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The Motif of 'Gypsy' Child-theft in Dutch History Painting

The Fetish of Whiteness and Dutch Realism

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After its publication, the fame of the extraordinary Spanish *gitanilla* quickly spread across Europe through translations, stage adaptations or various re-workings, and caught and held the imagination of several generations of Dutch artists for almost a century. Without a claim to exhaustiveness, it can be argued that between 1630 and the first decade of eighteenth century, the literary drama of the noble girl-child stolen and raised by 'gypsies' was interpreted on canvas by Jan Lievens (1607–1674), Paulus Bor (1605–1669), Jan van Noordt (1623–1681) in two almost identical paintings, Leendert van der Cooghen (1632–1681), Abraham van den Tempel (1662–1672), Johannes Voohout (1647–1723), Godfried Schalcken (1643–1706), Willem van Mieris (1662–1747) in possibly four paintings, David Rijckaert III (1636–1661), and Philips Wouwerman (1619–1668) in three paintings. It also features in drawings by Simon de Vlieger (1601–1653), Isaac Isaacsz (1599–1649), Pieter Jansz Quast (1605/06–1647), Leonaert Bramer (1596–1674) and Willem van Mieris; as well as in engravings/etchings by Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–1669), Adriaen van de Venne (1589–1662), Pieter Nolpe (1613–1652), Jacob Folkema (1692–1767), Rienk Keyert (1719–1775) and Pierre-François Basan (1723–1797) (cf. Gaskell; de Witt 1999).

Taking an overall look at the works of these artists, I can highlight two recurrent patterns that require further attention. Firstly, all Dutch painters, except for Leendert van der Cooghen (**Fig. 4),** have chosen as the main subject of their history paintings the twofold moment of recognition – the climax in Cervantes' tale, depicting either Don Juan's first encounter with Preciosa and the acumen of true love, or the governor and his wife finding out about Preciosa's true identity

and reuniting with their lost daughter. In line with the original story, the moment of child-theft presents little interest and is ignored. Secondly, in almost all of the paintings, the moment of anagnorisis, i.e. the revelation and ascertainment of Preciosa's high birth and nobility, is rendered in strong colour/light contrasts, placing an emphasis on skin colour, where Preciosa's whiteness appears to be not only the work's central message but also the artist's chief artistic achievement.

In the following sections, I focus on three oeuvres by Jan Lievens, Paulus Bor, and Jan van Noordt, based respectively on Cervantes' *novela* and two of its spinoffs – Jacob Cats' poem *Het Spaense Heydinnetje,* and Mattheus Tengnagel's theatre play. Comparing and contrasting them with the other paintings, I consider how colour symbolism works in conjunction with face visibility and realism, on the one hand, and with racialisation, on the other. It should be noted that the process of racialisation, in Robert Miles' definition, takes place on two overlapping levels: a social level, which expresses itself in classism or class racism, and an 'ethno-racial' level. It is hardly surprising that Preciosa's high birth,

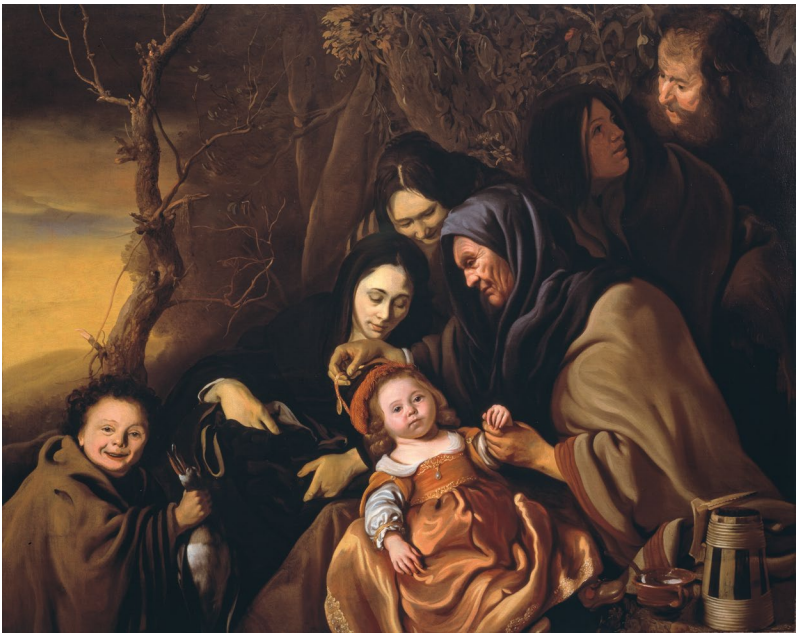

Fig. 4. Leendert van der Cooghen, *Constance (Preciosa) Abducted by the Gypsies (J. Cats, Het Spaans heidinnetje)*, 1652–1681, oil on canvas, 131 × 167.5 cm.

noble self and unsullied body are consistently coded in white that – let us be reminded again – is also the colour of light, while 'gypsy' figures are rendered as a dark, contrastive and sullying background. All these paintings feature deft compositions where figures of varying skin colours are organised within a broader framework of black/shadow-and-white/light contrast, an artistic technique that has hardly been discussed by scholars[29] with regard to 'gypsy' figures so far, if at all.

5.1 *Preciosa and Doña Clara* (1631) by Jan Lievens

> *An object represented in white and black*
> *will display stronger relief than in any other way;*
> *hence, I would remind you, O Painter!*
> *to dress your figures in the lightest colours you can,*
> *since, if you put them in dark colours,*
> *they will be in too slight relief*
> *and inconspicuous from a distance.*
>
> Leonardo da Vinci, *Leonardo's Notebooks* (98)

Variously identified in catalogues as *The Soothsayer* or *The Gypsy Fortune-Teller*, the painting in **Fig. 5** is the most ambitious *portrait historié*[30] made by Jan Lievens for the courts in The Hague. Probably commissioned by Amalia van Solms, the painting catered for the specific interests of Frederick Hendrik, the Prince of Orange; it is documented that already in 1632 the work hung over a fireplace in the Stadhouder's quarters in The Hague (Lloyd de Witt 110). The titles given to it derive from a description in the inventory of the princely collection at Noordeinde,

29 For further reading on the intersection between Art History and Postcolonial Studies or Critical Whiteness Studies, see Schmidt-Linsenhoff; Greve; Peter Bell.

30 This French term refers to portraits featuring the depiction of eminent individuals in the guise of biblical, mythological or literary personages. A synthesis of history painting and portraiture, *portrait historié* originated in the Netherlands in the later sixteenth century. Lloyd de Witt remarks that the face of the seated woman, dressed in black velvet silk trimmed with gold aglets, bears resemblance to that of Amalia van Solms in her portrait by Hornthorn of 1631, and in her Rembrandt's portrait of 1632 (112). David de Witt disputes this resemblance and suggests that the lady's portrait should be interpreted as a celebration of a young woman of talent. It may refer to one of the female luminaries that Constantijn Huygens (Frederik Hendrik's secretary) was in contact with while organizing the commission of the painting under the patronage of the Prince of Orange (2007: 132).

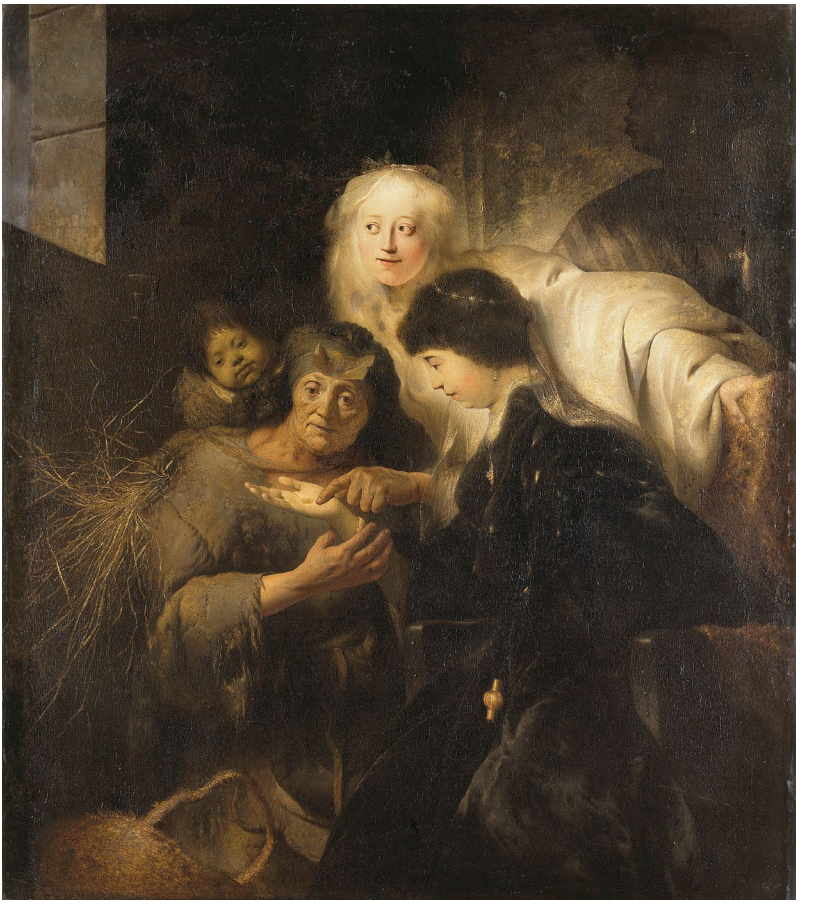

Fig. 5. Jan Lievens, *Preciosa und Doña Clara*, c. 1631, oil on canvas, 161.2 × 142.3 cm. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Gemäldegalerie.

which reads: "A painting of a soothsayer or a gypsy fortune-telling by palm-reading, by Jan Lievensz of Leiden." (de Witt 1999).

For a long time, Lievens' work posed an iconographical puzzle to art historians, who assigned it to the category of 'gypsy' genre depictions. The latter are standard genre compositions created with the purpose of warning against superstition and gullibility (de Witt 1999: 183). Renaming the painting to *Preciosa and Doña Clara*, David de Witt, however, demonstrates in an article of 1999 that Lievens' work is not a genre-scene of fortune-telling but a history painting[31] visualizing a scene from Cervantes' tale "La gitanilla". In fact, it is possibly the first and the only preserved painting[32] of the period that is based directly on Cervantes' text,[33] and not on the moralizing transformations the story suffered at the hands of the Dutch men of letters – Jacob Cats and Matheus Tengnagel – some years later. Depicting Jan Lievens' first-hand interpretation of Cervantes' story, *Preciosa and Doña Clara* presents a theme "that remains unique in Dutch Baroque painting" (181).

The singularity of the theme lies in the following: unlike most of his contemporaries, Lievens did not go in for the climactic scene of recognition but chose an episode of lesser importance. This is one of the introductory, irony-laden scenes in which Preciosa accepts the magistrate's invitation and visits his family to find out that no one in the household, not even the magistrate and his wife Doña Clara, have even the smallest coin to give her for the ritual of fortune-telling. Eventually, one maid finds a silver thimble, and Preciosa uses it as a lucky coin. Lievens chose to visualise the act of fortune-telling but, taking a departure from the text, depicted the old 'gypsy' as the palm-reader.

31 History painting, a type of narrative painting, was theorised as the most elevated form of art in seventeenth-century Holland and the rest of Europe. A true history painting, in Albert Blankert's definition, is "a picture with large figures in which an episode from a story is depicted" (111). Painters and their public had a preference for biblical stories, mythological fiction, episodes from antique history as well as scenes from Italian literature and the works of contemporary Dutch writers, including Cats' *Spaan Heydinnetje*. All these stories – coming from books – were perceived as true and represented in the same realist manner. Characteristically, a taste for the erotic was paired with moralising content (109–113).

32 Lievens probably produced another depiction of the same theme, copied by Leonaert Bramer; the black-chalk drawing of the latter is now in the Kupeferstichkabinet in Berlin (de Witt 1999: 185–6).

33 The language favoured by the court in The Hague was French. In 1614, one year after Cervantes published his *Novelas ejemplares*, the first French translation appeared in Paris, followed by six reprints (de Witt 2007: 132; see also Heinsworth 58–74).

Dutch artists were cautious to dissociate Preciosa from palmistry, a point at which Lievens was also compliant (Gaskell 267). Moreover, Lievens culled two standard elements from the genre tradition that are missing in the text, and this is the second distinguishing feature of his work. He placed a golden coin in Doña Clara's hand and a baby child on the back of the old 'gypsy' with his face gazing out at the viewers. By incorporating the coin and the child into the scene, Lievens combined the moralising message of the genre tradition with the particularity of history painting (cf. de Witt 1999: 184).

It is, however, more interesting to consider why Lievens focused on this particular scene. In my view, he was gripped by Doña Clara's description of Preciosa's luminous beauty, a memorable highlight in the text, which would present itself as a challenge to any painter interested both in portraiture and in rendition of light. It is obvious that Lievens subjected Cervantes' *novela* to a careful reading. In his day, there was a new approach to history painting that Rudi Fuchs explains with a new orientation towards texts and the emergence of the Dutch school of realism. Painters of history paintings were expected to have carefully studied and contemplated their source texts and were openly commended for doing so (65–72). "[P]ainting a history meant reading the text scrupulously, but with imagination, providing the moment with the richest significance, and constructing the picture around that moment" (70). Therefore, it is worth quoting the passage that Lievens must have mused over:

> As soon as the Gypsies entered, Preciosa shone forth among all the rest like the light of a torch among other, fainter lights. And so, all the women reached up to her: some embraced her, others looked at her, one group blessed her, another group praised her. Doña Clara said:
> "Yes, this can really be called golden hair. These really are emerald eyes! (…) Do you tell fortunes, my child?"
> "In three or four ways," Preciosa replied.
> "That, too?" said Doña Clara. "On the life of my husband the constable, you must tell mine, golden girl, silver girl, pearl girl, garnet girl, heavenly girl [niña del cielo], which is the most I can say. (Cervantes 25)

With his brush, Lievens materialised a fictional ideal of female beauty and the colour symbolism it goes with, turning it into the central subject

of his monumental history painting. In his rendition, broad colour/light contrasts become the main compositional principle as well as a demonstration of his virtuosity. It is not Don Juan who, chancing a glance of Preciosa's whiteness, is invited to recognise her true identity but the viewer. The white colour is a sign of Preciosa's virginity and thus a proof of her virtuous self and noble origin. The illegible note on the forehead of the old 'gypsy', which has occasioned a lot of speculation among art historians,[34] is also on display for the viewer to see, being nothing else but the hand-written confession presented by Preciosa's putative grandmother. Along with the many other proofs, it ascertains that *la gitanilla* is the governor's stolen daughter and a noblewoman.

Much more persuasive than the written evidence and truly miraculous is Preciosa's glowing and soaring visual presence. Occupying the upper centre of the painting and emitting a white glow with golden undertones, she is the primary source of light in the dark setting. It is as if this golden light emanates from within her being, illuminating the space, the other figures, and her own body of which we can see only her radiant head and an outstretched left arm covered with drapes of white silk satin with a golden pattern. The impression is of a translucent, almost transparent celestial creature that is more spirit than flesh. To slightly tone down that ghostly effect and assert Preciosa's humanness, Lievens has given some non-white colour to her cheeks, a touch of pink. The evidence of whiteness, which the painting displays for the viewers' discernment, is the outcome of a successfully completed series of trials. Preciosa's purity is verified, growing in value, for she has passed the test of sullying 'gypsyness'. Her white glow is an important result that the painting publicly celebrates, inviting the viewer to also acknowledge it, for the colour of Preciosa's skin has no other purpose than that of legitimating and naturalising social hierarchies. In effect, the rite of passage – a sort of genetics experiment launched in the virtual space of seventeenth-century public imagination, if we rephrase it in modern terms – concludes that aristocrats, by

34 Wurfbain is the first to suggest, in his article of 1997, that Lievens' work is more than a genre painting, grounding his interpretation in an attempt to decipher the inscription on the said note. David de Witt argues in an article of 1999, that the inscription is illegible and it is rather the "radiant, young blond woman, wearing a glowing white robe", "a light form standing out against dark surroundings" that offers the key to the meaning of the scene (181). Lloyd de Witt, in turn, briefly concludes that the note cannot be explained by Cervantes' text (111). As I demonstrate, a piece of paper is a recurrent element in the paintings under scrutiny here, appearing in at least four of them, and pointing directly to the *novela*.

virtue of their blood, are predestined to occupy a superior position in society. Even if they happen to mix with the lowliest of the low, both females and males have the necessary self-control and know how to preserve their purity – in its spiritual (virtue) and corporeal (virginity/continence) dimension – and thus prove their inborn superiority. De Witt draws the same conclusion, albeit in an acquiescent manner: "In the end, the story confirms the power of blood that sparked a love between these two children of nobility, in the face of an apparent gulf between their social class and religion" (1999: 182). Translated into the practical terms of daily conduct, the fetish of whiteness disavows the corporeality of female existence, and Lievens' painting is a good point of illustration; the beauty ideal of whiteness is the aestheticised form of representing the social imposition of female asexuality.

Indeed, Cervantes deploys the fetish of whiteness in his tale but not without an ironic twist. On a closer inspection, the colour coding woven into the text proves dubious and contradictory. There is only one single mention in the entire *novela*, alluding to the bronzed skin of 'gypsies', and it comes up in the middle of a description appraising the reader of Preciosa's beauty:

> Ni los soles, ni los aires, ni toda la inclemencia del cielo, a quien más que otras gentes están sujetos los gitanos, pudieron deslustrar su rostro ni curtir las manos; (2)

> Neither the sunshine, nor the wind, nor any inclemency of the weather, to which the Gypsies are exposed more than other peoples, were able to tarnish her face or tan her hands; (3)

While underlining *la gitanilla*'s extraordinary whiteness, the omniscient narrator drops in the comment that 'gypsies', unlike most peoples, are exposed for much longer stretches of time to sunlight, leaving the reader to infer that, as a result, they have sun-tanned *faces* and *hands*. Bronzing is conceived as the skin's natural reaction to sun radiation, a mutable social marker rather than an immutable 'racial' marker, and is thus normalised. (It is instructive here to refer back to Angélica Dass' photographic project and her artistic take on the instability of skin colour). Following this logic, Preciosa's pallor should raise concern rather than admiration because her unchangeable white skin speaks more of a medical condition. The Spanish verb '*des*lustrar' used in the original text deserves attention, too. In this context, its morphological

motivation 'quitar el lustre a', that is 'to remove the light of', which is lost in the English or German translations ('tarnish', 'verderben'), comes to the fore. If we are to rephrase the litany of Preciosa's beauty, we would end up with the rather questionable assertion that the light radiated by the sun could not diminish the light radiated by her face. One is bound to wonder what kind of light a noblewoman possesses, having avoided the sun, and how one should think of and hierarchise these two sources of light. In other words, typical of a Cervantes' text, a lofty literary fiction – in this case the fetishised beauty ideal of whiteness – is brought into collision with the reality and common sense of everyday life. Yet, in spite of its pernicious artificiality, the beauty ideal of whiteness underpins a representational regime that dominates the arts till today.[35] Lievens' embraced this aesthetic invention and employed it in his next work, *Bathsheba Receiving King David's Letter* (1631). As de Witt points out, "not hitherto drawn to idealized female figures, Lievens was clearly sparked by the image of the young blonde woman he conjured for Preciosa, and he adapted it in quite a number of paintings of this period" (Wheelock 132–133).

As already mentioned, another recurring element in these compositions is the deployment of 'gypsy' figures in the shadowy background or as a shadowy background. In Lievens' work, the two 'gypsy' figures occupy a more prominent position, but they are rendered in the brownish tones of the unlit room interior, their faces reflecting the golden light radiated by Preciosa. The colour coding suggests that there is no inner light (or Christian spirit) to illuminate the presence of the old 'gypsy', so her flesh appears dense, rough, ugly and dark brown. Her roughhewn garment, too, is coarse, dirty and tattered; covered with hay, it has an uneven earthy tone. If Preciosa's soaring whiteness is laced with shining gold and can be decoded simultaneously as a physical, spiritual, and social attribute of superiority, the dull, earthy colour of the 'gypsy' figures placed beneath her is but a signifier of absence. By inference, 'gypsies' are conceived and perceived as lacking physical and spiritual virtue, a circumstance that should also justify and naturalise their lowly social status.

35 On the representation of whiteness in the medium of film, see Dyer.

5.2 *The Spanish Gypsy Girl* (1641) by Paulus Bor

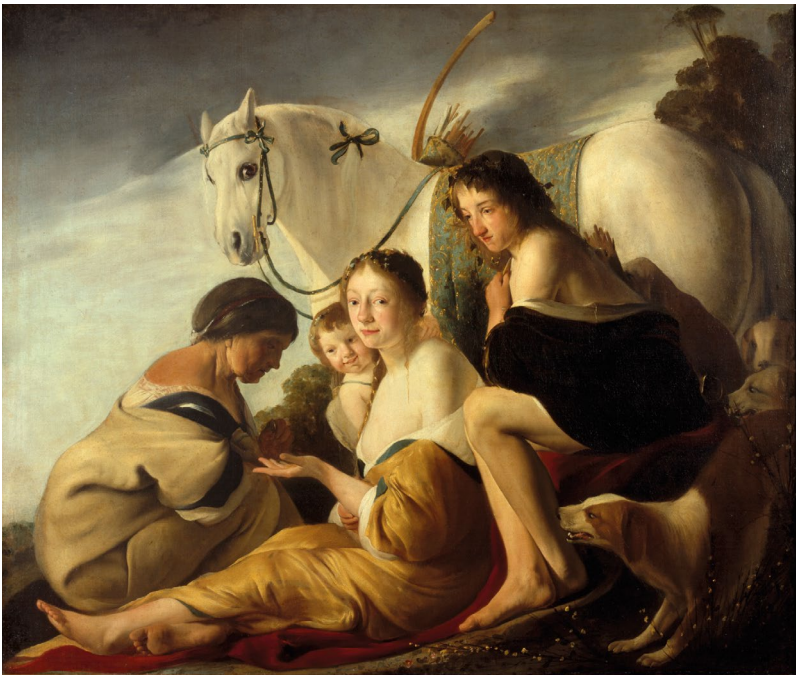

Fig. 6. Paulus Bor, *The Spanish Gypsy Girl / Voorstelling uit het "Spaens Heydinnetje,"* 1641, oil on canvas, 123.8 × 147.8 cm.

The second work in my chronological review of Dutch history paintings which draw directly or indirectly upon Cervantes' text belongs to the Utrecht master Paulus Bor (**Fig. 6**). Dated 1641, his oeuvre has been discussed under various titles,[36] and nowadays there is a general consensus among art historians[37] that Paulus Bor based his work on

36 *Deseuse de bonne aventure* (Bloch 25), *Pretiose, Don Jan and Majombe* (Gaskell 50), *The Spanish Gypsy Girl* (de Witt 1999: 185) and *Don Jan and Mojombe* (de Witt 2006: 111n307).

37 The first scholar who pointed the connection to Cat's poem is Remmet van Luttervelt. Even if it cannot be established with complete certainty that Bor was influenced by Cat's poem, the reception of his painting nowadays is refracted through the poem. See, for example, the note that accompanies Bor's painting on the website of Centraal Museum Utrecht.

the extremely popular exemplary poem *Het Spaens Heydinnetje*[38] (*The Spanish Gypsy Girl*) penned by the Dordrecht poet Jacob Cats (1577–1660). Cats, "the arch-moralist of his age", reworked Cervantes' tale, casting it in verses and removing many elements that he considered to be morally dubious, such as Preciosa practicing palmistry (de Witt 1999: 184). He included the poem in his eclectic collection of edifying marriage stories *Trou-ringh*,[39] which was published in 1637. In Cats' version, Don Juan meets the 'gypsies' while out hunting (hunting was one of the privileges accorded to Dutch nobility). As de Witt observes, the quiver and the arrows in Bor's painting, which are absent in the *novela*, are an indication that Bor was led by *Het Spaens Heydinnetje*[40] and not by "La gitanilla" (1999: 185).

Similar to Lievens' work, Bor's composition features a condensation of motifs: the child-abduction motif is complemented with the motif of palm-reading.[41] Again, it is the old 'gypsy' who is associated with palmistry, not Preciosa,[42] but this time it is Preciosa's palm that is presented for examination. In comparison with the child-theft motif, the palm-reading motif has an earlier history and enjoyed distinctly greater popularity among visual artists, so I should highlight in passing some of the reasons for this marked preference. The palm-reading motif, to start with, is static, which – pictorially – makes it very economical. It boils down to a single hand gesture and is a universally recognisable marker of 'gypsyness' (= paganism). Secondly, this motif offers a fruitful ground of stark contrasts for artists to explore; most of them use it, as Bor does, to organise their figures in a dyadic-world structure, usually juxtaposing aristocrats vs. 'gypsies'.[43] Two worlds which are

38 Cats' poem was published with print illustrations by Adriaen Pietersz van de Venne, one of them showing the scene of the first meeting. The etching apparently served as a basis for a painting attributed by Johan Lagoor (Gaskell 264).

39 Offering a codification of female behaviour, *Trou-ringh* is Cats' most popular work with at least 23 editions in the seventeeth century (Gaskell 263n3).

40 In the Netherlands, Gypsies were called *heiden*, which is related to the English "heathen" (Charnon-Deutsch 39n72).

41 For an insightful study of the palm-reading motif in European art from the late Middle Ages till early modern era, see Bell ("Lebenslinien").

42 In Dutch texts, the names of Preciosa and Don Juan are changed to Pretioze and Don Jan. To avoid unnecessary complications, since some of the paintings have multiple titles and it is not always clear which painting is based on which text, the current exposition sticks to the original names of Preciosa and Don Juan.

43 Consider, for example, the stark colour and light contrasts in Willem van Mieris' work *Die Wahrsagerin* (1706), Staatlichen Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Gal. Nr.

perceived as mutually exclusive, or as negating each other, are brought together within a single scene. For example, if we draw a vertical line at Preciosa's opened palm in Bor's painting, we can see that the figure of the old 'gypsy', crouching to the left, occupies less than a third of the canvas, with her back to the main source of light in the composition. A part of her dark-skinned neck and back is on display while her face is overcast by a shadow, devoid of individual features. Opposite the old 'gypsy' is youthful Preciosa sitting with her legs leisurely outstretched, a winged Cupid and Don Juan at her side, behind them, the body of a white horse that dominates the composition. Gazing out towards the viewer, the four white faces (that of the horse, too!) are shown in three-quarters, beautifully illuminated and painstakingly individualised. It is notable that the two worlds are brought together through the gesture of palm-reading, but there is no point of contact – the hands of the two women do not touch.

Again, it is the luminosity of Preciosa's face and bared chest that contains the main message of Bor's painting, while attesting to the artist's virtuosity. The girl's breasts are uncovered to reveal the white mole under her left breast, which is yet another piece of evidence confirming her noble origin. Preciosa's white skin rhymes with the white, lit-up body of the horse behind her; the animal is, notably, adorned with blue reins and a blue blanket. The combination of the white and blue colour in this context is a straightforward reference to aristocratic pallor and "blue blood".[44] In his article on Bor, Bloch evaluates the artist's contribution to the rise of Dutch tone-painting, claiming that the "helle Fleischton/Inkarnat" [light flesh tone] is distinctive of his style (26). According to Bloch, the composition of the painting, which involves

1773; or in *The Fortune Teller* (ca. 1626) by the Flemish painter Nicolas Régnier (1591–1667), oil on canvas, 127 × 150 cm, Musée du Louvre, Inv. Nr. 366; or in *Wahrsagende Zigeunerin* (ca. 1720), a work by the French-born court painter of Prussia Antoine Pesne (1683–1757), oil on canvas, 166 × 134 cm, Breslau, Muzeum Narodowe, Inv. Nr. VIII–2302.

44 As Montagu explains, "the term "blue-blood", which refers to a presumed special kind of blood supposed to flow in the veins of ancient and aristocratic families, actually represents a translation from the Spanish *sangre azul*, the "blue blood" attributed to some of the oldest and proudest families of Castile, who claimed never to have been contaminated by "foreign blood". Many of these families were of fair complexion, hence in members of these families the veins would, in comparison with those of the members of the predominatingly dark-complexioned population, appear strikingly blue. Hence, the difference between an aristocrat and a commoner could easily be recognised as a difference in "blood"; one was a "blue-blood", and the other was not." (183).

a group of figures placed in front of a white horse, is, in all likelihood, unique for seventeenth-century Dutch painting (25).

The palette of tones used by the Utrecht master indeed warrants closer examination. Let us consider a few elements that hark back to literature. To stress the brilliance of the white colour in a given description, writers usually devise visual tropes – such as metaphors or similes – that should prompt the reader's imagination by way of evocative comparisons. One of Cervantes' characters, for example, gives a full lecture on female purity in *Don Quixote*, providing an insight into the then-employed imagery codifying female sexuality. During his speech, Anselmo, the character in question, compares the chaste and virtuous woman to "an exquisitely fine diamond", a valuable jewel, a shining and bright mirror of crystal "liable to be sullied and dimmed by every breath that comes near it", "a fine garden full of roses and other flowers" whose fragrance is to be enjoyed "only at a distance, and through iron rails" (287). The most suggestive is Anselmo's description of the ermine, a white creature with fine fur that would not come close to dirt and would not suffer to destroy and sully "its whiteness, which it values more than liberty or life". "The virtuous and modest woman" – Anselmo concludes – "is an ermine and the virtue of chastity is whiter and cleaner than snow" (287). Clearly, all the images conjured up in Anselmo's speech are symbols referring to the abstract/concrete notion of female chastity/virginity.[45] Artists, as well as writers, employ visual analogies in their works, incorporating elements that provide the viewer with a positive and a negative point of reference, a touchstone for 'whiteness' and its opposite value, 'blackness'. In Bor's painting, the figure of the winged Cupid and the white horse with its blue decorations set the standard by which to measure Preciosa's noble skin colour. At the same time, her luminous face and skin are juxtaposed to the dark skin and unlit face of the old 'gypsy'. Even the garments of the two women speak of unbridgeable differences – Preciosa's lemon-yellow garment is set against the dirty grey-yellow ("smutziggraue Gelb" in Bloch's description) of the 'gypsy' figure (25). The opposition between the two worlds is clearly coded along the light/colour line: pure colours, white and the illusion of light vs. reduced colours, black and the illusion of

45 The aspirational ideal of whiteness and its symbols, undoubtedly, derive from religious visual symbolism and the cult of the Virgin Mary. As Fuchs notes, a painting representing Mary always contains symbolic references to her purity and virginity, such as a ewer of water, fire, strong light coming in through a window, or a vase of white lilies (16).

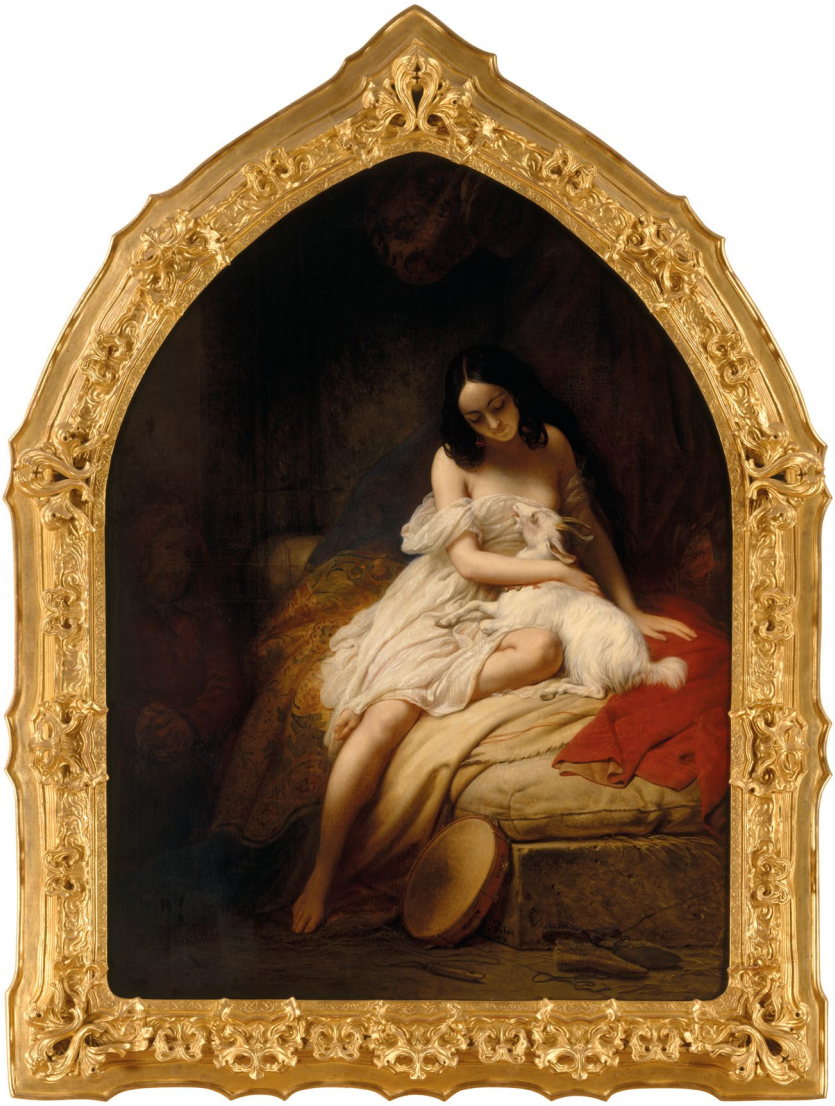

Fig. 7. Charles Steuben, *La Esméralda*, 1839, oil on canvas, 195.3 × 145 × 3 cm. Musée d'Art de Nantes.

shadow. The painting of the Utrecht colourist is a glaring instance of visual Othering grounded in class difference and coupled with the racialisation of the 'ethnic' Other. The images of the aristocrat and the 'gypsy' undergird 'white' and 'non-white' 'ethno-racial' identities, constructed in this work as the two polar ends of the social hierarchy.

I will conclude this section by drawing a parallel with another depiction of a 'gypsy'-turned-aristocrat, rendered in highly exaggerated white tones, to highlight the ubiquitous preoccupation with 'white' skin as well as the dexterity of representing it on canvas. *La Esméralda* (1839) by the French artist Charles Auguste Steuben (1788–1856) was painted two hundred years after Bor's work (**Fig. 7**). It features a portrait of a woman of noble blood (being the illicit child of a nobleman) who was stolen and raised by 'gypsies'. Steuben chooses to explore his idea of Esméralda in a classical French boudoir setting. Reclining on the edge of a bed, the semi-clad young woman looks down at a white kid goat curled in her lap, while "a remarkably undeformed Quasimodo" – the hideously deformed 'gypsy' child swapped for Esmeralda – "crouches like a surrogate voyeur in the shadows to the left" (Brown 42). Actually, the figure in the shadow could also be interpreted as Pierre Gringoire or even as Claude Frollo, but let us leave this detail aside and focus on the female figure. Steuben's work was celebrated as the major attraction of the Paris Salon of 1839. The critic Barbier, for example, praised each of the girl's features, one by one, and "especially the feet which, revealed by the removal of the pointed boots in the right foreground, were found to be particularly titillating" (Brown 42). It is important to note that Esméralda's face, bare shoulders, breasts, arms and legs are depicted in white colour that correlates to that of her white gown, the bed sheets, and the goat's fur. Light coming from above illuminates the figure, adding brilliance to her white skin and overall appearance: she is the hyperbolised version of a dazzling 'white' class/'ethno-racial' identity. It is only logical, as we are about to see, that the artistic obsession with female whiteness (read: virginity and restrained sexuality) would spur a counter obsession with authentic 'gypsyness' (read: promiscuity and unrestrained sexuality), that unceasing search for the real 'gypsy' and her fatally attractive 'non-white' body.

5.3 Proofs of Nobility: How White Can Human Skin Become on Canvas?

As already mentioned, all Dutch history paintings, with one exception, dramatise the miraculous moment of recognition. In literature, writers can employ the device of omniscient narration to offer direct access to the protagonists' inner world and describe their thoughts and feelings. For visual artists, though, it presents a special challenge to communicate inner emotional states, and Dutch figure-painters placed "great value … on the depiction of a person at the instant in which he is moved by powerful, conflicting feelings" (Blankert 121). Paulus Bor, Jan van Noordt, and Abraham van den Tempel grapple with the challenge of seemingly incompatible love, depicting in their works the first meeting of Don Juan and Preciosa. It is that auspicious and baffling moment when a noble soul recognises his kindred in a 'gypsy' and is stricken with love. Lievens makes an exception here with his fortune-telling scene, but for him as well as for the others, it is Preciosa's identity, her exemplary nobility, that sums up the work's chief message.

It is necessary to spell out once again the various facets of meaning transported via Preciosa's extraordinary and edifying whiteness. It is the Christian spirit residing in her that illuminates the pure vessel of her body, giving it its brilliant white colour (with blue undertones) and safeguarding her moral virtue and virginity. These supreme qualities testify to Preciosa's nobility and can be recognised only by a soul of the same moral eminence and social status in a revelatory moment of love. She has earned her place in the social hierarchy, which she also deserves by virtue of her high birth. The visual message represents a self-congratulatory equation and condensation of highly disparate qualities: Christian spirit (religious) = virtue (moral) = virginity (physical) = nobility (social) = white skin (social/'ethno-racial') = true love. The moment of recognition resurfaces again in the works of two late seventeenth-century Leiden artists: Godfried Schalcken and Willem van Mieris. While Schalcken chooses to depict Preciosa's reunion with her parents interpreting the scene in a highly theatrical manner, Willem van Mieris stages the double moment of recognition in his paintings. He achieves this merger of climactic moments by including Don Juan and Preciosa's parents in the composition.

The works of the Dutch masters are literally cluttered – just as the climactic scene in Cervantes' tale – with pieces of evidence pointing to Preciosa's noble birth. The most visible proof is undoubtedly

Preciosa's white skin, which painters emphasise through light and colour contrasts, by adorning her with luxurious white gowns or by contriving evocative visual comparisons with other noblewomen and conspicuously white objects, such as white linen lace or the fine white fabric of shirts, sleeves or headgear; the white-winged Cupid; feathers or animals with white fur; the extraordinarily rare white freshwater pearls; white marble; and finally, white paper. Don Juan's love and the emotional response of the astounded parents present, too, crucial pieces of evidence, similar to a number of other symbolic and/or solid proofs of nobility that I point at in each of the following paintings.

In *Preciosa und Doña Clara* (ca. 1630) by Jan Lievens: the note on the forehead of the old 'gypsy' in which she confesses to having stolen Preciosa as a small child; Preciosa's superiority to occult practices: she is in the scene of fortune-telling but not part of it.

In *The Spanish Gypsy Girl* (1640) by Paulus Bor: Preciosa's bared breast revealing her white mole; her bared foot revealing her webbed toes; the winged figure of Cupid, a symbol of true love, peering from behind her.

In *Pretioze and Don Jan/De Spaensche Heidin* (1660) by Jan van Noordt: the allusion to the goddess Diana via her lavish white dress; the fresh rose – a coded reference to virginity – crowning Preciosa's head, another rose at her feet; the unrolled scroll of paper on the ground to her left containing the confession of the child-theft committed by the old 'gypsy'.

In *Don Juan and Preciosa* by Abraham van den Tempel[46]: the roses scattered around Preciosa and the figure of Cupid peering from behind her.

Johannes Voorhout also belongs to this list even though I have not been able to see his work; he also painted the meeting scene inspired, just like Abraham van den Tempel, by Noortd's *Pretioze and Don Jan* (de Witt 1999: 184).

David Ryckaert III represents a later moment in the scene, as Gaskell reports. "Pretiose in a Gypsy turban stands holding a rose garland and

46 A reproduction of the work is cited in Gaskell's article, identifying it as "Dutch School. *Pretiose and Don Jan* Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, bequest of Charles Turner" (46). De Witt refers to the same work, identifying its author as Abraham van den Tempel, while giving it the title *Don Juan and Preciosa*; the other details include: 71 × 60 cm, signed and unclearly dated, Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, Inv. Nr. 74.9 (1999: 186n17). The painting is unclearly dated, but it has been established that Abraham van den Tempel follows the basic layout of Jan van Noordt's work, only placing the figures in an interior setting (de Witt 1999: 184).

facing the viewer. Just behind her to the right are Majombe and an elderly male Gypsy. Don Jan kneels, offering Pretiose a diamond ring." (264).

In *Preciosa Recognised* (c. 1675) by Godfried Schalcken[47] (**Fig. 8**): the marble vessel with fresh pink roses, the snail (another symbol of love), the note of the theft, a gold chain and a jewel on the floor in the foreground; Preciosa's opening her décolleté to show the white mole under her left breast; her bared feet revealing her joined toes; the old 'gypsy' – an unsightly creature emerging from the dark background – who points with a finger at the girl's birthmark, her gesture clearly addressing the viewers, urging them take a look and convince themselves. The auction catalogue of 1818, as Anja Ševčík notes, praised the painting as "the very celebrated cabinet chef d'oeuvre" and "an exquisite bijou", apparently referring to Schalcken's exquisite rending of the fine fabric and valuable accessories worn by the nobility. In depicting the old 'gypsy', he was influenced by a drawing of Simon de Vlieger's (**Fig. 9**) (which was used as an etching template by Peter Nolpe[48]); 'quoting' the facial features of the old 'gypsy' and the jewellery lying on the floor (128).

Vlieger's drawing (**Fig. 9**) is one of the very few images of the time that depicts the scene of child-theft and yet, remarkably, the focus is not, as one would expect, on the horror of abduction but on Preciosa's power and wealth, underscored by her regal attire, jewellery, and posture. She is depicted like a miniature adult or a grown-up doll seated on the arm of the masculine-looking, old 'gypsy' woman.[49] Her portrait, very reminiscent of a society portrait, clearly lays the emphasis on her social standing and on her place of significance in the family line of descent, not on her being a child. A similar interpretation of the child-theft scene can be seen in an illustration in the nineteenth-century German children's book *Anna, das geraubte Kind* (*Anna, the Stolen*

47 In Gaskell's article, the work is referred to as *Pretiose revealed as Constance* (50).

48 Pieter Nolpe produced six etchings to illustrate M.G. Tengnagel's play *Het Leven van Konstance: waer af volgt het tooneelspel "De Spaensche Heidin"*, published in Amsterdam in 1643. The prints were made after drawings by Simon de Vlieger, Isaac Isaacsz, and Pieter Quast. Simon de Vlieger designed the title print featuring a medallion portrait of Majombe (the name of the old 'gypsy' in Tengnagel's text) holding the infant Preciosa (Stanton-Hirst 229).

49 The image is accompanied by the following text in the online collection catalogue of Rijksmuseum: "The Roma woman [sic!] Majombe with the little Konstance on the arm, standing in front of a tree. Konstance wears a crown, necklaces and a rich robe. Print from an edition of the play *The Life of Konstance*, a story about the noble Spanish Konstance who was kidnapped as a child by Roma because of her clothing and jewelry." ("Roma vrouw").

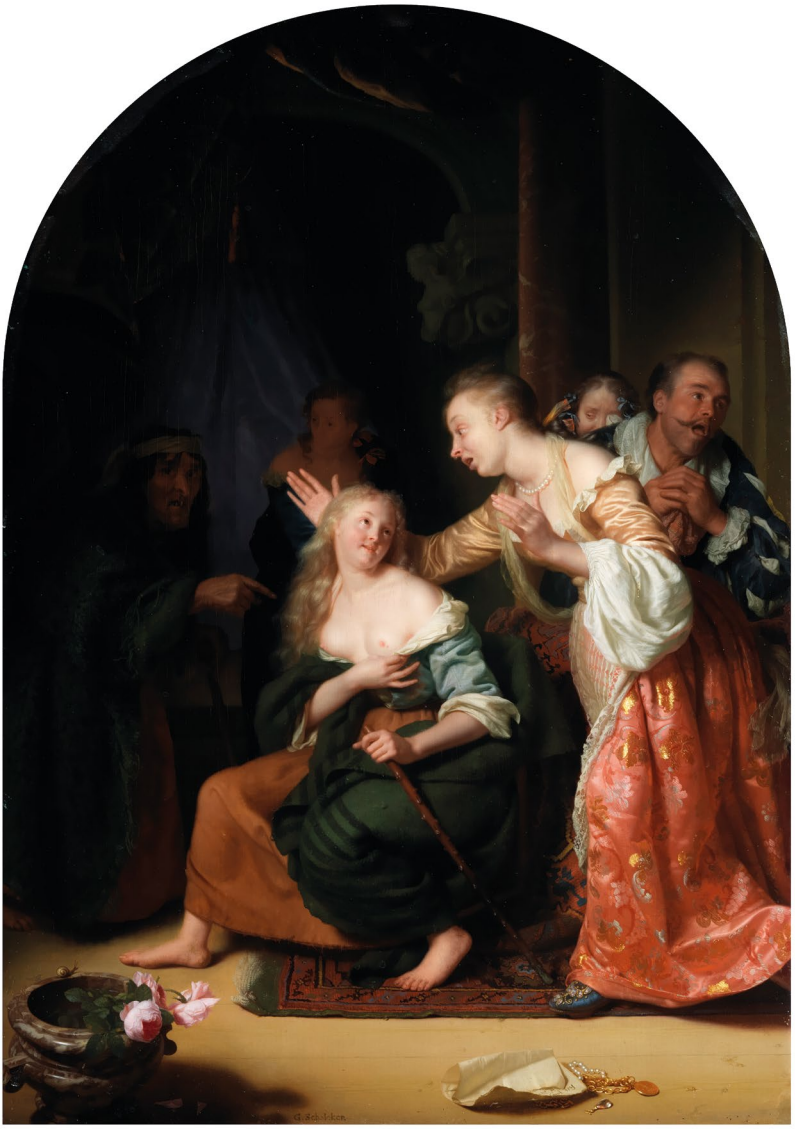

Fig. 8. Godfried Schalcken, *Preciosa Recognised*, c. 1675, oil on wood panel, 44.2 × 31.2 cm. Courtesy of the National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin.

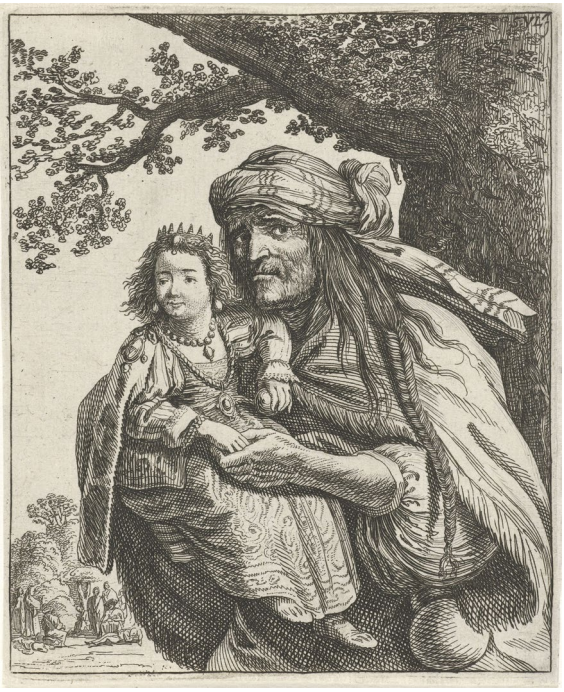

Fig. 9. Simon de Vlieger, Pieter Nolpe (print maker), *Roma vrouw Majombe met Konstance*, 1643, etching / engraving, 129 × 106 mm.

Child) by Alexander Löwen (**Fig. 28**) where the abducted girl looks like a grown-up doll while her abductor is a 'gypsy' male with a black beard and a dark-brown hat. In the section on prints, we shall discuss in greater detail the rendition of the moment of the child-theft and the depiction of abducted girls as white dolls.

Homecoming of Preciosa (Cervantes)/Die wiedergefundene Tochter (nach Jacob Cats: Het Spaens heydinnetye) (ca. 1677–1685) by Willem van Mieris (**Fig. 10**). This work of Mieris, unlike his next one, strays from the tradition as it only hints at the extra proofs. Preciosa looks as if she has just covered her left breast and only the toes of her left foot show at her skirt's edge.

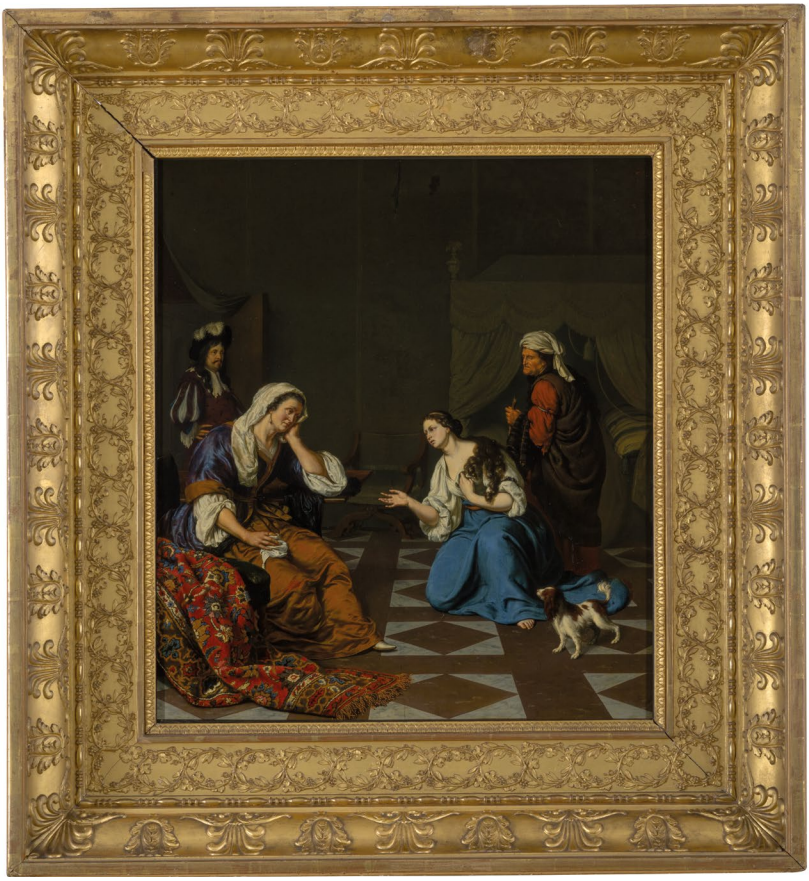

Fig. 10. Willem van Mieris, *Homecoming of Preciosa (Cervantes) / Die wiedergefundene Tochter (nach Jacob Cats: Het Spaens heydinnetye*), c. 1677–1685, oil on wood, 51.9 × 45.1 × 1 cm.

Preziosa (1709) by Willem van Mieris[50] (**Fig. 11**): Preciosa's bared leg and feet, her undone leather sandal lying in the foreground; her fully bared breasts; the coffer with her baby trinkets on the table next to the scroll of paper containing the old 'gypsy's' confession of child-theft.

This section will end with one example in counterpoint. There are three more works featuring the first encounter that slightly differ from the pictorial tradition outlined so far. Authored by Philips Wouwerman, all three may be dated to the 1640s.[51] Wouwerman appears to be the only artist of his time who visualises the moment of true love by elaborating a dramatic nature landscape. In the painting shown here (**Fig. 12**), he does not fail to place fresh roses in Preciosa's hands or to show her semi-bared breasts and bared feet as a reminder of her virginity. Neither are his renditions of the stolen aristocratic girl and the old 'gypsy' spared the contrastive black/dark and white/light tones – yet, their figures are not the main focus. His two other paintings suggest even more clearly that the artist took little interest in proving noble origin or depicting the glowing whiteness of female skin. Wouwerman's works express instead the dramatic encounter through movement and elements of nature: riding his horse, Don Juan lays his eyes on Preciosa who is sitting in the company of the old 'gypsy' under a gnarled, leafless tree. The figures are small and viewed from a distance. The sense of inner turmoil is conveyed through Don Juan's body reclining towards the girl, through the contorted shape of the tree but above all through the vast expanse of misty sky: two-thirds of the canvas is taken up by a spectacularly

50 An earlier version of this work is to be found in the online collection of Palazzo Bianco, Musei di Genova: *Riconoscimento di Preziosa*, oil on canvas, 34 × 42 cm. Palazzo Bianco, Musei di Genova Inv. PB 193; about other variations on the theme by Mieris, see Gaskell (270).

51 Gaskell reports of two paintings by Wouwerman – a larger and a smaller one, showing the same scene viewed from two points of view (Gaskell 47, 264). With the kind assistance of Drs. Huub Breuer from The Netherlands Institute for Art History (RKD), I have been able to identify three paintings on this topic by the artist as well as their whereabouts. The first painting is *Don Jan begroet Pretiose, het "Spaens Heydinnetje", die naast de zigeunervrouw Majombe langs de weg zit* also called *The Flirtation* (1640–1643), oil on canvas, 40 × 45.5 cm, Maastricht/London/Hulsberg, art dealer Robert Noortman. The second one is *De ontmoeting van Don Jan en Preciosa (J. Cats, Spaens Heydinnetje)* (1640–1643), oil on panel, 35.5 × 34.5 cm, Lochem/The Hague, art dealer S. Nijstad; and the third one is *Ruiter begroet een zigeunerin ("Spaans Heidinnetje"?)*, panel 30 × 40 cm, Atkins Museum of Fine Arts, Kansas City (Missouri), William Rockhill Nelson College, Inv. Nr. 31–92. There is also one painting after Wouwerman: *De ontmoeting van Don Jan en Preciosa (J. Cats, Spaens Heydinnetje)*, (1650–1699), oil on canvas, 40 × 34.6 cm, Christie's (London, England) 2003-04-09, Nr. 46. See also RKD Online Collection.

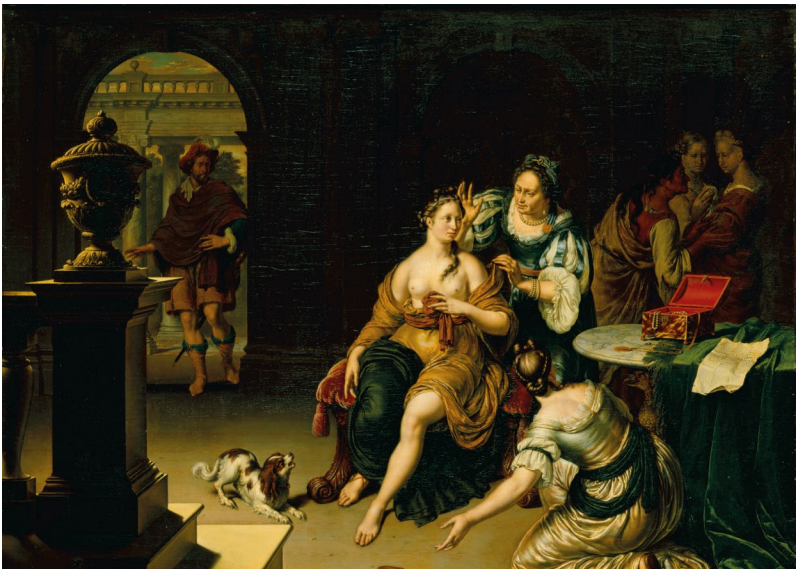

Fig. 11. Willem van Mieris, *Preziosa*, 1709, oil on oak panel, 41 × 51.5 cm. Gemäldegalerie Dresden, Gal.-Nr. 1775.

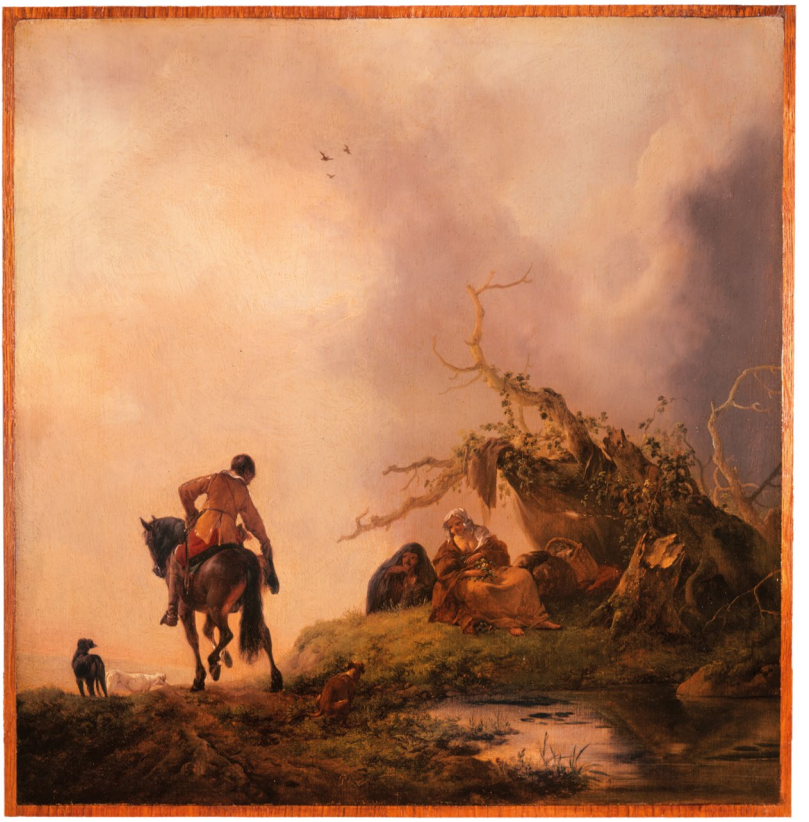

Fig. 12. Philips Wouwerman. *De ontmoeting van Don Jan en Preciosa (J. Cats, Spaens Heydinnetje)*, ca. 1640–1643, oil on panel.

illuminated overcast sky. In Wouwerman's interpretation, the seizure of love is shown to be a mystery of nature, unknowable, baffling, even a bit disheartening, and yet a universal human experience that could transcend class divisions. The artist adopts the form of a non-narrative landscape painting to produce a story, and his choice of form in itself introduces an alternative to the discourse of racialisation that we have seen in history painting and points to the possibility for another, more universalist perspective on the topic.

5.4 *Pretioze and Don Jan* (1660) by Jan Van Noordt
Dark-Skinned on Canvas: Is It the Suntan, the Shadow Effect or the 'Race'?

The third and last history painting I apply my scholarly lens to is *Pretioze and Don Jan* by Jan van Noordt (**Fig. 13**).[52] Its source of inspiration is a popular theatre play published by Mattheus Tengnagel in 1643. Tengnagel organised his text in two parts: a moralising account of the story in prose and a stage adaptation. In the prose text, he specified that Pretioze wears a splendid white dress with blue reflections and that her skin is blue-veined (cf. de Witt 2007: 148n3); the aim clearly being to establish a parallel between the luxurious material and the most highly prized colour of human skin. As Gaskell observes, "the force with which Pretiose's beauty strikes Don Jan is conveyed by his suffering the delusion that she is his hunting goddess, Diana, captured by devils. (…) These he quickly recognises as Gypsies" (263–264). By introducing Pretioze's full-length white satin dress and the allusion to the goddess Diana, Tengnagel heightens even further the colour contrast to 'gypsies' who, in turn, are associated with black devils. It is notable that the white dress becomes a focal point of communication in Noordt's painting, expressing both the power of Pretioze's noble beauty and the power of Don Jan's noble love. Tengnagel's play was a source for a number of depictions by Dutch painters and Noordt's *Pretioze and Don Jan* is the best-known example on the theme (de Witt 1999: 184).

Jan van Noordt's work also stands out with its nuanced rendition of skin colour between the extreme poles of 'whiteness' and 'blackness'. Art historians have invariably focused on the two main figures in the composition but, in my view, the background of human figures – which ensures the visibility of Pretioze and Don Jan, and is marked by an intriguing complexity – deserves equal attention and scrutiny of detail. To begin with, the old 'gypsy' woman here is granted an unusual conspicuousness. Draped in a coarse hooded-cloak, her body looms like a shadow from behind and above Pretioze's seated figure. Against her brown, shrivelled and unsightly face, the viewer is prompted to appreciate the fine features of the girl, her luminous whiteness in skin and

52 There are two versions of *Pretioze and Don Jan*, "the only known example of an exact repetition in the oeuvre of Jan van Noordt" as de Witt comments. Painted at almost the same time, they show no significant differences (2007: 150). Noordt's work is also cited as *Pretiose and Don Jan* (Gaskell 46), *Preciosa and Don Juan* (de Witt 1999: 184).

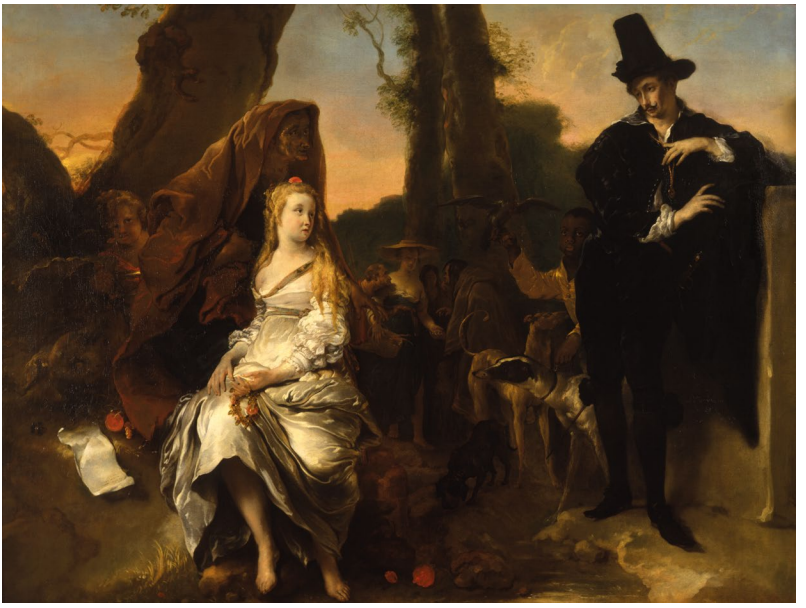

Fig. 13. Jan van Noordt, *Pretioze and Don Jan* / *De Spaensche Heidin*, ca. 1660, canvas, 132 × 170 cm.

dress. Yet, and this is rather remarkable, a part of the old hag's body is set against a light sky gaining a clearer outline, while another part merges with the knotty-brown tree trunk behind her and with the ground. This double contrast is deployed to ascertain that her dark complexion is not a shadow effect, as is the case with the blond Cupid figure behind her, but represents a genuine skin colour. Thus, the old 'gypsy' is granted visibility and used as Pretioze's contrastive background. Undoubtedly, the dark earthy tones associate her with nature, dirt, and animal existence, communicating to the viewer that, unlike Pretioze, she is more of a body than an illuminated soul. (The blond child behind her, in the logic of the painting, is perhaps Cupid overcast by shadows or a stolen aristocrat but definitely not a 'gypsy' child.)

Both Lievens and Noordt complement their figure compositions with a Moorish slave,[53] appearing like a shadow in the background, and both artists add visual touchstones of 'blackness'. The wealthy lady

53 The two artists reproduce the widespread Dutch view that Spanish nobility were slave owners (Wheelock 132n9).

in Lievens' painting is dressed in fine black fur, while Noordt chooses black clothes for Don Jan, linking him to a 'black' slave with a black falcon perched on his arm. Within the framework of colour references, the dark brown complexion of the old 'gypsy' and that of the other 'gypsies' in the distance (identifiable through the gesture of palm-reading) is firmly assigned to the 'non-white' section on the skin colour spectrum. As a result, 'gypsies' are racialised, i.e. constructed as 'non-white' (= non-European, sharing similarities with Africans), and thus de-Europeanised. In most of the history paintings considered here, the 'gypsy' figure merges entirely with the dark background, performing the function of a negative visual reference without which the message of Preciosa's nobility (whiteness) would lose its immediacy and clarity.

Finally, a few words are in order about the literary and pictorial tradition that influenced Jan van Noordt's choice of subject matter. In his wonderfully written monograph on the Dutch master, David de Witt comments that Noordt did not venture to experiment with novel themes but generally kept to the standard repertoire of topics that dominated the market of history paintings in the mid-seventeeth century. There was a demand for exemplars of virtue and love in the circles of the Amsterdam social élite, and painters responded with various depictions showing the moment of true love, usually in a pastoral setting. The main function of these paintings was to present morally exemplary behaviour, but also, notably, one that upheld "a doctrine of class and blood at it applie[d] to breeding and marriage" (de Witt 2007: 57). Among the favourite subjects was the meeting of Granida and Daifilo: their rural romance was interpreted on canvas by Abraham Bloemaert, Gerrit von Hornthorst and Jan van Noordt, and was based on Pieter C. Hooft's popular pastoral play *Granida* (1605). By choosing the story about the Spanish *gitanilla*, Dutch artists could, in turn, expand on their repertoire of idyllic love scenes.

Other literary and painted works also fed into the fashion for pastoral idyll, but – more significantly – all these, basically variations on the theme of true love, fall within a tradition established by Heliodorus' romance *Aethiopica*. In fact, Jacob Cats considered *Aethiopica* to be the prototype of Cervantes' story (Gaskell 268). Written in the first half of the third century A.D., the ancient Greek romance also warrants a mention. As Wolfgang Stechow underlines in his article "Heliodorus' *Aethiopica* in Art", the ancient text – "a colossus in the history of literature with boundless influence" to borrow his words – experienced an astonishing revival during the age of Mannerism and

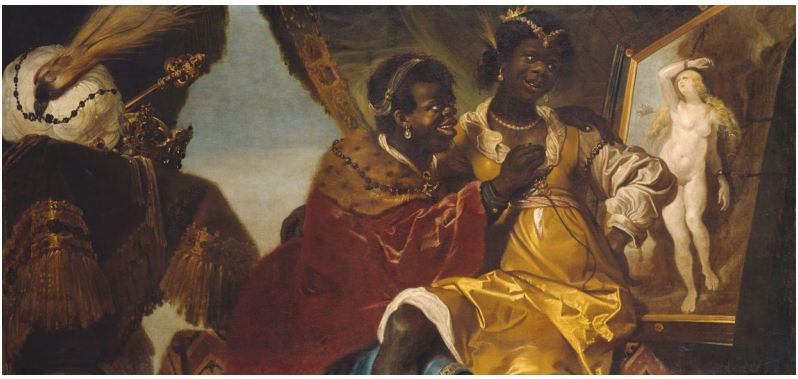

Fig. 14. Karel van Mander III, *Persina and the Picture of Andromeda / Hydaspes und Persina vor dem Bild der Andromeda*, ca. 1640, 110 × 220 cm.

Baroque (144–5). Paintings presenting scenes from *Aethiopica* were produced by Ambroise Dubois, Jean Mosnier, Abraham Bloemaert, Gerard Honthorst, and Nicolas Knupfer. Pondering what contributed to this revival, Stechow lists six different reasons but fails, in my opinion, to identify the most pertinent one, and that is the binary coding of skin colour in the text. The entire drama revolves around the Ethiopian princess Chariclea who was born 'white' because her 'black' mother gazed upon a painting of the naked Andromeda. At the same time, Stechow does not fail to notice that "the explanation of the complexion of Chariclea (…) has been rendered great gusto" by Karel van Mander III (1606–1670) in his *Persina and the Picture of Andromeda* (ca. 1640) (**Fig.14**) (152).

Clearly, Heliodorus' text provided suitable material for representations that espouse black-and-white morals, and what we would call today 'racial' antinomies, allowing Dutch royalties to self-style themselves against a background that would make them appear undeniably noble and 'white'. As Miles points out, until the end of the eighteenth century,

> … although the predominant view was that the African was a human being, part of God's creation, and exhibited characteristics subject to environmental influence, the African was nevertheless defined as an inferior human being. The representation of the African as Other signified phenotypical and cultural characteristics as evidence of this inferiority and the

> attributed condition of Africans therefore constituted a measure of European progress and civilization. The sense of Otherness was increasingly, although not exclusively, grounded in skin colour (…) and sustained by the attribution of other negatively evaluated characteristics. (30)

If we consider the attitude towards Africans, outlined by Miles, it is perhaps easier to explain why, and this is a question Stechow puzzles over irresolutely, almost all of the Dutch paintings deriving from *Aethiopica,* form cycles that were commissioned either as decorations for royal residences or as decorations for royal weddings.

5.5 The Effects of Racialisation

Of several patches of colour, all equally white,
that patch will look whitest which is
against the darkest background.
And black will look most intense against the whitest background.

Leonardo da Vinci, *Leonardo's Notebooks* (128)

In Cervantes' text, as we have seen, the colour opposition between aristocrats and 'gypsies' is unstable, symbolic and fraught with paradoxes; yet, in this archetypal story of initiation, human identity is conceived fluid enough to undergo cardinal changes. As a true heroine, Preciosa plunges from the world of light (nobility) into the world of darkness/lack of light ('gypsies') to re-emerge renewed into her original world, bringing a new, brighter light. Psychologically, light and darkness can be read as metaphors for the conscious and unconscious state of mind, while the cycle of initiation traces the process by which human consciousness is expanded. The story structure encodes a universal phenomenon.

However, the sternly moralist Dutch literary and pictorial interpretations of "La gitanilla" do not sustain this playful and contradictory conception of human identity. In fact, Dutch writers shorten the period of time that the aristocrats spend among 'gypsies', making sure to impress on their readers that the former were not morally contaminated by the latter. Seventeenth-century artists added to the stabilisation of human identity by aestheticising and racialising it. Preciosa is firmly entrenched in realist (racialised) whiteness, while 'gypsies' are represented as her negating opposite. As a result, a dividing line of colour is constructed and a whole pictorial tradition is established in the framework of which nobility/national majority are imagined along the lines of European 'white' identity, while 'gypsies' are seen as its 'non-white' and non-European complementary Other. This division has three consequences. Firstly, the constellation in which aristocrats are opposed to 'gypsies' and not to sun-tanned peasants, for example, allows the ruling classes/national majorities to export social tensions outside of their realm, explaining such tensions with the Roma minority, i.e. re-formulating social disparities in 'ethno-racial' terms. Secondly, this polarised and racialising pattern of thought precludes the possibility of blond, fair-skinned and fair-haired individuals – although

there are a great many Roma who fall within this segment of the skin tone spectrum – to be perceived and visualised, i.e. described, painted, photographed or filmed as 'gypsies' or as representative of the Roma. They are deemed non-existent; the individuals are taken for stolen children (of noble origin or of the national majority), or they are treated as curiosities. The phrase "blond gypsy", for example, is ubiquitously used as a laughter-inducing oxymoron. Finally, since the colour line of difference is artificial, having its roots in metaphoric language, it is highly mutable and can easily be adapted to serve the interests of those in power. In practical terms, this means that almost any member of a national majority in Europe, or even entire nations,[54] can be labelled and represented as 'gypsy', and thus ostracised or otherwise punished in an exemplary manner.

The aesthetic polarisation of human skin colour into 'white' and 'non-white'/'gypsy' was expressed with zeal in another pictorial manner. In the nineteenth century, the artistic fixation on female 'whiteness' and celestial virginity flipped over into its opposite, turning into an obsession with 'non-whiteness'/'gypsyness' and promiscuity. As Lou Charnon-Deutsch explains, "Cervantes' Preciosa was transformed into a born Gypsy, which made it easier to justify her passion, impulsiveness and tragic allure" (64). The play with fluid identities in Cervantes' text was brought to halt, coded in immutable 'racial' colours and fragmented, which gave rise, on the one hand, to idealised portraits of our stolen 'white' vestals and, on the other hand, to ethnographised and sexualised portraits of real 'gypsies'. Examples of the first trend, taken up by Romantic artists and already tapering off in the second half of the nineteenth century, are Wilhelm von Schadow's work *Mignon* (1828); Narcisse Díaz de la Peña's *Frollo and Esméralda* (1845) and the artist's life's oeuvre; or Ary Scheffer's *Mignon Expressing Her Regret for Her Native Land* (1851) – "one of the most unlikely candidates for a gypsy ever painted" (Brown 43).

Assuming the form of naturalism, realism, and avant-gardism, the second trend gained the upper hand. In a chapter, aptly called "Canvassing the *real* Spanish Gypsy", Charnon-Deutsch gives an insightful account of the bohemian craze that swept literature, theatre and the

54 A prime example here are the so-called Balkan nations which are de-Europeanised in various ways but also with recourse to 'gypsy' figures, as Maria Todorova persuasively demonstrates in her seminal work *Imagining the Balkans* (1997). Another pertinent example comes from Bulgarian social media where the non-empathic attitude towards Syrian refuges is commonly justified by positing that the latter are no different to 'gypsies'.

fine arts in Paris, spurring a steady stream of images from the 1830s till the end of the century. In the rendition of 'gypsy' subjects, it was authenticity, the true-to-nature realism that established itself as the leading aesthetic principle. Charnon-Deutsch examines this development by zooming in on the life work of Alfred Dehodencq (1822–1882), a French artist vigorously praised for his "ethnographic aptitude". In her conclusion, the scholar posits that the ethnicised portraits of Gypsies showed the female subjects as sexually available (71–77). Other examples, profusely discussed by Brown, include Lois Knaus who stereotyped 'gypsies' as outlaws in his *Bohemians* (1855) and *The Foragers* (1857) (63–64); Théodore Valério "ethnographic" watercolours of gypsies and other nomads from 1855 (65); Achille Zo's *Family of Voyaging Bohemians (Andalusia)* (1861), a picture that merged the "ethnographic" tradition of Dehodencq's Spanish "local color" with the prettification of Léopold Robert's Italian peasants" (78); and Henri-Guillaume Schlesinger who "perpetuated Knaus' stereotype of the gypsy brigand" in his painting[55] *The Stolen Child/L'Enfant volé* (1861) (**Fig. 15**). Schlesinger's critics, as Brown points out, did not "address the specious subject matter, but noted the pleasure bourgeois audiences took in the painting's easily legible sensationalism" (78). In the twentieth century, the fervent pursuit of the real 'gypsy' continued, even more convincingly, with recourse to the novel tools of photography[56] and film. It is important to stress that the voyeuristic demand for 'gypsy' reality is often motivated by an ethnographic and a pornographic interest,[57] the former serving as a legitimation of the latter; a potent mix that has secured the staying power of these images in European culture.

This radical shift of pictorial taste can be attributed to none other than the French writer Prosper Mérimée (1803–1870), and his undyingly popular tale "Carmen" (cf. Hille 38). Since its first publication in 1845, the text has not ceased to incite the imagination of male artists across Europe and beyond. Mérimée was, undoubtedly, fascinated by the image of the emancipated woman presented in the figure of Preciosa, but he remodelled Cervantes' creation with an acutely misogynous twist. In his text, Carmen, a woman who owns her life and body, is point-black

55 Schlesinger's painting is known nowadays only from a black-and-white engraving, also included here, but it was praised by his contemporaries for "its lively colour effects" (Tinterow 213).

56 For further reading, see Frank Reuter.

57 See, for example, the chapter on "Pornography, Ethnography and the Discourses of Power" in Bill Nichols' book.

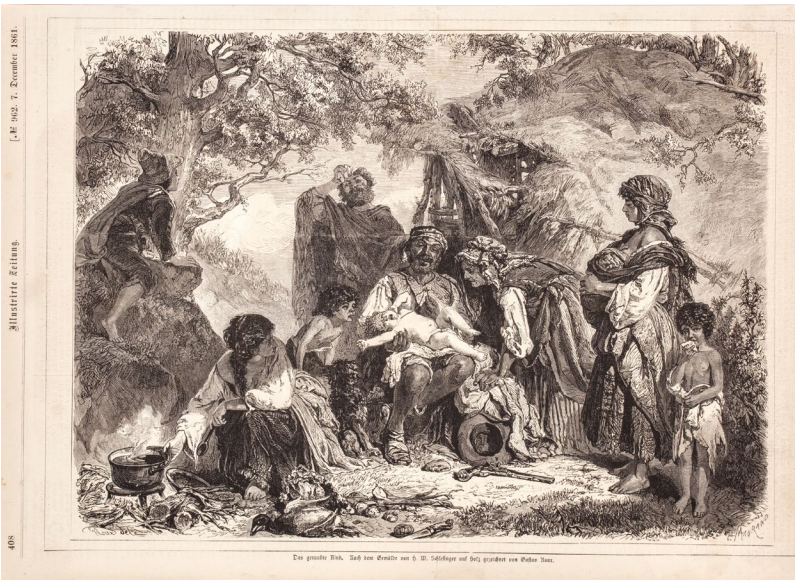

Fig. 15. Henri-Guillaume Schlesinger, *The Stolen Child / L'Enfant volé*, 1861, black-and-white engraving. National Library of France.

racialised (her skin "the colour of copper" (14)) and demonised, providing the prototype of another equally fascinating European figure, the *femme fatale*. The narrative is dominated by a male gaze that exudes the twofold quality of learnedness and lewdness, whereby the former warrants the gratification of the latter. Here is the place to mention that Mérimée had a certain opinion of Gypsy women and mocked George Brown, the author of *The Bible in Spain* and *The Zincali*, for failing to appreciate their passion and promiscuity. In a letter to his friend Manuela Motijo, he wrote: "in Seville, Cadiz and Granada, I came across in my time Gypsy women whose virtue did not resist a *duro*." (Charnon-Deutsch 61). The gypsification of Preciosa at his hands concurred and could at least partially be explained by broader cultural and historical developments: the renewed interest in stories of origin, the rise of nationalism as well as the growing importance of human and natural sciences (cf. 64). Charnon-Deutsch also reports that Mérimée wrote reviews about the works of his contemporaries admiring, not surprisingly, Dehodencq for his authenticity, while objecting to Steuben's *La Esméralda;* the latter, he claimed, "resembled a Paris grisette more than his passionate muse Carmen" (72).

The writings of the French Romantic Mérimée helped shape both literary and pictorial tastes for generations to come and, for that reason, it is necessary to give a brief account of his tale. Our attention shall be directed – again, as with "La gitanilla" – to the role of the narrator as well as to the strategies the text deploys for the authentication of its fictional world. Carmen's fatal charm and destiny are universally known, yet it is hardly ever mentioned that everything we learn about this treacherous woman with wolf's eyes is mediated to us by two male narrators, both of whom are furnished with the best possible credentials Mérimée could devise. The first first-person narrator, presumably the author, stylises himself as a well-read and well-travelled French scholar of great distinction while the second, Don José, portrays himself as a Basque hidalgo and a dragoon with a promising career in the military. Their two stories of Carmen, filled with male braggadocio and deplorable slander, conveniently – even miraculously if we are to adopt Cervantes' ironic stance – overlap, corroborate and validate each other. The object of their artfully coordinated verbal attack is an illiterate woman of foreign origin and of a low social position. The gaping power asymmetry, which defines the position of the accusers and the accused, is underscored by the fact that Carmen never gets a chance to tell her side of the story.

Unlike Cervantes' tale, which discreetly undermines its own fictions, Mérimée's text deploys the full arsenal of authentication procedures available to verify its tales of Carmen, not only within the tale's fictional world, but also beyond, in the author's socio-historical world. It is precisely this claim for ethnographic veracity, merging the fictional with the scientific, where the harmfulness of the text resides. Its core is formed by Don José's confessionary tale on his last day in which the Basque hidalgo, apparently unable to take responsibility for his own actions, lays the blame on Carmen, explaining his wrongdoings and villainous life with her. His story is then 'wrapped-up' by several authenticating narratives of ever-growing authority. The tale opens with the scholar's first-person account, adorned with an epigraph and several footnotes, and ends up with an impersonal pseudo-ethnographic treatise on the customs and traditions of 'gypsies', placed separately in the fourth and final chapter. And as if these 'insignia of truth' were not enough, Mérimée published his tale[58] in *Revue des Deux Mondes*, a magazine popular at his time for its scholarly articles and first-hand travelogues.

58 Mérimée's inspiration for Carmen was a waitress he met and sketched in Valencia in 1830, merging the story of this encounter with a story related to him by

The pivotal role of Mérimée's *nouvelle* in reversing aesthetic preferences points to the centrality of literature, of text, in steering human perception, in shaping that inner "lens" that helps one structure the visual information coming through the eye. It is texts rather than images that lie at the core of cultural (re-)codings: stories (fictions) provide the cognitive frames of reference within which certain attributes, such as human skin tone, for example, can gain meaning and thus salience; only then can they be seen, recognised and possibly re-coded.

There are countless depictions of Mérimée's Carmen. Here, we shall consider only *Gypsy with a Cigarette* by Édouard Manet (1832–1883), a French artist and contemporary both of Prosper Mérimée and Charles Steuben (**Fig. 16**). I have chosen to direct the spotlight on this particular work of Manet's because it allows for fruitful comparisons, being an aesthetic antithesis to Steuben's *La Esméralda*: the latter was criticised for "lack of fidelity to the chaste characterisation of Hugo" (Brown 43), whereas the former was also criticised, in this case for daring perhaps the first depiction of a woman smoking a cigarette (Leonard Bell 203n54). As Brown explains, the female portrait was probably painted in the artist's studio where Manet had his model don a 'gypsy' costume, and then added the horses in the background. Brown quotes one of the animalising metaphors from Mérimée's "Carmen", using it as a point of entry to her analysis of the painting: in the story, Carmen is compared to "a thoroughbred filly from a Cordova stud" (76). In Brown's interpretation, the horses make a contrived allusion both to the nomadic lifestyle of 'gypsies' and to the woman's "sexy sleekness" (76). Embodying the artist's aesthetic and sexual ideals, she is rendered in contrastive colour primaries: reds, yellows, blues, which are meant to convey her "primitivism", a message supported also by the "improvisational" brush strokes. The gesture of hand on hip and the cigarette emphasise her "natural compose, assuredness, independence, and casually seductive attraction" (76); the cigarette gives her a mannish appearance. Just like Mérimée, Manet was fascinated by bold, assertive women, Brown continues, but since he could not conceive them as his creative equals, he regretted that they were not men. This is the light in which, according to Brown, we should interpret the more passive and

Manuela Montijo, Countess of Teba, about a man from Malagueña who killed his lover in a fit of jealousy. During his travels in Spain, to his great disappointment, Mérimée never crossed paths with highway robbers, but that did not stop him from passing on second-hand stories of thrilling adventure to his readers in the *Revue de Paris* and *L'Artiste* (Charnon-Deutsch 60).

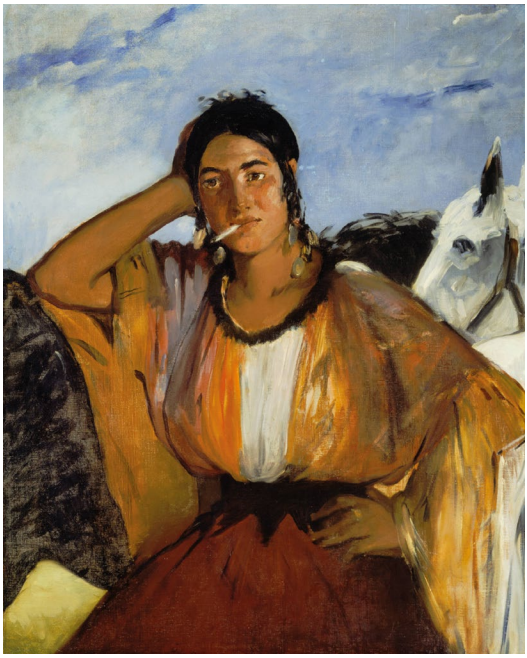

Fig. 16. Édouard Manet (1832–1883), *Gypsy with a Cigarette* / *Gitane avec une Cigarette*, c. 1862, oil on canvas, 92 × 73.5 cm.

contemplative gesture of the other arm on which the woman rests her head and "the dreamy indolence of her limpid gaze" (76).

However, it is also necessary to account for the whites and blacks used in the painting. Manet has placed his subject against a background of a white and a black horse; the choice of setting is clearly meant to convey an impression of 'non-whiteness', enhanced by the white cigarette in the woman's mouth and the white stipe on her blouse. Without this frame of reference (white animal fur, white paper, and white textile), the message that she is 'non-white' would have been lost on the viewer. The effect of the white horse in Manet's avant-garde painting urges a comparison to Bor's *The Spanish Gypsy Girl* (**Fig. 6**) where, as we have already seen, the girl's complexion is identical to the colour of the white horse behind her. Let us remember that matching a model's skin colour to a legible touchstone of whiteness in no way represents strict adherence to epidermal facts but is a form of privilege; a privilege that is in the power of the artist to grant or to withhold. Pursuing this theme, if we take the racialisation of Manet's subject and regard

it in the context of Brown's analysis (presented in a summary form in the previous paragraph), we can point to two distinct ways in which womanhood is depreciated in this greatly eulogised masterpiece. First, the appeal of female sexual independence is "exported" into the realm of 'ethno-racial' Otherness, positing that sexually liberated women are 'non-white'; and secondly, creativity is entirely proscribed from the domain of femininity, the implication being that, 'white' or 'non-white', women cannot participate on equal terms in artistic activities with men.

Let us now return to our main topic under discussion – the motif of child-stealing 'gypsies' – and try to conclude the findings in this chapter. Unlike the static palm-reading motif, the story of child-theft has a dynamic dénouement along the axis of time and is imbued with emotional drama. Colourwise, it involves the interplay of two archetypal extremes: of day and night or of light and darkness, but embodied in human form, staged as an opposition between 'white' aristocrats and 'black' 'gypsies'. In the story, a noble infant girl (a nascent source of pure light) is first engulfed by the underworld of 'gypsies' and then found anew, recognised thanks to the spark of true love she ignites in the heart of a distinguished nobleman. From of the 'gypsy' shadow, an adolescent woman steps out who, unaware of her noble origin, has had the wisdom to preserve intact the purity of her spirit and the virginity of her body, both reflected in her 'white' skin. She has thus proven the power of her noble nature (blood) demonstrating the inborn superiority of her kind. The miraculous moment of Preciosa's recovery and recognition, the re-appearance of her luminous being out of the 'gypsy' darkness is celebrated in numerous history paintings, in etchings and engravings during the Dutch Golden Age. Cervantes' story has thus been transformed into an aesthetic tool, one of the many which European aristocracy invested in to set themselves apart from and above other social strata, and to offer matchless evidence in support of their claim to domination. The image of the 'white' European aristocrat is not a self-evident truth, nor does it rest on epidermal facts but is a long-term aesthetic project, a powerful symbolic tool, a highly sophisticated and expensive form of seventeenth-century public relations and image making, for the sake of which much money and artistic talent has been spent. More often than not the works of the Dutch masters stage the young, fine, luminous noblewoman in sharp contrast to her old, ugly, brownish 'gypsy' thief-mother: aristocrats are set against the lowliest of the low, linking skin colour to social status, criminality, and poverty. Epitomising entire social strata, the two figures stand on the two

sides of a decisive colour divide: noble Preciosa (and by extension the high nobility) has the colour of broad daylight, while the old 'gypsy' is portrayed in the colours of the falling night. In two of the paintings, the artists include 'black' African figures, which adds another layer of signification to the shadowy 'gypsy' skin colour: it is no longer only a mutable 'social' marker but could also be interpreted as an immutable geographical marker, one pointing to the non-European origin of the figure. The opposition is no longer only social but socio-'ethno-racial'. Thus, an unbridgeable colour rift is created between social strata which later will be refracted in the representation of imagined 'ethno-racial' groups, between those privileged to have their image depicted in the colour of daylight and the rest whose image deviates from pure white.