

The Literary Encyclopedia

The Spanish Gypsy

Eliot, George
(1868)

- Jodie Matthews (University of Huddersfield)

Genre: Play, Poetry. Country: England.

Set in fifteenth-century Andalucía, Eliot's narrative poem, conceived as early as 1864 and finished in 1868, tells the story of Fedalma, a young woman experiencing the clashing of two duties.

Raised in luxury and as a Catholic by her fiancé Don Silva's family, the heroine was born a Gypsy. In a reversal of the usual child-stealing plot involving Gypsies, she was snatched from her parents by marauding Spaniards during a raid against the Moors. Her origins first appear to burst out from behind a façade of nurtured control when she dances publicly and sensuously in the town square to the horror of her husband and the Catholic religious authorities:

Sudden, with gliding motion like a flame
That through dim vapour makes a path of glory,
A figure lithe, all white and saffron-robed,
Flashed right across the circle, and now stood,
With ripened arms uplift and regal head,
Like some tall flower whose dark and intense heart,
Lies half within a tulip-tinted cup. (Book 1)

When her father, Zarca, is also captured by the Spaniards, he recognises her, contrives a meeting and discloses her heritage. With the acceptance of this heritage comes a commitment to leading her people, a role that means leaving her lover behind. Her father envisages a future for her as the queen of the Gypsies as they found a homeland in Africa, and refuses to accept any reconciliation between the life of a noblewoman and the hardships that the impending political struggle will bring.

Fedalma chooses the fate of the Gypsies over her life with Don Silva but, such is his love for her that he joins her people too. In a final confrontation with his former allies, however, he is unable to follow Zarca's orders, and he and Fedalma are separated forever.

In her notes on the poem, written in 1868, Eliot described how she wanted to tell the story of a woman believing, like the Virgin, that she shares in the ordinary lot of womanhood, full of young hope, but discovers that she has been chosen instead to fulfil a great destiny. This conceit was influenced by a painting of the Annunciation by Titian that Eliot saw in Venice. Eliot used the idea to consider the results of duty, choosing a Spanish context in which to do this. Having decided on her theme, she was also influenced by Cervantes's *La Gitanilla*. She read all that she could about the names by which Gypsies called themselves in Europe, opting for *Zincal* because of the negative connotations of the English term *Gypsy*. From her journal, it appears that Eliot wrote the text in prose first and later versified it.

Despite some critical reviews (in the *Pall Mall* and the *Westminster*) the poem sold well, with the second edition being bought up by booksellers on the first day of its release and the third selling so quickly that the publishers prepared in haste a cheaper edition to follow it.

More recently, the text has been seen as important insofar as its central character and literary structure informs Eliot's later novel, *Daniel Deronda*. Fedalma is compared in the poem to Miriam, sister of Moses, and it could be said that she is a literary sister to Deronda, who departs Britain to help found a Jewish state. As a text in its own right, however, *The Spanish Gypsy* has been critically neglected and, some would argue, rightly so. Recent scholarly attention on the representation of the figure of the Gypsy has begun to change that perception, as the poem offers an insight into the figurative language used to describe Gypsies in Europe in the nineteenth century. They are, Zarca says,

Wanderers whom no God took knowledge of
To give them laws, to fight for them, or blight
Another race to make them ampler room;
Who have no Whence or Whither in their souls,
No dimmest lore of glorious ancestors,
To make a common hearth for piety. (Book 1)

The Spanish Gypsy is powered by an energetic, event-filled narrative. The dense poetic images to be found elsewhere in Eliot's prose are also in evidence here, but Eliot's style is perhaps burdened in the poem by attention to minute historical detail. Her characters frequently make expansive rhetorical speeches, and it is in these that the author's intellect and interest in the philosophies of belief, morality and identity are most apparent.

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