

## Mérimée

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### Death by Statues: Mérimée's "La Vénus d'Ille" and Molière's *Dom Juan*

Prosper Mérimée's "La Vénus d'Ille" can be read as a work of travel literature: the narrator, an erudite Parisian, travels into the exotic countryside of southwestern France and discovers a disconcerting statue that seemingly comes to life. Yet this moving statue reveals more about the culture of the Parisian hegemony of the July Monarchy than it does about the supernatural or the opposition between Paris / province. I read Prosper Mérimée's "La Vénus d'Ille" as a retelling of Molière's *Dom Juan ou le festin de pierre*. Both literary works build to the murder of characters who have made promises to statues and are obliged to honor them. Both *Dom Juan* and Alphonse are "parasites" (Serres) and both marry more than one woman and seduce even more. In both texts meals are interrupted by moving statues and in both men die in a statue's embrace. These similarities lead to a reevaluation of "La Vénus d'Ille" and of the text's socio-cultural significance. "La Vénus d'Ille" and *Dom Juan* are written at times of social transition. *Dom Juan* depicts the change from *noblesse d'épée* to *noblesse de robe*; the play's protagonist represents a member of the old nobility exerting the few rights that he has managed to retain. "La Vénus," on the other hand, depicts the transition from the old monarchy to the new bourgeois monarchy, where money--not traditional markers of nobility (sword and phallus)--becomes the primary signifier of status. Where *Dom Juan* symbolizes values of the past that are giving way to a new power structure, Alphonse symbolizes the new constitutional monarchy and he is ultimately punished by the Venus, a perfect representation of the past.

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### In-Between Identities: The Exotic Other/Orient in Prosper Mérimée's *Carmen*

In nineteenth-century French literature and art, Spain was often equated with Africa and depicted as Europe's internal Other. Hugo wrote: "L'Espagne c'est encore l'Orient; l'Espagne est à demi africaine," and Stendhal declared: "Sang, mœurs, langage, manière de vivre et de combattre, en Espagne tout est africain." A burgeoning fascination with the mystery and exoticism of Spain accompanied the height of French expansion in Africa. In this critical moment, Prosper Mérimée published his novella *Carmen* in 1847. Set in Andalucía during the period of 1830-1845, *Carmen* tells the story of a gypsy from "nowhere and everywhere."

In my paper, I demonstrate that the character of Carmen is depicted as the quintessential exotic Other of nineteenth-century France due to her hybrid identity. She is a wandering bohemian with "dark skin and slanted eyes" who is continually linked to the dangerous, erotic, and exotic. Because Carmen is an in-between figure who cannot be categorized by a single ethnicity, language, or race, she represents a threat to order and purity. In *Orientalism*, Edward Said posits that "it is perfectly natural for the human mind to resist the assault on it of untreated

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strangeness” by exoticizing the Other. I argue that Carmen’s death at the end of the novella reflects France’s attempt to silence and dominate “alien” lands and to maintain a sense of order during a time of political and social unrest.

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### The Carmen Myth: Adaptation across Artistic Mediums

In the tradition of adapting literary texts into other artistic mediums, few stories have been as successful as that of *Carmen* (1845) by Prosper Mérimée. Originally published in a biweekly journal of exotic Third World travelogues, the novella has given rise to a ballet (1846), an opera (1875), and over 77 film adaptations ranging from melodramatic to burlesque. What explains the extraordinary appeal of the Carmen myth to artists of audio-visual genres? At the formal level, the narrative style is responsible for the ease with which the performance arts have appropriated *Carmen*. Because Mérimée builds the plot on the voyeuristic observations of the narrator, the *récit* emphasizes the components of the story that are easiest to communicate through performance: dialogue, actions, facial expressions, gestures, etc. Although this style accounts for the *ability* of artists to adapt the text, it does not explain their unbridled enthusiasm for doing so. Ultimately, the captivating force of the story is the exotic alterity of the Gypsy women that it portrays. Audio-visual genres thrive on the aura of strangeness that the novella describes; in the music of Bizet’s opera, the choreography of the seguidilla, and the design of costumes and scenery, they recreate Mérimée’s Othering vision of nineteenth century Spain. By analyzing these features of disparate adaptations, this paper illustrates how the exotic, or the imaginary image of the unknown, is uniquely conducive to showing modes of representation.