Gypsyism as a Cultural Discourse on Otherness: The Spanish Gypsy and Other Gypsy Representations in Early Modern England

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I. Introduction

It has been a common notion that gypsies might be descendants of the ancient Egyptians. Obviously, the gypsies themselves did not try to dismiss this notion, because, in the common opinions of ordinary people in early modern Europe, Egypt was regarded as a country which outran all the world in its skill of magic, and mysterious black arts of divination. Even if xenophobia was notoriously endemic throughout Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a reputation for supernatural powers might help the gypsies to offset the worst aspects of persecution against them (Salgado 151-52). The gypsies might argue, “King Ptolemaeus” was their grandfather and “Queen Cleopatra” their “grand matra”, as the Patrico does in Ben Jonson’s masque of 1621 (The Gypsies Metamorphosed 166-69). However, it is certain that they had nothing to do with the Egyptian origin.

Thomas Dekker in Lantern and Candlelight (1608) asserts definitely, “If they be Egyptians, sure I am they never descended from the tribes of any of those people that came out of the land of Egypt. Ptolemy, King of the Egyptians, I warrant never called them his subjects; no, nor Pharaoh before him” (133). According to the modern-day studies, they were originated from India. They seem to have shared a common ancestry with the dom of modern India, the vagrants of “low caste who gain their livelihood by singing and dancing” (Judges xxiv). Their migration to Europe dates as far back as to the eleventh century, but their great movement took place, possibly because of “the hardships suffered by them when the Mongol Emperor, Tamerlane, overran India in 1398” (Salgado 152).

No one can give a definite answer to the puzzle of when the gypsies first appeared in the British Isles, but the turn of the fifteenth century must have witnessed their first arrival in Scotland. In a letter of April 1505, they are reported to have been granted the sum of ten French crowns in return for their performance in the Scottish court (Randall 48). By the time of Henry VIII, they seem to have spread southward to England. English gypsies are frequently associated with the so-called ‘Devil’s Arse,’ a famous limestone-cavern in the Peaks of Derbyshire. The Devil’s Arse, familiar to travellers in Tudor England as a yawning, castle-like hole of the cliff, enjoyed a folkloric reputation as a real-life hell-mouth and hideout for the gypsies, especially as a safe-haven for the king of the gypsies, who is called Cock Lorel. In his masque, Jonson introduces the fictive Tudor rogue, Cock Lorel, as the founder of English gypsies, and he renders a fantastic ballad which describes the awe-inspiring Peak Cavern as being blown into existence by the gluttonous Devil’s thundering fart (The Gypsies Metamorphosed 1102-66). Apparently, Jonson’s description is a parodic antithesis to the divine creation, via God’s breath, of the world and Adam. However, Cock Lorel does not seem to have been regarded as a gypsy leader until Jonson’s masque. According to the pamphleteer Samuel Rid, the “fellowship” of the counterfeit English gypsies was
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