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# FANTASTICAL AMBIVALENCE: THE MYTH OF CARMEN

Cécile Kovacshazy

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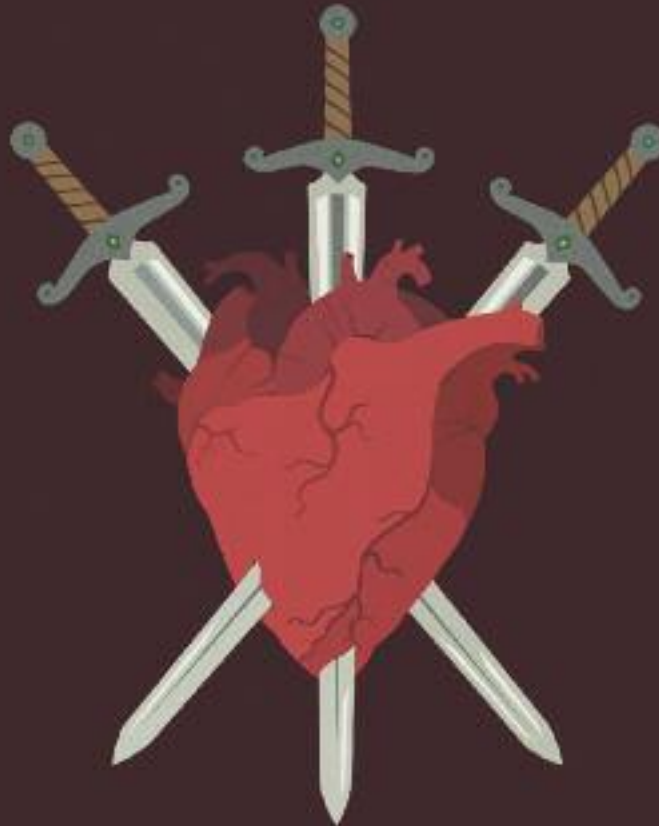
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# CARMEN

GEORGES BIZET

 OPERA  
HOLLAND  
PARK



OPERA HOLLAND PARK 2022 SEASON PROGRAMME

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Content editors **Chloe Bridgen, Anna Picard**

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[www.operahollandpark.com](http://www.operahollandpark.com)


Box Office: 0300 999 1000

Main Office: 020 3846 6222


Registered Address: 37 Pembroke Road, London W8 6PW

Theatre Address: Ilchester Place, London W8 6LU

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Spanish Gypsies by Francis William Topham, 1854-55  
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# FANTASTICAL AMBIVALENCE: THE MYTH OF CARMEN

Cécile Kovacshazy explores the freedom and danger in the character of Carmen and the stereotype of the modern woman

In 1845, Prosper Mérimée, a French writer with a passion for Gypsy culture, published *Carmen*, a short story made up of four chapters. It is the third of these that we remember, which narrates the setbacks of the Basque sergeant Don José. Madly in love with the beautiful Carmen, he manages to become her “rom” (“husband” in the Romani language). According to José, Carmen leads him to his downfall. He is stripped of his profession becoming a brigand, a smuggler, and finally a murderer.

Mérimée struck on a theme that would be all the rage towards the end of the 19th century: that of the woman who would essentially combine the amorous passion (*eros*) and the destruction (*thanatos*) of the man, victim of her deadly feminine wiles. Carmen is therefore the archetype of the *femme fatale*, a misogynistic trope of the time. Her success comes from the fact that she unites several archetypal patterns. She personifies the ambivalent woman, both passionate lover and shameless schemer. But she is also a “true servant of Satan”, in the Romantic sense that she takes a devilish path, transcending the ordinary. Finally, Carmen is also an iconic figure of an emancipated woman who does not need a husband to make a living or lead a deeply sensual life,

a nomad free in her movements, a roaming nature associated with Romani communities. “I don’t want to be tormented, and above all not controlled. What I want is to be free and to do as I please,” she says. It is the multiplicity of possible interpretations that contributes to her success.

It is thanks to the adaptation into opera by Georges Bizet in 1875, based on a libretto by Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy, that *Carmen* achieved international success. It was in that era that Mérimée’s short story was widely translated. Since then, Bizet’s opera has constantly been staged and reinterpreted; it is currently the most performed opera in the world, in no small degree due to its musical appeal, its ever-popular melodies which rival Italian opera’s own arias. The myth of Carmen is not the result of national variations, but rather an archetype that has become mythical, and which varies extremely little from one country to another, proof of the worldwide appeal of this previously French figure.

During the 19th century across the arts (painting, music, literature), bohemianism was very widely in vogue — an artistic movement inspired by the nomadic, roaming freedom of the Romani populations that it tried to evoke in its works. Historically, the 19th century actually saw the movements of Romani populations increase towards the west of Europe. This was particularly true following the end of serfdom in Wallachia and Moldavia, which led many former slaves to seek their fortune elsewhere, even to the Americas. Like many poor European populations, from Ireland to Russia, the Roma are no exception to the call of the West.

The Romantic fashion of bohemianism, however, is not enough to justify the unstoppable progress of *Carmen* throughout Europe and even further afield across the arts

from 1845 to the present day. Mérimée's *Carmen* does not emerge *ex nihilo* culturally: quite the contrary. She is the direct descendent of an already ancient figure, very much integrated into the European artistic imagination since the Ancien Régime: that of the Egyptian woman and her continuation into the Gypsy woman in the classical age.

Although the presence of Bohemian groups in Western Europe was recorded since the beginning of the 15th century, and although the latter were fairly well received in the overall social fabric, that situation changed during the 17th century with the emergence of the nation-state and the Church's repression, which condemns palmistry. Correlating with the increasingly severe repression of itinerant populations, Egyptians, especially Egyptian women and their finery, become a frequent feature in the arts. See, for example, Caravaggio, *La Tour* or the *Commedia dell'Arte* in painting and ballet.

The short story *La Gitanilla* (1613) by Cervantes and the intermezzo *La Zingara* (1753) by Rinaldo di Capua (reworked by Favart) are two important sources, further establishing a solid artistic tradition that developed this character. It would therefore be a mistake to see in *Carmen* and the gypsy the incarnation of a cultural (or ontological) otherness or of a foil. On the contrary, she represents a positive "culture of contact" (to use French historian Henriette Asséo's phrase) that characterises Bohemians throughout society reflected in art (particularly Western art). *Carmen* is as accessible and familiar to Sergeant José and the bullfighter Escamillo as she is to the contemporary reader and opera audience member. She precisely embodies historical reality and at the same time a fantasy of that reality.

*Carmen the Bohemian* is therefore a social character familiar to everyone in Mérimée's time, and still in that of Bizet even if the nomadic trades often associated with Bohemians were beginning to disappear. (They disappeared almost completely – with rare exceptions – in the 1960s.) *Carmen* is a free woman, but free from what? She is free either to submit to unjust authority (this is what the guards represent, putting her in prison at the start of the story without checking what might have happened at the factory) or to die for having dared to take this incredible liberty: that of saying no to a man she doesn't love, José, who will kill her for doing so. Some freedom! In this, we find a parallel with the fate of perennial discrimination against the Roma: a people who attract fascination precisely because of the gulf between their norms and those of the dominant population, a fascination which costs them dearly – sometimes their lives.

Nothing more or less than the story of a femicide, *Carmen* invites the viewer to wonder if *Carmen*, our tragic heroine, was not in some way responsible for what happened to her. *Carmen* is presented as an ambivalent character, thus preventing any identification with her. However, ambivalence is also found in her tragic dimension, oscillating between destiny, a fate from which she cannot escape, and the idea that she would have her share of responsibility. This would explain the colossal success of this opera in which a woman – triply out of the ordinary because she is unmarried, because she is a Bohemian, and because she said no – is murdered precisely for these reasons. ●

*Dr Cécile Kovacshazy is a professor of comparative literature at the University of Limoges. Her research is focused on Romani literature. This article was commissioned by Opera Holland Park and translated by Stephen Wilkinson.*