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CARMEN DEBATING THE FEMME FATALE

JALA SAMEH EL HADIDI

2007

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The American University in Cairo

School of Humanities and Social Sciences

<u>Carmen</u>: Debating the *Femme Fatale*

A Thesis Submitted to

The Department of English and Comparative Literature

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for

The Degree of Master of Arts

by

Jala Sameh El Hadidi

Bachelor of Arts

(Under the Supervision of Dr. Michal Oklot)

May 2007

The American University in Cairo

CARMEN: DEBATING THE *FEMME FATALE*

A Thesis submitted by Jala Sameh El Hadidi

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ABSTRACT

"Carmen: Debating the *Femme Fatale*" is a thesis submitted to The American University in Cairo by Jala Sameh El Hadidi, under the supervision of Dr. Michal Oklot. The thesis analyzes Georges Bizet's operatic transposition of Prosper Mérimée's novella, Carmen, focusing on the staging of Carmen as a *femme fatale*. After examining the requirements for transposing different literary genres into music, the first two chapters present the biographical backgrounds of both Mérimée and Bizet up to the time in which each creates his version of Carmen. Plot summaries are followed by an analysis of the critical reception to both works, discussing the noticeable division among opera and literary critics of nineteenth-century France.

Chapter 3 explores the problematic theme of Carmen as a *femme fatale*. The classification of Carmen as a *femme fatale* has always been controversial. An analysis of select musical excerpts sung by Carmen directly addresses and attempts to resolve this controversy. Carmen is also compared to other literary figures such as Lady Macbeth and Salome. By contrast, Carmen seems to lack the intentional malice which marks them definitively as *femmes fatales*. On the other hand, her eccentricity, independence, and strong belief in freedom are character traits which are commonly observed in *femmes fatales*.

This chapter also compares Bizet's treatment and presentation of Carmen to Bizet's. In Mérimée's novella, Carmen is indirectly portrayed and is in fact killed twice: first, when Don José stabs her; and second, when Mérimée's French traveler adds a fourth chapter to the novella reporting on Romany—which in fact confuses readers and marginalizes the real plot. Bizet's opera, on the other hand, with its linear and streamlined plot, shifts the focus to Carmen herself, embedding her in the minds of generations to come as one of the strongest and most popular *femme fatale* figures in history.

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INTRODUCTION

"Anything can be set to music, true, but not everything will be effective."

Giuseppe Verdi[1]

Literature, in most cases, is considered the foundation for the majority of the arts. Language, in literary works, has been the communicator of ideas and fantasies that have long inspired artists to create and excel. Ezra Pound once said: "great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree."[2] If this is true, it can be assumed that all art forms are various interpretations of language and, thereby, of literature. And since literature, specifically poetry, has always promoted musical inspiration, one can conclude that music—one of the most accessible art forms, reaching the widest audience range—is therefore dependant to a great extent on literary works, as well as representing an interpretation of them.

Of course, one can argue that music must not necessarily depend or spring from a literary work. However, one of music's highest arts, opera, cannot exist without a literary work as its basis—"For opera is not music alone; it lives in association with poetry and dramatic action, an association that has made it idiosyncratic."[3] Opera can therefore be regarded as a "hybrid medium."[4] Generally, hybrids—at least when talking about human races—are considered to have more beauty, as they often contain a balance between two distinct characteristics. I believe this to be the case for opera, which is a combination of two distinct art forms: that of

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[1] Quoted in Gary Schmidgall, Literature as Opera (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977) 3.

[2] Quoted in Judith Nowinski, "Sense and Sound in Georges Bizet's Carmen," The French Review 43.6 (1970): 895.

[3] Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker, eds., Analyzing Opera: Verdi and Wagner (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989) 3.

[4] Abbate 5.

literature and music. With Carmen as my focal point, I intend to show how both literary and musical artistry have intertwined to bring to life one of the world's greatest and most famous operas.

Before I begin my analysis of Mérimée's and Bizet's Carmens, I would like to discuss briefly the relationship between literature and music. "A literary work is composed of form and subject matter; a musical composition, particularly an opera, while including these two elements, also contains other dimensions—melodic material, rhythmic values, tonality and orchestration."[5] Consequently, transposing literary texts into an opera is a complex artistic task. When analyzing an opera, one has to consider that any form of literature being adapted has to be modified and changed to suit operatic style, as is the case for Carmen's novella. One should also take into consideration that "qualities of excellence" in a literary work can actually hinder and block an operatic transposition.[6]

Unlike Wagner, who wrote almost all his librettos himself,[7] the majority of composers adapt famous literary works to music with the aid of librettists. While it is generally considered to be the librettists' task to rework and rewrite the original piece of literature into a libretto, the majority of opera composers do in fact revise the librettos themselves to ensure that they are appropriate for the music and singers—only composers can really be aware of how music transforms and communicates words to audiences. One can claim that librettists, on the other hand, focus on making the first transformation of a literary work into a condensed text—"for it so happens that the narrative genre, in contrast to the lyric and the drama, is distinguished by its

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[5] Nowinski 891.

[6] Schmidgall 4.

[7] Thomas Matthews, Stories of the World's Great Operas (New York: Golden Press, 1968) 16.

length."[8] They also make changes to the style of the language by omitting ornamental trivia and replacing it with precise and economic language.

In opera, due to space and time constraints, librettists must break down complex narrative styles to fit a linear narration; excluding discursiveness and focusing mainly on action. One can consider Goethe's The Sorrows of Young Werther, for example—his letters constitute a rather dry and linear narration, but are perfectly suitable for operatic conventions. Therefore, it is largely the librettists' task to select the most essential, linear, plot-promoting events and characters to be included in his libretto; conveying the drama as quickly and interestingly as possible. While studying a literary work, both composers and librettists focus on specific literary instances; looking for sentiments, characters, and situations appropriate for "amplification," since opera as a genre is "possessed of what expressionists called a *Steigerungstendenz*."[9] To summarize: whereas in a novel a reader can (if he happens to forget events or certain characters) reread certain pages and refresh his memory, an opera, especially if performed live, has one run-through. Librettists, therefore, should only include events and characters that lead to the plot's climax and desired end, excluding subplots and detailed descriptions.

This brings us to another important fact. While literature permits certain characters to be passive—Mérimée's Carmen figure herself, for example, who is described indirectly—in opera there is only room for activity on stage. This obliges every character on stage to contribute to his/her character's definition and agency, without excluding, for example, mute characters. Again, due to time constraints, opera focuses on actuality, which depends on immediacy in transmitting an event, as well as

[8] Theophil Spoerri & Trude Douglas, "Mérimée and the Short Story," Yale French Studies 4 (1949): 7.

[9] Schmidgall 11. In a chapter named "An Opening Perspective," Schmidgall writes: "Opera has to do with Heights. Exaggeration is part of its essence. [...] The world of opera is one of high relief, magnification, escalation" (11).

immediacy in revealing its characters to the audience. In the context of Jacques Derrida's theory of language, the realm of deferred meaning[10] and attributes that might promote a different view and description of character and plot are almost non-existent in opera. Different productions of the same opera—Francesco Rosi's Carmen, Herbert von Karajan's Carmen, Franco Zifferelli's Carmen, and many others—to a great extent offer alterations of only the visual presentation of the setting, acting and staging, while maintaining the same linear plot with its well-defined and fixed characters.

Turning now to composers: a literary work must primarily challenge the composer to want to say something about it. As an example, composer Ferruccio Busoni suggested that in choosing a subject for an opera, a composer should rather concentrate on a subject that "could not exist nor reach complete expression without music."[11] After choosing an interesting subject, and upon receiving a finished libretto, composers still request changes in some passages or simply rewrite parts themselves. As is usually the case, librettists sometimes use words that might obstruct singing or might even render it impossible—in order for the written word to project sound it has to contain at least two syllables, enabling it to be expanded musically, therefore acoustically. Once these technical problems are solved, composers start choosing parts of the libretto for "music heightening"[12]—many famous arias have been a product of this.

At the debut of every new opera, composers deal directly with their premiere singers, who either agree to the librettos and music or reject them. Therefore, in the

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[10] Jacques Derrida, "Semiology and Grammatology," Literary Theory: An Anthology, ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (Malden: Blackwell 2004) 332-39.

[11] Quoted in Schmidgall 4.

[12] Schmidgall 12.

case of almost every opera, we can claim that the words we are listening to are the outcome of the tastes of the librettists, composers, and singers who produced them in the past. Relevant to this point is Gary Schmidgall's assertion that "sometimes peculiar facts surrounding the premiere—the availability of a great soprano, or an excellent chorus, for example—subvert loyalty to the literary text."[13] On the other hand, musical figures such as composer Hector Berlioz believe that even under ideal conditions an operatic translation simply ruins its foundational literary text.[14]

The question must therefore be asked: can one consider Georges Bizet to have ruined Prosper Mérimée's Carmen? I will argue that this is not the case. Although Mérimée's and Bizet's life paths never crossed, Bizet's musical personality blends naturally with Mérimée's, as will become evident. And Bizet's fascination with Mérimée's Carmen figure made him challenge virtually everyone in late nineteenth-century Paris in the process of producing his version of Carmen. Therefore, I agree with Gary Schmidgall's claim that Carmen must probably have contained a "particular hint" which made Bizet feel that "music would make a natural addition"[15] to the novella.

Femmes Fatales

While I intend to analyze Bizet's Carmen as an interpretation of Mérimée's original—with some necessary technical analysis on how Bizet transposed Mérimée's novella—I would like to first explain why I chose the figure of Carmen rather than any other. Like Bizet and Mérimée, I developed an interest in Otherness, especially with regards to staged *femmes fatales*.

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[13] Schmidgall 8.

[14] Schmidgall 373.

[15] Schmidgall 6.

Initially, I was tempted to discuss Lady Macbeth and Salome, but I discovered that although more aggressive than Carmen, both actually lack an important factor: they do not demonstrate an authentic Otherness. Although Salome and Lady Macbeth probably fit into Mario Praz's category of vampire *femmes fatales*[16]—those purely bloody women pursuing the destruction of men—both were actually normal women up to the point in which they turned into vampires. Therefore, in my opinion, they cannot be viewed as representatives of the Other. Carmen, on the other hand, is unconventional from the outset. First, she is a gypsy, free of social conventions, with no authority figure to obey, no social image to keep, and no (real) husband to care for. She embraces her freedom to such an extent that she refuses to be shackled with material possessions, and none can remain with her for more than a day. In my view, this makes her a completely free person, affirmed by the fact that from the beginning she does not uphold any moral or religious beliefs except for the primacy of freedom. To humanity in general and to women in particular she is a true Other.

Another important reason why I chose to write about Carmen is that the classification of Carmen as a *femme fatale* has always been controversial. Compared to Salome and Lady Macbeth she might seem less like a *femme fatale*, however, since Mario Praz states that *femmes fatales* have never really had a fixed definition, she cannot be excluded from that categorization either. But what is more interesting than just comparing Carmen to the two other female figures, is actually comparing Mérimée's Carmen to Bizet's—there is a different stress and intensity to her character and presence that makes her cruel in one version and mild in the other. Can she be a *femme fatale* in one version and not in the other? Given Berlioz's summary

[16] Mario Praz, The Romantic Agony, trans. Agnus Davidson, 3rd ed. (New York: Meridian Books, 1963) 209.

conviction, would such a difference be considered a distortion or "ruin" of Mérimée's original?

The first and the second chapters of the thesis present factual information about both Mérimée and Bizet up to the point in which each created his Carmen. Plot summaries of both the novella and the opera libretto are also included. In the third chapter I will focus on demonstrating the differences between Mérimée and Bizet, analyzing their presentation of Carmen. Providing musical as well as literary analysis of certain musical excerpts sung by Carmen, I intend to pursue a discussion of the problematic theme of the *femme fatale*.

CHAPTER 1: PROSPER MÉRIMÉE'S "CARMEN"

1.1 Mérimée's Biography

Prosper Mérimée, born September 28, 1803, was a son of well-to-do parents.[17] Following the French tradition of his time he studied law and decided to pursue a diplomatic career. Being a young diplomat, he had several opportunities to travel, enabling him to make important connections with the Montijo family in Spain, as well as gathering interesting material to narrate to the child Empress Eugenie. Attracted to court by the Empress, he was soon promoted to the post of senator. Given this close association, it is said that the empire's collapse coincides with Mérimée's own end. He died a few weeks after the fall of Napoleon, on September 23, 1870.

Mérimée was described by his biographers as a spoiled child of fortune; a man who was clearly regarded as a dandy, and a devotee of pleasure, especially since he had every material advantage. He started writing early in life, and is most famous for his short works: Mateo Falcone (1829), Colomba (1840) and Carmen (1845), to name a few.

> In youthful high spirits, the *enfant terrible* of Romanticism tried his hand at the dramatic and lyric modes with the *Théâtre de Clara Gazul, comediénne espagnole* (1825), *Le Carrosse du Saint-Sacrement* (1829), and the *Guzla, ou Choix de poésies illyriques recueillies dans La Dalmatie, La Bosnie, La Croatie et l'Herzégovine* (1827) and *Le Vase étrusque*.[18]

His writings can be categorized according to the three life phases he experienced. Mérimée was famous for being in several casual relationships with women—critics referred to him as "merely playing with women,"[19] while Victor

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[17] Spoerri 3-11.

[18] Spoerri 6.

[19] Spoerri 6.

Hugo referred to him as "le dernier courtesans."[20] Although he was a womanizer, two phases of his writing indicate his seriousness with regards to two women. First, he fell in love with a married woman named Madame Lacoste, but their relationship was not long-lived, causing him to write a series of grief-filled stories. Later, he fell in love with another married woman, Valentine Delessert, to whom all his greatest works, especially Carmen, were credited.

1.2 Creation of Mérimée's Carmen

At the time Carmen appeared, French society had been accustomed to reading and writing about the Orient with its exotic nature and its exotic as well as erotic characters. Mérimée simply continued on the path already taken by his contemporaries, though Carmen was by no means his first exotic work. Traces of exoticism have long been prevalent in his writings, ever since his first work Théâtre de Clara Gazul.

His first visit to Spain was in 1830, yet critics believe that Carmen had been occupying his mind long before that.

> In May 1825, he published *le Théâtre de Clara Gazul*, a masterpiece of ironic parody, whose central character—a Spanish actress—strums the guitar to accompany her gypsy songs, and whose physical appearance foreshadows that of Carmen. Subsequent works such as *La Femme est un diable*, *L'Amour africain* and *L'Occasion*; all contain germinal elements of the future Carmen, Don José and others.[21]

Although Mérimée may have been following the latest trend of choosing an exotic topic for his work, critics believe Carmen owes its creation to one of his love affairs. He developed a deep friendship with the married Valentine Delessert, who was the daughter of a friend of his. According to his famous biographer, Pierre

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[20] Quoted in Spoerri 5.

[21] Nowinski 893.

Trahard, she was his "woman-friend, whose passionately beautiful face, for more than twenty years, is to be found again and again in the women's figures in the great stories she inspired"[22] such as La Vénus d'Ille (1837), Colomba (1840), and Carmen (1845). In 1854 their friendship ended abruptly, causing a simultaneous decline in his artistry.

1.3 Novella's Plot Summary

It is interesting to note that the original novella of Carmen was written as a three-chapter story, of which only the third chapter presents Carmen's story fully. Later, Mérimée added a fourth chapter which is not relevant to the plot of the novella itself.

The novella begins with a French archaeologist who is on a mission to map out the region in which Caesar defeated the conservative Roman senate. He is soon beguiled by the nature of Spain, and decides to take a rest in Spain's exotic pastures. His first exotic encounter is with a local bandit who he describes as being from a good background but hardened by Spain's cruel nature. The bandit, Don José, taking pity on the French traveler (narrator) offers to deliver him to a nearby inn, which is in fact his hiding place. At night, the French traveler becomes aware that his travel assistant secretly went to inform the authorities about Don José's location. The French traveler, overcome by a feeling of gratitude for the bandit who offered him a place to rest, warns Don José that the authorities are on their way to the inn. Don José escapes and the French traveler is interrogated by the police. The French traveler believed this to be the last of his wild Spanish adventures; however, upon his arrival in Cordoba he encounters a poor gypsy, Carmen. Enchanted with her daring character, he follows her to a private room owned by an elderly lady. When he is about to become intimate

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[22] Quoted in Spoerri 7.

with her, the door is flung open, and he finds himself confronted by the renegade bandit whom he helped not long ago. The French traveler realizes that Carmen has betrayed him—not only has she robbed him of his watch, but she is also persuading Don José to kill him. The French traveler finds no other solution than to surrender and to offer Don José a cigarette as a sign of peace. He is spared by Don José, but he is forced to leave at once, and he promises never to return again. After his second lucky escape the French traveler abandons this region. However, a couple of months later, he is informed that Don José has been jailed for the murder of Carmen. The French traveler visits Don José in prison and José, realizing that he is about to leave this world, starts narrating the story of his affair with Carmen. He tells the French traveler about his good background and about how he met Carmen at a cigar factory.

Due to a quarrel in the factory, Don José had to arrest Carmen and deliver her to prison. En route, she started seducing him to facilitate her escape. She asked him not to resist her, pushed him, jumped off the wagon, and vanished in the mountains. He was imprisoned in her place. During his sojourn in prison Carmen sent him a fresh baked Spanish specialty, in which she hid some money and an English file, yet he refused to escape from prison. Two months later he was released, but he lost his rank and was forced to work as a private officer guarding a high official's house. One night, there was a party in the house and to his surprise Carmen and a group of gypsies were called upon as entertainers. When he saw her with the party's guests, he realized for the first time that he was madly in love with Carmen. Before leaving she managed to instruct him to meet her at Lillas Pastia, which he did, and from that moment his transformation began.

Don José explains to the French traveler how Carmen tricked him, how she abused his love, how she lied about her several affairs, and, more importantly, how

she concealed that she was married. She also concealed her master plan to smuggle her husband out of his well-earned imprisonment. He relates his regression at her hands from a morally upright, disciplined military officer, to a ruthless criminal. Ironically, Don José relates his misfortunes to a man who he himself has saved from suffering at the same woman's hands.

Carmen's story really ends here, but a couple of months after publishing it Mérimée added a fourth chapter to the already finished story—"In this fourth section, the French narrator returns and delivers a long-winded discussion on Romany, the gypsy language—its origins, its dialects, its influence on French slang; its qualities and its proverb."[23]

1.4 Responses to Mérimée's Carmen

Since Napoleon Bonaparte's conquest of Egypt, the French culture became fascinated "with the exotic, the bizarre and the supernatural, often resulting in stories very much like Carmen: stories in which a sober, high-minded French narrator—representative of French superiority and civilization—visits areas alien to him and reports upon what he finds."[24] Therefore, the average reader of 1845 would not have found anything shocking about Mérimée's Carmen.

The novella which was published in La Revue des Deux Mondes—a bi-weekly travel journal depicting exotic landscapes and adventures in what we today call the 'Third World'—was to a large extent not recognized as a fiction, since it appeared to have all the trappings of a "letter from Abroad."[25] Not even professional critics appeared to notice the novella, published since 1830 alongside articles on

[23] Susan McClary, Georges Bizet, "Carmen" (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992) 2.

[24] McClary 1.

[25] McClary 1.

Belgium and the Catholic Party. Several years after its publication, critics and readers at large recognized Mérimée's Carmen, referring to it as 'Mérimée's masterpiece.' "This was even true before Bizet's transposition of it."[26]

In her book Georges Bizet: "Carmen," McClary claims that readers would probably have been mystified by Mérimée's choice of the name 'Carmen,' since for readers of that time this name was not French. It became recognizable after the novella itself became famous, and probably also after the production of Bizet's Carmen.[27] Further mystification was produced by the epigraph written in Greek, not French, quoting the Greek Palladas: "Every woman is bitter as bile, but each has two good moments, one in bed and the other in the grave."[28] Women of Mérimée's time did not know Greek, which suggests that this novella was probably intended for male readers only. Male readers in Mérimée's day were expected to be able to read Greek, since instruction in this language was part of their education. Female readers, on the other hand, were unable to receive the same education and "could not have discerned that it was they who are at issue in the epigraph."[29] But apart from this observation on Mérimée's preference for male readers, Mérimée's plots themselves never seemed to have been an issue of debate.

Mérimée was considered one of the best short story writers in France, and probably in the world. And his plots, which "reek blood" and "reach their outcome in death,"[30] were very popular in France. In my opinion, however, Mérimée's captivating plots cannot often be reconciled with his rather factual and dry writing style. In a

[26] McClary 1-2.

[27] McClary 3.

[28] Quoted in McClary 4.

[29] McClary 4.

[30] Spoerri 8.

letter to Johann Peter Eckermann on March 14, 1830, Goethe writes that Mérimée's stories "are written from a certain objective distance and as it were with irony."[31] This is the same feeling one gets after reading Carmen, and especially when reading the fourth chapter, which makes the whole novella seem like a report on true events. Therefore, I believe that as interesting as Carmen's plot is, Mérimée does not give adequate space for either Carmen's character or for the novella as a whole to develop. The Carmen story ends abruptly and is followed by a chapter that might make readers totally forget and overlook the real story itself.

[31] Quoted in Spoerri 6.

CHAPTER 2:
GEORGES BIZET'S "CARMEN"

2.1 Bizet's Biography

Georges Bizet was born on October 25, 1838, in Paris.[32] He was born into a musical family—his mother was a pianist, his father was a vocal coach, and his two uncles were well-known singers—making him well versed in piano, voice, and harmony. He entered the Conservatoire at the fairly young age of nine, and he studied composition with Fromenthal Halévy, composer of La Juive, who later became his father-in-law. Halévy had a great influence on Bizet, and he helped him to develop his instinct for poetry and literature in general. Later, he studied with Charles Gounod, under whom he developed the majority of his musical styles.

Throughout his life, Bizet worked as a pianist and as a piano instructor trying to provide for his wife, Geneviève, and his son, Jacques. Musicians such as Liszt regarded Bizet as one of the greatest living pianists, which I assume influenced Bizet's understanding of himself as a composer. Perhaps out of modesty, but definitely out of low self-esteem, Bizet always viewed himself as living in Gounod's shadow. He continuously attempted to transcend his master and, ultimately, succeeded in doing so, though he never lived to witness his success.

Apart from his famous Carmen (1874-5), Bizet produced several other renowned operas such as Les pêcheurs de perles (1863), La jolie fille de Perth (1867) and Djamileh (1872), as well as his *Schauspielmusik* for L'Arlésienne (1872). Although Carmen is today considered his best work by far, during his lifetime it was perceived as his worst. According to Bizet scholars, this critical reception caused him to fall into serious depression, leading to his untimely death in 1875.

[32] Mina Curtiss, Bizet and His World (New York: Knopf, 1958) 3.

2.2 Creation of Bizet's Carmen

"An elusive heroine" like Mérimeé's gypsy "had long intrigued" Bizet, yet there were many "obstacles in the way of composing *Carmen*."[33] In 1872, while still rehearsing for L'Arlésienne, Bizet started working on Carmen. During that time, Gounod was in London, leaving Bizet no option but to work on the revival of his Roméo et Juliette. By 1873 he had finished supervising performances of Roméo et Juliette and wanted to focus on composing Carmen. However, his wife and baby son hardly left him any time to focus on work. Other projects of his such as his Petite suite d'orchestre and Djamileh also came in his way.

In the summer of 1873, when he finally met with the two librettists who agreed to write Carmen's libretto, Henry Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy, the Opéra-Comique directors were horrified by the idea of producing such an opera. At that time, the Opéra-Comique had two directors, Camille du Locle and Adolph de Leuven, and while the former agreed to produce Carmen, the latter refused. De Leuven claimed that the Opéra-Comique, which was considered a family theatre in which marriages were arranged, could not produce an opera that had a "background of thieves, gypsies and cigar-makers!"[34] Halévy's persistence and promises to make the opera more innocent by introducing characters such as Micaëla made de Leuven agree to it conditionally. However, he still expressed his concern at having Carmen die on stage—he referred to this as an unprecedented event in the history of the French Opéra-Comique. "Six months later, de Leuven resigned, largely because of his antipathy to Carmen."[35] Pretending to suffer from financial difficulties, du Locle

[33] Nowinski 892.

[34] Curtiss 351.

[35] Curtiss 351.

postponed Carmen, and Bizet, distressed by such a delay, agreed to take up another project, Don Rodrique, which he never finished.[36]

Despite working on several other projects, Bizet managed to write enough of Carmen to begin searching for his leading lady. Bizet's first choice was Zulma Bouffar, a famous singer at the time and a favorite of Meilhac, who could not tolerate to have his favorite singer stabbed at the end of the opera. Following Bouffar's rejection of the role, Bizet interviewed the British Marie Roze, whom he did not picture as fitting for his Carmen. The third in line was Marie-Célestine-Laurence, known as Galli-Marié. She bore Spanish features, but had no knowledge at all of Mérimeé's Carmen.[37] When Galli-Marié agreed to the part, it was immediately assumed that she had fallen in love with Bizet. However, correspondence between Bizet and Galli-Marié reveals that he had been worried that she might refuse to sing Carmen due to financial problems, as he received very little funding.

Obstacles in producing Carmen did not only stop there, Bizet also faced several problems with his singers—Galli-Marié, Paul Lhérie (the first Don José), as well as Jacques Bouhy (the first Escamillo). They refused to sing his music and required changes to fit their image of their roles, and to cater to their egos, of course. It took him two more years, solving uncountable problems, until Carmen finally had its premiere on March 3, 1875. Three months later, Bizet died. In tribute to him, du Locle and Léon Carvalho, de Leuven's substitute, decided to revive the opera.

2.3 Libretto's Plot Summary

Georges Bizet's influence on Carmen was pervasive. "Few people are aware of the fact that the *Carmen* we know today is not that of Henri Meilhac and Ludovic

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[36] Curtiss 352.

[37] Curtiss 358.

Halévy, traditionally credited with the libretto. [...] Rather it is the version reworked by Georges Bizet, who felt that neither of them actually understood Mérimeé's story, and that they had thus distorted the original meaning and esthetics."[38] Bizet had always believed that an intelligent composer chose and worked on the libretto by himself.[39]

The Opera is divided into four acts, and the action takes place in Spain.

Act One

The action begins in a square in Seville. In the background there is a cigar factory and children are playing in the middle of the square, while the Spanish dragoons are waiting for the guards to change shift. A young woman, Micaëla, comes looking for corporeal Don José, only to be informed that he has not arrived yet. She refuses to wait for him among all these men and leaves the scene. The guards change shift and Don José enters the square. Immediately after he appears, the bells of the factory start ringing, announcing noontime. The factory girls storm the square for some rest and to smoke. Then, Carmen appears on the scene. Don José is busy cleaning his sword and ignores Carmen, while all others approach her, demanding her love. Bored of their demands, she quickly develops an interest in the handsome corporal who seems oblivious to her charms. She starts singing her famous "Habañera," in which she explains the intangibility of love, and at the end of which she makes sure she gets Don José's attention. Right after her aria, she throws an acacia flower at him. The factory bells ring again, announcing that it is time to return to work. Don José, who is left alone, takes the flower and places it in his coat. Before he can digest what has happened, Micaëla, his betrothed, returns to the scene. Micaëla

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[38] Nowinski 891.

[39] Curtiss 86.

kisses him innocently on the forehead, and hands him a letter from his mother. She soon leaves to give him space to read his mother's letter. Suddenly, the factory bells start ringing frantically and the factory girls are screaming for the dragoons. Carmen is accused of having injured another girl in the factory. Don José is ordered to enter the factory, arrest Carmen, and accompany her to jail. Carmen starts singing her "Seguidilla," which she uses to win back her freedom as well as to discreetly direct Don José to her hideout at Lillas Pastia. She soon succeeds in persuading Don José to set her free. He allows her to escape and gets arrested on her behalf.

Act Two

At Lillas Pastia, a group of smugglers (Carmen's friends) are making plans for an upcoming job, while Carmen's thoughts are elsewhere. She is in love with Don José, and is awaiting his arrival at Lillas Pastia. However, while waiting for him, she has to entertain Zuniga, the very captain who ordered her arrest and who imprisoned Don José in her stead. She is also quickly admired by Escamillo, a Spanish toreador who arrived in Seville that same day. Escamillo, wanting to impress the company, starts singing the "Toreador Song," at the end of which he realizes that Carmen's heart is already taken. Carmen quickly manages to escape from the attentions of both Escamillo and Zuniga, sending them away in order to be alone when Don José arrives. When he does arrive she is filled with such happiness that she dances and sings.

Her happiness, however, is short-lived—Don José has to return to the dragoons. She tries to convince him to stay, but he refuses to leave the military. She accuses him of not loving her and Don José tries to calm her down by showing her the flower he had preserved as a sign of devotion, resulting in the famous aria "La fleur que tu m'avais jetée." At the climax of their dispute, the door is flung open and Zuniga, who has come back for Carmen, is struck by extreme jealousy upon seeing

Don José. They start fighting. Carmen's friends help Don José, leaving him no option but to escape with them to the mountains.

Act Three

In the mountains, Carmen has already grown weary of Don José's attachment to her. Don José suspects a relationship between Carmen and Escamillo, who had come searching for Carmen that morning. Jealousy drives him to fight Escamillo, yet Carmen propitiously interferes. At night she sits with her fellow gypsies—Mercedes and Frasquita—who read cards to predict their fortunes. While Frasquita and Mercedes dream of love and money, Carmen's cards reveal her impending death, followed by that of Don José's. She sings her first sad aria, "En vain pour éviter," acknowledging the fact that by now Don José must be aware of her boredom, and her desire to be with Escamillo.

Meanwhile, Micaëla has been searching for Don José, and she is soon discovered near the smugglers' camp. Micaëla informs Don José that his dying mother wishes to see him. Reluctant to leave Carmen, he follows Micaëla, warning Carmen that he will come back for her.

Act Four

On a festival day, all of Seville is on its way to see Escamillo and his bullfight. Escamillo and Carmen enter the scene together, followed by Mercedes and Frasquita who notice Don José's presence in the crowd. Fearing that he might harm Carmen, they advise her to escape. Carmen arrogantly refuses to consider the idea, and convinces them that she will join them in the arena as soon as she finishes talking to Don José. Alone in the street, Don José approaches Carmen, begging her to come with him. She refuses, and unexpectedly asks him whether he intends to kill her or

not. He swears never to harm her, but his pleading soon becomes intolerable to Carmen. She takes off the ring he had once given her and throws it in his face. Desperate and enraged by this last action, as well as by her arrogant determination to pass him and go to Escamillo in the arena, Don José is left with no option but to take her life. The bullfight has ended and people are cheerfully gathering outside the arena, only to find Don José holding Carmen in his arms, confessing that he killed her.

2.4 Responses to Bizet's Carmen

Having referred earlier to the difficulties Bizet faced to get his opera produced; it is now necessary to evaluate how his Carmen was viewed by both critics and musicians. When talking about Bizet, one has to keep in mind that this fairly young composer, who had a rather childish temper—destroying many works before they were performed to neurotically prevent them from being corrupted by others—suffered a great deal from what critics said about him personally, even more than what they said about his work itself. Although he always claimed to be impervious to criticism, he had a sponge-like soul on which anybody could easily leave imprints, if not scars.[40] Therefore, the majority of his critics and scholars are convinced that his untimely death, which was preceded by a strong depression, was due to the fact that Carmen's first performance, which he personally attended, received harsh criticism. He may have believed that this critical reception meant the end of his cherished ambition to become a celebrated French opera composer.

Carmen's first performance on March 3, 1875, turned into a huge fiasco. Till today scholars still wonder whether the audience's contempt for Carmen was caused by Bizet's unconventional music or by the baseness of his heroine. For the first time in the history of French opera, audiences saw a commoner, a gypsy, cast in the title role,

[40] John W. Klein, "Bizet—Opportunist or Innovator?" Music and Letters 5.3 (1924): 238.

smoking cigarettes, smuggling, dancing, and above all dying right in front of their eyes. Such vulgarity provoked uproar, and the press soon declared that attendance for minors should be forbidden.[41] The fact that the opera was perceived as scandalous—providing fodder for the rumor-mills of Paris with its immoral *sujet* staged at the Opéra-Comique—ironically promoted the opera's continual production and success.[42]

Having challenged the traditions of the opéra comique, as aforementioned, Bizet's critics can be divided into two broad groups. The first group views him as a charming but rather "minor composer," while the second group considers him to be one of "the three greatest French musicians of all time." During his lifetime, however, although some considered him to be the best living composer, he was generally belittled and ignored—"denounced as a too scholarly musician completely lacking in spontaneity and incapable of writing a simple melody."[43]

Unlike Mérimée, Bizet did not enjoy much material advantage. This drove his biographer, Jean Albert Gauthier-Villars, to conclude that although Bizet possessed "great potential genius," he "unhesitatingly sacrificed it [...] to his frantic desire to attain the *succès d'argent* of his dreams."[44] Gauthier-Villars, one of Bizet's cruelest critics, disregarded the fact that a young composer like Bizet—given his comparative inexperience, and given the many problems he faced with the Opéra-Comique directors, and with pampered opera singers—would in fact prefer "a performance—however imperfect—of his work to no performance at all."[45]

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[41] Andràs Batta and Sigrid Neef, eds., "Bizet: Carmen," Opera: Komponisten, Werke, Interpreten (Cologne: Könemann, 1999) 58.

[42] John W. Klein, "Bizet's Admirers and Detractors," Music and Letters 19.4 (1938): 408.

[43] Klein, "Bizet's Admirers" 405.

[44] Quoted in Klein, "Bizet's Admirers" 412.

[45] Klein, "Bizet's Admirers" 406.

At that time, nearly all the famous French critics—Ernest Reyer, Camille Bellaigue and Romain Rolland, for example—criticized Carmen, to the extent that some of them, despite commending all of Bizet's other works such as L'Arlésienne, ignored Carmen intentionally. According to Adolphe Jullien, another intractable critic of Bizet, Carmen was a "vulgar *opéra-comique*," and he accused Bizet of "deliberately pandering to the lowest passions of the multitude without even succeeding in winning their applause,"[46]

His critics did not stop there, however. They further accused him of a tendency toward Wagnerism, which was considered disgraceful at that time—Wagner was considered "the best-hated man in France after Bismarck" during the Franco Prussian war.[47] In brief, Bizet failed tremendously in the eyes of French critics and audiences at large. However, his reception among other French musicians, as well as outside France, was altogether different.

The first to recognize his genius was Hector Berlioz, later followed by Claude Debussy, who was initially forced to attend Carmen upon Brahms's demand. From 1878 till 1883 Bizet's "masterpiece swept all over Europe." This opera that was denounced by the French was gloriously celebrated in Germany. And even though Wagner was still at his peak, Carmen soon dominated all German opera houses, largely replacing Wagner's repertoire. Wagner himself, as well as Brahms and Tchaikovsky, was fascinated by Bizet's Carmen, considering its composer one of the finest to have ever lived.[48] Carmen, hailed by such great composers, created a

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[46] Quoted in Klein, "Bizet's Admirers" 408.

[47] Klein, "Bizet's Admirers" 406.

[48] Klein, "Bizet's Admirers" 409.

competitive atmosphere among conductors who started to look forward to producing and touring with it, at least in Germany.

In England, Carmen went more or less unnoticed and was referred to mostly "as a charming little work of slight importance,"[49] though that did not prevent it from being performed and appreciated all over the island. In Italy, Carmen had a great influence on musicians and audiences, and even though Giuseppe Verdi never mentioned it, Puccini, his rival in popularity, declared his admiration for Carmen publicly.[50] Trying to understand why Carmen and Bizet had been so harshly denigrated in France, John Klein argues that the French may have begrudged Bizet the acclaim and esteem he received from so many foreigners.[51]

2.4.1 Nietzsche and Bizet

Musicians and critics were not the only ones who noticed Bizet. Men of letters were drawn to Bizet's masterpiece as well. Joseph Conrad and John Galsworthy shared a fascination for Bizet's Carmen, to the extent that the latter payed homage to Bizet by writing an English translation of Carmen's libretto.[52] In Germany, Friedrich Nietzsche made a huge contribution to the composer's fame by placing him in direct opposition to Wagner.

Nietzsche, known for being interested in a variety of fields, was a critical listener of music and of opera, mainly because of his liaison with Wagner. A persistent promoter of Wagner's music for years, he had a final breach from his former friend and tutor in 1878; swearing never to hear music nor play the piano

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[49] Klein, "Bizet's Admirers" 414.

[50] Klein, "Bizet's Admirers" 414.

[51] Klein, "Bizet's Admirers" 412.

[52] John W. Klein, "Galsworthy and Bizet," The Musical Times 108.1494 (1967): 700-701.

again. Yet, on November 27th, 1881, Nietzsche went to the Politeama Theatre at Genoa where he attended Carmen for the first time.[53]

Although he had never heard of its composer before, upon hearing Carmen for the first time Nietzsche decided to listen to it for a second time within the same day. Nietzsche developed a deep admiration for Bizet, yet he dared not proclaim his regard until after Wagner's death. His love for Bizet was so great that he was considered the "most eloquent and devoted of Bizet's admirers."[54]

Nietzsche's Der Fall Wagner was considered by many critics to be an exaggeration—in that small book Nietzsche praises Bizet's Carmen to such a degree, that conversely, he seems to be intentionally belittling Wagner. On the other hand, critics who were more interested in deriding Bizet's efforts set Nietzsche's comments within the context of trying to retaliate against Wagner; denying Bizet the right to any claims of fame.

However, Nietzsche proved his seriousness and devotion to Bizet. Nietzsche, especially after his breach with Wagner, started to develop a serious illness, and he claimed that Bizet's music aided and stimulated him, helping him to recover and to accept life again after having fallen into serious depression. To sum up the effect of Bizet's music on this great philosopher, Nietzsche stated that music in general should follow in Bizet's footsteps and be mediterraneanized ("If faut mediterraniser la musique"), so that it "returns to nature, health, cheerfulness, youth, virtue!"[55] In Jenseits von Gut und Böse, Nietzsche also declared Bizet to be "a good European" for

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[53] John W. Klein, "Nietzsche and Bizet," The Musical Quarterly 11.4 (1925): 482.

[54] Klein, "Bizet's Admirers" 411.

[55] Friedrich Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy and the Case of Wagner, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1967) 159-60.

having "discovered new beauty and new seduction,"[56] and having "succeeded in combining the otherwise conflicting elements of north and south into one harmonious whole."[57]

Furthermore, Nietzsche believed that Bizet presupposed the intelligence of his audience, whereas Wagner set fairly high standards for his. According to Klein, "no opera had ever appealed so forcibly both to the man in the street and to the most cultured and fastidious of musicians."[58] This is still the case for audiences of both the twentieth and twenty-first centuries who undoubtedly consider Bizet's Carmen a masterpiece for all times.

Some critics are wary of calling Bizet a genius. It is a well-established fact that he cared so much for his work that he sometimes chose to destroy it, rather than witness it being mis-performed or misinterpreted. That being the case, Bizet's output is very small, and hardly any of his earlier works reveal that he is capable of writing Carmen. In this respect, he has been compared to Emily Brontë, whose general output shows no evidence that she could have written the masterpiece, Wuthering Heights.[59] While some regard Bizet as a mere second-rate composer who had a stroke of luck, his contemporaries claimed that all his work contained genius, which would have been evident if not for the mood swings that made him destroy his work.

Whereas Mérimée's works were widely celebrated during his lifetime, Bizet's were only appreciated after his death. And the proof of his everlasting genius is the fact that Carmen is considered the most famous opera ever composed, to the extent that the majority of people credit him for the story itself.

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[56] Quoted in John W. Klein, "Nietzsche and Bizet," The Musical Times 64.959 (1923): 28.

[57] Quoted in Klein, "Nietzsche and Bizet" 28.

[58] Klein, "Bizet's Admirers" 410.

[59] Klein, "Opportunist" 230.

CHAPTER 3:
COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

3.1 Carmen, a *Femme Fatale*?

Audiences, as well as performers, generally consider Carmen a *femme fatale* and many would be astonished to discover that certain critics as well as certain opera books—for example, the famous anthology Opera: Komponisten, Werke, Interpreten—present a different view. However, before discussing whether or not Carmen can be considered a *femme fatale*, one has to first define the concept of the *femme fatale*.

The *femme fatale* is a stereotypical image of a woman. This image can be traced back to ancient Greek mythological figures—Medea, Clytemnestra, and Elektra, for example. In The Romantic Agony, the literary critic Mario Praz notes that *femmes fatales* do not have a fixed description, he argues that until the middle of the 19th century although one meets "with several Fatal Women in literature; there is no established type of Fatal Woman in the way that there is an established type for a Byronic Hero."[60] He does not deny, however, that there are certain criteria by which one can distinguish a *femme fatale* from other female characters.

The term is commonly used in its French original and refers to the type of woman who is generally considered a seductress or an enchantress,[61] though the range of traits which differentiates the *femme fatale* is variable. She is usually a woman not confined to the norms of the society in which she is living; she shows signs of dominance and independence, as well as being able to express and attain her emotional and physical desires. In the majority of cases, especially in literary texts,

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[60] Praz 191.

[61] "Femme Fatale," Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, 30 Apr. 2007, Wikimedia Foundation, Inc., 10 Jan. 2007 <http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Femme_fatale&oldid=127208023>.

she leads her male followers or partners to their destruction. Mario Praz also adds that the *femme fatale* commonly exerts her power on young men who usually posses physical beauty, sexual chastity and inexperience in matters of the heart. They fall in love with her unaware of the fact that she is unattainable. Praz compares the allure of the *femme fatale* with "[...] the flame which attracts and burns" at the same time.[62] In brief, she is considered a threat to morality and a danger to humanity.

The majority of encyclopedic entries on *femmes fatales*—in Encarta and Britannica, for example—utilize the aforementioned description. However, I believe that Praz was the only critic who searched for reasons to explain why a woman develops into a *femme fatale*. When Praz was analyzing Gautier's Mademoiselle de Maupin, he observed that Cleopatra used all her charms to attract a young lion hunter, yet after only one night with him she loses interest. Praz concluded that Cleopatra suffered from "ennui," boredom.[63] The same concept can be applied to Carmen. Carmen is a gypsy, accustomed to mobility and change. Consequently, it is not out of character for her to get bored easily, and to change partners regularly. This ultimately leads to her death, however. According to Praz, therefore, "ennui" is one possible cause for the emergence of the *femme fatale*, and it can be described as the motive force behind Carmen's actions.

In Fatal Women of Romanticism, on the other hand, Adriana Craciun argues that the concept of the *femme fatale* is simply a stereotypical view of certain women which springs from the minds of male authors alone. In her analysis she concludes that this image is the representation of the "male fear about feminism."[64] It is not so

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[62] Praz 206.

[63] Praz 205.

[64] Adriana Craciun, Fatal Women of Romanticism (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 15.

farfetched to believe that Praz would partially agree with Craciun's conclusion—he himself considered the *femme fatale* to be a cultural obsession which created a clichéd type. Nonetheless, he has emphasized that "for a type—which is in actual fact, a cliché—to be created, it is essential that some particular figure should have made a profound impression on the popular mind."[65] This is certainly true of Carmen—whether or not she belongs to the category of the 'fatal woman,' she has become embedded in the popular consciousness.

Carmen, as Mario Praz described her, belongs to the type *fatale allumeuse*—an enchantingly fatal woman—as opposed to the vampire women who seek the direct destruction of their male followers.[66] I assume this is one reason why some find it difficult to categorize Carmen as a pure *femme fatale*, especially when compared with vampire figures such as Salome and Lady Macbeth. Nevertheless, because of her character, some might be tempted to see her as a 'different' *femme fatale*.

Before discussing Carmen's representation by both Mérimée and Bizet, it is important to note that the differences between Bizet's opera libretto and Mérimée's novella actually influence her categorization as a different type of a *femme fatale*. These differences can mostly be observed in the narrative style. In Mérimée's version we have two narrators—the French traveler and the bandit, Don José. Carmen is introduced through the separate accounts given of her by these two male figures. This, in my opinion, makes her a passive character to a great extent. On the other hand, due to the necessary limitations of transposing a literary work into an opera, Bizet's libretto discards the figure of the French traveler completely, and allows Carmen to introduce herself directly to the audience. This major shift in narration transforms Carmen into a dynamic figure, whose presence is central and directly felt by the

[65] Praz 191.

[66] Praz 199.

audience. This simple alteration in narration, essential for transposing the novella into an opera, actually makes Carmen appear more active in the opera than she is in the novella, where Mérimée's focus seems to be in depicting Don José's misfortunes. Of course, someone like Berlioz would call it a distortion of the author's true intent.[67] However, through analyzing and comparing Bizet's and Mérimée's versions, I intend to show that Bizet may have actually improved upon Mérimée's portrayal of Carmen and ultimately saved it from oblivion.

3.2 Carmen's Basic Description

In Mérimée's novella, Carmen is first mentioned by the French narrator who describes her seductive ways and notes that she is a thief. The second description is Don José's—about to be sentenced to death, he recounts his encounter with Carmen at the cigar factory in Seville to the French traveler. He describes her seduction; how she lured him into falling in love with her and letting her escape, transforming him into a bandit, and eventually provoking him to kill her. It is interesting to note that Mérimée limits himself to a superficial depiction of Carmen, focusing on her appearance—her physique and her attire—and making only limited observations about her character. The French narrator's description is to a large extent a neutral one, while Mérimée's Don José is evidently biased, yet both essentially describe the same thing: her exteriority as well as her vulgarity.

The French narrator describes Carmen as "petite," young and, "well-proportioned,"[68] with dark hair, and amazing, large, dark eyes. He does not consider her beautiful by normal standards, though she is acknowledged as the most beautiful

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[67] Schmidgall 373.

[68] Prosper Mérimée, Carmen. Carmen; Arsène Guillot; L'abbé Aubain; La dame de pique; Les bohémiens; Le hussard; Nicolas Gogol (Paris: Calmann Levy, 1925) 22.

of all women belonging to the gypsy race, and he assumes that she is racially mixed. He maintains that though she is not classically beautiful, her strange and savage beauty makes her hard to forget.[69] Apart from this rather concise description of Carmen, one encounters several scattered descriptions about her attire, which in fact really describe the strength of her allure—the quickness of men's stimulation upon seeing her skin through the small holes in her stockings, for example.[70] Insights into Carmen's psychology or any deep analysis of her are almost non-existent. It is always her surface that the two heroes see and discuss.

Bizet's Carmen is confined to Mérimée's description of her, yet Bizet omitted one aspect which Mérimée's French traveler introduced: Bizet did not make his Carmen a thief. This slight alteration makes Bizet's Carmen more sympathetic than Mérimée's—Bizet's Carmen is only promiscuous and not a thief who despicably steals from her lovers after she has tired of them.

Reading Mérimée's novella, one feels that the author was very interested in projecting a real picture of Spain with its gypsies, its factory workers, its military life, and its social mores. He did not seek to glorify or sensationalize his heroes or heroines. Bizet, on the other hand, created his Carmen to cater to the higher standards of opera audiences, and had to amplify and glorify the traits of his heroine accordingly. Opera audiences of Bizet's time would have felt affronted to attend an opera in which the heroine was not only a seductress, but a thief or a prostitute as well, and thereby completely lacking in dignity. It is this difference between the two versions—Mérimée's thief and Bizet's more edifying gypsy—that has, in my opinion, created some confusion in the classification of Carmen as a *femme fatale*. Therefore, I

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[69] Mérimée 24, 25.

[70] Mérimée 35.

would like to shift to a deeper analysis of how Carmen is really presented in both the opera and the novella.

3.3 Analysis of Bizet's *Femme Fatale*

The *femme fatale*, as I have shown earlier, is a conception of women who demonstrate strength and decisiveness in reaching certain goals, causing the destruction of male partners along the way. However, this description lost its applicability after the women's liberation movements of the last century which valorized independence, strength, and decisiveness in modern women—qualities that were once denigrated, and which men generally found threatening. Therefore, in my opinion, what remains decisive in the description of the *femme fatale* is that she brings about the destruction of men through her seductiveness. But even though this view of the *femme fatale* is commonly observed, I believe that an alternative definition is possible.

Fatale, or fatal, comes from the Latin word *fatum*, meaning destiny or fate—an exterior power under which human beings are powerless. Since Carmen never intends to harm the men in her life—they suffer anyway without her active participation in their destruction or downfall—then she can perhaps be described as a *femme fatale* in the more literal sense of the word. Carmen's applicability as a *femme fatale* has been controversial under the commonly observed definition; however, in this more literal sense she becomes an agent of *fatum*, and as much a victim of this supra-human power as her paramours.

Bizet's Carmen unveils her true nature as soon as she appears on stage. In the first act of the opera she sings two famous arias—the "Habañera" and the "Seguidilla"—in which she reveals herself completely to both the audience and Don José.

3.3.1 "Habañera"

It is interesting to note that this aria (see appendix A), considered the most famous in the whole opera tradition, was in fact composed a bit later than the rest of Carmen. Galli-Marié, Bizet's first Carmen, asked him to write her a seductive aria. Presented with the difficult and heavy words written by his librettists, Bizet finally chose to write the eternal words of the aria himself. It is said that he had to rewrite it more than thirteen times until both Galli-Marié and he could agree on the final version.[71] It is also important to note that Bizet, who never visited Spain, chose a Cuban cabaret melody by the Spanish composer Sebastián Yradier and revised it to become his famous "Habañera."[72] It is significant that Bizet, who was by then well-versed in classical opera conventions, chose such 'cabaret' dance music in an opera that was composed for the Opéra-Comique.

This aria is the most important aria in the whole opera; it constitutes the point of departure for the whole tragedy. Before Carmen starts her "Habañera," she is asked by various men to love them, and she replies that she will certainly not do so today.

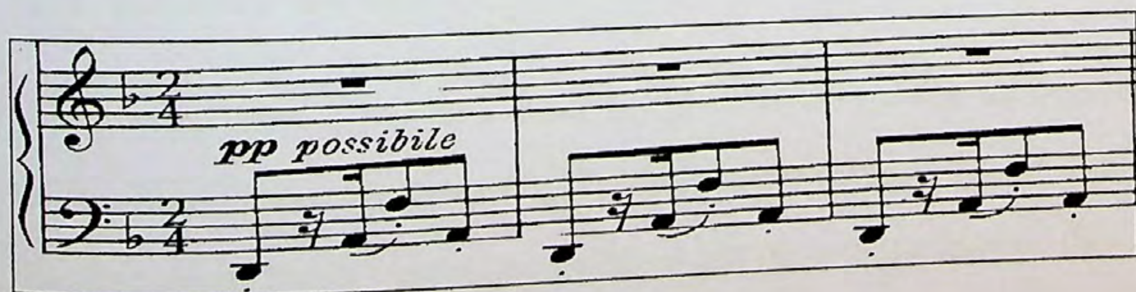

Fig. 1. "Habañera's" introductory bass-line.

The audience then listens to four bars of a melody in the bass that provide the prelude to Carmen's singing (Fig. 1). The rhythm is evidently defined by the 'pointee' on the first note at the beginning of the bar, which constitutes the physical moment of the

[71] Matthews 49.

[72] McClary 26.

music. The fact that Bizet chose a mixture of both Latin American and Mediterranean beats underscores the sexual component of the music—it is purely erotic. Without even noticing, the listener is stimulated. The repetitiveness of the same phrase with its falling beat clearly projects an image of someone falling in love with both Love itself and with Carmen. This fall of more than an octave between the F and D notes—bearing in mind that an octave usually constitutes the biggest interval in music—is actually Bizet's projection of love's fatalistic attitude. The fall in the music is the objective correlative to the emotional fall that love represents. Therefore, it is conceivable that Bizet relayed the quality of fatality through the music before even introducing Carmen. He thereby illustrates that the entire drama is permeated and controlled by fate and that Carmen is simply a marionette that fate moves as its agent.

CARMEN

Lie-be ist wie ein wil - der Vo - gel, wer den will zäh - men, hat es schwer,

L'a-mour est un oi - seau re - bel - le que nul ne peut ap - pri - voi - ser,

Fig. 2. "Habañera's" first verse.

Carmen starts singing in a minor key about love: "L'amour est un oiseau rebelle que nul ne peut apprivoiser (Fig. 2)." Interestingly enough we notice that her first verse already blends together the archetypal and the individual/private. Carmen creates two allegories for love in her "Habañera." In the first verse, she compares love to a bird that no one can tame. At the end of the verse, when she says "Rien n'y fait, menace ou prière, l'un parle bien, l'autre se tait; et c'est l'autre que *je* préfère" (my emphasis),[73] one notices that she includes herself in the allegory, thereby conflating herself with that untamable bird. It is important to note that in this verse she actually

[73] Georges Bizet, Carmen, ed. Fritz Oeser (Kassel: Alkor/Bärenreiter, 1964) 47.

explains an aspect of her character—she cannot be tamed; this is her nature and not her choice. This line of song also moves at a different rhythm than that of the bass (fate) accompanying it. The fact that both rhythms contradict or oppose each other proves that both Love and Carmen are untamable.

It is also interesting to note that this singing phrase is constructed in the chromatic scale, which was used in Renaissance music as a means of expressing pain and sorrow. Chromatic scales, however, which usually produce a certain dissonance, are also used as an expression of eroticism. They produce in the listener a contraction of the muscles similar to that produced in sexual activities, accompanied by feelings of both pleasure and pain.

Subsequently, Carmen sings the word "L'amour" four times, switching between ascending and descending melodies. This demonstrates the intangibility as well as the inexplicability of love, and of Carmen herself. She then shifts to singing in a major key, indicating joyfulness. Her refrain, "L'amour est enfant de Bohême, il n'a jamais, jamais connu de loi," actually compares love to a child, which explains the melody's joyfulness. Here she introduces the second allegory for love: love becomes Eros, a gypsy child. She again fuses this archetypal image with her own when she sings: "si tu ne m'aime pas, je t'aime."[74] She likens herself to Eros, a child-like figure, shooting arrows everywhere without restraint.

It is also important to observe the construction of this line—it is structured upon a chiasmus, though it is not fully achieved. When she sings: "Si tu ne m'aime pas, je t'aime," it is expected that she continue with: "si je t'aime, tu ne m'aime pas," to complete the reverse parallelism. Instead, she sings: "si je t'aime, prends garde a

[74] Bizet 48-49.

toi!"[75] asserting her indifference to the reaction of others. In this refrain the melody is more playful, adding a rather popular/folkloric flair to the music. The musical style here corresponds perfectly with the naïveté of the *enfant de Bohême*. And, strangely enough, while Carmen expresses a warning in her words, the melody itself does not contain warning nor does it foreshadow any evil. This establishes that fatalism is one aspect of her nature; it is not her intent to harm her lovers, though their suffering is inevitable. The warning is inherent in the nature of an *enfant de Bohême*, it does not need to be articulated externally through music. This is probably the first allusion toward fatalism. Note that the danger she represents is not of her choice, rather, it is in the nature of love itself, which she allegorically embodies. It foreshadows the hurt and injury that love can cause, or that necessarily accompany it. Furthermore, we also have for the first time a fatalistic statement about her love. Though Carmen herself can think of nothing but love, those that fall in love with her must beware—only harm can befall them.

We move to the second verse which brings us back to the allegory of the bird. Again, we find a chiasmus that demonstrates the fickleness of love: "L'amour est loin, tu peut l'attendre; tu ne l'attends plus, il est là!"[76] The refrain with the gypsy child is then repeated again.

It is important to note the position of this aria within the opera. It is Carmen's first aria, and in fact serves as her identification card. It is distinguished by the melting of the archetypal into the individual, suggesting that Carmen is incapable of acting in any other way, since it would go against her nature. Furthermore, this aria, which is the quintessence of the entire drama, underlines the unstoppable drive of the tragedy. As in all Greek tragedies, events in Carmen's life move forward with a

[75] Bizet 48-49.

[76] Bizet 52.

momentum that makes the tragedy seem inevitable. The aria foreshadows this tragedy. The catastrophe is in the fatalism of Carmen's love. Ultimately, both the music and the lyrics of the "Habañera" reveal that Carmen is not only a strong, active woman, but also a victim of her own nature. And this nature of hers—allegorically referred to as an untamed bird and a gypsy child—becomes in fact essential for the tragedy to unfold. What is ambivalent about the figure of Carmen is the fact that on the one hand she represents *L'amour*, and, on the other hand, she is a victim of *L'amour* herself.

It is relevant to the "Habañera" and to the question of the *femme fatale* in general to observe that Carmen chooses to keep no secrets about herself. From her first moment on stage, when she meets Don José, she talks forthrightly about her nature, going so far as to warn those listening that her love is fatal. Like love itself, she is as fickle and unreliable as an untamed bird or a gypsy child—"This gypsy would not report on love; she is, instead, its willing agent through whom love speaks for itself; its mischievous quality, its whimsy, inborn in the primitive Carmen."[77]

Carmen may be a *femme fatale*, but, in my opinion, the fact that she is so honest about her nature and about the risks her lovers face makes her actually seem good-natured, clearly unlike other seemingly demonic *femmes fatales*. Salome and Lady Macbeth, for example, considered typical *femmes fatales*, never reveal themselves; they are predators in the true sense of the word—acting silently until they capture their prey. Carmen's honesty suggests that her nature forces itself upon her, driving her to act in ways she may not choose or control. She is solely at the mercy of *fatum*—a presence felt in the "Habañera's" bass line and which dominates the whole

[77] Nowinski 897.

rhythm of the melody in Carmen's aria. I believe this establishes her image as a fatalistic figure, a dependant on fate.

3.3.2 Recitative after the "Habañera"

After singing the "Habañera," Carmen throws an acacia flower at Don José, who was inattentive to her singing. This flower, he says, struck him like a bullet/arrow, alluding to Eros's arrows that intoxicate people and make them fall in love. In Mérimée's novella, Don José mentions that the flower smelt strange and bewitching. In Bizet's version, in the recitative that follows the "Habañera," Don José is bewildered by her actions, and remarks on her impropriety, but as soon as he takes the flower off the ground he becomes intoxicated.

Fig. 3. Excerpt from the recitative after the "Habañera."

Bizet projects Don José's intoxication onto the music that accompanies him in the bass, allowing it to echo the "Habañera's" *enfant de Bohême* theme (Fig. 3). By

making Carmen's music overtake Don José's, Bizet transposes the feeling of bewitchment that Mérimée's Don José feels from the moment he picks up Carmen's flower.[78]

This scene is quickly interrupted by Micaëla's presence on stage. Micaëla is the librettists' invention; she does not exist in Mérimée's novella. Mario Praz would agree that Micaëla may have sprung from the following need: "Whenever it happens that a writer feels admiration for the passionate energy—particularly if this energy has fatal results—one finds two types of women standing in opposition to one another: the diabolic vs. the angelic."[79] This seems like a valid rationalization for the introduction of Micaëla's character; however, the librettists actually created Micaëla as a neutralizing agent for the opera. Fearing that Parisian audiences would disapprove of an opera with only one female figure, and an amoral one at that, the librettists created Micaëla to preemptively neutralize such criticism.[80] The inclusion of Micaëla, however, did not mitigate the shocked reaction of the bourgeoisie patrons of Paris's Opéra-Comique, who were more accustomed to operas with "moral plots, edifying characters and happy endings."[81]

3.3.3 "Seguidilla"

Ironically, although the inclusion of Micaëla did not serve its ultimate purpose as a conservative counter-weight, her angelic and maternal attributes did serve to further strengthen Carmen's character. The difference between the angelic and the 'barbaric' would not have been so evident had the opera presented Carmen and the

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[78] Bizet 61.

[79] Praz 190.

[80] Curtiss 351.

[81] McClary 45.

other gypsies alone. It is in contrast to Micaëla that Carmen's character becomes more real and definitely more dominant. Because of Micaëla, Carmen's second aria seems truly fatalistic. This second aria (see appendix B), which is also very famous, appears in the first act, shortly after the "Habañera" and Micaëla's duet with José.

The close proximity of these two famous arias is quite unusual. It was the general practice of composers to divide arias among the different acts of the opera because of their difficulty and the strength they required from their performers, so that a singer usually had to perform no more than one aria per act. Although there is no recorded reason for Bizet's decision to have both the "Habañera" and the "Seguidilla" performed in the first act, I believe that Bizet wanted to maintain the momentum of Carmen's self-revelations. He did not want the audience to forget the words of the "Habañera"—their portrayal of Carmen's true nature—by allowing for an intermission between acts. Furthermore, her character is not fully realized until the second aria. Carmen's second aria is actually the first in which she takes action to hunt for a new lover, becoming a fatalistic predator.

While in the "Habañera" she gave a simple description of herself, in this second aria she elaborates on her inability to settle into a stable relationship, as well as revealing (in true *femme fatale* tradition) her predatory intent to make Don José fall in love with her. Carmen begins singing the aria while being held captive by Don José and awaiting imprisonment. Her intent is two-fold: naturally, she wants to escape imprisonment, but at the same time she wants to win Don José's love. Fearing her influence over him, Don José instructs her not to speak to him, but Carmen starts singing her "Seguidilla" anyway. In the aria she discloses the location of her hide-out, and hints at the "paradise-like" activities (such as drinking and dancing) that she promises to bestow on him should he decide to later meet her at the tavern of Lillas

Pastia.[82] He interrupts her and reminds her that he has asked her not to speak. But Carmen, fully aware of her influence over this naïve corporal, replies that she is merely singing to entertain herself. Knowing that she has hooked him, and that he will allow her to escape, she continues singing to ensure that he will follow her. She attains her goal when she declares that she will return his love. At this point, Don José cannot contain himself any longer and surrenders completely, telling her to remember her words, especially her promises of love.

What is amazing about this aria, apart from its fluid dancing melody, is the fact that she does not hide her attitude to men; on the contrary, she openly describes her intimate relationships, admitting that she gets bored easily and discards lovers once they have sated her interest. This is the second time she has warned him about her fickleness and emotional unreliability, but Don José naïvely dismisses her words. It is important, however, to make a distinction: in Bizet's Carmen Don José is given a choice, but in Mérimée's novella Don José follows Carmen without knowing anything about her lifestyle and is astonished when she asks him to leave the next day. Bizet gave Don José a way out by making Carmen openly speak her mind, which also arguably vindicates Carmen to a certain extent. I believe this to be one of the reasons why Bizet had this second aria performed so closely at the heels of the first; to ensure that the audience felt equally sympathetic toward both Don José and Carmen—for Carmen's helplessness in the face of fate, and in the face of her own nature, as much as for Don José's social and moral decline due to his weakness for her.

Carmen is definitely more of a *femme fatale* when singing the "Seguidilla" than she was when singing the "Habañera"—she has begun to use her seductiveness consciously and is toying with Don José. Nevertheless, she remains honest about her

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[82] Bizet 112-21.

intentions and the way she handles relationships. This Carmen is still the same fate-dominated Carmen of the "Habañera." Although she seems active and in control here, "attentive" listeners—for whom the words of the "Habañera" still echo—will realize that all her actions should be viewed through the spectacles of *fatum*. And the fact that she cannot control her desire toward Don José is further proof that she is a victim of her nature, at the mercy of Eros.

Fig. 4. "Seguidilla"

As for the music of this second aria, the "Seguidilla" is also a gypsy melody embedded in a classical 3/8 rhythm (Fig. 4).[83] Generally, all three beat bars represent a dancing melody and the most famous example of such a melody is the waltz. She sings instead of talking here, which gives her a more active role than had Don José allowed her to speak. The local color of this song is filled with gypsy scales, which are again very erotic, but far less stimulating than the erotic current felt in the "Habañera." She uses this aria for the dual purpose of setting herself free and winning Don José's love. This song is therefore an intentional one, directed toward the

[83] Bizet 112-21.

seduction of the young corporal, unlike the "Habañera," which she sings with no particular aim and for no particular audience.

At the conclusion of the aria, Carmen convinces Don José to allow her to escape and arranges a rendezvous with him at Lillas Pastia. Don José unties the ropes that bind her. She then begins singing gypsy tunes to tease and provoke Zuniga, his officer in command, before suddenly pushing Don José aside and running away. Don José is sent to prison for facilitating her escape.

3.3.4 Chanson "Les tringles des sistres tintaient"

This chanson marks the beginning of the second act, and also simultaneously marks a change in Carmen's character. Susan McClary notes that while it is difficult to distinguish between the private Carmen and her performing persona in the first two arias of the first act,[84] in this second act Carmen looses all her ambiguity and presents only the performing persona. The setting of the second act is Lillas Pastia, her favorite rendezvous location, and also the place where she works. The scene opens at the tavern; other gypsy colleagues of Carmen are there as well as Zuniga and a few other men. Carmen is immediately recognized as a performer here, and she uses this chanson to entertain the tavern's visitors. Her song is about the impact that gypsy music has on its listener, which should remind audiences of the impact Carmen's "Seguidilla" had on Don José. But, although she mentions the frenzy that gypsy music and dancing creates, Carmen herself refrains from getting personally involved—she sings and dances professionally, but unlike her performance in the first act, she does not reveal anything further about herself through the music.

[84] McClary 90.

"Because this set-piece represents an actual song-and-dance number within the opera, it can afford to be extravagant in its staging."[85] This chanson is a full-blown cabaret spectacle with strong resemblances to flamenco music and one therefore finds that the orchestra is very "flashy." As in the "Habañera," Carmen starts singing "a strophic song with major-mode choral refrains, and again she sings a chromatic descent over a static bass."[86] As she and her colleagues sing together, they start simulating the "frenzied passion which purports to be inspiring by accelerating and finally opening out into an orgiastic" scream, as well as "orchestral postlude."[87] This aria is the least revealing one she sings during the whole opera. It only serves to demonstrate Carmen's confidence, strength, and professionalism while dealing with customers. It is only after singing this aria that one recognizes some weakness/humanity in her—she is very interested in Zuniga's news about Don José, who spent a month in prison. She truly wants him to come to Lillas Pastia.

3.3.5 "Toreador Song"

While Carmen anxiously awaits Don José's arrival at the tavern, the picador Escamillo introduces himself to the tavern's guests. They joyfully salute him, and he starts singing one of the most famous songs in the history of opera, the "Toreador Song." According to Bizet's biography, it is said that he hated this piece, referring to it as trash—"musique militaire"[88]—which he was forced to compose for the middle-

[85] McClary 90.

[86] McClary 90.

[87] McClary 91.

[88] Curtiss 390.

class audiences of the Opéra-Comique. Bizet's biographer, Mina Curtiss, says that he almost scandalized his first Escamillo, Bouhy, because of this aria.[89]

For the purposes of my discussion, Escamillo's character will not require a detailed analysis—he is a superficial figure, and almost irrelevant to the tragedy itself (to quote the Finnish baritone Tom Krause).[90] Like Micaëla, Escamillo is "based on a standard type of the *opéra-comique* stage." And McClary points out that although Escamillo may exhibit too much exotic flair for the traditional opéra comique, his macho attitude is still very consistent with the genre.[91]

Although the main focus of my research is on Carmen, I include this song because Escamillo shows an interest in Carmen toward the end of it. He sings the word "L'amour" while admiring Carmen, and she replies by singing a very low-pitched "L'amour" in return—perhaps because she is disappointed that Don José has not arrived yet. This song also reveals a small aspect of Carmen's character that contradicts the impression she initially makes. At the beginning of the second act Carmen is very collected and reserved, her reaction to Escamillo's song however, reveals her weakness. It is clear that although she chooses to reject Escamillo in this episode, her choice has been dictated by Don Josés's absence, rather than from personal disinclination. She has not yet sated her interest in Don José, but his role in her life is one that can be easily supplanted, and this is evident in her echoed response to Escamillo. Later, after she has satisfied her desire for Don José, she does in fact move on to Escamillo.

McClary suggests that Escamillo and Carmen are a matched pair, "both belong to the gaudy world of mass entertainment [...]," and are "experts at simulating affect

[89] Klein, "Opportunist" 230.

[90] Tom Krause, personal interview, 5 Apr. 2007.

[91] McClary 46.

and arousing it in others." Therefore, I agree with her conclusion that though they are different in depth, "they represent threats" to society.[92] Their similarity is also evident in their music: just as Carmen's music constantly suggests dancing, Escamillo's music too is very physical, though evoking the gestures of bullfighting instead—"His characteristic pattern alternates between percussive motives and suspense, and the orchestra lavishes his every move with ornaments."[93]

3.3.6 "En vain pour éviter"

When Don José joins the smugglers in the third act, Carmen soon becomes weary of him. One night in the mountains, Frasquita, Mercedes and Carmen start reading their fortunes through cards. All but Carmen start fantasizing about a better future filled with love and fortune. Carmen's cards reveal to her Don Jose's as well as her own death. This short aria is embedded in a famous trio known as "**Mêlons! Coupons**" (see appendix C) Like in the "Habañera," Carmen reveals the unstoppable and inescapable forces of fate. This is considered Carmen's only sad aria, in which she surrenders to fate knowing that she will soon die. She even explains in her aria that no matter how many times one tries to change ones fortune, by shuffling cards—if death is on its way, one cannot simply escape it.

In comparison to all her arias and duets in the opera, this aria seems sad and submissive. Though, I believe it shows Carmen's true strength by accepting her fate, and enjoying every minute of her life until her time comes. Whereas in the "Habañera" Carmen was fate's marionette without probably seeing herself as such, here she consciously gives in to the idea that fate controls everyone. Her fatalistic side

[92] McClary 92.

[93] McClary 92.

shows even more, since she is not only dominated by *fatum*, but she accepts and in fact embraces her fate fearlessly unlike for example Lady Macbeth.

Fig. 5. "En vain pour éviter"

The music's bass line accompanying the aria is like a traditional funerary march, indicating the sad content of the aria (Fig. 5). This is probably the only aria in which Bizet transposed Carmen's death or the whole tragedy into the music's bass line. Audiences, who might not understand Carmen's words, will still be affected by the overall sad atmosphere. Unlike previous arias, this last one is the only one similar to traditional French compositions of Bizet's time. I assume that since this aria talks about death, Bizet chose to compose it in a familiar mode to his French/European audiences so that they sympathize with it; after all death has more or less the same impact on all cultures, and by transposing it to French traditional funerary rhythm Bizet can guarantee that even if his audiences felt alienated from the gypsy Carmen at first, they can at least commune with her as human being in her last aria.

Again, the dignity and strength in which she receives the information about her death makes her in my view ever more fatalistic. Since, as opposed to "Habanera" her she makes an active and conscious choice of remaining in fate's hands. She does

not try to escape her death nor does she accept the warning that Don José gave her, which alludes to her eventual death.

In the fourth act, even though Frasquita and Mercedes warn her about Don José's presence near the bullfight, she refuses to run away and insists on facing her destiny. She knows that she is about to die, and she even asks Don José if he plans to kill her. The final duet between Carmen and Don José reveals that she will not and, in fact, cannot change her nature, and having realized that Don Jose decides to take her life and end both their miseries. Carmen died because she remained true to her nature until the end, she never concealed her fatalistic side nor did she ever try to escape it.

3.4 Analysis of Mérimée's *Femme Fatale*

When comparing Mérimée's and Bizet's versions of Carmen, one has to take into consideration that Bizet adapted Mérimée's Carmen almost literally. Bizet recognized Mérimée's *femme fatale* theme, and he transposed its fatalism into both Carmen's lyrics and her music. However, there is one notable difference between both versions: in Bizet's opera Carmen is presented as a single woman, while in Mérimée's novella she is married.

3.4.1 Carmen, a Gypsy Bride

Although Mérimée's Carmen is married to a gypsy outlaw, both the reader and Don José become aware of this very late in the novella. I believe her marriage plays an important role in classifying Mérimée's Carmen as a 'true' *femme fatale*. Ironically, one online definition of *femme fatale* limits this category to single

women.[94] This actually triggers the following questions: What does marriage really mean for Carmen? And, can she be considered a wife?

One quality of Carmen's fatalism is her ability to understand situations and people correctly. Therefore, she is aware that had Don José known about her marriage he would not have agreed to follow her after their first encounter. Although there is no doubt that she succeeds in seducing him, reading his character correctly she first offers him a strong incentive for surrendering to her—she starts alluding to marriage, mentioning that she will become his "Romi," his mate/wife.[95] This shows how little the word marriage means to her. She deceives him by offering the promise of 'marriage'—a word which she knows will persuade the 'virginal' Don José to stay with her. Yet during the same night, she simply says:

> Mais cela ne peut durer. Chien et loup ne font pas longtemps bon ménage. Peut-être que, si tu prenais la loi d'Égypte, j'aimerais á devenir ta romi. Mais, ce sont des bêtises : cela ne se peut pas. Bah! Mon garçon, crois-moi tu en es quitte á bon compte.[96]

Not long after Don José joins their band of smugglers, a physically sated Carmen grows tired of his attachment to her and simply admits the truth about her marriage, detaching herself from him totally once her husband returns from prison. Strangely enough, her refusal to be with Don José demonstrates a respect for gypsy marriage vows. Now that her husband has returned she cannot be intimately involved with other members of their group. This does not prevent her, however, from having affairs with other Spanish and foreign men since affairs with strangers are considered business transactions and do not constitute a threat to her marriage.

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[94] Gareth Jones, "French Words and Phrases in English," Gareth Jones 3 Mar. 2001, 22 Mar. 2007 <http://modena.intergate.ca/personal/gslj/wordsfromfrench.html>.

[95] Mérimée 50.

[96] Mérimée 51.

A jealous and obsessed Don José observes Carmen enjoying both the material and sensual benefits of her various short-term affairs, and this eventually drives him to kill her. The realization that to Carmen these affairs constitute more than mere business transactions, that she actually takes physical pleasure in them, is probably what maddens him above all else. By killing her he is denying her that pleasure, and also punishing her for having deprived him of the same. His rage seems to be less focused on the fact she has affairs with others, and more to do with the fact that she refuses to continue her affair with him. Toward the end of the story, Don José becomes aware that he cannot survive his lust for Carmen. But, he also understands that Carmen can never be domesticated. In a fit of passion, therefore, he kills her.

Although not a wife in conventional terms, Carmen seems to have honored the letter, if not the spirit, of her gypsy marriage vows. For some readers this actually throws further doubt on her classification as a *femme fatale*. However, while I had initially assumed that a married Carmen would enjoy less freedom and independence than her unmarried counterpart in Bizet's version, the opposite seems to be true. Mérimée ultimately gives his Don José valid and profound reasons for killing Carmen. Mérimée's Carmen, with her liberal interpretation of her marriage vows, uses, corrupts and discards Don José. Furthermore, while Bizet's Don José witnesses Carmen's betrayal only once, Mérimée's witnesses Carmen having almost a dozen different affairs before her last with Lucas, the picador. This latter Carmen, despite her married status, seems to wear the mantle of *femme fatale* much more comfortably than Bizet's.

Mérimée's Carmen conforms to the *femme fatale* classification much more consistently than Bizet's Carmen. In Mérimée's version, it is easy to observe that Carmen is something of a sexual predator, who takes a purely physical pleasure in her

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serial affairs. She has a Machiavellian attitude and uses any means to achieve her ends, such as falsely promising to marry Don José to facilitate her seduction of him. She is portrayed as a mastermind; a truly 'masculine' figure, planning both her escape from Don José as well as her husband's from prison. In Mérimée's novella, Carmen lacks romance; everything that defines her or even surrounds her is material and physical. She easily betrays both Don José and her husband, and she does not seem to have any moral boundaries.

All these traits are absent in Bizet's adaptation, though it is precisely these traits that seem to define her as a *femme fatale*. In Bizet's opera she first appears as a romantic heroine driven by fate. Due to aforementioned opéra comique conventions, Bizet was impelled to domesticate Mérimée's Carmen to a great degree. However, despite the limitations that were forced upon the operatic figure of Carmen, Bizet still managed to project Mérimée's *femme fatale*. In Carmen's first aria, the "Habañera," Bizet presented a fate-driven Carmen; in her second aria, the "Seguidilla," he makes her actively fatal.

3.4.2 Master vs. Apprentice

Relevant to the theme of the *femme fatale* is another theme—present in both Bizet's and Mérimée's versions—which underscores Carmen's fatality: Bizet and Mérimée structure the Carmen/Don José relationship in terms of the master/apprentice dialectic.

In Lessons of the Masters, George Steiner states:

> principle scenarios or structures of relation: First, masters have destroyed their disciples both psychologically and in rarer cases, physically. They have broken their spirits, consumed their hope, and exploited their dependence and individuality. In counterpoint, disciples, apprentices have subverted, betrayed,

> and ruined their Masters. Again, this drama has both mental and physical attributes.[97]

Both versions of <u>Carmen</u> describe the two kinds of relationships delineated above between masters and apprentices. In opposition to José, Carmen—both a gypsy and a 'prostitute'—has a great deal of sexual experience, and in this respect can be considered his master, teaching him about physical intimacy. By the terms of the primary relationship, Carmen, the dominant partner, destroys Don José, who represents the virgin hero.

Initially, Don José loves Micaëla. However, when Don José accepts her kiss on his forehead in greeting, the innocence of their relationship is suggested. Don José's lack of sexual maturity is evident here—if he had been intimate with Micaëla, or if he had enjoyed any previous sexual adventures, their meeting would have probably been more physical. It is easy to assume, therefore, that he is a virgin. Carmen's interest in him may have been provoked by his obvious inexperience. Here one should remember Mario Praz's observation about *femmes fatales* exerting their power over young men.[98]

In both the opera and the novella, Don José fails to initially notice Carmen. His indifference suggests his virginity—she is a sexually mature woman and therefore outside his province of experience. In my opinion, however, it is his innocence that first grabs her attention—the age-old fascination of the jaded with the untouched. This was the case with ancient Greek tutors who preferred virginal youths they could teach about life and rhetoric, and whom they enjoyed as lovers at the same time. The only difference is that Carmen does not share the noble intentions of the Greek masters—what she desires of Don José is actually the only thing she can teach him, sexuality.

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[97] George Steiner, <u>Lessons of the Masters</u> (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003) 2.

[98] Praz 205.

Therefore, in terms of the master/apprentice dialectic (though probably not in strict conformity with Steiner's model), Carmen—by virtue of her dominance and Don José's passivity—unwittingly becomes the master to his apprentice, teaching him about sexual pleasure and lust.

Carmen exploits Don José and is ultimately responsible for his loss of innocence, dignity and even humanity. Which brings us to Steiner's second master/apprentice relationship: in an inversion of the primary relationship, the student destroys the master. Don José, feeling exploited and abandoned, craves lustfully for what Carmen no longer offers him. Realizing that she will never be his, Don José decides to kill her. However, it is only after doing so that José understands: murdering his master also means destroying himself. José is no longer the innocent, young corporal of old; he has been refashioned by Carmen into something altogether different. Though his nature rebels against this new persona, he can no longer go back to his old life—having become a thief, he is forbidden his former occupation as a dragoon; and having become sexually corrupt, he cannot reclaim the innocence and romance of his love with Micaëla. Don José is unable to go back to a time before Carmen, and without Carmen he cannot go forward—she has become his reason for being, the new marker by which he defines himself and his life. Therefore, by killing her, he destroys his self-orientation. There is no recourse for him now but death.

CONCLUSION

There has been a great deal of confusion and controversy over the issue of Carmen's classification as a *femme fatale.* What is more striking is the fact that she is usually compared to the most ferocious of operatic *femmes fatales* characters, Salome. In my opinion, however, Bizet's Carmen is not only a more benign *femme fatale* than Salome, but a very different kind of *femme fatale* figure altogether. Carmen's "Habañera" becomes a declaration of intent. From this aria it is evident that Carmen is 'fatal,' but only in the literal sense of the word—she is both the victim and agent of fate. She is not 'fatal' in the same way as Salome; she does not intend or desire the destruction of her lovers.

Although Carmen differs from Salome, I disagree with the contention made by some scholars that she cannot be classified as a *femme fatale.* They base this argument on the fact that, unlike Salome, Carmen does not pursue men; rather, it is she who is pursued.[99] This may be true for the male choir and for the soldiers in the Seville square, but it is Carmen who develops an interest in and approaches Don José and even the French narrator. Had she not approached Don José, he would never have become her lover. More specifically, if she had only sung the "Habañera" without taking further action, Don José would probably have forgotten her, especially as Micaëla appears immediately after this aria. However, by singing the "Seguidilla" she takes an active role in ensnaring Don José.

Again, it is less a question of whether or not she is a *femme fatale*, and more a case of her being a different kind of *femme fatale.* Carmen is unconventional by the standards of bourgeois morality and according to societal norms, but she is at home in the gypsy world and abides by its laws. She is not an outcast in the extreme sense of

[99] Batta 58.

the word; rather, she belongs to a certain race and conforms to its way of life and its rules.

In contrast to Carmen, Salome is born into the upper-class ranks of her society, and is expected to demonstrate a certain reserved behavior, which makes her machinations all the more shocking to her stepfather Herod and to readers/audiences at large. Salome's huge 'fall,' or break from the norms of her society, makes her more eligible for the title of 'vampire' *femme fatale*. Salome changed unexpectedly and rapidly from a traditional, domesticated woman to a 'vampire.' Carmen's character, on the other hand, is consistent from beginning till end. From the start, her appearance and her attire mark her as a gypsy, as Other. Lack of conformity to traditional norms and unconventional behavior are therefore expected from her to some degree. And the fact that Bizet allows her to candidly describe her nature and her intentions in the first two arias of act one makes the audience conscious that she gives Don José full-warning of what to expect from her, provoking their sympathy for both figures, and not for Don José alone.

Carmen is a *femme fatale*, though not necessarily the kind that Salome and Lady Macbeth typify—a *fatale allumeuse* perhaps (as described by Praz). Carmen demonstrates emotional and physical strength, self-assurance, dominance and other seemingly 'masculine' traits—all characteristics which the 19th century would have deemed typical of the *femme fatale*.

In my opinion, Mérimée's image of Carmen is to a large extent a gendered viewpoint. Mérimée's whole narrative seems male dominated: the first narrator is a civilized French traveler, believed to represent Mérimée himself, and the second narrator is Don José. Carmen is hardly ever allowed to represent herself, and when she does speak it is for the most part to demonstrate her 'devious' character. The

novella opens with a misogynistic epigraph by the Greek Palladas—not only degrading women, but written in a language that was only accessible to the educated males of Mérimée's time. What further corroborates this is the fact that the novella was first published in a bi-weekly travel publication which I assume women of that time would not have subscribed to. Also, the fourth chapter that was later added to the novel—a report-like description of Romany and the gypsy languages and origins—seems engineered to appeal to male readers.

Bizet, on the other hand, threw the spotlight on Carmen herself. He recognized that the strength of Mérimée's novella lay in its third chapter—the story of Carmen and Don José. He therefore decided to exclude the superfluous first narrator, focusing instead on the two principal figures: Don José and Carmen. Mérimée's novella was entitled Carmen, but Bizet's opera is *about* Carmen. In Mérimée's version, Carmen is never allowed to portray or represent herself. Such a flamboyant and larger than life character, however, can only be imprisoned by such a narrow narrative frame. As McClary argues, Mérimée's Carmen is killed twice: once by Don José, and again, more profoundly, by her creator (Mérimée) and his alter-ego (the French traveler)—by writing the fourth chapter he manages to kill her story, and to erase it from the minds of his readers.

Therefore, I believe that in Bizet's version Carmen is unleashed. Bizet's Carmen acts the way she truly is—larger than life. She sings four arias and some gypsy melodies as well, actively representing and describing herself. She is infused with life, and this in my view reflects on Bizet himself. Whereas Mérimée writes from a patriarchal perspective, Bizet seems to have a lot of sympathy for his heroine, composing for her the most eternal of melodies. The original Carmen—Mérimée's passive heroine—is revitalized by Bizet and becomes an equal to her male

counterpart. If it were not for Don José's famous aria "La fleur que tu m'avais jetée," it would have probably even been possible for him to be cast as a secondary character, so passive and naïve is he. However, the question remains: have Bizet and Mérimée created opposing versions of the *femme fatale*? And, can Hector Berlioz's statement regarding music distorting the original literary work be considered true in the case of Bizet's transposition of Mérimée's novella?

I believe that such a question is superfluous. As aforementioned, the same Carmen is portrayed in both versions; it is only the duration of her presence and the narrative focus that differ in both works. In Mérimée's novella, Don José is definitely the hero, and the plot unravels as the narrative of his life. Bizet's version, however, is the story of Carmen and Don José, with the main focus on Carmen. The concept of *fatum* is emphasized more in Bizet's version, and he composed melodies as well as distinct scenes to remind us that destiny is the real power with which his players must contend. Mérimée's Carmen is also fatalistic, but this is evident more through her actions and her character, and is never overtly emphasized. Although it can be argued that Mérimée's Carmen is more of a *femme fatale* than Bizet's, I definitely view both as representations of the *femme fatale*. While Mérimée develops the reader's sympathy for Don José alone, in Bizet's version Carmen is equally sympathetic—which may account for the ambivalence surrounding her *femme fatale* status. Under usual circumstances the *femme fatale* is an outcast who receives society's hatred and criticism, but the way that Bizet portrays her in first two arias develops the audience's understanding for her, making her more complex and ambiguous.

Whether one agrees or disagrees with the concept of Carmen as a *femme fatale*, one cannot deny the fact that Bizet subverted traditional opera conventions to create a very unique opera. Bizet's Carmen was considered the first opera to present a

femme fatale on stage. He added movement and melody to Mérimée's beautiful but dry novella. Concurrently, he changed and modernized opera conventions in general. His opera was the first to force movement upon choir singers, for example. It was considered the first opera to have genuine mass appeal, popular even among those who normally never patronized the art. It also embedded in people's minds an association between the opera and the sub-cultural image of the *femme fatale*. Carmen came to be the representative figure for the *femme fatale*, and movies that have adapted either Bizet's or Mérimée's version of her story have more or less played on this theme. The *femme fatale* has in fact become one of the most vividly provoking themes in the human imagination. Since the time of the ancient Greeks, it has spawned a pantheon of dangerous and fascinating female icons, and none more so than Carmen.

I must therefore conclude that without Bizet's adaptation, Mérimée's novella would have been forever condemned to obscurity—anyone reading the first two chapters, or skimming through the fourth, might completely overlook the wonderful third chapter. Bizet's Carmen is not just a superior adaptation of a literary text, however. Bizet offered the world great music, and can even be credited with having saved opera itself—rejuvenating and revitalizing what had been on the verge of becoming an imaginatively stagnant and parochial institution. Amazingly, Bizet's music is still relevant and popular today, Carmen's arias are recognized by both laymen and opera aficionados, proving the opera's eternal quality. It is a classic for all times.

APPENDIX A
CARMEN'S FIRST ARIA

Recitative Before Aria

Quands je vous aimerai? Ma foi, je ne sais pas,
Peut-être jamais! Peut-être demain!
Mais pas aujourd'hui, c'est certain.

"Habañera"

I.

L'amour est un oiseau rebelle que nul ne peut apprivoiser,
et c'est bien en vain qu'on l'appelle, s'il lui convient de refuser!
Rien n'y fait, menace ou prière, l'un parle bien, l'autre se tait;
et c'est l'autre que je préfère, il n'a rien dit, mais il me plaît.

L'amour! L'amour! L'amour! L'amour!

L'amour est enfant de Bohême, il n'a jamais, jamais connu de loi,
si tu ne m'aimes pas, je t'aime, si je t'aime, prends garde à toi!

Si tu ne m'aimes pas, je t'aime, si je t'aime, prends garde à toi!

II.

L'oiseau que tu croyais surprendre battit de l'aile et s'envola;
L'amour est loin, tu peux l'attendre, tu ne l'attends plus, il est là.
Tout autour de toi vite, vite, il vient, s'en va, puis il revient;
tu crois le tenir, il t'évite, tu crois l'eviter, il te tient!

L'amour! L'amour! L'amour! L'amour!

L'amour est enfant de Bohême, il n'a jamais, jamais connu de loi,
si tu ne m'aimes pas, je t'aime, si je t'aime, prends garde à toi!

Si tu ne m'aimes pas, je t'aime, si je t'aime, prends garde à toi!

APPENDIX B
CARMEN'S SECOND ARIA

Excerpt from the Spoken Dialogue Before the Aria

Don José
Vous êtes Navarraise, vous? ...

Carmen
Sans doute.

Don José
Allons donc ... il n'y a pas un mot de vrai ...vos yeux seuls, votre bouche, votre teint ... Tout vous dit Bohémienne ...

Carmen
Bohémienne, tu crois?

Don José
J'en suis sûr ...

Carmen
Au fait, je suis bien bonne de me donner la peine de mentir ... Oui, je suis Bohémienne, mais tu n'en feras pas moins ce que je te demande ... Tu le feras parce que tu m'aimes ...

Don José
Moi!

Carmen
Eh! Oui, tu m'aimes ... ne me dis pas non, je m'y connais! Tes regards, la façon dont tu me parles. Et cette fleur que tu as gardée. Oh! Tu peux la jeter maintenant ... cela n'y fera rien. Elle est restée assez de temps sur ton coeur; le charme a opéré ...

Don José
(avec colère)
Ne me parle plus, tu entends, je te défends de me parler ...

Carmen
C'est très-bien, seigneur officier, c'est très-bien. Vous me défendez de parler, je ne parlerai plus ...

"Seguidilla"

(Chanson et Duo)

I.

Près des remparts de Séville, chez mon ami Lillas Pastia,
j'irai danser la Séguidille et boire du Manzanilla,
j'irai chez mon ami Lillas Pastia.
Oui, mais toute seule on s'ennuie, et les vrais plaisirs sont a deux;
donc, pour me tenir compagnie, j'emmènerai mon amoureux!

Mon amoureux! Il est au diable! Je l'ai mis à la porte hier!
Mon pauvre coeur; très consolable, mon coeur est libre comme l'air!
J'ai des galants à la douzaine; mais ils ne sont pas à mon gré.
Voici la fin de la semaine: qui veut m'aimer? Je l'aimerai!
Qui veut mon âme? Elle est à prendre! Vous arrivez au bon moment!
Je n'ai guère le temps d'attendre, car avec mon nouvel amant ...

II.

Près des remparts de Séville, chez mon ami Lillas Pastia, j'irai danser la Séguidille et boire du Manzanilla, dimanche, j'irai chez mon ami Pastia!

(The Duet within the Aria)

Don José
Tais-toi, je t'avais dit de ne pas me parler!

Carmen
Je ne te parle pas, je chante pour moi-même, je chante pour moi-même!
Et je pense! il n'est pas défendu de penser!
Je pense à certain officier, je pense à certain officier qui m'aime et qu'à mon tour; oui, qu'à mon tour je pourrais bien aimer!
Mon officier n'est pas un capitaine, pas même un lieutenant, il n'est que brigardier; mais c'est assez pour une Bohémienne
et je daigne m'en contenter!

Don José
Carmen, je suis comme un homme ivre, si je cede, si je me livre, ta promesse, tu la tiendras,
ah! si je t'aime, Carmen, Carmen, tu m'aimeras!

Carmen
Oui ...

Don José
Chez Lillas Pastia, ...

Carmen
Nous danserons

Don José
tu le promets!

Carmen
la Séguidille

Don José
Carmen ...

Carmen
En buvant du Manzanilla,

Don José
Tu le promets! ...

Carmen
ah! ...
Près des remparts de Séville, chez mon ami Lillas Pastia, nous danserons la Séguidille et boirons du Manzanilla,
Tra la la la la la la la la la la ...

APPENDIX C
CARMEN'S FOURTH ARIA: TRIO "MÊLONS! COUPONS!"

There is a small aria "En vain pour éviter" embedded in this trio.

[...]
Frasquita
Fortune!

Mercédès
Amour!

Carmen
Voyonz, que j'essaie à mon tour.
Carreau! Pique!
La mort! J'ai bien lu! ...
Moi, d'abord, ensuite lui ...
pour tous les deux, la mort!

(The Aria)

En vain, pour éviter les réponses amères, en vain tu mêleras!
Cela ne sert à rien, les cartes sont sincères et ne mentiront pas!
Dans le livre d'en haut si ta page est heureuse, mêle et coupe sans peur,
la carte sous tes doigts se tournera joyeuse, t'annonçant le bonheur.
Mais si tu dois mourir, si le mot redoutable est écrit par le sort,
recommence vingt fois, la carte impitoyable répétera: la mort!
Oui, si tu dois mourir, recommence vingt fois,
La carte impitoyable répétera: la mort!
Encor! Encor! Toujours la mort!

Frasquita and Mercédès
Parlez encor, parlez, mes belles, de l'avenir, donnez-nous des nouvelles.
Dites-nous qui nous trahira!

Carmen
Encor!

Frasquita and Mercédès
Dites-nous qui nous aimera!

Carmen
Encor!

Frasquita and Mercédès
Parlez encor!

Carmen
Le désespoir!

Frasquita
Fortune!

Mercédès
Amour!

Carmen
Toujours la mort!

Frasquita, Mercédès and Carmen
Encor!

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