

Sarah Houghton-Walker, *Representations of the Gypsy in the Romantic Period*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. Pp. 294. £60. ISBN 9780198719472.

The theme of identity and representation has in recent years become one of the most researched, written about and hotly contested areas of scholarly work on gypsies, and one which crosses many disciplinary boundaries. This study of literature and, to a lesser extent, art, from the period 1783 (the date of the repeal of the Egyptians Act and the first publication of Heinrich Grellmann's influential study of gypsies) to 1830, the date from which the effects of the 1824 Vagrancy Act were 'beginning to bite' (11), is the latest contribution to this distinctive sub genre concerned with literary and fictional representations of gypsies. While this study does consider the writings of some lesser-known writers, the main part is focussed on the more renowned works of William Cowper, John Clare, William Wordsworth and Jane Austen. A detailed analysis of representations of the gypsy and their use as a literary device to explore contemporary anxieties and concerns is also set within the wider historical context and the traditions and myths surrounding the group. Houghton-Walker consider works in which the gypsy is a relatively minor character who wanders into and out of a text as well as those where the gypsy is the primary subject.

Houghton-Walker sees the Romantic period as a turning point, a cusp, a time of transition when perceptions of gypsies 'altered profoundly' (12) and when the representations in literature marked a distinct change from what went before and from what came after. This is seen as a period when issues around law, morality, art, economic change and class 'coalesce into a pressure pushing on a single point, the figure of the gypsy' (2) and when gypsies were used as a device that enabled writers to articulate contemporary concerns about identity and Englishness. The gypsy in literature is identified as living within and outside conventional society, seen as fascinating and feared, familiar/indigenous and exotic. Houghton-Walker argues that this is the moment they became 'acclimatised' and 'at home' in the English landscape, stopped being foreign and became an accepted part of that landscape; this is the time from when they 'began to belong' (24) and came to represent a 'very particular type of Englishness' (181).

In many ways this comes across as a most convincing argument. Houghton-Walker provides a good sense of the period and the wider societal and economic changes occurring, and the interpretation and mediation of these in literature. Her detailed, textual analysis of a range of lesser and well-known sources is exemplary in its thoroughness. However, my reservations are flagged by the author herself when she writes of 'unavoidable generalisations and loose chronological boundaries' (12). While the start point of 1783 is justifiable, primarily because this marks the first publication of Grellmann's treatise, the end point lacks any distinctive marker and is less convincing. Periodisation aside, my second main reservation concerns the argument that this was a turning point which saw the emergence of the gypsy as acclimatised, indigenous and representing one form of Englishness. While acknowledging this was a key element in the texts analysed, and perhaps a dominant feature of this period, it is also the case that previous representations and (legal) definitions of the group also saw them as just one part of an indigenous nomadic group. Moreover, Grellmann's text and its reproduction in many later forms, established, albeit on the basis of prior scholarship, a distinctive racial definition of the group based on their foreign, Indian origins. So, rather than representing a particular type of Englishness, gypsies became a distinctive racial 'other'. In other words, if this period was a turning point, it was one which went in two directions: the direction identified by Houghton-Walker and also the second, racial path.

This is a well-written and engaging study based on extensive and careful research. Some readers not from a literature background may struggle with some of the close textual analysis, but overall this is a stimulating and provocative account. There could have been more on the complexities, ambiguities and contradictions, and I am not entirely convinced that the developments in representations of the gypsy were quite as compartmentalised or linear as is perhaps suggested here. But this is not to detract from what is a significant and important contribution to the growing literature on the topic of representation on gypsies.

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