

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Carmen. 1845

Prosper Merimee. 1803-1870

Overview We have been tracking the broad outlines of the early Romantic movement in France, retreating in time as deeply as the early seventeenth hundreds—Voltaire, Rousseau, Diderot—all born between 1694 and 1713—and we have come to see cultural transitions announce themselves on the early end of that time period— Mme. de Lafayette, Le comte de Rochefoucault, Mme. de Sevigne-- where the voices of classical culture and older language conventions still prevail. And why such a busy tracking of stages in what this animal man is? And has been? Writing our own history, in no matter how narrow swathes, never fails to reorient our cultural journey into directions which evoke our creative.

Romanticism A Romantic Merimee was, to judge from the conspicuous lightening passions that flash across this text, and yet we are likely to find, in the velocity and impact of the events tracked here, a tone of temperament not usual in Romanticism. Let me explain, by reverting to some of the Romantic texts already reviewed in these entries. By and large the Romantic input, flooding the rigor of stable Romance Latinate tone in French culture—the clarity and rigor of a Descartes—remains within the boundaries of feeling, within the explorations of *Dominique*, *Adolphe*, *Atala*, or even *Virginie* (of *Paul et Virginie*). There is in fact a sub current of sadness flowing through the feeling-tone of much French Romanticism. Feeling, after all, does not exclude sadness or melancholy or Weltschmerz. What startles in Merimee's plot, for all its tragic implications, is the capacity for outburst, fieriness, the off the chart of the tale's protagonist, Don Jose. Here of course is the Spanish element which was heady for the French, and professionally exciting to Merimee.

Author With Prosper Merimee (1803-1870) we move into the multifaceted world where science and scholarship intersect. He was born into a creative family—both his parents were noteworthy painters. He had in his gene pool a distinguished physicist, a well known novelist, and an orientalist, and was himself—like, say, Mme de Stael—brought up around sophisticated and welcoming intellectuals. Aside from his own studies, which began to lean increasingly toward language, culture and archeology—from 1830 -1860 he was in charge of the National Bureau of Historical Monuments, dedicated to historical preservation—he was involved, for example, in the restoration of the façade of Notre Dame Cathedral. Merimee's literary-creative direction was, given the elite milieu in which he developed, as good as predictable. Growing friendships with such as Hugo, Stendhal, and Eugene Sue positioned Merimee as an upcoming figure in the new imaginative environment of Romanticism.

Background In 1829, when still in his twenties, Merimime found his way to a new and personal literary style, the *novella—long short story or short novel--* which was going to play an important role in Romantic creativity. (We have tracked this literary form in pieces by Fromentin, Constant, and Chateaubriand.) For a period of some five years, in his early thirties, he wrote several such novellas, certain of which, published in the *Revue de Paris*, brought him welcome attention. Launched on a fresh identity as a litterateur, Merimee took a several year self-discovery trip to Spain, where he was able, at leisure and length, to pursue his interests in indigenous music and art, and to grow from the personal experience.

In 1831 Merimee returned to Paris, where he continued his reputation as a chronicler of exotic Spain. He was also gradually mounting the ladder of bureaucratic success, while extending his influence over French historical self-consciousness. Out of the blend of these self-positioning efforts, Merimee succeeded, by 1844, in getting himself elected to the Academie Francaise. The boost thus given to his reputation was only bettered by the prominence of the operatic work of his contemporary Georges Bizet. A reading of the fiery gypsy explosiveness, composed into Bizet's 1875 opera *Carmen*, arose right out of Merimee's novella, arose right out and had by the end of the century made the name of Carmen familiar throughout Europe.

Plot

Over the Andalucian plain we proceed---as we read-- at a leisurely horse pace, our two hired guides scoping the landscape, my own mind on the issue preoccupying my current archeological research, into the site of the classical battle of Munda. My luggage—a few shirts and a copy of Caesar's *Commentaries* hang at my side—minimal-- and my mind is on the new article I am preparing. Even here I am the scholar. It is into this mode of scholarly idyll that the narrator drifts, until he finds himself and his horse gradually being led down a narrow stream bed 'thoroughly shaded by the steep cliffs that lay all around it.' This classic introduction to a narrator and narration, through a secretive landscape, soon opens out onto a green sward on which a man could be seen resting. The narrator cautiously but then cordially approaches the stranger, whose attitude appears slowly to be one of thawing. In a short time the two men are engaged in conversation, and decide to ride on together to the next city--despite the covert signals the servant is passing to his boss, warning of the dangers of his new found companion.

What Merimee contrives, against the quasi idyll of an introduction, is to take the reader toward the fevered mind of an outlaw, who will eventually tell him his whole dark story. This will be a story consummated in tragedy, through which run the intensities of romance. It will be a tale told on top of the growing mutuality between the two interlocutors, who between them construct the present story, as the outlaw reveals to the narrator why he is imprisoned under sentence of hanging. But we are not quite there yet.

After a brief mutual acquaintance in the City of Cordoba with the outlaw, Don Jose, the narrator goes off on a new research trip, and upon his return learns that his new acquaintance, who is in fact the well-known outlaw, Don Jose, has been imprisoned. Confused, but persistent, the narrator, who has cause to think he has been robbed, makes his way to the prison, where he is led into Don Jose's cell. The uniting friendship is still there, but this time the narrator is on the lookout for danger and crime. He suspects that it is the outlaw who has robbed him. He is to learn far more than that.

The narrator leaves the prisoner, who is on schedule to be hanged. With him he takes a letter from Don Jose, in which he reads and learns the whole story that leads up to the impending hanging. It is a tale in itself, which will immerse us in the inner mad depths of Don Jose's mind. The story of this story is what Merimee is truly out to tell us.

As a military officer, a dragoon, Don Jose is seduced by a fiery and independent Gypsy woman, Carmen, who takes complete control of his heart. The evidence for this seizure is that Don Jose forsakes his military oath, in order to help Carmen, an avowed smuggler, to escape arrest. Don Jose deserts the army and joins Carmen's smuggler band, where he lives as a thief, this once innocent Basque from the mountains--yes we continue to learn more about him as he continues his tale. (This blend of tale with self-awareness is full of literary artifice.) A bloody end is in preparation, as the narrator, reading the end of Don Jose's account, realizes. The narrator reader is not disappointed. As Don Jose discloses to us, he is in line for a dreadful shock. He comes to realize that Carmen, whose signature is freedom, and who does fiercely whatever she wants to do, has fallen deeply in love with a currently hot picador. When Don Jose becomes aware of this infidelity he explodes with jealous rage--the manner in which he depicts this transport is a small glory of self awareness and control, and shakes the page. Not surprisingly, given the intensity of this fury, Don Jose murders his beloved, Carmen. This is his mortal crime.

Themes

Spain For educated French, of the era of Merimee, the Hispanic realm was little known--except on the international dynastic front--and international archeologists like Merimee were virtually unknown in Spain, in particular in the Basque and Gypsy territories, tucked away in the Pyrenees. The regions of this novella seemed hidden and mysterious.

Jealousy The ex-dragoon has sacrificed everything for love, and yet he has not been able to guarantee the fidelity of Carmen. He has fallen in love with a free woman, and so he receives with despair the news that Carmen has given herself to a new man, a sexy picador, no less.

Violence So intense is the denial of Don Jose's personality by the loss of Carmen, that he has no choice but to kill her, which he does in a violent rage. Don Jose must wipe out his torturer in order to bring life to himself--at least until the hangman settles that matter.

Discussion questions

Why does Merimee introduce the passionate love and death story of Carmen and Don Jose inside the frame of a scholarly ramble through Spain, and why does he convey the story of Don Jose's life and death through a letter written by Don Jose? Is there an artistic motive behind this kind of framing? What seems to be the governing mindset of the fabricator of this entire tale? What does he want to say about life?