Gypsies & the British Imagination, 1807–1930

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Introduction

Children of Hagar

In 1930, the gypsiologist John Sampson, librarian of the University of Liverpool and leading member of the Gypsy Lore Society, published a volume he had labored over with love for many decades. He called it *The Wind on the Heath: A Gypsy Anthology*. With its frontispiece a beautifully colored painting by Augustus John (figure 1), it contains more than three hundred selections—excerpts from novels and plays, entire poems, journal entries—culled from the works of great writers, mainly, although not exclusively, British. Shakespeare, Milton, Bunyan, Gay, Clare, Fielding, Keats, Wordsworth, Hazlitt, Lamb, Scott, Howitt, Arnold, Browning, George Eliot, Hardy, Meredith, and George Borrow—the nineteenth-century writer most closely associated with recording Gypsy ways—are represented, as are members of the Gypsy Lore Society, founded in 1888 to collect and preserve the cultural artifacts of Gypsy life, and many of their Edwardian progeny. Although Sampson intended the volume to convince readers of the "glamour that enwraps the Gypsy race" and promote the idea of the Gypsy as "touchstone to the personality of man," I begin with it simply as evidence of the ubiquity of the idea of the Gypsy in British literature and culture.[1] Readers alert to the Gypsy presence in British texts might not be surprised by the breadth of Sampson's anthology, and students of Victorian literature certainly would find it confirmation of what they already suspected: that the "gipsy brat" Heathcliff, Matthew Arnold's scholar-gypsy, Edward Rochester's Gypsy masquerade, and Maggie Tulliver's defection to a Gypsy camp on the outskirts of town reflect the persistence of a widespread dependence on the tropes of Gypsy life in British writing and culture. And although Sampson's anthology does not make it explicit, Gypsies were an object of fascination not simply for creators of literature throughout centuries, but for

FIGURE 1 Augustus John, *Spanish Gitana*, ca. 1921 (oil on canvas). (Private collection. © The Fine Art Society, London)

John Sampson used John's painting as the frontispiece for *The Wind on the Heath* (1930), retitling it *Head of a Gitana*.

ethnographers, historians, philologists, social and legal reformers, graphic artists, and journalists.

Sampson's anthology offers a starting place for thinking about the Gypsy as one of the primary "surrogate and . . . underground sel[ves]" of British identity. The phrase is Edward Said's, used to describe the place of the Orient in European imaginations.[2] Said's critical perspective is especially useful in regard to the Gypsies because it renders the complexity and ambivalence of

an orientalist mentality, insisting on the importance of imagination, identification, and desire, as well as of relations of power, domination, and repression. The Orient, as place and idea, provided Westerners with careers (the East *is* a career, said Benjamin Disraeli in his novel *Tancred, or the New Crusade* [1847]), scholarly pursuits, opportunities for masquerade and the refashioning of identity, and an escape from the strictures of European bourgeois culture. And in many important respects, fascination with Gypsies in Britain was a form of orientalism.[3] "Gypsies are the Arabs of pastoral England," declared the gypsy lorist Henry Crofton, "the Bedouins of our commons and woodlands."[4] Like the "Oriental" or the colonized, racially marked subject, the Gypsy was associated with a rhetoric of primitive desires, lawlessness, mystery, cunning, sexual excess, godlessness, and savagery—with freedom from the repressions, both constraining and culture building, of Western civilization. Gypsies were the victims of oppression, harassment, and discrimination and of persistent efforts to outlaw and destroy their way of life (figure 2).[5] They operated as a field for the projection of what was both feared and desired in that part of the British cultural self that was denied, reviled, or prohibited. Gypsies functioned in British cultural symbolism as a perennial other, a recurrent and apparently necessary marker of difference that, like the biblical Hagar and Ishmael, represented an alternative and rejected lineage.

Unlike colonial subjects, however, Gypsies were a domestic or an internal other, and their proximity and visibility were crucial features in their deployment as literary or symbolic figures. Their familiarity lent them an exoticism that was, at the same time, indigenous and homely. When the speaker in William Wordsworth's poem "Gypsies" (1807) comes upon an "unbroken knot" of sleeping Gypsies on his rural travels, when Jane Austen's Harriet Smith is accosted by begging Gypsy children on the outskirts of Highbury in *Emma* (1816), or when George Eliot's Maggie Tulliver runs off to join the Gypsies camped in a lane in *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), no one, either characters in these texts or nineteenth-century readers, would register shock at the invasion of English landscapes by a foreign people. Indeed, these Gypsies are British, if not in citizenship, then certainly in permanent domicile and, most likely, country of origin. David Mayall, historian of Gypsies in nineteenth-century Britain, remarks, for example, that the most virulent anti-Gypsy racism on the part of the English most often was reserved for foreign Gypsies—from Greece, Serbia, Hungary, and other lands in eastern and southern Europe—who took refuge in Britain in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[6] Arthur Morrison's "The Case of the Missing Hand," one of the Martin Hewitt stories, includes a band of Gypsies who turn out to be members of the Lee family, a well-known English clan. The one Gypsy who is "much darker . . . than any other present" is from Romania, and his suspicious behavior, together with his distinctive swarthiness, immediately make him a suspect in the crime that Hewitt is

FIGURE 2 John Garside, "Gypsies and Gentiles." (From John Sampson, *The Wind on the Heath* [London: Chatto and Windus, 1930])

Garside's Gypsy stands in front of a sign that offers a reward of 10 shillings for the rounding up of "Rogues and Vagabonds," a category that included Gypsies.

investigating.[7] Although British Gypsies were considered alien, they were, at the same time, imagined as long-standing features of English rural life and, in some nostalgic views of the English past, signify the very essence of true and ancient Britishness (figure 3).

And yet, as all these literary examples suggest, Gypsies tended to exist not in the midst but on the periphery of British settlement, so they were present but separate, often within view but almost never absorbed, encountered but seldom intimately known. In *Emma*, the geographic point of Harriet's encounter with the Gypsies precisely marks, albeit comically, the cultural borders of provincial community, beyond which a young lady should not roam without protection. Only because the Gypsy band that approaches her is unfamiliar and yet known by rumor and reputation could Harriet be so frightened by what amounts to a

FIGURE 3 John Garside, "Field and Sky." (From John Sampson, *The Wind on the Heath* [London: Chatto and Windus, 1930])

Garside's is a classic image of a secure and inviting Gypsy camp.

group of rowdy children or Emma so eager to make her friend's encounter into an elaborate tale of danger, rescue, and romance. Indeed, the Gypsies' place in Austen's novel exemplifies the mix of foreignness and familiarity, exoticism and homeliness that characterizes their role in British imaginative life.

Jonathan Boyarin has called these alien but domestic groups "the other within." In an essay concerned primarily with European Jews, Boyarin recognizes the Gypsies as a parallel group. Both possess "transnational (or at least non-national) and stubbornly distinct minority identities," and both have histories in pre-Holocaust Europe that tend to be overshadowed and obscured by the events and atrocities of World War II.[8] Like the Jews, with whom they were frequently paired throughout the nineteenth century and beyond, the Gypsies were a people of diaspora, wanderers with no state of their own and thus dispersed to reside

among all nations. "They have gone wandering about as pilgrims and strangers," wrote John Hoyland, a Quaker reformer, yet "they remain in all places, as to custom and habits, what their fathers were."[9] Also like the Jews, they appeared to retain their separateness and their customs.

Walter Scott and George Eliot—both of whom were drawn to stories of dispossession, cultural multiplicity, and national identity—devoted novels and poems to Gypsy and Jewish plots: Scott's *Guy Mannering* (1815) and *Ivanhoe* (1819) and Eliot's *The Spanish Gypsy* (1868) and *Daniel Deronda* (1874–1876). George Borrow's alter ego Lavengro is fascinated by Jews, their language, and their separateness and regards the fragility of their modern survival as analogous to that of the English Gypsies, about whom he writes. The Romany themselves circulated myths of shared Jewish–Gypsy ancestry, primarily in the story of the two "Jew brothers," Schmul and Rom-Schmul, who lived at the time of Christ. While the first brother was reputed to be delighted at the Crucifixion, the second wanted to save Jesus from death if he could. Finding this impossible, Rom-Schmul stole one of the nails destined to pierce Christ's feet. For this reason, one nail had to suffice for both feet, resulting in the overlapping of Christ's legs and the conversion of Rom-Schmul, the original ancestor of all Gypsies, to Christianity.[10] Jews and Gypsies haunted each other throughout the nineteenth century as persecuted and stateless peoples, amounting to each other's "strange, secret sharer[s]," a term that Said borrowed from Joseph Conrad to refer to the paired discourses of orientalism and anti-Semitism.[11]

Yet the differences—both mythic and real—between the two groups shaped literary representation as well. Jews may have occupied a reviled or, at least, suspect place on the edge of the British world, but they mingled with polite society, if only as business associates, moneylenders, and tradesmen. Gypsies, who were imagined as dwelling at the other end of the economic spectrum from reputedly rapacious and wealthy Jews, maintained a tangential relationship to the economy and a social and geographic distance from British communities. Whether underworld criminal, like Fagin in Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* (1837–1839), or prosperous charlatan, like Melmotte in Anthony Trollope's *The Way We Live Now* (1875), the Jew in Victorian fiction is almost always associated with urban—or cosmopolitan—cultures and with greed and overreaching. Seldom, except for Rebecca in Scott's *Ivanhoe* and her fictional descendents, are Jewish characters romanticized or idealized, even in a condescending and distorting way.[12] Gypsy ways of living and subsisting—vagabondage and rural wandering—could, however, play a role in bohemian mythmaking and in dreams of escaping from stifling respectability. Even though London and its environs attracted the bulk of the Gypsy population, at least during the nineteenth century, Gypsies most often were cast in literary texts as pastoral figures, allied with an aesthetic of the picturesque and with protests against modern encroachments on unsettled lands.[13] A striking exception to this pattern is Dickens's Pancks, the

self-declared "gipsy" and "fortune-teller" in *Little Dorrit* (1855–1857). Pancks, in truth a good man who exposes the hypocrisy and sham of his boss, Mr. Casby, and helps uncover the secret of the Dorrit family's fortune, functions as a front man or middleman, collecting rents from the poor inhabitants of Bleeding Heart Yard for Casby, the real gouger and exploiter of the novel. Not only is Pancks an urban Gypsy, but he plays an economic role often associated with Jews.[14]

Some historians and writers, among them Eliot, also emphasized a difference of history between Gypsy and Jew. Many regarded Jews as conscious of their history and aware of their origin, while Gypsies, they argued—with no sacred texts, clearly defined homeland, or written histories—lacked a rich and solid basis for either a national identity or a propitious future. Furthermore, the Jews' elevated, if eclipsed, role in the history of Christianity gave them a cultural status that the Gypsies, presumed by many to be heathens, could not enjoy. Gypsies and Jews also differed in the matter of a putative home. Even before the political project of Zionism, Jews looked toward a specific land, with its attendant history, as their home and conceived of themselves as a people in exile. For Gypsies, no idea of a place of origin or fantasy of return informed their sense of self or yearning for redemption although, as we shall see, Eliot struggled in *The Spanish Gypsy* to endow them with both.[15]

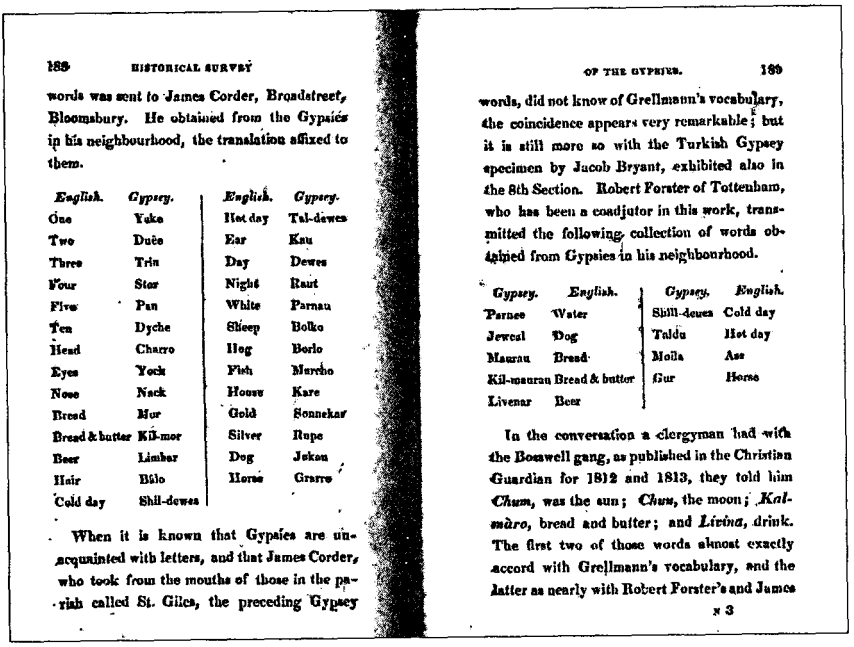
Origins

The most pervasive theme in writing and thinking about Gypsies throughout the nineteenth century, however—and the feature that most clearly distinguished them from Jews and other minority groups—was the mystery of their origin. Since the arrival of Gypsies in England and Scotland in the early sixteenth century, British chroniclers and officials believed them to have come from Egypt, and thus called them Egyptians.[16] As late as 1743, legislation that prohibited fortune-telling referred to its likeliest practitioners by this name, and, even when the epithet fell out of favor, the short version—Gypsies—stuck.[17] By the late eighteenth century, philologists and historians began to identify the Gypsies' place of origin as India, largely because of vocabulary that Romani, their language, shared with Hindustani (and, behind that, Sanskrit).[18] In 1787, the German linguist Heinrich Grellman published a lengthy ethnological study of the Gypsies and ended it with an assertion that, contrary to popular belief, they came from "Hindostan" and were likely identifiable as the lowest caste of Indians: "Parias; or, as they are called [there] Suders."[19] A translation of Grellman's book appeared in England in 1807, and John Hoyland's history of the Gypsies, aimed at their moral and religious rehabilitation, floated Grellman's thesis about their origin a few years later. Hoyland's title, *A Historical Survey of the Customs, Habits, & Present State of the Gypsies: Designed to Develope*

the Origin of This Singular People, and to Promote the Amelioration of Their Condition, sounded the keynotes of popular interest in the Gypsies: customs, habits, origin, and the need for conversion. His text also promoted the idea of a scientific search for the truth of their beginnings.

Despite Grellman's and Hoyland's work early in the century, those who wrote about the Gypsies seemed unwilling to relinquish the belief that their origin was ultimately still mysterious. The debate about their genesis (and the reasons for their initial exodus) became a perennial feature of texts that centered on Gypsies. The ostensible ambiguity of their derivation animated the imaginations of various commentators, who, even while acknowledging the power of the Indian hypothesis, would, with great relish, offer alternative speculations of their own. Perhaps the Gypsies were the descendants of Ishmael, the son of Hagar and Abraham, cast out by his father in favor of Isaac to wander the earth.[20] Were they, in fact, Egyptians, who had made their way to Europe while doing penance for withholding hospitality from the Virgin Mary and her son?[21] Or were they actually German Jews who, unfairly blamed for the plague of 1348, had hidden in the forests to escape persecution?[22] Gypsies themselves clung to a number of myths about their origin. In a memoir published in 1970, Silvester Gordon Boswell, an English Gypsy, includes a variation of the Rom-Schmul story to explain Gypsy origins: "That's my belief. That's what I've been taught." His version features no Jews but only a nameless first Gypsy, a metalworker, who was asked to make nails for Christ's Crucifixion. Boswell finds redemptive possibilities in the disappearance of the fourth nail: "[The Gentiles] are realising that the Gypsies done a *good* turn by taking it away instead of adding it to the other three."[23] Although thieves, the original Gypsies might one day be thanked for their efforts to lessen the suffering of Christ.

The reputed mystery of the Gypsies' homeland became, in other words, a necessary and stubbornly preserved staple of thinking about and imagining Gypsies. Their literary representation was intimately connected to an obsession with origins of all kinds—linguistic, personal, and national. A people "without" origins came to stand, paradoxically, for the question of origins itself and to be used as a trope to signify beginnings, primal ancestry, and the ultimate secret of individual identity. Comparative philologists who recognized correspondences between Romani and Indian languages were part of a larger movement in Germany and England that began to consider Sanskrit as "the elder sister of the classical and Romance languages, and . . . the Teutonic as well" (figure 4).[24] This ancient language might yield clues to the histories of different peoples and to the connections between disparate races and their civilizations. Some philologists believed that, as J. W. Burrow puts it, "if all languages could be shown to be related, one could establish the single origin of the human race."[25] The search for linguistic and human origins gave Romani an elevated status among certain early-nineteenth-century philologists and ethnologists, and claims for its



188 HISTORICAL SURVEY

words was sent to James Corder, Broadstreet, Bloomsbury. He obtained from the Gypsies in his neighbourhood, the translation affixed to them.

English.	*Gypsey.*	*English.*	*Gypsey.*
One	Yeke	Hot day	Tal-dewes
Two	Duèe	Ear	Kau
Three	Trin	Day	Dewes
Four	Star	Night	Raut
Five	Pan	White	Parnau
Ten	Dyche	Sheep	Bolko
Head	Charro	Hog	Borlo
Eyes	Yock	Fish	Murcho
Nose	Nack	House	Kare
Bread	Mur	Gold	Sonnekar
Bread & butter	Kil-mor	Silver	Rupe
Beer	Limber	Dog	Jukau
Hair	Bilo	Horse	Grarro
Cold day	Shil-dewes		

When it is known that Gypsies are unacquainted with letters, and that James Corder, who took from the mouths of those in the parish called St. Giles, the preceding Gypsey

OF THE GYPSIES. 189

words, did not know of Grellmann's vocabulary, the coincidence appears very remarkable; but it is still more so with the Turkish Gypsey specimen by Jacob Bryant, exhibited also in the 8th Section. Robert Forster of Tottenham, who has been a coadjutor in this work, transmitted the following collection of words obtained from Gypsies in his neighbourhood.

Gypsey.	*English.*	*Gypsey.*	*English.*
Parnee	Water	Shill-dewes	Cold day
Jewel	Dog	Taldu	Hot day
Maurau	Bread	Molla	Ass
Kil-maurau	Bread & butter	Gur	Horse
Livenar	Beer		

In the conversation a clergyman had with the Boswell gang, as published in the Christian Guardian for 1812 and 1813, they told him *Chun*, was the sun; *Chun*, the moon; *Kalmàro*, bread and butter; and *Livina*, drink. The first two of those words almost exactly accord with Grellmann's vocabulary, and the latter as nearly with Robert Forster's and James

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FIGURE 4 Romani words and phrases, with their English translations. (From John Hoyland, *A Historical Survey of the Customs, Habits, & Present State of the Gypsies* [York: Darton, Harvey, 1816])

importance found their way into the more fantastical speculations of writers like George Borrow, who ventured that Romani might turn out to be the "mother of all languages in the world" and a "picklock, an open sesame" to the study of language itself.[26]

When John Sampson refers to the Gypsy as "the touchstone to the personality of man" in the preface to *The Wind on the Heath*, he has some of this philological speculation in mind, but he also implies a conviction that the Gypsies played an important role as ur-ancestor to humankind. If Gypsies are represented in literature and other kinds of writing as primitive, it is not only to underscore the ostensibly underevolved nature of their customs and traditions in relation to advanced British culture, but also to suggest that they occupy a primal spot in the history of civilizations and contain in their culture clues to essential humanity that might otherwise be lost. For some writers, this meant that the Gypsy could remind modern men and women of a time before the corruptions of modernity corroded their souls. For others, who regarded the Gypsy as a pastoral figure, Gypsies could conjure an older, preindustrial England, a golden age before enclosure, urban encroachments, the railway, and other defilements of nature. In "The Scholar-Gipsy" (1853), Matthew Arnold famously associates Gypsies with resistance to the "strange disease of modern life." In many of his

lyrics, John Clare evokes Gypsies as emblems of both liberty and safety: they seemed to him to live a life free from social constraints and protected from contemporary dangers. Members of the Gypsy Lore Society regarded Gypsies as remnants of a golden age, the human equivalents of village rituals and rural customs long forgotten. In a slightly different register, Walter Scott made Meg Merrilies, the Gypsy sibyl of *Guy Mannering*, at once the embodiment of the "old ways" threatened by new legal and class arrangements and the symbolic maternal presence in the life of his hero, Harry Bertram. In Scott's novel, Gypsies are associated with the complex and partly shrouded origins of both a culture and an individual.

Kidnapped

As in *Guy Mannering*, the mystery of the Gypsies' ancestry makes its way into numerous fictional narratives in the form of stories of vexed personal identities and displaced protagonists. In Scott's novel, Harry Bertram has been separated from his past and has no idea that he is the son and heir of a Scottish laird. In *The Mill on the Floss*, Maggie Tulliver interprets her own physical and temperamental differences from her family—especially, her mother and aunts—as evidence that she actually was born to Gypsies and ended up in the wrong world. Eliot's narrative poem *The Spanish Gypsy* tells the story of a fifteenth-century Spanish princess who discovers that she is, indeed, a Gypsy. The parentage of Heathcliff, the so-called gipsy brat of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), remains a permanent mystery: an orphan snatched from the streets of Liverpool by Mr. Earnshaw, he may have come from abroad through the port of the city, be the illegitimate son of the man who brings him home to Wuthering Heights, or have descended from non-English and certainly non-Anglo-Saxon stock. Even Arnold's scholar-gypsy, at once an Oxford student and a Gypsy, develops a muddled and protean identity over time.

These stories of hidden or ambiguous identity, all variations on the changeling plot, were clearly influenced not only by mysteries of Gypsy origin, but also by long-standing myths of Gypsy kidnappings, themselves the products of cultural anxieties about difference. Legends of kidnapping and child swapping had long been associated with Gypsies, and accusations of such crimes haunt them to this day.[27] A combination of proximity and distance fostered English fantasies that Gypsies were close enough to switch one of their children with an English child without detection and yet remote enough to place that child permanently out of the reach of his parents. So, the idea went, a child could grow up in a Gypsy family, lost forever to her own. Probably the most famous story of Gypsy kidnapping—or near-kidnapping—involved Adam Smith, who was said to have been taken as a small boy and returned a few hours later.[28] The thought

of losing the great political economist to a Gypsy band seemed so horrifying that the tale became a useful admonition to wayward or recalcitrant children. The father of the painter Augustus John warned his children that if they "walk[ed] abroad on market days . . . they should be kidnaped by the gypsies and spirited away in their caravans, no one knew where."[29] This possibility became a staple of nursery rhymes, the premise for the plots of popular fiction, and even the stuff of lullabies that mixed comfort and threat:

> Hush nae, hush nae, dinna fret ye;
> The black Tinkler winna na get ye.[30]

Parents also apparently teased their naughty children, much as Mrs. Tulliver does in *The Mill on the Floss*, by telling them that they must be the offspring of Gypsies, not born of English parents.

David Mayall has suggested that the habitual association of Gypsies with kidnapping grew out of the need to account for blue-eyed, fair-haired Gypsy children, who simply did not fit the swarthy, raven-haired stereotype.[31] Indeed, many recent accusations of child stealing have arisen merely from sightings of Gypsy adults accompanied by blond children.[32] In the nineteenth century and earlier, when genetics was unknown and paternity could not be proved, suspicions about true parentage were often close to the surface. Tales of kidnapping and child swapping, in other words, reflect the myth of group homogeneity, as well as the belief in absolute distinctions among racial, national, or ethnic types that almost all groups—but especially dominant ones—hold dear. Gypsies should not have fair children, and the Tullivers should not have a dark-skinned child; otherwise, we cannot be sure of exactly who we are and where we belong. The perpetual and imaginatively powerful divide between light and dark affords cultures one convenient way of drawing the line between self and other. (The belief in detectable class differences operates similarly but with another set of identifying characteristics, such as speech or comportment.) The implicit impossibility of making such neat distinctions, however, haunts all societies, eroding their confidence in the purity of any race or discrete group. Kidnapping stories, captivity narratives, and foundling plots express the anxiety created by adhering to an absolute and inherently fallacious separation between peoples and offer reassuring explanations for differences within groups that exist universally.

Kidnapping stories and Gypsy narratives, as well as the larger tradition of foundling or bastard plots, also signal something of the fundamental mystery of individual origins that, even in an age of scientific sophistication, haunts human psyches. Uncertainty about identity and fantasies about parentage form the basis for Freud's theory of the "family romance." According to Freud's schema, the child's feelings of resentment or sexual rivalry lead him (the child is male

for Freud) to imagine that he is adopted, in reality the offspring of parents of higher social standing, whose superiority elevates the child's image of himself and simultaneously diminishes the stature of the "adoptive" parents, primarily the father.[33] In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century fiction, the child's fantasy became the novelist's plot: Tom Jones discovers that his mother is not a maid but the sister of his prosperous and kindly surrogate father, Squire Allworthy. Oliver Twist, although born and raised in a workhouse, learns that his father has willed him a fortune and that his mother is of genteel birth. The child-stealing stories associated with Gypsies in folklore and fiction lend themselves to the imagined plot of family romance and the literary plot of the foundling. *Guy Mannering* follows this paradigm: Harry Bertram, like Oliver Twist, turns out to be a well-born heir.

There is another version of the family romance and its literary manifestations, however, that involves the fantasy not of social aggrandizement and aspiration, but of lowly or stigmatized birth. The desire to rival and defeat the parent can also express itself as the wish to escape from the bonds of obedience and conformity through the discovery of a secret non-English, non-white (to the extent that Englishness is defined as white) self. Many of the protagonists of Gypsy plots and the writers who gravitated to Gypsies as subjects of art imagined that they had been switched at birth as a way of explaining their inability or unwillingness to adhere to parental expectations. They rationalized their personal idiosyncrasies, eccentricities, or feelings of being "out of place" in the world by inventing a Gypsy lineage. Michael Holroyd tells us that Augustus John longed to be "someone other than his father's son" and went from imagining himself a descendant of Owen Glendower, the last Welshman to hold the title Prince of Wales, to posing as a Gypsy.[34] These narratives of alternative birth—whether that of Augustus John, George Eliot, or Maggie Tulliver—suggest that the longing to be something other than English, Welsh, or Scots was, for some, as powerful and certainly as generative as the fear of losing or diluting their class position, nationality, or race. In the Gypsy version of the family romance, psychological anxiety about and desire for difference are combined with a rebellious zeal against the perceived homogeneity of Anglo-Saxon culture.

Gender Heterodoxy

Writers who used Gypsy plots and figures also often chafed against patterns of gender conformity. They tended to invent Gypsy characters who deviated from conventional forms of masculinity and femininity. When we think of nineteenth-century French traditions of Gypsy representation, sirens, seductresses, and exotic female beauties come to mind. The best-known of these femmes fatales—Victor Hugo's Esmeralda and Prosper Merimée's, then Georges Bizet's,

Carmen—emerged from fantasies of heterosexual male longing.[35] Early-nineteenth-century English commentators noted the lasciviousness and abandon of Gypsy women's dancing, and late-nineteenth-century male bohemians, including some members of the Gypsy Lore Society, conjured Gypsy beauties as objects of desire.[36] But by far the most interesting and memorable literary Gypsies in the nineteenth-century English (or Scottish) tradition are heterodox in their relationship not to chastity but to norms of either masculinity or femininity. Scott's Meg Merrilies, immortalized in poetry, drama, and painting, combines elements of feminine and masculine appearance and affect; Arnold's scholar-gypsy, flower-laden and languid, is a vaguely androgynous dropout from university and manly professional pursuits. These figures launched a tradition of literary Gypsies who transcended the divide between male and female and, through their association with racial differences that loosened the bonds of convention, could circumvent rigid standards of gender difference.

In Freud's theory of the family romance, the male child's fantasy of secret, superior birth expresses his desire to (literally) lord it over his father, perhaps in the context of Oedipal competition for his mother. As the scion of an imagined noble father, the son achieves mastery over his real one and thereby establishes—at least in the abstract—his adult masculinity. In the alternative family romance, with its fantasy of lowly or exotic birth, the son can be said to overcome his father through rejecting a certain idea of mastery and opting out of conventional manly success. The "Romany ryes," or English gentlemen who fostered their own identification with Gypsies, sometimes through language study and sometimes through vagabondage and bohemian habits, rebelled against the strictures of respectability and the demands of bourgeois manhood.[37] Poets like John Clare, Matthew Arnold, and even the ambivalent William Wordsworth used the Gypsy as, among other things, an alter ego free from the shackles of the daily grind and from the modern world of getting, spending, working, and obeying the law. The pastoral, indolent, and sometimes passive male Gypsy of their poems offers a contrast—and a comforting one—to conventional and exigent models of nineteenth-century manliness.

Arnold's scholar-gypsy, to return to him once more, provides an antidote to the "sick hurry" and "divided aims" of "modern life," not by undertaking heroic or noble actions but by "leaning backward in a pensive dream, . . . fostering in [his] lap a heap of flowers" and avoiding contact with the contaminants of civilization.[38] George Borrow's Lavengro, the prototype, along with Arnold's scholar, of the "Romany rye," gives up on both worldly success and heterosexual union to roam in solitary fashion the forests and dingles of Britain and, ultimately, the world. As we shall see, his relationship to the masculine efficacy of his father, a soldier and boxer, works itself out through his identification with Gypsies and pursuit of an unsettled, peripatetic existence. Even Scott's hero Harry Bertram, who finally does resume his rightful place, rank, and title, wanders for years as

a nameless, homeless man whose dispossession and rootlessness mirror those of the Gypsies banished by his father. The Gypsy, imagined as an itinerant outside the economic and social structures of British life, becomes a trope for nonproductive work, refusal of ambition, and the delicacy and softness—the implied effeminacy—of the unsalaried and unharnessed male.

Scott invented Meg Merrilies, the "ancient sibyl" and Gypsy witch of *Guy Mannering*, as a hybrid figure, at once Scottish and "Eastern," male and female. She is six feet tall and of "masculine stature," and her voice hits high notes "too shrill for a man" and low notes "too deep for a woman."[39] The biological mother of twelve children and the surrogate mother of Harry Bertram, she occupies a powerful maternal position and conforms to the image of the mythic female seer. But she is also the leader of her people, the fiercest defender of the rights of her tribe, and the Gypsy who swears to avenge their persecution at the hands of the local laird. She is, then, both masculine and feminine in the roles she plays and in the manner of her dress and speech. This outsize Gypsy leader helped establish the figure of the androgynous—or masculinized—female Gypsy in nineteenth-century literature. There are traces of Meg not only in many contemporaneous works of art, but also in the Gypsy "mother" and fortune-teller played by Edward Rochester in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) and in the character of Fedalma, the Spanish princess who discovers that she is the daughter of a Gypsy chieftain, in George Eliot's *The Spanish Gypsy*. Fedalma, who begins as a romantic heroine destined for a great love match, ends as a celibate leader of her people, the inheritor of her father's mantle, for whom both love and feminine attire are prohibited.

A number of the works of Eliot, the nineteenth-century writer most interested in the literary uses of the Gypsy, exemplify what we might call the female version of the family romance. Although Freud had a hard time imagining a girl's fantasy of social aggrandizement in connection with hostile Oedipal feelings (perhaps because the father, not the mother, establishes family rank and social standing), we can easily see a novel like *Jane Eyre* in terms of the model of the family romance.[40] Jane outclasses her reviled Aunt Reed by marrying Edward Rochester (although her desire for independence takes its toll on Rochester's health and property). But in Eliot's variation, especially in *The Spanish Gypsy* and briefly in *The Mill on the Floss*, the fantasy of stigmatized, rather than elevated, birth frees the heroine from the cultural and literary requirements of the marriage plot. The eccentric female, whether heroine or author, imagines herself a Gypsy as a way of escaping from the exigencies of conventional femininity. The Gypsy's habitual swarthiness becomes a marker not simply of foreignness, of non-Englishness, but of heterodox femininity as well. In the girl's family romance, a fantasy of social stigma masks rebellion against or even defeat of the mother. The mother, customary model and reproducer of exemplary femininity, is replaced by an alien and exotic template that enables the heroine to reinvent womanly identity.

Dissociation

The phenomenon of dissociation refers not, like kidnapping, to a trope but to a mode of representation and its evolving history. Over time, Gypsy identity or, if you will, the quality of "gypsiness" came to be abstracted and separated from Gypsies themselves. It could be argued that there is always an inevitable dissociation between any marginal social group and its representation in literature or in the dominant culture, but, in the case of the Gypsies, the gap between people and image has been especially profound. This is evident on the level of casual language, in which the word "gypsy" can refer to an itinerant dancer or stage performer, a kind of moth, a type of cabdriver, an open-air meal, or an individual—perhaps a scholar—who moves frequently from job to job or place to place.[41] These uses barely call to mind the actual people from which they were derived, nor do they carry the stigma of insult, so neutral do they seem and so wholly separate from any original referent.

A similar dissociation operates between Gypsies and their characterization in literary texts, in which, as Katie Trumpener puts it, "literary traditions [are conflated] with living people."[42] Trumpener argues that this trend deepened over time, reached its ghastly climax during the Holocaust, and extends to the present day, with harsh and even brutal consequences.[43] Although my discussions of nineteenth-century poems, novels, sketches, ethnographies, periodical articles, laws, memoirs, and, to a lesser extent, graphic images support important parts of Trumpener's claim, I offer a few modifications of her argument at the outset. First, although many writers confused symbol with actual people without any irony, some used this conflation self-consciously and pointedly. Both Jane Austen and George Eliot mock their heroines—Emma Woodhouse and Maggie Tulliver, respectively—for failing to distinguish between fiction (or myth) and reality in the matter of Gypsies. In a brief but salient episode in *Emma*, after Harriet Smith returns from her traumatic encounter with the Gypsies on Frank Churchill's steadying arm, the story of her ultimately benign experience with what was, after all, a group of children begins to circulate through Highbury as a drama of terror to be savored and retold. Emma turns the incident into a tale of romance and chivalry, feeling sure that the potential lovers were thrown together by an unprecedented ordeal. Emma's misreading of the event is consistent with her misperceptions of romantic attachments throughout the novel.

In addition, Emma fails to grasp that Frank was fortunately placed to rescue Harriet because he had just come from visiting his secret love, Jane Fairfax. Austen seems to be commenting both on Emma's "imaginist" tendencies (and self-delusions) and on the excessive insularity of Emma's world, in which stories of danger and romance are concocted from the mildest contact with figures whose meanings themselves derive from story and myth.[44] Like Emma's nephews, who

spin Harriet's chance meeting with the beggar children into the "story of Harriet and the gypsies," Maggie Tulliver first envisions her escape to the Gypsy camp on Dunlow Common as a fairy tale.[45] "It was just like a story," Maggie thinks, delighting in being addressed as a "pretty lady" and treated, she imagines, like a queen.[46] The narrator's language undercuts Maggie's childish illusions and arrogant assumptions about the Gypsies' enthusiasm at her arrival. Her confidence becomes panic as she realizes that the Gypsies have no interest in her and as her idealization of them turns to unfounded fear. Both Austen and Eliot deploy the "literariness" of Gypsies: they not only make use of a well-established shorthand of evocation (Austen's Gypsies do not even have to appear in the narrative), but also debunk familiar stereotypes as a way of commenting on their heroines' myopia and delusions. The phenomenon of Gypsies' factitiousness in cultural representation becomes part of the fabric of fiction itself.

Second, the separation between Gypsies and their representation began benignly in the mid-nineteenth century and grew out of the sympathetic identification of writers like Arnold, Borrow, and Eliot with the marginality of Gypsies.[47] The space that opened up between image and actual people was created by the "Romany rye" and other fellow travelers whose own eccentricities and dissenting postures toward Victorian society caused them to gravitate toward the Gypsy as representative outsider. In works like Arnold's "The Scholar-Gipsy" and "Thyrsis" (1866), Borrow's *Lavengro* (1851) and *The Romany Rye* (1857), and Eliot's *The Spanish Gypsy*, we see empathy and intense identification at work, but we also see that the alienated writer or artist begins to stand in for and replace the Gypsy in a cultural discourse that threatens to occlude the already partly invisible object of sympathy. By the late nineteenth century, this eclipse became nearly total and, in some cases, took on a more insidious caste. The members of the Gypsy Lore Society, bohemians and scholars who studied Romany language and customs, were in the paradoxical position of bringing Gypsy culture to light and, at the same time, obscuring it through the force of their own projections.

In certain literary works of the turn of the century, the problem created by dissociation between rhetoric and referent is not projection but caricature: a use of the Gypsy as sign or symbol that is completely emptied of reference to reality, history, or experience. In Arthur Conan Doyle's story "The Adventure of the Speckled Band" (1891), a mystery and its solution turn on a Gypsy band (both tribe and headgear) that is never seen. The evocation of the speckled band is sufficient to cast suspicion on an invisible group of people because of the associations—many of them literary—that accrued over time between Gypsies and criminality. Whereas Austen undermines the myth of Gypsy criminality and demystifies the off-stage Gypsy band in *Emma*, Conan Doyle depends on and never dispels the image of marauding Gypsies that he can conjure with little more than a word or two.

In a third modification of Trumpener's theory of the "literariness" of the Gypsy, I suggest that this form of metonymic representation reaches a dead end in D. H. Lawrence's novella *The Virgin and the Gipsy* (1930). In his story of a middle-class young woman's sexual awakening through her encounters with a charismatic male Gypsy traveler, Lawrence makes use of well-established stereotypes of the physically compelling, emotionally primitive Romany, but he also ultimately challenges them by exposing their reliance on ignorance and misperception. Lawrence both exploits and debunks the cultural myths of Gypsies' elemental passions, association with nature, inarticulateness, and perpetual anonymity. At the end of his story, Lawrence gives his Gypsy an identity and a voice, reversing—or at least exposing—the trend toward the invisibility and namelessness of the literary Gypsy.

Finally, I consider the partly written, partly dictated autobiography of Gordon Boswell, a British Gypsy born in 1895, and the brief statement of John Megel, an American Gypsy who was an informal representative to the United States Holocaust Memorial Council. These texts offer an opportunity to speculate on the connections between writing and self-consciousness in the Gypsies' emergence from the realm of the literary into a history composed by themselves. Boswell writes a personal history that directly or indirectly controverts a number of myths about Gypsy life. Megel suggests that the Holocaust enabled—or forced—Gypsies to recognize themselves as historical subjects and to articulate (through testimony and through institutions like the Holocaust Museum) their relationship to the devastating experience of genocide as well as to a largely unwritten collective past. "Through awareness of the Holocaust," Megel writes, "we will become aware of our own history. . . . [W]e can't prepare for the future until we understand our past."[48] The bitter irony of this point of view notwithstanding, Megel proposes that Gypsies begin to wrest the narratives of their own experience from others and effect social and even political change through claiming possession of the record of the past.

In tracing this movement in the representation of the Gypsy from ancestral kin to phantom and then to historical subject, I want to pose some general questions about the benefits, limits, and liabilities of identification. British literature is filled with apparently sympathetic evocations of Gypsy life. Identification is almost always the source of this sympathy, even for someone like John Clare, who had a keen sense of the economic and political realities that Gypsies faced and the harassment to which they were subjected. Is it possible, we might ask, to champion the Gypsies in their oppression without engaging in the potentially distorting process of personal identification? Without the mechanisms, both psychological and fictional, of fantasies or tropes of family romance, kidnapping, and infants switched at birth? When does identification exceed its ethical bounds and become a kind of projection that obscures even the partial reality of the real Gypsy? At what point is the Gypsy obliterated in the writer's own

search for expression of self, nostalgia for a golden age, or critique of modernity? I have chosen in this book to focus on the Gypsy as surrogate self to the British writer because the most powerful and influential images of Gypsies in the literature of the nineteenth century convey the general longing to reimagine or expand British identity through a wider vocabulary of images and types. This focus should not, however, obscure the fact that Gypsies, like the children of Hagar—although viewed with fascination and desire, understood as a parallel line of descent or the road not taken—remain an abandoned alternative to and a mere proxy for the British self.

It will be clear that I do not follow a teleological line of argument in relation to the persecution of Gypsies in the twentieth century. That is, I consider nineteenth-century British representations of Gypsies and Gypsy life not as preludes to the exterminatory policies of the Holocaust, but as expressions of a variety of attitudes, some highly discriminatory and racist, others sympathetic and tolerant. In this regard, Jonathan Boyarin's argument about the occlusion of the pre-Holocaust European Jew from history is helpful. The horror of the Holocaust, he writes, eclipses the lives of European Jews before the 1930s and makes it almost impossible not to read backward from events that render all earlier forms of anti-Semitism and distorted characterization insidious and potentially violent.[49] The situation of the Gypsies is not, of course, absolutely equivalent, in that even their fate at the hands of the Nazis has been partly occluded, sometimes by an exclusive emphasis on the suffering of Jews. Neither can the relatively sparse documentation of their lives in the nineteenth century be compared with the extensive record available for many European Jewish communities. For these reasons, it may seem offensive to some to concentrate on what is essentially a history of representation, in a manner largely separate from the events of twentieth-century persecution. My aim, however, is to illuminate the cultural meanings of a pervasive and strikingly resilient tradition of representation in the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth, in a time before and outside of genocide.

A Word About Definitions and Terminology

The word "Gypsy" is used throughout this book, even though it is a misnomer bestowed by non-Gypsies and has come to be understood as a term of opprobrium by many of the people it is used to describe. Because the word is used in most of the texts I am writing about, this simply makes my discussion of those works less confusing. I do at times, however, also employ "Romany," the name that is currently preferred in English-language writing. Some English, Canadian, and American Gypsies have referred to themselves as Romanichals. French Gypsies are manouches and eastern Europeans, Rom or Roma. In German-speaking

countries, members of the principal Roma group are Sinti. In order to avoid confusion, I have followed Angus Fraser's lead in using the word "Romani" for the Gypsies' language and "Romany" for the people themselves.[50]

The question of terminology is, to some degree, inseparable from the question of identity. It is not my intention to explore or resolve this issue—rather, my task is to examine myths of identity and conventions of representation—but I wish to acknowledge the controversial and sensitive nature of this matter. Some historians and social anthropologists, especially those with a Marxist bent, have settled on a definition that is based largely on economic categories, occupation, and mode of subsistence. Judith Okely speculates that Gypsies may be a people who "chose to reject wage-labour rather than be proletarianised."[51] She maintains that intermarriage between immigrants and indigenous groups of tinkers, peddlers, pilgrims, and other itinerants occurred so early and so extensively over the centuries that it is difficult to regard Gypsies as a coherent and consistent ethnic or national group. The impulse to see Gypsy customs or even language as having originated in an Indian past, she claims, can indeed be a racist one.[52] David Mayall, who has a similar point of view, emphasizes the idea of the Gypsy as a "racial construct" fostered by gypsiologists determined to find "pure" strains of Gypsies and Romani.[53] Pointing to the documented frequency of intermarriage in the nineteenth century, Mayall wishes to "deconstruct" the image of an authentic Romany culture. Wim Wellems takes the argument that the Gypsy is a social construction even further. He is critical of what he calls the "ethnographic viewpoint," with its "primordial" assumption that Gypsies "constitute a single people with a number of specific characteristics of their own."[54]

Although Okely, Mayall, and Willems rightly direct their critiques at those who both romanticize and revile Gypsies because of a fantastic and insidious belief in racial purity, their efforts at deconstruction are problematic for those who wish to claim a Gypsy identity that has a recognizable linguistic, cultural, and ethnic core. After the Holocaust and certainly since the 1960s, international efforts have been undertaken to claim and document a varied but coherent Gypsy past and, despite the degree of intermingling and national variety, a cohesive and discernible Gypsy identity.[55] The founding of the Gypsy Council in London in 1966 and Ian Hancock's creation of the Romani Archives and Documentation Center there in 1962 (in 1976 the center moved to the University of Texas at Austin) are but two examples of these efforts at political organization and cultural and historical preservation and retrieval.[56] In a recent survey of answers to the question What is a Gypsy? Mayall identified Ian Hancock, Angus Fraser, Thomas Acton, and Donald Kenrick as believers in an "ethnic/racial" or "ethnocentric" classification. He categorizes Judith Okely as a member of the opposing "ethnic/cultural" school, which argues that nomadic ancestry, rather than Indian origin, accounts for the ethnic identity of the Gypsies. Not surprisingly, Mayall maintains that the "key point of contention" between these

two groups "remains that of origins."[57] With many others, I believe that Gypsy identity is a matter of both personal self-definition and history. Varieties of experience and culture and the commonness of intermarriage over centuries affect other transnational groups as well but do not nullify the realities of, say, Jewish or Armenian identity and history—or histories. Misplaced and racist beliefs in the homogeneity of minority groups do not invalidate the power or felt reality of minority identity.[58]

Finally, there is the use of the word "race," a highly elastic and elusive concept that is ubiquitous in nineteenth-century references to Gypsies. Any reader of nineteenth-century writing knows that the term is used very loosely, without a precise or consistent definition. When Gypsies or Jews or, for that matter, Italians are referred to as a race in English texts, a number of meanings of the word coalesce: a group descended from common ancestors, a nation or tribe, a group identifiable as decidedly non-English in appearance and habit. When, at the beginning of *Silas Marner* (1861), the narrator speaks of a "disinherited race," he (or she) employs all these connotations to describe an indigenous but alien-seeming class of men—linen weavers who had left the towns to settle in the countryside.[59] A more specifically anthropological definition of race had also been in use since the 1830s and 1840s, when debates about monogenism and polygenism entered ethnographic discourse. Were all human beings, despite differences among civilizations, descended from a single seed, or did each race—by some accounts, five, and by others, three—have its separate point of origin?[60]

Color of skin was considered a determining factor of race, certainly in the division of the three "great races"—Negro, Chinese, and European (or Caucasian)—but also in the habit of designating arguably dark-skinned peoples, like Gypsies, as a race. No matter how vague the meanings of the word, it almost always implied a group with shared characteristics, although such traits could be either biologically or culturally generated.[61] As the anthropologist George W. Stocking, Jr., makes clear, even as late as the mid-nineteenth century, the use of the word "race" did not connote a "rigidly biological determinist approach." "Given the belief that the habitual behavior of human groups in different environments might become part of their hereditary physical makeup," he writes, "cultural phenomena were readily translatable into 'racial' tendencies."[62] When Gypsies were referred to as a race, then, as they invariably were, the epithet implied a number of characteristics—from dark skin, foreign origin, and inherent inferiority to common ancestry, culture, experience, and sensibility. The word "race" could express a desire to designate ostensibly separate and identifiable "non-English" groups, just as it could convey bigotry, revulsion, and certainly disavowal. I have used the term in this book largely without quotation marks, even though its definitions in the nineteenth century clearly differ from those in the twenty-first.