

Book Review

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WALKER, Barbara G., 1983. **THE WOMAN'S ENCYCLOPEDIA OF MYTHS AND SECRETS**. San Francisco: Harper & Row. Pp. xii + 1124; paper, \$19.95.

The notes on the back of this impressive volume, which is almost three inches thick, state that it is a "feminist encyclopedia, twenty five years in preparation...to uncover precisely what other encyclopedias leave out or misrepresent". There has been a desperate need for just such a work for centuries, among other things to dispel the vast amount of superstition and myth which has attached itself to women, and because of which women have been victimized. The book makes it frighteningly clear how deep-rooted and pervasive this victimization is, and for that Ms. Walker must be thanked; she is evidently concerned with correcting the misrepresentation and exploitation of women, and has quite clearly done an enormous amount of research towards this end. But in so doing, she has in turn misrepresented and exploited Gypsies, as a result causing this reviewer at least to call into question the fidelity of her statements in areas which he is less competent to judge.

This misrepresentation is certainly not conscious, and simply reflects the quality of her sources -- indeed, it is doubtful whether Ms. Walker actually perceives Gypsies to be real, contemporary people at all. Her accounts are all in the past tense, a not uncommon characteristic of non-scholarly writing on Gypsies, and her sources are without exception popular, rather than academic, and all written by non-Gypsies. When non-Gypsies go to other non-Gypsies for their information about Gypsies, some perpetuation of error is to be anticipated.

References to (uncapitalized) "gypsies" are scattered throughout the volume, but most discussion is found under the entries

Gypsies (pp. 360-363), *Hair* (pp. 367-371) and *Sara-Kali* (pp. 890-892). A sample of the general tone runs

The matriarch was the center of gypsy tribal life. "Everything that went on around a tribal mother resembled the old pagan sex rites" [quote not referenced]. Her husband was a drone, whose function was to impregnate her. The tribe supported him in idleness, but looked down on him as a non-productive member. If he failed to beget perfect children, he was "accidentally" killed, and another stud-chieftain took his place. "Tribal mothers were often widowed half a dozen times over" [quote not referenced]. The male functionary closest to a tribal mother was not her husband but "the coaxer", a man trained from an early age...to know all the sensitive and erotic zones of the female body (p. 361).

A later quote reveals that the source of this information is Derlon (1977), itself a valueless piece of fiction but which, in the same paragraphs from which the compiler culled the above, states that "The majority of Gypsies don't practice elaborate sexual relations", and "For the majority of Gypsies the sexual act has no other meaning than procreation" (*op. cit.*, pp. 133-134). Whether Derlon is right in these statements or not, the fact that they occur in the same source indicates "selection out of context" to make a point on the part of Ms. Walker; not the most unbiased journalistic practice.

There are blatant errors almost serially, and space does not allow for them all to be dealt with here. But to illustrate, ^{together} with "Smith", "Faa" is said to be "the most common gypsy surname", and to mean "fay" or "fairy" (p. 361). This is in fact an old lowland Scottish surname and not Gypsy in origin at all, and adopted by them only after their arrival in Scotland in the late 1400s. Similarly,

The popular gypsy surname Kaldera or Kalderas may have been derived from [the name of the Hindu goddess] Kali-Devi (p. 363).

The reference given for this is Esty (1969:67) which, on being consulted, has the following:

...the Kalderaš tribe, that huge group of Gypsies spread halfway around the world...governed in patriarchal fashion. There is no king or chief; all the men in the *viṭsa* make the decisions. No mention of Walker's *Kaldera*, or of popularity, or of surnames. Elsewhere she has a footnoted reference to a G.W. Summers which does not appear in her bibliography at all. Most of her information, however, is derived from Leland's masterpiece of Victorian occult literature *Gypsy sorcery and fortune telling* (1891), from Berlon's *Secrets of the Gypsies* (1977) already mentioned, and Trigg's pot-pourri, *Gypsy demons and divinities* (1973).

The shakiness of Walker's scholarship, and her zeal to find sexual symbolism in almost everything, could probably be illustrated by statements taken from anywhere ~~else~~ in the book. Just one that this reviewer chanced upon was the suggestion that Cinderella's glass slipper "perhaps stood for the Crystal Cave by which pagan heroes entered the uterine underworld" (p. 186). Continental versions of the Cinderella story have her wearing fur slippers, not glass ones, the English version resulting from a misinterpretation of French *vair* "squirrel fur" as *verre* "glass" (Smythe-Palmer, 1883:145). Again, if such errors are evident in material one is able to judge, how reliable can we assume the rest of the book to be? It is much to be regretted that once again, like filling a tray in a cafeteria, the latest publication to deal with Gypsies presents an eclectic hodgepodge of tid-bits with as many different origins as her equally inaccurate sources provided. It is a pity too, because if the compiler had taken the time to undertake some *serious* research, and consulted any one of the growing number of scholarly works available on the subject, she would have found plenty of aspects of different Gypsy cultures to support the feminist cause. As it is, Gypsies have been presented in a way more suited to *Chariot of the Gods* or the *National Enquirer*, in a volume which purportedly deigned to "uncover misrepresentation".

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