

ISLANDS, LOVERS, AND OTHERS

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ABSTRACT. Geography, experience, and imagination are all crucial to how we take measure of islands. Prime foci of legend and invention, islands have haunted humanity since the dawn of history. Why are they so intensely loved and loathed, desired and rejected, minutely scrutinized yet often perilously misjudged? On islands we feel alternately landed and adrift, magnified and reduced, fulfilled and voided, at home and in exile. These and other polarities are reviewed here with examples from Caribbean, Atlantic, Mediterranean, antipodean, and imaginary islands fancied by the creator. *Keywords:* *autonomy, circumscription, islands, insularity, paradise, possessiveness, prison.*

Islands are for lovers, it is often truly said. But lovers seldom have them all to themselves. Honeymooners share paradise islands with ticks and sand flies and mosquitoes, tourists and touts, the flotsam and jetsam of sojourners past and present. Quintessential lovers' havens—tropical palm-fringed islets set in balmy seas—are hardly the only islands, nor are lovers their only owners. Islands belong also to children and castaways and convicts, to pirates and pensioners, to selfish autocrats, and to ascetic reformers. Indeed, they belong to all of us, however reluctant we may be to acknowledge possession. Or perhaps it is better to say, with José Saramago (1999), that islands really own us, for in seeking them we are more often than not in search of ourselves.

It is a seeming paradox that island parochialism is also commonly invoked to disparage others—the bluff, intolerant insularity habitually ascribed to the English and latterly deployed to denigrate “America: The World’s Most Insular State.” Our age is one of “unprecedented insularity,” rails a critic, “of individual islands of furious opinion, . . . entire archipelagos of tribes, sects and groups . . . marooned by their own sense of moral or political rectitude.”¹ To be insular is to be out of touch, narrowly prejudiced in feelings, ideas, or manners. Yet it is precisely being out of touch that makes islands such popular destinations.

Island fascination is age-old. From Homer’s *Odyssey* to Augustine’s *Confessions* to Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, from Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* to Golding’s *The Lord of the Flies*, islands have served as archetypes of good and evil, dream and nightmare, despair and fulfillment. They commonly harbor both castaways and conquerors, with cautionary warnings for each. Shipwrecked on the seemingly desolate coast of Rhodes, the Socratic philosopher Aristippus at length espied geometrical figures drawn in the sand. “Let us be of good cheer,” he cried out to his sailing companions, “for I see the traces of men.” Heartened by signs of intelligent life, Aristippus found his way to the island’s capital, where he taught for many years. Earlier human traces in Rhodes were less cheering. A century previously, Queen Artemisia of Halicarnassus had laid the island waste in her conquest of the Aegean.

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