which she has no control.

Imagine what it was like, then, to encounter *Robinson Crusoe* for the first time in this context—sandwiched between the alphabet and a story about the conjoined rewards and humiliations associated with radical upward mobility. To be sure, the story’s moral logic bends under the pressure of such competing didactic claims, but it is simultaneously fortified; the presence of literacy tools and “Virtue Rewarded” make it difficult for readers to understand this version of *Robinson Crusoe* as mere entertainment, and thus bring its pedagogical interventions into sharp relief. When encountered in this context, Crusoe’s obsessive discussions of money and the constant recalibration of his attitudes toward wealth and status begin to make sense. Crusoe’s professional experiments in sailing, commerce, planting, and the trade of enslaved people are all attempts to increase the value of his labor, and the seafaring life is the imaginative landscape onto which he projects his successive fantasies of upward mobility, the precise fantasies which “Virtue Rewarded” is designed to discourage.

America's *Robinson Crusoe* Economies

As the above readings illustrate, the issue of *Robinson Crusoe*'s economic message remained unsettled throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, often in ways that suggest the enduring interpretive consequences of abridgments. Journalists referenced *Crusoe* in both articles that bemoaned the loss of international trade relationships and articles that lauded American economic independence. In an 1802 article about the waning British wool supply, a writer for the *Virginia Argus* wrote about the growing US cotton sector as "a Herculean infant . . . [who] . . . Like the simple but wise . . . new Robinson Crusoe . . . [has] never failed to rise when the real occasion required" (*Virginia Argus* 1802). American economic independence, in this case, is put forth as the model to emulate, "lest the poor of England . . . lose their bread." In 1806, by contrast, in response to trade blockades imposed during the Napoleonic Wars, a writer for the *National Intelligencer* worried that in the absence of international imports, the United States would be forced, "like the new Robinson Crusoe, to work up our crops for ourselves" (*National Intelligencer* 1806). Tellingly, despite arguing different positions, both articles deploy language drawn from the title of Campe's abridgment.

Trade relationships between the North and the South were similarly vexed, and once again, *Robinson Crusoe* proved a useful repository for that confusion. In his "Speech on the Tariff" published on January 28, 1832, Robert Hayne, who would later become the fifty-fourth governor of South Carolina, spoke in opposition to a bill that sought to impose high tariffs on goods manufactured in the industrial towns of the North. Hayne argued that the bill imposed undue costs on the South in order to maximize profits in the North, a system which "if carried fully out . . . considers villages, and even families as rivals; and cannot stop short of Robinson Crusoe in his goat skins" (Hayne 1832). For Hayne, tariffs are synonymous with a premodern mode of production antagonistic to economic growth, and Robinson Crusoe stands in, once again, for the figure of isolated economic man. Unsurprisingly, Hayne's formulation ignores the far more conspicuous resonances between Robinson Crusoe's exploitation of Friday and the fact that southern economic productivity depended upon the forced labor of enslaved people, an elision that colludes with the revision of the Friday plot in numerous American abridgments.

Regardless of this confusion, however, *Robinson Crusoe* was a mainstay for social reformers interested in providing the poor with a model of industry and self-reliance. Joseph Lancaster, in an 1809 article

describing his plan for “educating ten thousand poor children, by establishing schools in country towns and villages; and for uniting works of industry with useful knowledge” suggested that “the history of *Robinson Crusoe*” might be a “very fair and innocent rival [*sic*] to set up against” the poor’s taste for “boxing or bull-baiting” (Lancaster 1809). He went on to say that “reading is always accessible, and is permanently opposed to the permanent temptation of beer.” For Lancaster, universal literacy—especially among the poor and working classes—was a cheap and expedient solution to indigence and immorality alike. That *Robinson Crusoe* functions, in this moment, as a stand-in for all literature, speaks to the multiplicity of registers in which the novel is able to signify. It is both entertaining and instructive, firmly seated within the canon of high literary culture and capable of transcending it. Its economic message is flexible and expansive enough to work in multiple directions simultaneously, enabling the philanthropic classes to feel secure in their positions while asserting the tantalizing prospect of mobility to the poor.

Perhaps the clearest distillation of *Robinson Crusoe*’s ability to speak simultaneously to different economic interests is an edition published in 1850 by the Philadelphia Journeymen Printers’ Union. After a series of failed negotiations with publishers and managers, Philadelphia’s printers went on strike, and in order to make up their lost wages, they produced a leather-bound octavo version of Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*. The edition contains both a portrait of Defoe on the frontispiece and a biography appended to the back. His reputation as a dissenter and social critic made him a useful figure of resistance, while his repeated brushes with bankruptcy qualified him for honorary membership in the pecuniary struggle his work was being used to resolve.

The choice of *Robinson Crusoe* was motivated in part by the fact that it was free to use. But, given the lack of international copyright protection, the printers could have chosen any number of novels—including contemporary best-sellers—to reprint free of charge. This means that perhaps there was something about *Robinson Crusoe* that was uniquely appropriate to the task of persuading consumers that “the wants of the public . . . [can] be better supplied, and at cheaper rates, by journeymen assuming the direction of their own labour, than these wants are now supplied by employers and publishers” (Walker 1850: iv). It is possible these journeymen printers, who had themselves been raised on multiple variations of *Robinson Crusoe*, understood the unique alchemy that took place when Defoe’s novel was set against the vexed and contradictory ideologies upholding US capital and labor markets.

Regardless of why the Printers' Union selected *Robinson Crusoe*, the gambit worked; because Defoe's novel could be read simultaneously as a defense of skilled labor and an assertion of upper-class benevolence, the public "so well supported the Union in this work, that two editions (the first of 1000 and the second of 2000 copies) were subscribed for immediately on the appearance of the first number" (Defoe 1850: iii). It was universal enough to be of recognizable literary merit to the journeymen printers and their elite subscribers alike, people with enough disposable income to pay for a leather-bound octavo of a book that they could—as we know—easily obtain for much less. And it was a story which, thanks to the widespread and consistent circulation of chapbook abridgments, had come to mean profoundly different things to different groups of readers. Far from representing a stable interpretive consensus about the future of labor and economics in the United States, *Robinson Crusoe*'s power, in this instance, was derived from its multiple and divergent interpretive afterlives—afterlives which were facilitated by its proliferation in cheap, abridged form and by its transformation at the hands of those reading at the margins of American social, economic, and literary life.

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Notes

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- 1 The catalog for the *Charles and Henry* was discovered by Edouard A. Stackpole and further discussed by Wilson L. Heflin (1974). The catalog appears in the form of a bill from the stationer Andrew Macy to Charles G. and Henry Coffin, the owners of the ship and the purchasers of the books in its modest library. The book in question is listed as *Child's Robinson Crusoe*. As Heflin argues, the books on this list "should certainly be taken into account among [Melville's] early formative influences" (Heflin 1974: 11). Heflin's article is reprinted in Yannella and Parker 1976.

- 2 As of yet, we do not know which of the many available abridgments made its way onto the *Charles and Henry*.
- 3 Later in the nineteenth century, literary representations of money and gold would become more explicitly invested in critiques of the marketplace, as Walter Benn Michaels explains in *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism* (1987). Scholarship that addresses the relationship between the rise of capitalism and the transformation of literature in the antebellum period tends to bracket such questions of representation in favor of taking the literary marketplace as its primary object of scrutiny. Ronald J. Zboray and Mary Saracino Zboray's *Literary Dollars and Social Sense: A People's History of the Mass Market Book* (2005) is a good example of this kind of scholarship, and Michael T. Gilmore's *American Romanticism and the Marketplace* (1985) established the tradition of understanding Romantic-era literary production in terms of its complicity in capitalist systems of production. What I hope to do here is bring these impulses together and attempt to understand literary representations of money and economics in relation to the transformation of the literary marketplace under market capitalism.
- 4 This argument is also indebted to the work of scholars who, following the work of Meredith McGill (2010) have illuminated the importance of transatlantic reprinting to the literary culture of the nineteenth-century United States. See especially Joseph Rezek (2015, 2019). The choice to focus on *Robinson Crusoe* as an American text is enabled by Elisa Tamarkin's (2008) work on the importance of Anglophilia in US literary production, and Lawrence Levine's (1988) seminal work on Shakespeare in US popular culture. My desire to take questions of material format seriously in reconceptualizing the afterlives of an early novel build on the central claims of Jordan Alexander Stein's (2020) recent work. My attention to the variegation across different literary and textual communities within the United States is made possible by the work of Trish Loughran (2007).
- 5 The subtitle *Written by Himself* provoked virulent criticism, led by Charles Gildon, about *Robinson Crusoe*'s false claims to truth. For more on this see Novak 2007. For information about Defoe as a pioneer of the spiritual autobiography genre, see Carnochan 1965. For more on *Crusoe* as a children's book, see Sánchez-Eppler 2013; Michals 2014; O'Malley 2011; and Lerer 2008.
- 6 *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, "Philanthropinum," <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Philanthropinum>.
- 7 For more on Gossen, see Watson 2018.
- 8 This argument is indebted to book historical scholarship that attends to the transatlantic print histories of canonical works. Cathy N. Davidson's (1989) essay on the reprinting of *Charlotte Temple* by Susanna Rowson (1791) is an especially vivid example of the scholarly tradition I am following here, and Sánchez-Eppler's (2013) more recent work on *Robinson Crusoe*'s US abridgment history has also been very influential. Joseph Rezek's (2019) work on the circulation of what he calls "the old canon" in

the United States was likewise indispensable. Barbara Hochman's (2011) work on *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe (1852) has influenced my sense of how readers can shape the interpretive legacy of popular works of literature.

- 9 Sánchez-Eppler (2013: 117–42) writes extensively about the Hale family's relationship to *Robinson Crusoe* in her chapter "Over a Century of Shipwrecks," in *The Materials of Exchange between Britain and North East America, 1750–1900*, and in her forthcoming book "In the Archives of Childhood: Playing with the Past." Hale eventually wrote a short adaptation of *Robinson Crusoe* himself. See Hale 1880. For more on Hale's reimaginings of *Robinson Crusoe* in both *A New England Boyhood* and "Crusoe in America," see Speicher 2016.
- 10 For Hale, the remedy to widespread illiteracy was not adapting texts and knowledge for new audiences but rather expanding the education system to bring new members of the reading public into the culture of letters. His was not, however, a vision of social leveling; for Hale, the working-class subject needed to be literate, but such literacy training was not conjoined to fantasies of radical upward mobility. See *Journal of Education* 1877.
- 11 For information on the relationship between children's literature, alphabetic literacy aids, and American literature more broadly, see Crain 2000.
- 12 See also Smith 1983: 10. For an extended discussion of the relationship between the American Revolution and the book trade's reliance on transatlantic reprints, see Green 2010.
- 13 Like Clarence Saunders Brigham's extensive bibliographic work on cheap American editions, Howell (2014: 293) has conducted a study of eighteenth-century British abridgments of *Crusoe* and notes that virtually from the moment it was published *Robinson Crusoe* was "revise[d] and condense[d]" to meet the demands of readers who wanted shorter versions of the book. As Steven Carl Smith (2017: 142) has shown, Evert Duyckink had 3,900 copies of *Robinson Crusoe* printed in his shop 1795, which was typical of his tendency to print "large runs of inexpensive steady sellers."
- 14 Brigham counted 125 surviving American abridgments in his 1958 survey of the American Antiquarian Society's collection of Robinsonades (Brigham 1958). Others have since found more.
- 15 McLoughlin Brothers was the largest publisher of toy book *Robinson Crusoe* abridgments. The earliest illustrated toy book abridgment I have examined is Edward Dunigan's *The History of Robinson Crusoe* (1843). It bears an inscription: "Given to Julien E Smith—when seven years of age [7 years] by her Aunt Pauline B Smith of Seifine Mich. On the death of her doll Lorina Smith." The American Antiquarian Society's copy of Lucy Aikin's *Robinson Crusoe in Words of One Syllable* (1868) is inscribed to "Lowell from granma Bowen Dec. 25 1868."
- 16 For detailed bibliographic information about all these editions, see Brigham 1958: 147–56. See also Smith 1983: 12–13.
- 17 The six-page version is *Robinson Crusoe* (Defoe 1871–74); the eight-page version is *Dunigan's History of Robinson Crusoe* (Defoe 1859–62); the

twelve-page version is *Robinson Crusoe* (Defoe 1869). The sixteen-page version is a prose adaptation entitled *Robinson Crusoe* and is part of Aunt Kate's Series (Defoe 1875). The twenty-six-page version is a shaped book in the form of a theatre proscenium and is also a richly illustrated verse adaptation: *Robinson Crusoe* (Defoe 1893). Aikins's adaptation *Robinson Crusoe in Words of One Syllable* was also reprinted by McLoughlin Brothers in 1869.

- 18 During a residency at the American Antiquarian Society, I was able to look at 121 separate copies of reprints, abridgments, adaptations, and reimaginings of *Robinson Crusoe*. The variation of these editions is as striking as their abundance. In addition to the abridgments I describe at length in this essay, I also looked at a number of poems, broadsides, toy books, rewritings, sequels, and other adaptations of the story for new audiences.
- 19 During a residency at the American Antiquarian Society, I cross-referenced Brigham's and Smith's research with the American Antiquarian Society's collections and did not find any evidence that the abridgment in question was based upon a British source. It seems likely that this text originated in Babcock's print shop.

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