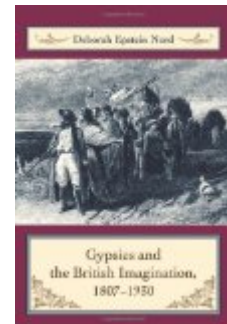


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Deborah Epstein Nord. *Gypsies and the British Imagination, 1807-1930*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2006. xii + 240 pp. \$39.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-13704-1.

Reviewed by Marianne Zwicker (Department of German Studies, University of Edinburgh)
Published on H-Ideas (November, 2007)



Exploring the Idea of the “Gypsy” in British Literature

Although Romani studies is gaining popularity and credibility as an academic discipline, there are still far too few reliable and well-researched books available to anyone wanting to learn more about Romani history, culture, and life. Much of the writing available is tainted by well-established stereotypes and written from an outsider’s perspective, further perpetrating the idea of a mysterious people and ignoring the opportunity to investigate the reality of the situations Romanies face in Britain, Europe, and elsewhere in the world. Due to various factors including a historical preference for oral tradition, written documents by Romanies are scarce, and so writers who were interested in Romani lifestyle, history, and culture, often relied upon their imaginations when commenting on these “mysterious” people and creating “Gypsy” characters. Deborah Epstein Nord examines this very phenomenon among some of most famous writers in British history in her monograph, *Gypsies and the British Imagination, 1807-1930*. She identifies key factors in the construction of these images, such as the mystery surrounding Romani origins, the geographical reality of Romani settlements on the outskirts of society, and the different gender roles in Romani society. Nord examines the way certain literary figures and images were constructed based on these factors and the function of the “Gypsies” as an element of the British imagination.

Nord’s prose is clear and concise and the structure of the book is carefully thought out, ensuring an engaging as well as thought-provoking read. In a well-crafted introduction, Nord gives a thorough background to the subject of Romanies in literature and in writing.

She gives an overview of the key writers and ideas that have worked together to construct the images of Gypsies prevalent in European and, more specifically, the British imagination. Importantly, she addresses the history of the Romanies in Europe and draws attention to the persecution they have faced since they first arrived there, their victimization in the Holocaust, and the continued prejudice against them. Nord acknowledges interesting parallels between images of Gypsies and of Jews in writing, identifying the focus on the unknown origin of the Gypsies as the key difference between perceptions of these two groups. However, while giving the essential historical background to the situation of Romanies in Europe and Britain, Nord never loses sight of her literary focus. She opens with the concrete example of John Sampson’s *The Wind on the Heath: A Gypsy Anthology* (1930), a compilation of more than three hundred selections from novels, plays, etc., mostly from British authors, to convey the ubiquity of the idea of the Gypsy in British literature. Nord’s points for discussion focus on authors such as Walter Scott, George Eliot, D. H. Lawrence, George Borrow, Jane Austen, Arthur Conan Doyle, John Clare, Matthew Arnold, and William Wordsworth.

Nord keenly observes the fear in Britain of losing a simpler life in the face of industrialization and the clinging to a more pastoral way of life in light of modernization, but also a willingness to embrace the modern. All of these were fundamental to the construction of the Gypsy in the British imagination. She writes, “Like the ‘oriental’ or the colonized, racially marked subject, the Gypsy was associated with a rhetoric of primitive desires, law-

lessness, mystery (etc.) with freedoms from the repressions, both constraining and culture building of Western civilization" (p. 3). This important observation is at the core of Nord's analysis and gives a concrete reason for the function of the idea of the Gypsy within literature.

Nord organizes her chapters by the different images which existed of the Gypsies and examines what these say about British society at that time. This is what is groundbreaking about her work: she takes these notions and from the outset looks at what these stereotypes say about the people who constructed them, rather than what they say about the people they were supposed to represent. For example, her first chapter, "A 'Mingled Race,'" discusses the Gypsies in Walter Scott's *Guy Mannering* (1815), where the character of Meg Merrilies is the manifestation of the feared hybridity of the Gypsy people: "Hybrid in a variety of ways male and female, Scottish and 'Eastern'"—she transcends distinctions of sex and nation and occupies the position of an ur-parent or original forbear" (p. 26). Meg Merrilies comes to represent the horror of interracial mingling and the fears of unknown and non-British origins. As Nord puts it, Britons were afraid of the "porous boundaries between the Gypsy world and their own" (p. 24). In chapter 5, "The Last Romance," Nord discusses a different stereotypical image, the romantic construction of the Gypsy at the core of writing by members of the Gypsy Lore Society. Other chapters include the image of the Gypsy as the

vagrant poet in George Borrow's *Lavengro* (1851) and *Romany Rye* (1857) and the "impossible Gypsy" in George Eliot's novels. Importantly, Nord points out that often these accounts—fictional imaginings of Gypsies and their history—were taken as sources for historians who read them and re-presented these stories as something authoritative. Nord's work is important for acknowledging this and for putting in perspective the images of the Gypsies that exist and that are too often taken for reality. In her coda, Nord observes that with Romanies taking possession of the knowledge of their history and integrating that past into their own identity, "the phantom Gypsy recedes into the realm of the literary" (p. 174).

Meticulously footnoted and with an extensive bibliography, this book is an excellent starting point for anyone wanting to know more about the history of the idea of the Gypsy in British society. Nord's sources are up-to-date and well selected. She also provides excellent references for those who want to look beyond those ideas and to discover the reality of the situation of Romanies in Europe and in Britain. I would have liked to see more references to books written in recent years by Romanies in Britain and Europe. In the last part of her introduction, Nord clarifies her use of the word "Gypsy," but I wonder if perhaps this should have come first or been footnoted earlier, as some Romani groups find the term offensive. However, these are small criticisms in a book that should be a welcome addition to Romani and literary studies.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-ideas>

Citation: Marianne Zwicker. Review of Nord, Deborah Epstein, *Gypsies and the British Imagination, 1807-1930*. H-Ideas, H-Net Reviews. November, 2007.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13842>

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.