The Gypsy As Trope in Victorian and Modern British Literature

Abstract

Since their arrival in the British isles in the early sixteenth century, the Romani people, known as Gypsies, were the objects of a complex mixture of both persecution and desire. Although early legislation reflects concerns about their alleged thievery and vagrancy, little factual historical information exists about them, and their identity is constructed in British discourse in large part by their functions in literature. In the nineteenth century, the stereotype of the wild, exotic Gypsy evolves into an established trope that can be readily deployed in texts as a challenge to normative forms of property ownership, gender, sexuality, and national identity. This dissertation takes as its central focus a twentieth-century text, Virginia Woolf's Orlando (1928), in which an aristocratic man lives for 400 years, turning into a woman midway through, and absconding with a band of Gypsies. Here, gender is famously interrogated, but the novel also calls attention to the fundamental instability of norms regarding property distribution, erotic desire, and British national identity. Through the lens of Orlando, the dissertation examines a variety of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century texts in which Gypsies or Gypsy figures (characters with Gypsy-like qualities) appear and disturb the social order. Chapter One shows how, in works by Emily Brontë, Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Arthur Conan Doyle, and Kenneth Grahame, Gypsy figures, sometimes in small or cameo roles, imperil the distribution of property through primogeniture. Chapter Two examines the ways in which Gypsies destabilize gender in novels by Sir Walter Scott, Charlotte Brontë, and Elizabeth Gaskell. Chapter Three considers the way they signal non-normative erotic desire in works by Jane Austen, Matthew Arnold, George Eliot, T.S. Eliot, and D.H. Lawrence. Finally, examining national identity in novels by George Borrow, Wilkie Collins, and Bram Stoker, as well as George Eliot's narrative poem The Spanish Gypsy, Chapter Four argues that while the British national project involves the abjection of "others" in order to shore up the body politic, this project is doomed to failure because Gypsies, as internal others, are ultimately inextricable from this body.

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