

"The Damned Fraternitie": Constructing Gypsy Identity in Early Modern England, 1500–1700. Frances Timbers.

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The representation and experience of early modern English Gypsies can be approached through two sets of sources. Creative literature and satirical pamphleteering established the hostile stereotype of lazy, wandering, fraudulent pickpockets and fortune-tellers. The records of parliamentary legislation and local justice exposed the dealings of Gypsies with communities and authorities. Though Tudor statutes made them felons, deserving death, Gypsies also fell under the vagrancy laws and were treated more as irritants than pariahs. Frances Timbers has worked through many of these sources to produce the first focused monograph on Gypsies in Tudor and Stuart England. The work announces its origins in a University of Victoria seminar "Magicians, Witches and Gypsies," with acknowledgments dated "Samhain."

The author's use of the lowercase *gypsies*, rather than *Gypsies*, reflects her belief that bearers of that label were neither an ethnic group nor a distinctive people, but rather a subset of deceptive vagrants. She challenges the widely held view that Gypsies were part of a Romani diaspora, originally from India, that appeared in Western Europe in the late Middle Ages and reached England at the beginning of the sixteenth century. She doubts that they used an Asian language, domesticated as Anglo-Romani, but used instead a form of thieves' cant, like the rest of the cony-catching underground. Rather than originating as migrants, retaining elements of a distinctive Romani culture, she supports the notion that Gypsies were homegrown British travelers whose socially constructed identity emerged from the collapse of feudalism and "the transition from manorialism to capitalism" (40). Tudor and Stuart Gypsies (or gypsies), she concludes, "were actually vagrant Englishmen in disguise" (28). They formed a fraternity of falsehood that anybody could join.

That Timbers shares these beliefs with some early modern witnesses and some modern scholars does not make them true. The Elizabethan anti-Gypsy statute imagined "Egyptians" as a false and subtle company of vagabonds who had transformed themselves by disguising their apparel, speech, and behavior. The Jacobean satirist Thomas Dekker depicted Gypsies as dropouts and ne'er-do-wells who adopted outlandish costume and artificially darkened their skin. Dozens of commentators repeated the canard that made Gypsies counterfeit. Timbers chooses to believe them. The Gypsy persona is treated here as a cultural product, the result of official displeasure, hostile labeling, and the opportunist adoption by itinerants of a performative Gypsy identity.

Although she insists that her work is historically grounded, rather than present minded, Timbers leans heavily on theorists who deny Gypsy ethnicity or dispute its Oriental origins. She finds support from radical constructionist sociology, anthropological fieldwork among modern Traveler-Gypsies, and the writings of

Traveler activists. She also cites the work of historicist literary scholars, such as Paola Pugliatti and Bryan Reynolds, treating them as social historians. She is dismissive of historical linguists who have traced the Romani roots of “the alleged gypsy language” (25). She makes no mention of the Romani vocabulary (quite different from cant) recorded at Winchester in 1616 and discussed in print since 1996. She ignores DNA evidence for the Indian ancestry of European Roma, now fully demonstrated by whole genome analysis. She also posits elisions between the figure of the Gypsy and the caricature of the witch, for which her principal exhibit is an eighteenth-century satirical print, from a quite different period and context. She warns against “speculative fancy” (117), but her location of Gypsy origins among Scottish tinkers or homegrown misfits is no more grounded in evidence than her linking of Gypsies with morris dancers and fairies.

The sources that Timbers cites tell a story of labeling and cultural construction, but they also reveal the experience of itinerant Gypsies as they made their living and interacted with mainstream society. By the late sixteenth century most English Gypsies were indeed English born, but they belonged to a community that was separate as well as scorned. Gypsy ethnicity was inherited as well as constructed, fluid, flexible, and self-replicating, outlasting the early modern period. The source of the title phrase “damned fraternitie” is nowhere cited, though it may be associated with John Awdeley, *The Fraternitie of Vacabondes* (1575), who does not actually mention Gypsies.

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