



# The Gypsy Role as a Plot Device of Romance in Jane Austen's, "Emma"

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The current paper discusses the traditional role of gypsies in Jane Austen's novel Emma. The gypsy image is functioned as a romance by the writer to show the nature of those who are known as being part of old traditions, such as, fortune telling, robbery, and entertainment too. Jane Austen presents them as they are, yet she links the gypsy nature to the plot of her novel as they have a considerable role in interweaving the events. Gypsies' participations in the novel reflect a notable influence upon characters' lives and their relationships. The study starts with the introduction which briefly presents how the gypsy image has been adopted by literature in general and by novelists in particular. It also includes analysis of some selected quotes and scenes from the novel through which the gypsy role can be discussed. At last, the study ends with the conclusion which sums up the final result as far as the subject is concerned.

**Keywords:** Gypsy figure, Emma, plot device, Jane Austen, romance traditions.

## Introduction

Stories have been told about gypsies throughout a very long and murky history. Gypsy people are said to be part of the actual Romany nation, which remains an almost obscure fact. Their history reads their entrance to France in the early fifteenth century and Great Britain gradually in the sixteenth century, following their expulsion from Spain in 1492. Thereafter, in French and British literature, the gypsies have become known as a transfigured collective trope trying to escape from the everyday thievery, exoticness, licentiousness, foreignness, and the ability to read the future. They also become a narrative source for many narrative works that show them as child-thieves' dealers and adult tempters. By the nineteenth century, gypsies were firmly established as archetypes of the romantic imagination and the Gothic tale, as much as they used to be actual people roaming the byways of the English and French countryside. As it is noted:

"The Gypsies have [...] held special appeal for the bohemian imagination of artists, poets, dramatists and fiction writers [...]. In fine art and "high-brow" literature, in the less



"respectable" penny dreadful and railway literature, and in both light and serious operas, the Gypsies regularly appear in the familiar guise of exotic, dark-skinned, nomadic and romantically alluring rural nomads" (David, 2004).

Throughout the nineteenth century, novelists and poets represented gypsies as a complex series of meanings. For instance, *Jane Eyre* has a famous gypsy interlude when Rochester assumes the guise of a gypsy fortune-teller to interrogate Jane. Maggie, in *The Mill on the Floss*, appears as a little girl who runs away to join the gypsies. Moreover, gypsies are used as figures of escape, exotica, and fortune-tellers in Balzac's novels as well. In Louisa May Alcott's novels, she treats gypsies as a trope for outdoor pleasure and sexual licentiousness. As for Edward Bulwer Lytton, the gypsies are invoked as the dark ancestors of dangerous characters. Considering real gypsies, the eighteenth and nineteenth century European accounts stress the absolute racial apartness of gypsies as well as their status as a degenerate breed of humankind. Such racial apartness includes the strong gypsy disinclination for marriage outside the clan. A member of one of the gypsy clans clarifies that "the most dreaded thing of all Romany parents is that a son or daughter... run away and marry a house dweller" (John, 1974). Moreover, in his *The Descent of Man*, Charles Darwin assumes that gypsies never intermarry and they stand as evidence to refute the idea that skin colour follows from climate: "Of all the differences between the races of man, the colour of the skin is the most conspicuous and one of the best marked. Differences of this kind, it was formerly thought, could be accounted for by long exposure under different climates. The view has been rejected chiefly because the distribution of the variously coloured races, most of whom must have long inhabited their present homes, does not coincide with corresponding differences of climate. The uniform appearance in various parts of the world of gypsies and Jews, though the uniformity of the latter has been somewhat exaggerated, is likewise an argument on the same side" (Charles, 1871).

The gypsies' refusal to fit into the prevailing social and economic system renders them into being disliked and eliminated from civilisation. In order to make money, they rely on "fortune-telling, hawking, secondhand goods, and clearing discarded waste" (Celia, 1999). Even when they work as musicians or hawkers, these activities are often a form of indirect intimidation and thievery. According to their hygiene standards, gypsies are seen, by the typical British citizen, as strange inferiors. They also have the reputation of having unrestrained licentiousness and involvement in prostitution. The figure of the female gypsy is attributed to her descent from Cleopatra, which was legendary (Westley, 1840). This is pointed to through the depictions of such poets as George Grabbe in his poem, "The Lover's Journey", in which he describes a gypsy woman whose "light laugh and roguish leer express'd / The vice implanted in her youthful breast" (The Eclectic Review). The lines show the gypsy woman as a symbol for temptation and a reference to the popular idea that gypsies steal children; that is why, it is not too difficult to see why respectable citizens fear and avoid them. They steal children either to keep them or for the purpose of ransom. Ross mentions an example of similar kidnapping cases



when the three-year-old child, namely Adam Smith, who later wrote *Wealth of Nations*, was stolen by gypsies but he was snatched back a few hours later (Ian Simpson, 1995).

There was a wide use of child snatchings during the nineteenth century by fictional literature, in an attempt to employ the narrative device of these children's stories who used to be stolen by gypsies to historical reality. The tale of little Adam Smith has become a springboard for a raft of nursery. It has also been pointed out that "If the great Smith, a man so important to the building of British civilization, found himself in danger of absorption into an alien tribe, so, too, might any careless child" (Deborah Epstein, 2006). The child stolen by gypsies reformulates an ancient device of romance where a child is sold to or stolen by a group of outsiders.

## **Methodology**

### **Emma: Plot and Romance**

In Jane Austen's world, gypsies are used but not as a usual feature, nor in general does she use so directly the figures and plot devices of romance. In *Emma*, however, the gypsies are central. The famous gypsy episode in this novel shows Emma's protégée, Harriet Smith, who falls into the hands of gypsies who harass her and try to steal her purse until she is rescued by Frank Churchill; a handsome young man who happens on the scene. Critics see that the gypsy subplot can be explained in terms of the thematic opposition that the novel asserts between social realism and romance, for the night before the gypsy interlude, Harriet had been at a ball in which she was shunned publicly by Mr. and Mrs. Elton. The novel's hero Mr. Knightley comes to the rescue of Harriet into the dance. Emma is confused about which rescue Harriet has valued, Mr. Knightley's at the dance or Frank Churchill's with the gypsies. This later confusion helps complicate the love plot. Moreover, the undoing of the confusion confirms Austen's moral and social point that Mr. Knightley's rescue is far more valuable to Harriet than is Frank Churchill's. As Debora Epstein Nord summarises this thematic point of the gypsy episode: "Emma turns this incident into a tale of romance and chivalry, feeling sure that the potential lovers were thrown together by an unprecedented ordeal. Emma's misreading of the event is consistent with her misperceptions of romantic attachments throughout the novel". Nord also argues that "Austen seems to be commenting on the insularity of Emma's world, a world in which stories of danger and romance result from the mildest contact with figures whose meanings themselves derive from stories and myth" (Deborah Epstein, 1998).

The gypsies appear as odd figures and their presence complicates other issues in the novel. Austen plays with the conventions of gypsies for her own purposes. She mocks the romantic conventions on one hand, and she creates complex resonances between these conventions and her own plot and characters on the other hand. She employs two romantic archetype elements of the gypsy; the purported ability to tell the future and the purported desire to steal children.



This is ironic with Emma's own future-telling, the matchmaking, and her desire to create a family romance for Harriet Smith, giving her a noble lineage. Furthermore, Austen considers participants in the view that gypsies, as non-racially English, must be understood as operating beyond the usual cultural constraints. The gypsies' historical identity has been taken as putative invaders, outsiders who are understood as having no respect for English laws or class structure. Gypsies constitute a specific challenge to Western Enlightenment values and they always stand apart from the Western cultures: "Moving through civil society, the Gypsies apparently remain beyond reach of everything that constitutes Western identity [...] outside of historical record and historical time, outside of Western law, the Western nation state, and Western economic orders, outside of writing and discursivity itself" (Katie, 1992).

Harriet herself has some uneasy consonances with the gypsies who attack her due to her illegitimacy and her role as a relative outsider in Highbury society. A chief anxiety about what might happen to a beautiful young lady who is taken unaware in the road, which really happens to Harriet. Such happening adds more to the reputation of gypsies. Evangelicals and evangelicalism, in which Austen is interested, see the gypsies as a race desperately needing rescue from their amoral lives and their irreligious beliefs. Attempts should be done in order to assimilate them into settled and respectable society (Mayall, 2004). Although Austen does not treat the gypsies in Emma for reform, she is aware of promoting such reform.

Harriet is troubled, not by a group of men and women, but rather "half a dozen children, headed by a stout woman and a great boy" (Emma, p. 333). These gypsies are after stealing Harriet and they would be content with her whole purse. Frank Churchill chases them on foot. Austen is careful to give a reason for Frank's being without his horse: "The pleasantness of the morning had induced him to walk forward, and leave his horses to meet him by another road, a mile or two beyond Highbury" (Emma, p. 334). Frank confronts the gypsies and implies a certain level of brutality that he admits without embarrassment: "The terror which the woman and boy had been creating in Harriet was then their own portion. He had left them completely frightened" (Emma, p. 334). His behaviour towards a woman and several children seems to be void of chivalry. Moreover, Frank does not confront the adult male members of the gypsies who are hidden in the neighbourhood and responsible for directing children and women towards stealing people. He instead leaves Emma to alert Mr. Knightley, the magistrate, about the set of people in the neighbourhood and goes on his way. This is another reverse of heroic behaviour.

The romance traditions that are related to the gypsies are brought through irony in this novel. Emma's disastrous propensity for matchmaking is set against gypsies' status as fortune-tellers. In the beginning of the novel, Emma is seen as a fortune-teller when she predicts for the newly wedded Westons. Mr. Woodhouse confirms that Emma's predictions, that the wedding is a lucky guess, are as good as any gypsy's: "Ah! My dear, I wish you would not make matches



and foretell things, for whatever you say always comes to pass" (Emma, p. 12). Later when she matches Elton and Harriet, Emma muses, "It would be an excellent match; and only too palpably desirable, natural, and probable, for her to have much merit in planning it. She feared it was what everybody else must think of and predict" (Emma, pp. 34–35). Once Emma assumes that Frank and Harriet are meant for each other, prediction and matchmaking conjoin with the gypsies. Emma notes that "she could not but hope that the gypsy, though she had told no fortune, might be proved to have made Harriet's" (Emma, p. 340). Here, Emma fills in the expectation about what the gypsies are to do, and she foretells in their stead. On the other hand, John Clare, who wrote many Romantic poems, the subject of which is the gypsies, describes fortune-telling as "nothing more [on] witchcraft than the knowledge of village gossips and the petty deceptions played off on believing ignorance" (Michael, 2004). This description presents a startling statement to Emma's fortune-telling as, for Clare, the fortune-teller deceives herself (Coleridge, 1985); (Darwin, 1871); (Esplugas, 1999).

Regarding the gypsy motif of stealing children, the gypsies attack Harriet when and where there are two relatively defenceless children about Highbury: Emma's nephews, Henry and John. Their parents have left them with their grandfather Mr. Woodhouse and Aunt Emma for several weeks. It may be impossible for their mother, who is depicted at the beginning of the novel as being very protective, to leave them with the loving but inattentive grandfather and Emma who is much involved with her own schemes and socialising. Yet, Austen creates such a circumstance and places the boys there in order to remind her reader of the gypsies as a threat in romances; which is stealing children.

In an effort to measure up to Emma's hopes for the social elevation, Harriet has to find a family romance. According to Freud, a family romance is related to one's persistent belief or fantasy when someone is brought up by the wrong family, stolen or switched in the cradle. In the meantime, that one's unknown real family is far superior to the parents whom anyone seems to have. As for Harriet, she has no intention to find out who her real parents are. In Emma, the focus is on the importance of the family romance to romantic tales of the gypsy. Emma, on her side, is sure that Harriet descends from elevated family. She advises Harriet: "The misfortune of your birth ought to make you particularly careful of your associates. There can be no doubt of your being a gentleman's daughter, and you must support your claim to that position by everything within your own power, or there would be plenty of people who would take pleasure in degrading you" (Emma, p. 30).

Harriet seems to be like the gypsies and a child stolen by them since no one knows from where or whom she comes. Harriet and the gypsies are natural in the sense that both have no known origin or even certain social position. She can be of a high or low origin. Mr. Knightley adopts the degrading view against her claiming: "She is the natural daughter of nobody knows whom, with probably no settled provision at all, and certainly no respectable relations" (Emma, p. 61).



Austen is interested in her attempt to imply that Harriet, like the gypsies, has no fixed abode. In this sense, Harriet becomes like the gypsies, an outsider to proper English society (Kramp, 2004); (Locke, 1994).

Harriet's status as an outsider is reinforced by other elements of the gypsy romance episode in the novel. When she comes across the gypsies, Harriet is not alone. Miss. Bickerton accompanies her. Miss. Bickerton is excessively frightened by the gypsy child whom she and Harriet first meet. This reflects the gypsies' reputation of being thieves. However, one may argue that if Harriet is an outsider like a gypsy, so what about her white skin, unlike the gypsy people who are usually known for their dark skin. Harriet's whiteness makes it possible to turn her from an outsider into a symbol of England's desired future. Michael Kramp pursues this matter in detail: "Austen's use of the alien dark-skinned gypsies in juxtaposition to the native White woman allows the novelist to accentuate the Englishness of the latter by stressing the foreignness of the former. As an illegitimate and orphaned member of the "large and populous" village of Highbury, Harriet initially appears similar to the nomadic outsiders, but as a young, White, and anonymous female resident of this neighborhood, she also represents the future promise of her local and national community" (Michael, 2004).

Thus, Austen offers what must have been the substance of Harriet as "She suffered very much from cramp after dancing, and her first attempt to mount the bank brought on such a return of it as it made her absolutely powerless-and in this state, and exceedingly terrified, she had been obliged to remain" (Emma, p.333). Another consonance is brought between Harriet and the gypsies. In Austen's day, the word "mountebank" refers to a quack or shyster as well as an entertainer who fooled people. In *Biographia Literaria*, for example, Coleridge yokes mountebank with one who "picks your pocket" (Jackson, 1985). Harriet's cramp here links the gypsy episode back to the Crown ball and Mr. Knightley's rescue. Before this episode, the reader has witnessed Harriet in a joyful mood, dancing and grateful to escape the snubs of the Eltons: "the cruel state of things before "opens the way to "very complete enjoyment and very high sense of the distinction which her happy features announced....she bounded higher than ever, flew farther down the middle, and was in a continual course of smiles" (Emma, p.328). Flying, bounding, and the cramp all suggest that Harriet perhaps does not completely belong to the Highbury society; that she is physically rambunctious. Her physical paralysis in the face of the cramp from dancing calls Harriet's fears of rape since she is lying on ground as the gypsies approach. This reminds Austen's readers of yet another way which Harriet can be rendered as socially untouchable, just as the gypsies whom she meets.

Gypsies are traditionally known as storytellers, which is one of their roles that has been reawakened in Emma. They enter the plot of the novel in the third chapter of the third volume. Emma and Frank's romantic plot starts in volume three, but this plot seems to have a steam which is being lost: "Her own attachment had subsided into a mere nothing" (Emma, p.315). Beside believing wrongly that Frank has romantic feelings for her, she still believes that those



feelings are subsiding as well: "It was a clear thing he was less in love than he had been" (Emma, p.316). Another plot that comes to a dead end is that of Harriet and Mr. Elton when Harriet is surprised to find out that the idealised Mr. Elton of her imagination never existed: "It seemed as if her eyes were suddenly opened, and she were enabled to see that Mr. Elton was not the superior creature she had believed him" (Emma, p.332). Then, the chapter that will contain the gypsies begins with a summation of how things stand from Emma's view point: "Harriet rational, Frank Churchill not too much in love, and Mr. Knightley not wanting to quarrel with her, how very happy a summer must be before her!" (Emma, p.332).

The plot starts up by the gypsies presenting Emma with a new red herring to pursue and a new matchmaking venture: Harriet and Frank, who Emma assumes will be drawn together, as all romance heroines and heroes are, through the hero's daring rescue of the heroine. Emma resolves not to speak of her hopes neither to Harriet nor to anyone else. She is not a gypsy to tell a fortune to Harriet. She is seen to follow logic instead: "Could a linguist, could a grammarian, could even a mathematician have seen what she did, have witnessed their appearance together, and heard their history of it, without feeling that circumstances had been at work to make them peculiarly interesting to each other?" (Emma, p.335). She has previously employed similar logic when she has observed that Mr. Dixon and Jane Fairfax have romantic feelings for each other. For Lorang, "From the melodramatic intrusion of the gypsies, the action of the last third of the book builds"<sup>15</sup>. Emma's mistake about Harriet masks Harriet's interest in Mr. Knightley, while Emma's mistakes about Frank masks Frank's interest in Jane Fairfax. At the climax of the book, Emma discovers who Harriet truly felt was her rescuer; Mr. Knightley rather than Frank. This is "a much more precious circumstance" (Emma, p.406). Furthermore, Emma may have lost Mr. Knightley to Harriet and so one can see the logical culmination of the gypsies' intervention. Since Emma has appropriated the gypsies' fortune-telling, her own fortune as one self-deceived has been set.

The gypsies have been reabsorbed into the repetitions of romance by the end of the chapter that introduces them for the gypsy adventure and has been reduced to a story that is demanded by Emma's nephews: "Harry and John were still asking every day for the story of Harriet and the gypsies, and still tenaciously setting [Emma] right if she varied in the slightest particular from the original recital" (Emma, p.336). Like other children, Harry and John are required to show accuracy in the repetition of the story, yet showing this influences Harriet's quick and thorough adventure which becomes a part of what is called the gypsy lore. Katie Trumpener treats the incident of gypsy in the novel as a focus on the oral memory: "In the wake of the gypsies' disruptive passage, special care must be taken to hold on to a history that exists only as an oral tradition; the psychic trauma of social violence is subsumed into a narratological compulsion to repeat" (Katie, 1992). There is a voice which says of the assault by the gypsy: "How the trampers might have behaved, had the young ladies been more courageous, must be doubtful; but such an invitation for attack could not be resisted... her terror and her purse were too



tempting, and she was followed, or rather surrounded, by the whole gang, demanding more?" (Emma, pp.333–334). Telling the details of the attack story is considered to be a cautionary tale of romance. After what has happened, "The gypsies [sic] did not wait for the operations of justice; they took themselves off in a hurry" (Emma, p.336) (Nord, 2006); (Nord, 1998); (Ross, 1995).

Two more touches belong to the gypsies who appear in the novel. The first one happens when Mrs. Elton is planning for an outing at Donwell Abbey. She is eager to play the role of Marie Antoinette with a donkey instead of a sheep. She writes to Mr. Knightley: "There is to be no form or parade—a sort of gypsy party. We are to walk about your gardens, and gather the strawberries ourselves, and sit under trees, and whatever else you may like to provide, it is to be all out of doors—a table spread in the shade, you know. Everything as natural and simple as possible" (Emma, p.355). Austen apparently points to Mr. Elton's dangerous romantic pretensions. Explanation is continuous by Mr. Knightley hinting at the fact that simplicity and nature are meant to be restricted: "My idea of the simple and natural will be to have the table spread in the dining-room. The nature and the simplicity of gentlemen and ladies, with their servants and furniture, I think is best observed by meals within doors" (Emma, p.355). Touches of gentility, furniture, and indoors are used by Mr. Knightley for reproaching Mrs. Elton and the gypsies' romantic world as well (Trumpener, 1992).

However, being grateful to the gypsies is Mr. Knightley's ultimate reaction at the end. The gypsies also have a part in the end of the novel since, as it has been believed, they come back to fulfill the spell of the happy ending. They, in fact, do much to the plot when they appear as the last instigators of a comic ending which seems to be appropriate.

## Conclusion

Jane Austen functions the gypsies' conventions in her novel, *Emma*, as useful tools for the design of the plot development. Although the romance tales about gypsies mostly narrate the dark side of their life, they still have an influential role in other people's lives. In *Emma*, they appear as thieves, children kidnappers, and fortune tellers. However, they are also taken to build up a necessary existence where they can participate in making some reconciliation between characters through their talents of telling future events, such as marriage and the like. At the beginning of the novel, Emma is seen as telling fortunes like gypsies since she predicts for the newly wedded Westons. Harriet and Frank, for instance, are also brought together into matchmaking by the gypsies who present Emma as an assist predictor to the hero and heroine. Emma follows her logic towards the relationship between Frank and Harriet, especially, she wrongly believes Frank's love for her. At the same time, she expresses hopes that are similar to the gypsies' fortune telling of this relationship.



Being good story tellers, the gypsies are used by Austen as plot devices in her story development because she needs talented event tellers, other than the novel characters. This use enhances the narrative strength and plot value to the reader's sensibility and realisation of the whole story. Such awareness consequently leads the reader to appreciate the role that gypsies perform in the novel through the fortune telling which is parallel to the origin characters' roles in telling the events of the novel as a whole.

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