Savage/Barbarian

The ‘savage’ occupied a liminal space between the human and the animal. The Middle French *sauvage* pertained to the wilderness or to spaces beyond human control. The postclassical *salvagiusi*, like *sauvage*, looked back at the Latin *silva* (woods). It invoked the pastoral and natural, and did not always carry negative connotations. However, while ‘savages’ as ‘naturals’ or innocent beings appeared in the sixteenth-century writings of the French essayist Michel de Montaigne or the Huguenot colonist Jean de Léry in Brazil, the more neutral connotations of ‘savage’ or its variant ‘salvage’ appeared less frequently in English texts. The English acknowledged that they too had developed their societies from savage roots, but this did not incline them to envisage perceived savages as embodying a benign state of being. More often, ‘savage’ carried connotations of corruption, brutality, or barbarity. Since ‘civil’ rooted virtuous human behaviour in town-dwelling and political organisation, ‘savage’ was its antithesis, relating to remote or undomesticated places as well as peoples. ‘Barbarian’, on the other hand, was used to characterise polities that Europeans deemed tyrannical or corrupt. Both ‘savage’ and ‘barbarian’ were terms that heavily informed English articulations of their own sense of civility in the context of cross-cultural encounters.

In the sixteenth century, ‘savage’ frequently related to animals and animal-like behaviour, particularly cruelty. In *The historie of foure-footed beasts* (1607), Edward Topsell described animals such as wolves, boars, and leopards as exhibiting ‘savage’ characteristics. These animals were often agents of divine retribution, signifying God’s hand at work in nature through a providence ‘executed by the raging ministery of wilde, savage, and ungentle beastes’ on the lives of the sinful. At the same time, humans who acted cruelly were described as becoming feral. Anger caused people to regress, wrote George Turberville, ‘[f]or then he waxeth out a kinde of savage beast’. The sense that one had been abandoned by God, the

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1 ‘Savage, n. and adj.’, *Oxford English Dictionary*.
reformer John Calvin wrote, will cause ‘griefe and anguishe of mynde, yea and even into some frenzie to play the savage beast, and to lift up him selfe agaynst God’. In Edmund Spenser’s ‘Sonnet XX’, the speaker complains that his mistress is ‘more cruell and more salvag[e] wyld[e], / then either Lyon or Lionesse’, taking ‘glorie in her cruellnesse’. Similarly, in Shakespeare’s *Much ado about Nothing* (c. 1599), Claudio rebukes his beloved by saying, ‘you are more intemperate in your blood / Than Venus, or those pampered animalls / That rage in savage sensualitie’. In these cases, sixteenth-century masculine anxieties about women as sexual snares led them to equate female behaviour with the intemperance of animals.

While the meaning of ‘savage’ as bestial or cruel did not disappear, colonisation in Ireland and later America indelibly altered English associations. As the post-Reformation state began to extend its bounds and exercise more rigorous control of its internal territories, ‘savage’ entered political discourse to describe treason and criminality and to disparage less elite members of society. The humanist and Protestant education of English policymakers and colonial governors imbued them with the expectation that the Irish and Native Americans who resisted reform and conversion were dissidents who stood between the English and their aim of establishing civil society. Authorities frequently condemned the manners of those dwelling on perceived ‘frontier’ territories, such as the Scottish highlands and Gaelic Ireland. ‘[T]her ys no confidence to be had in the hearts of so varyable & trayterous a nacion’ as Ireland, Charles Cornwallis wrote to the Privy Council in 1608, ‘as also to have so just an occasion, to roote out that savage generac[i]on bredd in those partes, and to plant his own people where his justice and moderac[i]on […] wyll not onyle secure those partes, but allso envyte all others w[i]thin that k[ing]dom […] to desire nothing more then to become wholly subject’. George Turberville, who travelled to the court of Ivan the Terrible in 1568, wrote that savages and barbarians could be found closer to home: ‘Wilde Irish are as civill as the Russies in their kinde / Hard choice which is the best of both, e[a]ch

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10 ‘Sir Charles Cornwallis to the Privy Council’, 9 June 1608, Hatfield House, CP 125/160v.
bloody, rude, and blinde. / If thou bee wise [...] covet not those barbarous coasts to see'.

Like ‘savage’, ‘barbarian’ often operated alongside discussions of foreignness and civility (or the lack of). A ‘Barbarian’ originally referred to an inhabitant of the North African Barbary coast, or to an ‘uncivil’ stranger. The Greek word barbaros and the Latin barbarus meant ‘not Greek’ or ‘not Latin’, juxtaposed against the classical or ‘pure’ and often used to discuss language, speech, and conversation. A cluster of related words appeared around ‘barbarian’ in some language manuals and dictionaries:

- **Barbarian,** belonging to
- **Barbary,** -ria, part of Africa.
- **Barbarism,** rudeness of speech or behaviour.
- **Barbarous,** cruel, inhumane.

A barbarian was by definition a ‘babbler’ speaking in garbled or unfamiliar words, signalling moments of collapse in language or communication. ‘Barbarian’ appeared in dictionary entries alongside ‘barbarisme’, a ‘rudeness or corrupt forme of writing or speaking’. Numerous Protestant devotional tracts cited 1 Corinthians 14:11: ‘Therefore if I know not the meaning of the voyce, I shall bee unto him that speaketh, a Barbarian, and he that speaketh shall be a Barbarian unto me’ (KJV). In his biblical annotations, the nonconformist minister Henry Ainsworth related ‘[b]arbarous speech’ or ‘speaking barbarously’ to a ‘strange, rude, uncouth language’, one that served to refer to ‘all speech that was not understood of God’s people: which hee that speaketh is [...] a Barbarian, that is, a stranger’.

While a ‘barbarian’ and ‘barbarous’ actions were not quite interchangeable, noun and adjective both involved a series of related concepts around perceived rudeness or deviation from orthodoxy. This association with rudeness and perceived underdevelopment is what often brought savage and barbarian together. ‘Thou has here’, presented the churchman and

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15 Henry Ainsworth, *Annotations upon the five books of Moses* (London, 1627; STC 219), sig. Ooooo05r.
geographer Samuel Purchas in his expanded travel compendium of 1625, ‘[n]ations Christian, Jewish, Mahumetan, Ethnicke, Civill, Barbarian and Savage, innumerable wayes diversified’. In the diversity of world peoples, ‘Barbarian and Savage’ were both distinct and grouped together in one category.

While ‘barbarians’ were often connected to ‘savages’ in terms of behaviour, there were political differences between the two. ‘Barbarous’ polities were those the English tended to regard as corrupt rather than apolitical, such as Spain, Russia, and the Ottoman and Persian empires. Defending the Church of England against charges of heresy, the Elizabethan John Jewel described Catholicism as inseparable from ‘the tyranny of the Bysshops of Rome and their barbarous Persian-like pride’. In his translation of a Swiss reformed text on tyranny, Thomas Twyne brought up the ‘wantonesse, pride and disdayne [of] the barbarous Turkes’, whose barbarism led to despotism. While ‘savages’ were believed to live outside the pale of human society, Spain’s ‘barbarous tyranny of wasting the West Indies’ became a manifestation of the ‘kingdome of the antichrist’, ushering bondage rather than redemption.

By contrast, colonial promoters related the behaviour of Indigenous peoples to the supposed savagery of its landscapes, where the perceived lack of land management ostensibly reflected a lack of culture. The English viewed uncultivated nature and woodlands as synonymous with an absence of domesticity, settlement, and civil structures. Desert spaces, like jungles, were ‘baren and salvage, so that it is not able to nourishe any beastes for lacke of pasture’. In England, ‘savage’ spaces were subject to reform, engendering radical transformations to the domestic landscape through enclosure, surveying, tillage, husbandry, and industrial projects. In the colonies, legal discourse associated the right of possession of land with

either the absence of habitation and ownership altogether (*terra nullius*) or the absence of settlement and cultivation (*vacuum domicilium*). When Purchas wrote in 1613 that Native Americans ‘seeme to have learned the savage nature of the wild Beasts, of whom and with whome they live’, a case was being made to support the claim of English settlers. By 1629, John Winthrop would utilise that argument in New England to assert that Native peoples had ‘natural’ but not ‘civil’ rights over the land because they had not ‘subdued’ it. These claims obscured the fact that the English often built their plantations on top of land that Indigenous groups had previously used for crops, gardens, and sacred burial sites.

Language played a prominent role in how the English positioned themselves in relation to ‘savages’ and ‘barbarians’. Teaching invaded peoples English was a direct method of initiating the colonising and civilising projects of the Crown and corporations. Evangelism and education were closely related. The role of the dutiful Christian, the schoolmaster John Brinsley wrote in his educational tract of 1622, was not only to advance ‘your owne ends and projects’ through colonisation, but to convert ‘the verie savage […] unto Jesus Christ, whether Irish or Indian’. Similarly, the origin of ‘barbarian’ as a ‘babbler’ loomed behind English expressions of linguistic superiority. The rising appreciation for the English language accompanied derisive attitudes towards Gaelic or Native American dialects. George Puttenham noted that the least developed language was ‘spoken by the rude and barking language of the Affricans now called Barbarians’. ‘[T]he most laudable languages’, Puttenham reminded his readers, ‘are alwaies most plaine and distinct, and the barbarous most confuse and indistinct’. In 1602, the lord deputy of Ireland Charles Blount, Lord Mountjoy complained that the Gaelic Irish refused to abandon local styles of dress, including mantles. They did so not for lack of other options, but because ‘the barbarous Customes in habits of apparell in their poets or herauldes’ served to ‘inchant’ them ‘in savage manners and sundry other such dregges of barbarism and Rebellion […] already forbidden’. Heralds in Gaelic households, orally

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23 Samuel Purchas, *Purchas his pilgrims* (London, 1613; STC 20505), sig. Lll4v.
28 Sugggestions by Lord Mountjoy for the Government of Ireland, 1602, Hatfield House, CP 139/138r.
sharing stories and news in the Gaelic tongue, were presented by colonists as perpetuating ‘dregs of barbarism’, manifested in turn through distinct clothing that opposed conformity to English Protestantism.

Even as the English targeted the ‘savage’ oral histories and language systems of those they sought to colonize, increased engagement with the classical translation and European languages brought an acute awareness of the questionable status of their own language and literature. The humanist reverence for the classical past in sixteenth-century England led to a sensitivity about the English language itself as ‘barbarous’ or inferior. ‘The foulest vice in language is to speake barbarously’, Puttenham wrote in The arte of English poesie (1589). ‘[T]his terme grew by the great pride of the Greekes and Latines, when they were dominatours of the world reckoning no language so sweete and civill as their owne’.29 ‘[B]arbarous conquerors invading [ancient Europe] with innumerable swarmes of strange nations, the Poesie metrical of the Grecians and Latines came to be much corrupted and altered’.30 Aware of the quirks and eccentricities of the English vernacular, which at times stood at odds with classical theory, English translators and writers began to champion the literary value of their own language, especially from the 1570s.31 George Pettie, though demonstrating an awareness of its questionable status among other European languages, defended English in his translation of Stefano Guazzo’s The civile conversation (1581). ‘There are some others yet who wyll set lyght by my labours, because I wrote in English’, Pettie wrote. Some English travellers, hungry for French, Italian, or Spanish, will ‘count it barren, they count it barbarous […] they report abrode, that our Countrey is barbarous’.32 Nonetheless, Pettie staunchly defended his decision to write in English, for the virtue of a language was always relative: ‘the maners and fashions of eche Countrey, are thy only thyng that make it counted barbarous or civile’.33

As Pettie articulated, language was one part of a broader question among policymakers and educators about how to categorise different peoples on the


33 Ibid.
spectrum of civility. ‘Savage’ and ‘barbarian’ were entrenched within these vital dialogues about the nature of society and who belonged. Technology played a further role in these categorisations. Humphrey Gilbert and other Elizabethan privateers and explorers were given permission to seek out those ‘remote heathen and barbarous lands’ that were not inhabited by ‘any Christian prince or people’ so that they might be ‘planted’ and fruitful industries might develop.\(^{34}\) By the 1650s, Robert Wood, a mathematician affiliated with the Hartlib circle, wrote that the main difference between the ‘Civility of the Europeans & Barbarisme of the Americans’ was that ‘the former had the use of Iron’, enabling Europeans to develop technologies, industries, and coinage.\(^{35}\)

As the English presence in the Americas grew more secure, ‘savage’ became more aligned with ‘barbarian’, conveying perceived inferiority without denoting any real threat to English sovereignty abroad. By the Enlightenment, ‘savages’ and ‘barbarians’ were mostly foils for English articulations of their own manners, customs, and even humanity. ‘Here was a Metamorphose wrought by the Force of Love and Beauty, a Barbarian civiliz’d to a milder Temper’, a novel from 1687 marvelled.\(^{36}\) This imparted the longstanding idea of civility as a marker of progress in which ‘savages’ and ‘barbarians’ might elevate their natures or soften their penchant for brutality through the pursuit of refined behaviour. Those who refused to conform to English ways of life, meanwhile, were continually accused of hindering, rather than advancing, progress.

Related keywords: alien/stranger, heathen, traitor, translator

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36 *Cynthia with the tragical account of the unfortunate lover of Almerin and Desdemona* (London, 1687; Wing C7710A), sig. B4v.