

# Georges Bizet

## *Carmen*

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**CAMBRIDGE**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge  
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP  
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA  
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1992

First published 1992  
Reprinted 1994, 1996, 1998

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

*A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data*

McClary, Susan.

Georges Bizet, Carmen / Susan McClary.

p. cm. — (Cambridge opera handbooks)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0 521 39301 9. — ISBN 0 521 39897 5 (pbk.)

1. Bizet, Georges, 1838–75. Carmen. I. Title. II. Title:

Carmen. III. Series.

ML410.B62M25 1992

782.1-dc20 91-32840 CIP

ISBN 0 521 39897 5 paperback

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# I *Mérimée's Carmen*

PETER ROBINSON

To the average reader of 1845, there was nothing particularly original or surprising about Prosper Mérimée's *Carmen* when it first appeared on October 1 in *La Revue des deux mondes*. It is, indeed, entirely possible that few recognized the story as fiction. *La Revue des deux mondes* (*Review of the Two Worlds*) had originally been founded as a bi-weekly travel journal depicting, for the civilized "world" of France, exotic landscapes and adventures in what today we call the Third World. The volume of October 1 contains Mérimée's contribution as lead with no indication of its nature, together with an article on Belgium and the Catholic Party since 1830, a literary/historical article on the satires of Lucilius, an article on the political situation in Germany in 1845, a synopsis of the political events of the previous fifteen days and a review of the historical plays of G. Revere. In this context, *Carmen* takes on all the trappings of a "Letter from Abroad." Not even professional critics appeared to notice the story.<sup>1</sup>

For several decades, French culture had manifested a fascination with history: the desire to rediscover the truths of the past, to place France at the head of a continuum of scientific progress, to assert its supremacy over lesser cultures. As we shall see in Chapter 3, this agenda was coupled with a fascination 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 an area alien to him and reports upon what he finds. The events reported will always in one way or another surpass those he could live himself as a rational, dispassionate Frenchman.

In the case of *Carmen*, a scholarly, amateur French archaeologist has gone to Spain to locate the real battlefield of Munda, the location where Caesar finally defeated the Republican forces in the Roman Civil War. This quest is interrupted by a series of events so

interesting that they delay his telling us of his discoveries, postponing them to a later time and another text. While looking for the battlefield, the narrator comes across a real Spanish bandit, a wonderful, exotic specimen he has for years hoped to meet. Using his superior French skills, the narrator succeeds in taming and observing this wild beast and discovers in him a rather sympathetic human being named Don José. The narrator helps the beast to escape from the authorities and continues his journey. He arrives in Cordoba and there meets another specimen he has hoped to study – the fortune-telling gypsy. Again he is beguiled by his observations, this time of none other than Carmen herself, and he manages to repair with her to her rooms for the telling of his fortune and other delights. What he might have learned is interrupted by Don José, and the Frenchman is forced to continue his travels. When he returns to Cordoba several months later, he finds Don José in prison condemned to die for having killed Carmen. Don José relates his own story, and this concludes the first version of the tale.

Late in 1846 Mérimée added a fourth section to what had been a three-part story, puzzling readers and critics alike. In this fourth section, the French narrator returns and delivers a long-winded disquisition on Romany, the gypsy language – its origins, its dialects, its influence on French slang, its qualities and its proverbs. He ends this part and thus the entire story by quoting a gypsy proverb: “*En retudi panda nasti abela macha,*” which he translates as “En close bouche n’entre point mouche” (p. 409); “Into a closed mouth enters no fly”).

On the surface, then, we are faced with a commonplace: two exotic anecdotes – predictably dealing with the uncivilized and thus, stereotypically, the violent, the disorderly, the superstitious, the diabolical – sandwiched in the middle of the narrator’s discourse, which is composed of order, rationality, logic, that is to say, the hallmarks of French civilization. Were this to constitute the interest of the story, perhaps little would be thought of it today. After all, so many stories of the period have precisely the same construction. Yet within several years of its publication, people were beginning to notice the story, to consider it one of Mérimée’s best – indeed, to call it a masterpiece. This was true even before Bizet was to catapult a version of it into worldwide notoriety some thirty years after the original was written. We must therefore look further in the attempt to discover the reasons for the powerful hold this tale has had on readers up to the present day.

Virtually all of the elements that compose the structure of the story are intimately linked to questions of control and mastery, as the major narrative strategy aptly illustrates. A Frenchman begins the story with learned, controlled discourse about history and local color, then surrenders his control to another tale told by a different narrator (foreign, violent, uncivilized). This tale takes over the French text and at least temporarily entirely subverts its control. Violence erupts, forcing the Frenchman to reassert mastery. He does so by attempting to reweave the torn fabric with yet another learned discourse, this time upon the nature of language in general, and of Romany in particular. It is precisely the gypsy language that was ostensibly obliterated with Carmen's death but that now has been appropriated by the Frenchman. He demonstrates his mastery and control by showing us a thoroughly domesticated tongue silenced finally when he, according to his own desires, chooses to cease writing.

The paradigm of control and subsequent threat to its hegemony is echoed throughout the text by any number of the episodes and anecdotes that compose it – the threat to Caesar's control by the Republicans; the fact that Don José himself is a member of an occupying army charged with keeping the local population in check; the smugglers' defiance of commercial law, and so on. Interestingly, as the story unfolds and one perceives these threats to control, one begins to notice that blame for almost all of the threats is attributed to Carmen herself. Her action in the cigar factory forces the army to impose order; her mockery leads Don José to disobey his duty to return to his barracks; her efforts free her husband from rightful imprisonment; her schemes organize the band of smugglers. Finally, her resistance to Don José is blamed for the ultimate assertion of power and control – the violence resulting in her death. Indeed, Carmen is everywhere and even spills out of the frame meant to contain her, as she seduces not only the foreign and violent narrator but the rational French narrator as well. Herein lies the obsession of the text. It always returns to Carmen; indeed, the tale begins at the name itself.

The linguistic mystification of at least some readers also begins immediately. The meaning of the word "Carmen" would not be readily decipherable to the reader of the time, as it is not a French word and would only become immediately recognizable as a proper name after this very story had become famous.<sup>2</sup> This mystification

deepens as the reader's eyes fall next upon a text not in French but in Greek. The epigraph is a quotation from the Greek author Palladas. Male readers in Mérimée's day could be expected to be able to read Greek, since instruction in the language was part of their education. Women readers, however, did not receive the same education, and most of them could not have discerned that it is they who are at issue in the epigraph: "Every woman is bitter as bile, but each has two good moments, one in bed and the other in the grave."<sup>3</sup>

The reader is thus immediately faced with another example of the drive for control. At the very outset of the story – in the title and the epigraph – the reader is notified that progress and understanding are impossible without the intervention of a master translator. Only he possesses the key to unlock the secrets of the many languages that might be used (and no fewer than seven languages are invoked in *Carmen* – Basque, English, French, Greek, Romany, Latin and Spanish). Significantly, the French narrator obligingly plays that role throughout the rest of the story, providing at least forty footnotes that translate expressions, explain details of local color or go so far as to elucidate metaphors whose meaning is obvious.

For the epigraph, however, Mérimée refuses to provide helpful information to female readers, thus at one and the same time telling men quite precisely what the story really concerns and occluding access to women. The battle that really interests this text is the battle between the sexes. From the very beginning, Woman is marked as the enemy. The battlefield itself, the territory that obsesses the text, is none other than her body, as the text constantly raises the question of who shall own it while describing those who are fighting over it.

The obsessional nature of this concern over the woman's body is apparent from the beginning of the story. The French narrator, while wandering around the plains looking for Munda, seeks a place to rest. His eyes light upon what can only be described as an uncannily feminine landscape. He is attracted to a spot of moisture and, approaching it, discovers a small stream trickling through high, narrow foothills. He resolves to penetrate this space in hopes of finding better within. Sure enough, the narrow gorge opens suddenly on to a natural space shaded by the high walls surrounding it. In the center of this uterine place is found a spring, the entirety causing the narrator to exclaim:

Il était impossible de rencontrer un lieu qui promît au voyageur une halte plus agréable. Au pied de rochers à pic, la source s'élançait en bouillonnant et tombait dans un petit bassin tapissé d'un sable blanc comme la neige. Cinq à six beaux chênes verts, toujours à l'abri du vent et rafraîchis par la source, s'élevaient sur ses bords, et la couvraient de leur épais ombrage; enfin, autour du bassin,<sup>4</sup> une herbe fine, lustrée, offrait un lit meilleur qu'on n'en eût trouvé dans aucune auberge à dix lieues à la ronde. (p. 346)

(It was impossible to encounter a spot that promised the traveler a more agreeable halt. At the foot of vertiginous rocks the spring boiled out and fell into a little basin carpeted with a sand white as snow. Five or six oaks, always sheltered from the wind and refreshed by the spring, rose on its borders, and covered it with their heavy shade; finally, around the basin, a fine, lustrous grass offered a bed better than could be found in any inn within a radius of ten leagues.)

Regrettably for the narrator this body he has penetrated is already occupied, for it is here that he meets Don José, who is quite prepared to defend his territory with the blunderbuss he holds conveniently out from his side. Realizing that he has nothing to match the blunderbuss, the Frenchman approaches, bows to *force majeure* and offers up what he can – namely, a cigar. There ensues an extraordinary scene of male bonding in which Don José lights his cigar off the Frenchman's, they breathe smoke together and the narrator carefully explains that in Spain this establishes a link of hospitality. The link established, the two men share food and ultimately lie down together to sleep. When the Frenchman learns his new friend is to be arrested, the demands of this companionship require the abandonment of the principles of law. He wakens Don José and warns him of his impending capture.

The most important consequence of this scene is to abolish any real difference that might have existed between the civilized, distant Frenchman and the wild, Spanish bandit. They are now essentially brothers, each like the other and in some sense each responsible for the other. Certainly the Frenchman feels this strongly as he debates with himself whether or not he should have done what he did:

Je me demandais si j'avais eu raison de sauver de la potence un voleur, et peut-être un meurtrier, et cela seulement parce que j'avais mangé avec lui du jambon et du riz à la valencienne. N'avais-je pas trahi mon guide, qui soutenait la cause des lois; ne l'avais-je pas exposé à la vengeance d'un scélérat? Mais les devoirs de l'hospitalité? . . . Préjugé de sauvage, me disais-je; j'aurai à répondre de tous les crimes que le bandit va commettre



... Pourtant est-ce un préjugé que cet instinct de conscience qui résiste à tous les raisonnements? (p. 356)

(I wondered if I had been right to save a robber from the gallows, and perhaps a murderer, and this only because I had eaten ham and rice *à la valencienne* with him. Had I not betrayed my guide, who was upholding the cause of law; had I not exposed him to the revenge of a scoundrel? But the duties of hospitality? ... Prejudice of the barbaric, I said to myself; I will have to answer for all the crimes the bandit will commit ... Yet is it a prejudice, this instinct of conscience that resists all reasoning?)

“Cet instinct de conscience” is both the result and cause of male bonding. Held together now by something stronger than societal judgments concerning law and order, or other abstract moral principles, these two men are now brothers-in-arms, fighting the same battles and enduring the same vicissitudes. The acts of the one are to be considered the acts of the other.

The relation between men and women is explored shortly afterward. Here, instead of linkage and bonding, is found difference and alienation. While in Cordoba, the Frenchman hears and tells about a curious activity of the women. At nightfall, just as the *angelus* rings out its last note, the women of the town gather together on the banks of the Guadalquivir River. Believing themselves protected by the cover of night, they disrobe and bathe in the river, unmindful of the men. The men, excited by the prospect of such a feast of flesh, gather on the high embankment of the river and stare excitedly into the water. They have even been known to bribe the bell-ringer so that the *angelus* will sound during a time of light, facilitating the seeing of these beauties. The Frenchman regretfully points out that the bell-ringers are today incorruptible, and distinguishing between the oldest hag and the youngest beauty is not really possible. The men remain on the periphery of this female world, forced to sublimate their desires voyeuristically: “Cependant, ces formes blanches et incertaines qui se dessinent sur le sombre azur du fleuve font travailler les esprits poétiques, et, avec un peu d’imagination, il n’est pas difficile de se représenter Diane et ses nymphes au bain, sans avoir à craindre le sort d’Actéon” (p. 357; “However, these white and uncertain forms which stand out against the dark blue of the river set poetic minds to work, and, with a little imagination, it is not difficult to see Diana and her nymphs bathing, without having to fear Actaeon’s fate”). What is of interest to them is solely the physical aspect of the female – the women’s bodies are their focus.<sup>5</sup> The evocation of Diana is

particularly telling. By remaining outside the woman's world, the tremulous male is left to be satisfied by fantasy alone, thus protecting him from the dangers of real, physical contact with the women who – like Diana – seem quite capable of destroying him.

This fear of destruction by the female is immediately illustrated by the Frenchman's encounter with Carmen. Participating in the *angelus* bathing scene one night, he finds himself face to face with a woman. There follows a reenactment of the bonding scene with Don José, but to quite different effect. The woman allows her mantilla to slide off her shoulder, thus revealing her weapon – her flesh. While a moment before the Frenchman could see nothing, now he immediately sees her as enticing, young and with big eyes. His first act is to throw away his cigar, thereby disarming himself. She, however, claims that she likes cigar smoke and even likes to smoke little cigars herself. He just happens to have some in a case, which he opens for her. They then smoke together. Again the Frenchman offers food as a sequel, this time inviting Carmen to accompany him for ice cream. Before agreeing, she asks him the time. “Je fis sonner ma montre” (p. 358; “I had my watch strike”) is his response. Taking his watch from his vest pocket, he allows it to ring out his prowess, at which she marvels. Later she again asks the time, and he again sounds it out.

As the seduction unfolds, the two proceed from the public square to increasingly private spaces, finally ending in Carmen's room where the Frenchman believes he is about to conquer. At the moment of culmination, however, the door bursts open and Don José enters. In an exact replay of the earlier scene in the mountains, two men now face each other, contending for ascendancy over a body. Here, instead of a sublimated, fantasized female landscape, we are faced with Carmen's body, and here the tensions are much higher. The Frenchman senses that she is urging Don José to kill him, and he wishes that he had allowed Don José to be arrested. The conclusion seems inescapable that women, or at least this woman, constitute the greatest threat to the bond that exists between men.

Luckily Don José manages to resist, the tension is deflected and he escorts the Frenchman to safety. He knows what the Frenchman does not – that the visitor was about to be ensnared, that the Frenchman would have become Carmen's victim as Don José had already become. Don José could now repay his debt and save the Frenchman's life by leading him out of the maze of Carmen's

world. When the Frenchman returns to his own room, he notes: “Le pire fut qu’en me déshabillant je m’aperçus que ma montre me manquait” (p. 363; “The worst was that while undressing I noticed my watch was missing”). Diana/Carmen has found him out and robbed him of his prowess. The result, then, of this episode is not like its male counterpart, one of friendship, bond and solidarity, but rather the opposite. It demonstrates mistrust, guile and alienation.

It is here that the narration is taken over by Don José. By now, however, it is clear that it does not matter. The vaunted superiority of the rational, civilized Frenchman has been reduced to the same level as Don José. In a very real sense what happens to Don José is the responsibility of the Frenchman, not just because he allowed Don José to escape, but because he and Don José are just alike. Both men instinctively see the other as a brother, and each sees himself as the victim of the same woman who has robbed them both. The dispassionate, distant Frenchman who knows the classics and can quote Greek has exactly the same attitude toward women as the Spaniard who overtly fears them. There is no longer the need for any pretense: the ancient Greeks, the civilized French, the exotic Spanish – all men have the same story to tell.

On the surface the story plays out in stereotypical fashion. Both the Frenchman and Don José see Carmen as a manifestation of the devil. For the Frenchman she is a gypsy, thus marked from the beginning with alterity. She is the lowest form of human life possible, even lower than the Jew he believes her to be when he first sees her (although, as we shall see, he cannot bring himself to utter the name “Jew”). As her charms are those of Satan himself, both men are helpless and cannot be held responsible for their actions. Everything she ostensibly wants them to do – lie, cheat, steal, revolt – they cannot refuse. They are her victims. Carmen tells Don José that he should leave her because certainly she will cause him to be hanged. But, of course, she has bewitched him so he cannot. Killing her, then, becomes a last act of desperation, the act necessary to reassert order and control. He is to be pitied; she is to be blamed. Surely this is how the story has been read over the years.

Yet it is not at all clear that Carmen really deserves to be blamed for what happens. Don José’s propensity for violence is established well before he meets Carmen. His killing of another Basque in Navarre, which necessitated his going to Andalusia, already marks him a murderer. Moreover, Carmen warns him repeatedly that he

should have nothing to do with her as he is too naïve and stupid to be able to handle someone like her. He, of course, refuses to listen.

Close reading of the text uncovers a portrait of Carmen that has nothing to do with the satanic: she is granted characteristics that in other circumstances would have been seen as laudable and, indeed, particularly male. The “crime” for which she was arrested, slashing the face of another woman, would not have been seen as a crime if committed by a male. Carmen’s honor and integrity were impugned by the other woman who accused Carmen of being a whore. Like any man – French or Spanish – Carmen reacted with vigor and immediately defended herself with her weapon. Mérimée himself was well known for his quickness to take offense, his propensity for dueling.

After she is arrested, she too uses a technique of bonding – speaking the same language as her captor – to escape. Feeling that a bond has been established, that she has a debt to pay for Don José’s allowing her to go free, she at first attempts to pay it in her own currency. The French narrator points out several times in the work that gypsies prize their freedom above all else. Carmen thus sends Don José a loaf of bread containing a file and money to allow him to escape from prison. He refuses this offer, as it goes counter to his own sense of honor and duty. Carmen therefore changes this currency to one she knows Don José will appreciate. She invites him to the tavern of Lillas Pastia and there sleeps with him.

For Don José, however, the preferred medium of exchange is possession, not liberty. Here lies the most fundamental misunderstanding between the two. What Carmen gives freely in order to repay what she considers an obligation she clearly believes frees her from obligation. Don José, however, takes her act as a sign that he now owns Carmen and that she is obligated to him in perpetuity. The morning after, Carmen considers there is nothing more between them, as she says: “Ecoute, Joseito, t’ai-je payé? D’après notre loi, je ne te devais rien, puisque tu es un *payllo*; mais tu es un joli garçon et tu m’as plu. Nous sommes quittes. Bonjour” (p. 379; “Listen, Joseito, have I paid you? According to our law I owed you nothing since you are a *payllo* [a foreigner]; but you are a handsome boy and you pleased me. We are quits. Goodbye”). He, however, does not get the point and immediately wants to set up another assignation. Several weeks later, when Don José is guarding a breach in the town wall from smugglers, Carmen approaches him and offers to pay him to allow her smuggling friends to get through.

He refuses, outraged. She then offers to pay with her body and again he refuses, but unhappily. As she turns to make the offer elsewhere he capitulates. The dynamics of this scene are repeated many times in the story. Every time Carmen wishes to get her way, to do so she is forced to use her body with the men who hold the power. Increasingly she resents it.

Carmen is not only endowed with great physical attractiveness, but is also described in the story as having the power and dedication to heal. During a duel with his lieutenant – which Carmen urges Don José not to get into – Don José is wounded. Carmen and a friend clean the wound, hide Don José from the authorities and, with special medicines, nurse him back to health. Later Carmen again saves Don José's life. He has been wounded when his band of smugglers is caught by the police, and he crawls away to die. Carmen finds him and, over a long period of time, nurses him back to health. What is extraordinary about this scene is that it takes place long after Carmen has ceased loving Don José, and his possessiveness and jealousy have made her life miserable. She, however, never abandons someone in need and is never herself violent.

Finally, it must be pointed out that Carmen is the most intelligent person in the story. It is she who manages to free her husband from jail, and it is she who organizes all of the escapades of the band of smugglers. She is its *de facto* leader, thinking up the schemes whereby it can succeed, marshaling the troops of the band throughout the countryside, managing large amounts of money and numbers of contingencies in her head. The band simply could not exist without her. Everyone else in it is replaceable except Carmen. Curiously she combines all the male virtues: she is clever, intelligent, brave, resolute, sexual, independent. Why then is she so despised, so threatening that she must be destroyed?

The most obvious threat is Carmen's sexuality. The text is obsessed by her physicality, her body and its movements. Virtually every time she appears at the beginning of the story, she reveals her flesh. The Frenchman narrator cannot make out her features at night until she removes her mantilla from her shoulders. Then suddenly he sees clearly that she is young, well-built ("bien faite") and has large eyes. Precisely the same movement attracts Don José, and he is subsequently transfixed by the movement of her body and by the sight of the flesh of her legs pushing through holes in her stockings.

While all this flesh is powerfully attractive, what is more important is the sense of inadequacy it engenders in the men. The text is obsessed with images of male inadequacy faced with such allurements. Even the most reluctant Freudian must recognize the extraordinary number of phallic images used to characterize the males in the story. When the reader first encounters Don José, he is standing in the earlier-described feminine landscape with a raised blunderbuss. The Frenchman, seeing such endowment, immediately surrenders his cigars. Subsequently we learn in Don José's narrative that he had started off with a *maquilla*, a long walking stick-like instrument with an iron head.

Moreover, Don José's first colloquy with Carmen is a series of obscene *doubles entendres*. While mounting guard, Don José occupies himself with fashioning a chain of wool to attach his *épinglette*, the little needle used to ream out the touchhole of his blunderbuss. Carmen suggests that he should use the chain to hold the keys to her strongbox and then goes on to declare that since he only has a needle he must be a lacemaker – namely, a woman. Clearly, neither the thin woolen string nor the little needle are sufficient to secure her strongbox. Later she cajoles Don José by saying that the Andalusians with their knives are no match for the Basques and their *maquillas*. When the French narrator first meets Carmen, he immediately throws away his cigar and replaces it with a *papelito*. Note that both the *épinglette* and the *papelito* are diminutives. And the Frenchman only observes when he is undressed that he has been robbed of his watch by none other than Carmen. Need one point out that in the cigar factory Carmen's job is to cut off the ends of the cigars?

Initially, when fighting other men, Don José possesses either a blunderbuss or saber, but he progressively seems to lose them and is reduced when fighting Carmen's husband to using a knife. As he kills the husband, Don José's knife breaks, and he assumes the knife of the husband. It is with this appropriated instrument that he kills Carmen. What is most curious is that Don José uses this very knife to dig Carmen's grave – in quite rocky soil. This is a most inadequate instrument for the task, particularly in a story which prides itself upon its realistic detail.

There remains the puzzling fourth section added less than a year after the first version was published. To most readers and critics this section remains enigmatic and disappointing. The various reasons adduced for its existence are unconvincing,<sup>6</sup> and many critics

simply leave it unmentioned. Proper study and understanding of the fourth section is, however, crucial. The issue of control and domination is engaged by the French narrator primarily through language itself. It is he who is to be seen as the interpreter: the one who can go into a foreign land, manipulate its language or languages and provide the necessary understanding to the reader who does not command so many tongues. That he is as willing to conceal as to reveal is evidenced by his refusal to translate the Greek epigraph at the beginning of the story.

The Frenchman narrator's initial analysis of others is through a commentary on their manner of speaking. He says of Don José, "C'étaient les premiers mots qu'il faisait entendre, et je remarquai qu'il ne prononçait pas l's à la manière andalouse, d'où je conclus que c'était un voyageur comme moi, moins archéologue seulement" (p. 348; "These were the first words he spoke, and I noticed that he did not pronounce the *s* in the Andalusian manner, from which I concluded that he was a voyager like me, only less archaeological"). Not only does this Frenchman know Spanish, he knows it well. When later he asks Don José to sing, he recognizes that the words are not Spanish but Basque. Our civilized, rational narrator is an expert linguist who prides himself on his knowledge and analytic powers.

When this same rational Frenchman meets Carmen, his powers utterly desert him. While the scene is somewhat long, it is significant. After the Frenchman and Carmen smoke together and she asks him for the time, the following exchange takes place:

– Quelles inventions on a chez vous, messieurs les étrangers! De quel pays êtes-vous, monsieur? Anglais, sans doute? – Français et votre grand serviteur. Et vous, mademoiselle, ou madame, vous êtes sans doute de Cordoue? – Non. – Vous êtes du moins Andalouse. Il me semble le reconnaître à votre doux parler. – Si vous remarquez si bien l'accent du monde, vous devez bien deviner qui je suis. – Je crois que vous êtes du pays de Jésus, à deux pas du paradis. (J'avais appris cette métaphore, qui désigne l'Andalousie, de mon ami Francisco Sevilla, *picador* bien connu.) – Bah! le paradis . . . les gens d'ici disent qu'il n'est pas fait pour nous. – Alors, vous seriez donc moresque, ou . . . je m'arrêtai, n'osant dire juive. – Allons, allons! vous voyez bien que je suis bohémienne; voulez-vous que je vous dise *la baji*? Avez-vous entendu parler de la Carmencita? C'est moi. (p. 349)

(What inventions you have in your countries, you foreigners! What country are you from, sir? English, no doubt?/French and your servant.

And you, Miss, or Madam, you are doubtless from Cordoba?/No./You are at least Andalusian. I seem to recognize that from your soft way of speaking./If you recognize so readily the accent of the world, you should easily guess who I am./I believe that you are from the land of Jesus, two steps from paradise. (I had learned this metaphor, which designates Andalusia, from my friend Francisco Sevilla, a well-known *picador*.)/Bah! paradise . . . people from here say that it isn't made for us./Then you would be Moorish, or . . . I stopped, not daring to say Jewish./Come on, come on! You see perfectly well that I am gypsy; do you want me to tell your fortune? Have you heard of Carmencita? That's me.)

In this extraordinary scene, not only is the narrator ignorant, he is tongue-tied. Carmen's use of language so far surpasses his knowledge that he cannot place it or, as a consequence, her. He insists first that she is from the very town they are in, then, if not the town, at least its province. When that does not elicit the response desired he insists again, using a deeply ambiguous metaphor. By saying that she must be from the "land of Jesus," he can be referring not only to Andalusia as he claims, but also to Israel, the very category he dare not mention. For him Carmen is unnameable and in this respect is marked from the outset as monstrous. Indeed she is so monstrous she belongs to an even more alienated category than that of Jew, a category that does not even occur to the Frenchman – that of gypsy.

As Carmen surpasses Don José in the realm of the sexual, she equally surpasses our Frenchman in the realm of language. Her capacity to speak many languages and to speak them so well that she fools others is one element of her success in getting what she wants. Thus by speaking to Don José in Basque she manages to effect her escape. She is in fact the only character in the story who speaks all the vernacular languages invoked. The Frenchman does not know Romany, at least not in the first three sections of the story. When Carmen is talking to Don José in front of the Frenchman, she does so in Romany and the Frenchman cannot understand. Yet it is precisely at this moment in the story that his life is most directly threatened. Don José in his narration comments at some length upon the fact that gypsies, because they live everywhere, take on the language of wherever they are living, becoming *de facto* superb linguists.

The fourth section of the story now becomes quite pertinent. Don José's unwillingness to allow a woman who is superior to him both intellectually and sexually to remain independent and free *Recollections*



from his domination is matched here by the Frenchman's equal inability. Carmen's skill in using languages unknown to the narrator himself threatens the very existence of the story itself, or at least of the narrator's version of the story. How can he master events if they are rendered in a language he cannot manipulate?

Once again we find no real difference between the rational, logical, civilized Frenchman and the wild, passionate, barbaric Don José. Both have been equally dominated and overwhelmed. The violent reassertion of order and dominance which is Don José's murder of Carmen is duplicated by the fourth section. Desperately trying to reassert his authority, the French narrator does violence to the very fabric of the story by now claiming to know a language he previously said he did not understand. Appropriating Carmen's language as Don José did her body, the Frenchman will finally finish her off, as well as end the threat she represents. Her language is now his and is completely tamed, dissected, analyzed.

The proverb with which the new story ends, "into closed mouth enters no fly," thus takes on a chilling meaning, for, after all, whose mouth has been closed? Writing over Carmen's language, the Frenchman attempts to write her off. Sealing every possible orifice, the sexual and the verbal, he brings the story to its end – silence. In this way he hopes forever to bury and to deny the terrifying reality of Woman's inalterable and unutterable superiority.<sup>7</sup>