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McKay, Brenda, "Race and Myth: The Spanish Gypsy" (1995). *The George Eliot Review*. 251.
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Brenda McKay RACE AND MYTH: *THE SPANISH GYPSY*

Although it cannot be claimed that George Eliot's poetry ranks with her prose fiction, it is nevertheless unjustifiably marginalized in discussion of her work. Among the more distinguished pieces – which include the important blank-verse drama 'Armgarth' – is George Eliot's longest excursus into poetry, *The Spanish Gypsy*. Set in Spain, this drama is the spiritual background of themes later developed in *Daniel Deronda*, on the nature of racial inter-relationships. In *Romola* too, Eliot had shown an interest in exploring a culture different from that of England, but also sharing many points of resemblance with that country. The medium of poetry in *The Spanish Gypsy*, however, enabled her to develop as well her growing interest in symbolism, in a compression of meaning, as her conception of realism changed. She became more interested in the organic form of a work of art, as opposed to her earlier emphasis on the necessity of a 'realistic' mirror of the external world. Writing in verse enabled her to use a more heroic treatment than usual, and to create correspondingly more heroic protagonists.

The Spanish Gypsy has a vast intellectual range, showing amongst other things an impressive ability to employ image clusters like those on the nature of myth. Her condensation of image and extended narrative form are two competing dynamics in the work. Some passages are remarkable, such as the rhetorical vigour which characterizes the opening pages that describe the whirl and clash of different cultures. The poem is rarely read and discussed, yet it is the starting point of her profound thoughts about race, that helps us understand her aims in what is arguably her greatest work, *Daniel Deronda*.

In *The Spanish Gypsy*, George Eliot is investigating the different mythological traditions of man, particularly Classical traditions of the West and the Judaism of the Near East. She seeks to create a dynamic, spiritual but secular, intellectual relationship between different races as she deplores the fate of persecuted races like the Jews and Gypsies in relation to imperial powers like late Medieval Spain.

The catalyst for the dawning of the Renaissance was the dynamic meeting of those two important mythological streams, Classical and Judaeo-Christian thought; and George Eliot seeks to bind together these myths in a type of mythological synthesis, in an idealist, perhaps Utopian account of race, which contributes to the union of the dispersed fragments of man's scattered psyche, pointing to the possibility of an ideal, secular Religion of Humanity which will transcend petty racial barriers. One perceives the influence of Jewish Cabbalistic writers like Isaac Luria on George Eliot in her emphasis on the inter-connectedness of the human family. Luria saw the exile and release from exile as analogous to the relationship of certain souls and families of souls: a parallel to this is the place originally occupied by the individual, integrated soul of Adam, before its scattering and dispersal with Adam's fall. Cabbalists saw Adam as the soul that initially, and still potentially, contained all souls (and therefore all races). There was a need to return to Adam the primary

man, since his fall scattered the sparks of soul everywhere, and they became diffused in matter. Elinor Shaffer has drawn attention to the fact that in Cabbala (and George Eliot also),

the moral task of man... is to restore his primordial spiritual structure [as a type of unfragmented Adam], and so contribute to the restoration of the spiritual structure of mankind.... The experience of exile as migration of the body became the symbol for the exile of the soul in Jewish belief.¹

There should be a movement toward the spiritual unity of different races. As Miller, a character at the Philosophers' Club in *Daniel Deronda*, succinctly puts it, 'We're all related through Adam... until further showing to the contrary'.² Halevi, another Cabbalist writer who influenced George Eliot, likened the Jewish exile to suffering from consumption. Hence the significance of Mordecai's illness in *Deronda*, in that it represents an important aspect of the Jewish soul, sick and in exile (see the *Kuzari*, vol. 2, p. 34, vs 30).

In *The Spanish Gypsy*, connection is made between race, myth, religion, and family; but the difficulty of attaining one great unified 'soul of multitudes'³ through racial transmission is recognized in the ultimate failure of Fedalma, the heroine of the poem. Nevertheless an attempt is made to seek a social charter explaining the fundamental features of relationships in given societies and between different races.

Free play of the imagination in mythology reveals structures of human thought underlying the development of mankind; similarly, in an analogical sense the action of the poem is based on a complex series of allusions to past mythologies which have contributed to Western civilisation. Myths of the past, especially Biblical myths and Classical myths of ancient Greece and Rome, are codified in a sub-structure underlying the story. George Eliot would have agreed with John Addington Symonds that 'myths, by reason of their symbolic pregnancy, ... are everlastingly elastic'.⁴ She would also have shared the view of James Kissane in his recognition of the 'primarily subjective origins of myths, their adaptability to the conceptions of succeeding generations, and their resulting enrichment by the process of imaginative transformation and elaboration'.⁵

Characters and events in the poem are images in an intricate symbolic pattern. As Felicia Bonaparte has established in her study of *Romola*, George Eliot from that novel onwards came to understand myths as symbols; her use of symbolism was born from her discovery that, while the particular and the individual were great discoveries of realistic narrative, the eternal and transcendent were lost. As Bonaparte says 'It is just when religion – the world of the eternal and transcendent – no longer commands faith, as in the scepticism of an empirical age it no longer did, that it becomes mythology'.⁶ The mythological allusions are not ephemeral images – they are poetic equivalents of meaning which cannot be conveyed in literal action; Eliot's use of a mythological substructure in the poem becomes 'a metaphor through which mankind attempts ... a coherent vision of human existence.'⁷

During the nineteenth century the Classics of ancient Greece and Rome experienced a revival as extensive as their revival during the Renaissance, and George Eliot's knowledge of the Classics, as well as of the Bible and other Jewish literature, was so remarkable that, to quote Bonaparte again, 'they were absorbed into the very texture of her mind'.⁸ Only in the nineteenth century did classical mythology fully cease to be regarded as heresy and superstition, and come to be considered (as it was by George Eliot) as a symbolic expression of parts of the collective human consciousness. Her emphasis on the varieties of class, cultures and races implied that each was a unique outcome of a people's environmental and historical experience, following the dispersal of mankind from its single original root. A people's uniqueness was embodied in its mythology, which was important for the development of mankind, since each embodied the historical, religious and ethical traditions of race – were complementary expressions of the collective human psyche. Though not reducible to a common measure, all myths to George Eliot were manifestations of a divinely human immanence realizing itself in the spiritual development of humanity as a whole. 'The great Herder', as she called him, said that these collective expressions of humanity's psyche arose from an 'internal prototype'.⁹ Myths to George Eliot represented 'the seeds, the gems, the silent harps that lay buried with memories of old renown' (*The Spanish Gypsy*, p. 6).

Like Fedalma's jewels in the poem, myths become symbols – are 'precious signs/ Of long-transmitted honour'; they are 'the sharers of my heritage' (102). 'These gems have life in them: their colours speak' (103). 'They say what words fail of' (104): that is to say, language is an inadequate representation of the meaning of such symbols: 'There's an ocean round our words/ That overflows and drowns them' (104). 'Speech', says Silva, 'is but broken light upon the depths of the unspoken' (104). George Eliot implies that we disregard aspects of this inter-related heritage – as we disregard other races – at our peril. Thus, for example, in many respects sixteenth century Spain remained drab, and the Cabbalistic school reached its most fruitful period outside Spain in the diaspora. The implication in the poem is that by eventually deciding to expel the Jews from the country, Spain suffered great loss: for she fractured what was really part of her own heritage.

In the search for some degree of synthesis the nations of the world, like the Gypsies under the leadership of Fedalma's father, Zarca, in the poem, should seek a 'Holy Place, a hearth that binds us in one family'. Allusions to the very ancient furies, to Achilles, Antigone, Miriam, Moses and Christ suggest beacons in man's journey, leading to Zarca and, after his death, Fedalma herself. Fedalma carries a tremendous symbolic weight. It is in connection with Fedalma that we come across one of the fundamental pre-occupations of Victorian mythographers as well as of George Eliot herself – the problem of solipsism (which implies fragmentation away from one's society) and the possibility of escape from such a state of mind: this parallels Jewish aspirations to return to an unfragmented Adam. Some Victorians felt that, with the development of the scientific mind and intellectual progress, there came an unfortunate fragmentation of the individual from his community – an estrangement, through self-conscious personal vision, from collective mythic perceptions. For Herder, true progress meant 'restoration of the primitive sensibility and the

poetic forms of expression which had existed before metaphysical abstractions had dried up man's imagination'.¹⁰

Fedalma rises to the occasion; and in sacrificing personal desire for the betterment of her race, she says: 'I will take this yearning self of mine and strangle it' (163). Many mythological parallels underlie George Eliot's depiction of her, giving added resonance to the poem: one thinks of the Virgin Mary (Zarca's confrontation with Fedalma, when he reveals that she is not Spanish but a Gypsy who was adopted as a baby, clearly suggests the annunciation), Miriam (who nurtured Moses despite Pharaoh's commands), Ariadne (she brings 'the invisible thread to guide myself toward that lost self', says Silva), and Antigone, in her rebellion against the laws of the community in which she has been brought up for the benefit of her kin when she frees the imprisoned Gypsies. Classical and Hebrew traditions are thus drawn together.

In the depiction of the Gypsy leader Zarca, too, there is a sense in which, like Fedalma, he is a hybrid figure, in that his prophetic character (which repudiates Christianity) echoes many prophetic figures of the past: Prometheus (a comparison George Eliot herself explicitly make in 'Notes on *The Spanish Gypsy* and Tragedy'); he has also, we are told, been schooled in 'lore from the Hebrew, deftness from the Moor, /Knows the rich heritage... of nations fathered by a mighty Past'; and, like those 'beings lonely in their greatness', he resembles 'Moses, Christ and Mahomet' in being a visionary denied personal experience of the fulfilment of his vision. In fact, nearly all the characters in the book are hybrids. In an early letter, George Eliot attacked Disraeli's theory of a 'pure' race as being 'without a leg to stand on'. There is paradoxically a Oneness in the heterogeneity which has arisen over the aeons.

George Eliot uses the image of chains to represent man's inter-connectedness. Duke Silva, the lover to whom she is betrothed, gives to Fedalma an ornamental chain which, together with certain jewels, Silva's men have plundered from the Gypsies. Fedalma's half-conscious racial memory, before she knows the full history of her heredity, enables her to discern a link between herself and the persecuted Gypsies:

I know it is those Gypsy prisoners.
I saw them, heard their chains. O horrible... (105).

The chains and jewels, she later comes to realize, come to represent 'her people's blood, decking her shame' (p. 142). This partly reflects Cabbalistic belief that jewels echo the essence of their previous owners: 'This man's fate [Zarca's] hovering about the thing he used to wear, /Has laid its grasp on mine appealingly' (120). The plunder of jewels from the Gypsies suggests symbolically that Spain has plundered their heritage through persecution. In fact, the Jews, Moslems and Gypsies, inhabiting the same country, are not separate at all, but are an integral part of Spain's heritage, which she self-destructively wishes to destroy. The chains bring to mind the fact that Joseph was sent to Egypt in chains, imagery that suggests a link between those persecuted races, the Jews and Gypsies.

George Eliot also traces back in narrative the geographic migration of Western civilisation, from its later development in the West to its origins in Asia Minor: reference is later made to remote beginnings – to ‘little swarthy tents/ Such as of old perhaps on Asian plains/ Or wending Westward past the Caucasus/ Our fathers raised to rest in’ (238). She also anticipates the westward trip of that pivotal figure in history, Columbus, to the discovery of the Americas, and in fact the action of the poem begins about the day Columbus sailed: ‘This man’, says the narrator,

....is the pulse of all mankind,
Feeding an embryo future, offspring strange
Of the fond present.... (8).

He heralds the coming together of different fragments of the human psyche. Columbus is also referred to at the beginning of *Romola*; and in fact, as with *Romola*, the poem opens in the year 1492. George Eliot clearly regarded this date as a turning point in man’s history – a symbolic moment in man’s evolution. Cordova is also mentioned several times in the poem – and we recollect that Maimonides was born in that city: the fact that George Eliot is alluding to the Jewish philosopher is confirmed when we learn later that Silva was ‘schooled at Cordova’ by the learned Jew, Salomo Sephardo, who quotes Halevi’s celebrated remark, that Israel ‘is to other nations as the body’s heart’ (210). The image beautifully conveys the idea that all the races of the world belong to what Mordecai in *Daniel Deronda* calls the one ‘great body of nations’ – they are all One – and that The Jews, in the role of the heart pumping blood to all the organs of the body, have a special, central place. All of these organs emblemize what George Eliot elsewhere refers to as ‘the common mind of humanity’.¹¹ It is Judaism’s belief in the divine Unity which, says Mordecai, gives ‘a binding theory to the human race’ (*Daniel Deronda*, p. 802). Judaism, as a central influence in the West, thus features in the poem.

But, in addition, says the narrator, ‘other futures stir the world’s great heart’ and find ‘a new audience’: this is the revival of interest in the Classics:

The poet-scholar spreads the Homeric page...
For now the old epic voices ring again
And vibrate with beat and melody
Stirred by the warmth of old Ionian days. (6-7).

And:

The maimed form
Of calmly-joyous beauty, marble-limbed,
Yet breathing with the form that shaped its lips,
Looks mild reproach from out its opened grave
At creeds of terror. (7)

The collision between Judaeo-Christianity and Classical Greece is a catalyst for the dawning of the Renaissance: thus:

The vine-wreathed god
Fronts the pierced Image with the crown of thorns. (7)

Also, there is contact with Africa, when the Gypsies migrate there in the attempt to find a homeland. And mention is made of 'Moorish land/ Where Allah lives unconquered in dark breasts/ And blesses still the many-nourishing earth/ With dark-armed industry' (p 238). 'Moors and Hebrews of Bedmar/ Our [Gypsy] kindred by warmth of Eastern blood' says Zarca (332).

George Eliot thus draws links between different races, as well as past and present and an 'embryo future'. An ideal world, where all races communicate, where attempts are made to bind together the fragments of man's psyche, is anticipated.

But the attempt to bind different mythologies together breaks down. This is because the Gypsies have no mythology of their own. As Zarca puts it, the Gypsies are

Wanderers whom no God took knowledge of
To give them laws,...
No Whence or Whither in their souls,
No dimmest lore of glorious ancestors
To make a common hearth for piety. (142)

Thus the Gypsies need redemption – need to be educated into a type of nationalism, with a 'hearth that binds us in one family' (147), before they can join the families of mankind.

George Eliot draws attention to the fact that the Gypsy character has been degraded by the contempt felt for it by other races; it has been "Crushed underfoot, warred on by chance like rats' (143). The result is that it has become 'A race that lives on prey as foxes do/ With stealthy, petty rapine' (142). George Eliot felt that it was necessary, in advocating better treatment of a race, not to disguise 'the ludicrous and ugly aspects' that resulted from that race's mistreatment: for if brutality creates a race of saints, then it has served a moral purpose. In reality, the 'terribly tragic element' in the relationship between races, she said, is the retribution 'lurking in the vices of the oppressed'.¹² Zarca (and Fedalma after him) thus becomes a potential redeeming figure, who aspires to create greatness amongst his race - which, however, is still merely an abject race, 'untutored, unbefriended, unendowed' (143). 'Because our race has no great memories' (i.e. myths), states Zarca, he asks Fedalma to

...help me bless this race taught by no prophet
And make their name, now but a badge of scorn,
A glorious banner floating in their midst. (147)

Unfortunately, Zarca is tragically killed, and Fedalma is invested (unfairly) with her father's qualities as a leader. But she fails as a prophet, partly through racial strife, partly because of the oppressed status of women, and partly because she does not have the qualities that she has been invested with:

She saw the end begun.
The Gypsy hearts were not unfaithful: she
Was the centre of of the savage loyalty
Which vowed obedience to Zarca dead.
But the great force which knit them into one,
The invisible passion of her father's soul,....
Was gone. (360)

The Gypsies scatter in a type of cultural amnesia, and the woman fails in the desire to create racial integration, so that the 'great purpose fed with vital fire.../ Would be a faint tradition, flickering low/ In dying memories, fringing with dim light/ The nearer dark' (361).

Thus *The Spanish Gypsy* illustrates a 'devastating scepticism'. A wide gap exists between the real and the ideal of racial unity. The ideal is not possible at this point in history. As Isobel Armstrong remarks, 'George Eliot is more honest about the fragility of her idealist accounts of race than is often thought'.¹³

The attempt to come to grips with racial problems is defeated. The ideal of creating an inter-connected spiritual union between races based on their myths ends in failure. George Eliot's poetry shows more pessimism than her novels, and in *The Spanish Gypsy* her outlook is more sceptical than it is in *Daniel Deronda*, the open-endedness of which suggests that, as opposed to the Gypsies' failure in their search for a homeland in Africa, the finding of a Jewish homeland is a possibility. Fedalma's attempt to find a situation representing racial cohesion – a 'life in union with multitudes', where there is no 'sense of separateness' (93) – remains perhaps a Utopian ideal to which to aspire.

Notes

1. E.S. Shaffer, 'Kubla Khan' and the Fall of Jerusalem: *The Mythological School in Biblical Criticism and Secular Literature, 1770-1880* (Cambridge, 1975) p. 255.
2. George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, ed. Barbara Hardy, (Harmondsworth, 1986), p. 589. All further references are to this edition and will be cited in the text.
3. George Eliot, *The Spanish Gypsy*, Cabinet Edition (Edinburgh and London, 1878), p. 270. All further references are to this edition and will be cited in the text.
4. John Addington Symonds, *Essays Speculative and Suggestive* (London, 1890), p. 313.

5. James Kissane, 'Victorian Mythology', *Victorian Studies* (1962), 18-19.
6. Felicia Bonaparte, *The Tryptich and the Cross: The Central Myths of George Eliot's Poetic Imagination* (Brighton, 1979), p 15.
7. Ibid, p. 16.
8. George Eliot's knowledge of these literatures has been ably demonstrated by Bonaparte, op. cit., William Baker, *George Eliot and Judaism* (Salzburg, 1975), and C.V. Rendall, 'George Eliot and the Classics', in G.S. Haight ed., *A Century of George Eliot Criticism* (Boston, 1965).
9. J.G. Herder, *Outlines of the Philosophy of the History of Man*, translated by T. Churchill (1784; rpt. London, 1800), p 151, quoted in George W. Stocking, Jr., *Victorian Anthropology* (New York, 1987), p. 20.
10. Frank E. Manuel, *The Eighteenth Century Confronts the Gods* (New York, 1967), pp. 288-289; as quoted in Janet Burstein, 'Victorian Mythography', *Victorian Studies* (1975), 312.
11. *The Letters of George Eliot*, ed. Gordon S. Haight, 9 vols (New Haven and London, 1954-78), I, 246.
12. Ibid, VI, 196.
13. Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics* (London and New York, 1993), p. 370.