

Indomitable. A few stories about famous outcasts and their literary accounts

Drifting. The story of a man on the raft raises existential questions concerning social identity. What happens if an individual is literally torn away from society? The stories of castaways have always awakened intense emotions and great interest. How to survive in one of the most severe conditions, when one is left alone to himself, how to remain human? The man's story associates with similar examples known from history or literature some of which will be now recalled.

The first one took place nearly 500 hundred years ago and despite the time difference it has got much in common with the *Drifting* story: while retelling the story a new one might be created. Marguerite de la Roche de Roberval was a noblewoman who in 1542 set out to Canada on a ship bringing the first settlers to the New World. The ship's captain was her relative Jean-Francois de Roberval who, according to different versions, was her uncle or cousin. Marguerite never reached her destination, as she was marooned on a deserted island which ill fame is reflected in its name *Isle of Demons*. There she spent two years and a half after which she was rescued by some fishermen. Her biography was included in many different works among which there are two most extensive accounts, *L'Heptaméron* by Marguerite de Navarre, published posthumously in Paris in 1559, and André Thevet's *Cosmographie universelle* from 1575.

The literary work of Marguerite de Navarre, inspired by Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*, tells nine stories of an ideal love. Marguerite de la Rocque is the heroine of the seventh's story. She is told to be the wife of a craftsman who proved to be a traitor. The captain decided to hang the man; but when Marguerite begged him not to, he left them on the haunted *Isle of Demons*. Initially he wanted to leave the man alone, but Marguerite desired to share her husband's fate. Roberval agreed and she joined her husband together with her maidservant, Damienne, The New Testament, an arquebus and some gunpowder. Shortly after she got pregnant, her husband died along with her maidservant, also the baby didn't live long in such severe conditions, and Marguerite was left all alone. The courageous woman lived only because of her strong faith. She prayed, read the Bible and defended the graves of her family from wild animals. She killed a polar bear and wore his fur to keep warm. After many months she saw a fishermen's boat. She immediately shot the gun to attract their attention, but at first they were terrified, thinking she was the demon herself. Luckily she managed to get back to France and in Château de la Mothe in Nontron she opened a school for wealthy young

ladies which became extremely popular, as Marguerite was considered an ideal of piety. In *L'Heptaméron* she is the role model example of a wife and conjugal love.

The account of André Thevet is entirely different. Marguerite is unmarried and gets pregnant already on the ship, which is why her uncle Jean-Francois de Roberval, a gambler having lots of debts, under the cover of defending morality, leaves the lovers on the island. The rest of the story doesn't bear further differences, Marguerite on the islands finds strength in penitence and her renewed faith. Chronicler records one more important fact: both uncle and niece share the same land. Marguerite de La Rocque's death would make de Roberval the only owner and could help solving his financial problems. The biography of the French noblewoman inspired numerous other literary works, and to this day she is a heroine of many romances. It is hard to tell the truth of her life apart from her wondrous survival on the hostile island. Her biography was altered accordingly to the need of the present author, exactly as in the story of the man on the raft.

Two other examples were most probably sources for Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. The first one is about the first inhabitant of St Helena island, hundreds of years before Napoleon lived there. Exactly 500 years ago, in 1505, a Portuguese soldier by the name of Fernão Lopes was left alone on the island as a punishment for rebellion on the Goa island. Goa was a Portuguese colony and the soldiers, who were left there to be representatives of the crown, settled on the island and married local women and eventually fought together with the native inhabitants to regain independence. In the 16th century many ships regularly passed St Helena and Portuguese sailors often provided the traitor with food. After a year they left him a letter urging not to hide along with a rooster, which fell overboard, and became Lopes' pet. It is said that over the years his legend was so great, that he was secretly taken from the island to visit the King and Queen in Lisbon and to Rome to see the Pope, who gave him absolution and allowed him to go back to the island, because the man didn't want to go back to civilization. Later Fernão became friends with a Negro boy who also fled to the island and spent ten years with him. He urged the boy to meet the Portuguese captain visiting the island, Pero Gomes, and unfortunately, despite the captain's promises, the child was taken to Portugal as a mascot. Fernão Lopes died in 1546 and his lot was described in many chronicles, as a person who rejected earthly pleasures and preferred lonely life to getting back to society and as such was considered virtuous. Some researchers question this story, as it

seems impossible that the man who received absolution from the Pope and the King, was still hiding on the island and supposedly his secret visit in Europe was fictitious.

Two hundred years later another outcast made his story a legend: Alexander Selkirk, a Scottish corsair, who spent four years and four months on the island Más a Tierra in the Pacific Ocean. Selkirk served on the ship *Cinque Ports* under the captain William Dampier. In 1704, while they were replenishing supplies on Más a Tierra, he suggested that due to numerous leakages they should abandon the ship and wait on the island for another. He was left alone on the island but his concerns proved to be true, as the ship sank one month after. His life on the island was less difficult than Crusoe's, as in 1575 Spaniards brought goats there for supplies so it was not that hard to provide enough food. After returning to England in 1711 he was a celebrity and became rich, but he always repeated that he was happier on the island penniless. He joined the army and returned to the sea and died of yellow fever on 12. 12. 1721.

Although the last story is not about an outcast, it is recalled, as it tells of a person who drifted from one place to another for many years. Giovanni Bernardino Bonifacio, the marquess of Oria, was an Italian nobleman born in Naples on the 10th of April 1517. He was a humanist with great interest in the Reformation of Martin Luther and the Inquisition. In 1557 Giovanni decided to sell all his lands and fled bringing only his greatest treasure with him: his impressive collection of books. He travelled from one country to another for over 30 years. His life motto was *SIC VIVERE TUTUS* (*Thus to live safely*) engraved on his medal around a scene showing a beaver chased by two dogs. It is a story from Plinius' *Historia Naturalia*, about a clever beaver who, knowing that those animals are chased only for their testicles, bite them off to save his life. Similarly, Giovanni thought that his books was a precious treasure that needed to be saved to keep him alive. After years of exile he coincidentally found his shelter in Gdańsk. In 1591, on the Baltic Sea near the coast of Gdańsk, the marquess of Oria survived a sea catastrophe on a ship who brought him from England to Scandinavia. The books were saved, but the marquess lost his eyesight. He gave the books to the city and was offered an apartment in Gdańsk Academic Gymnasium and a sum of money for a living. The Italian humanist was highly respected and admired in the city. He died in 1597, on the 24th of March, and a year before the first municipal library was opened.

The stories and the examples of the people who survived in harsh or often extreme conditions bring to mind questions about social identity. What makes us a part of some

community or makes us want to leave the community to gain one's freedom as in Selkirk's example? Is it faith like in Marguerite de la Rocque's example, love and family as in the case of Fernão Lopes or maybe intellectual ideas as was the case for the humanist Giovanni Bernardino Bonifacio, the marquess of Oria, which connects us with the society we belong to? There are no clear answers. However, all these different stories, like the man on the raft and his predecessors, seem to help us defining our own views and consider our feelings on the subject.

Magdalena Mielnik

MA in art history, curator of the collection of Gdańsk paintings in The National Museum of Gdańsk, doctoral student in the University of Wrocław under the guidance of prof. dr hab. Jan Harasimowicz (dissertation subject: Moralistic themes in the secular art in Gdańsk in 16th and 17th century).

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