

## From the Extolment of Freedom to the Reflection on Freedom: A Study of Carmen's Absorption and Deviation from "The Gypsies"

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### Abstract:

Mérimée's novella *Carmen* is derived from Pushkin's long narrative poem "The Gypsies". "The Gypsies" is a Romantic work, where Pushkin affirms and sympathizes with the gypsy girl Zemfira's life, which is integrated with nature, and her pursuit of freedom. *Carmen*, on the other hand, is a Realist work, where Mérimée adopts a cautious and critical attitude towards the concept of freedom exemplified by *Carmen*. Both Zemfira and Carmen are anarchists as defined by Proudhon; Pushkin extols the former, while Mérimée composes a lament for the latter.

**Keywords:** Pushkin; Zemfira; Mérimée; *Carmen*; Proudhon; Hobbes

Pushkin (Александр Сергеевич Пушкин, 1799—1837), often referred to as the "father of Russian literature", is the founder of modern Russian literature and the creator of the Russian literary language. His poems, novels, and dramas enjoy a vast readership, remaining timeless and enduring. Prosper Mérimée (1803-1870), a French realist writer, is renowned for his short stories, which are characterized by vivid, concise, and detached prose style. His works have influenced many writers, including notable authors such as Maupassant, Chekhov, and O. Henry (Xie, 1985). Pushkin and Mérimée admire and appreciate one another, and they had high respect for each other as well, and quite naturally, Pushkin's "The Gypsies" has profound influence on Mérimée *Carmen*, as we can see in the following.

### I. Pushkin and Mérimée

Pushkin and Mérimée were respectively born in 1799 and 1803. They were close in age, shared similar interests, and admired each other. Readers familiar with the Russian version of *War and Peace* know that the Russian aristocrats in the 18th and 19th centuries were keen on learning French, and nearly every household employed a French tutor. The aristocrats might not speak Russian well, but they could not do without French, which was their daily social language. The Pushkins were no exception. As a member of the Russian aristocracy, Pushkin was also tutored by a French teacher in his childhood, and he was so fluent in French from a young age that in his high school days, he was nicknamed “the French guy” by his high school classmates, and as a result, his proficiency with French allowed him to engage deeply with French literary works.

Although Pushkin and Mérimée never met, they had a long-standing mutual admiration. From the time Mérimée published his debut work *Clara Gazul, a Spanish Actress: Her Dramatic Works* in 1825, Pushkin began to pay attention to him. In 1828, after reading Mérimée’s poetry collection *La Guzla*, Pushkin was greatly impressed with it and translated it into Russian. He even wrote to his acquaintance Sobolevsky, who knew Mérimée, inquiring about the source of the material in the collection. Mérimée replied to Sobolevsky and addressed the questions posed by Pushkin.

In 1835, Pushkin published “The Song of the Wise Oleg”, and in the preface, he quoted part of a letter Mérimée had written to Sobolevsky. In the preface he also referred to Mérimée’s *Clara Gazul*, *The Chronicle of Charles IX*, and *The Double Mistake*, praising Mérimée’s sharp insight and originality. Mérimée, who was four years younger than Pushkin, respected him greatly, referring to himself as Pushkin's “loyal servant.”

Mérimée began systematically learning Russian in the mid-1840s and translated and published Pushkin's no Both Pushkin and Mérimée were deeply influenced vel *The Queen of Spades* in 1849, followed by the publication of Pushkin's long narrative poem "The Gypsies" and other works in the 1850s. In 1868, Mérimée published an article titled "Alexander Pushkin", in which he conducted a comprehensive and in-depth analysis of Pushkin and his works, including the tragedy *Boris Godunov*, the long 98 narrative poems "Eugene Onegin" and "The Gypsies", and the novels *The Captain's Daughter* and *The Queen of Spades*. He said that Pushkin played a dominant role in Russian literature, and no writer or critic dares to delete Pushkin's name from the list of great writers (Mérimée, 2014, p. 342). The famous Russian writer Turgenev once recalled, "The renowned French writer, and Pushkin's admirer, Mérimée, did not hesitate to call Pushkin the greatest poet of our time" (Zhang, 2013, p. 154). According to Turgenev's recollection, Mérimée believed that "Pushkin's poetry seemed to emerge miraculously and naturally from clear, limpid and concise prose" (Zhang, 2013, p. 154).

Both Pushkin and Mérimée were deeply influenced by Byron (Kang, 1984), the leading master and the charismatic model of the English "Satanic School" of poets. In the early 1820s, Pushkin was exiled from St. Petersburg by the Tsar and went to southern Russia. While staying at his friend Raevsky's home, he read Byron's works for the first time and was immediately captivated. Pushkin's "Southern Narrative Poems" written during this period were heavily influenced by Byron's "Oriental Tales." "Pushkin's Southern Poems were written under the influence of Byron's tempestuous Romantic passion and rebellious spirit, which had a strong impact on him. He said, 'I was driven mad by Byron'" (Kang, 1984). When Byron published his epic-like "Don Juan" from 1818 to 1823, it swept and captivated the whole Europe, and

Pushkin was mesmerized and infatuated with it. As a result, he imitated Byron in every aspect, including literature and private life. He even referred to his long list of lovers as “the Don Juan List” (Chen, 2006). In 1824, after completing “The Gypsies”, Pushkin wrote the much-claimed lyrical poem “To the Sea”, where he referred to Byron as “another ruler in the realm of our thoughts” (Kang, 1984).

Mérimée was also deeply influenced by Byron and believed that, like Pushkin, Byron “played a dominant role in his country's literature” (Mérimée, 2014, p. 342). Like Pushkin, he was also taken away by Byron’s “Don Juan”, so much so that he even wrote a short story, “The Soul in the Purgatory”, in which the protagonist, also called Don Juan, undergoes a whole metamorphic process from an innocent, honest and upright youngster to an amoral, liberal lecher, and then to an evil, wicked, diabolic scoundrel and impostor, and finally, after a long, pious confession, to a virtuous faithful man, depicting the painful, tempestuous psychic odyssey of a man in this secular world (Chen, 2006). Taking Byron as a model, and imitating “Don Juan”, Mérimée produced his own “foreign series”, which are exotic, outlandish and barbarous, exemplified by his much praised and widely spread *Carmen* and *Colomba*.

## II. “The Gypsies”: A Song of Freedom

In 1824, Pushkin used his experiences with the gypsies on the Moldavian steppe in southern Russia. This shows that Mérimée was not only as the subject matter to write his famous long narrative poem “The Gypsies”. The plot of this narrative poem is not very complicated: The male protagonist, Aleko, is a young nobleman who has mingled in high society. He is being pursued and wanted by the Russian government for violating the law (“The law persecutes him” (Pushkin, 2020, pp. 235), forcing him to flee the city and seek refuge with the gypsies (also

known as the Romani or Bohemians) in a remote area. There, Aleko encounters a beautiful and captivating gypsy girl named Zemfira, and the two quickly fall in love and become a couple.

However, their love does not last long. Zemfira soon falls for another man and secretly meets her new lover at a graveyard at night. Aleko discovers Zemfira's new romance and, consumed with jealousy, kills her lover in a fit of rage. Despite the wise counsel and advice from Zemfira's father, an elderly gypsy, who tries to comfort Aleko by explaining that such things are common among the gypsies, Aleko refuses to let Zemfira go. In the end, he kills her too, in a moment of blind fury. The gypsies do not punish Aleko; instead, they abandon him, leaving him alone in the "vast, fateful field," (Pushkin, 2020, pp.266) as desolate as a wild goose fatally wounded by a lead bullet and left behind by its flock.

Pushkin's "The Gypsies" is in essence a Romantic literary poetic work. For Romantics, civilization is normally seen as a negative force, symbolizing ugliness, filth, shackles, and sin, while nature is considered the sum of all that is good, representing beauty, purity, freedom, and forgiveness. Ultimately, "The Gypsies" is a narrative poem about the conflict between civilization and nature. The society from which Aleko gets away from represents civilization, a world that emphasizes "reason" (social ethics and morals) and "law" (social norms and customs), both of which are the sources of all ugliness, filth, shackles, and sin. Aleko, who is suffocated by this sinful world, betrays it and escapes from it, seeking refuge among the gypsies, who are the "children of nature". The gypsies have no country or laws; they are bound together by simple, spontaneous emotions, with "affection" being the lubricant of their society. As the Chinese playwright Tang Xianzu said, "People are born with emotions," "The world is

ruled by emotions,” and “Emotions arise inexplicably and grow deeper over time, leading to life and death” (Ye, 2019).

Zemfira, like Du Liniang the beautiful, courageous and faithful heroine in Tang Xianzu’s opera *The Peony Pavilion*, is naturally free-spirited, unbound by any social ethics or national laws. She lives and dies for her emotions, believing that “Flowers and grass can be loved, life and death are at the whim of people, and no one will complain even if it is bitter or sweet.” She falls in love with Aleko and resolutely stays with him, despite the significant gap between them. When her feelings for Aleko fade, she falls in love with another man and leaves Aleko without hesitation, even if it means meeting her lover in secret at a graveyard. Even in the face of death, she remains true to her emotions, unwilling to betray her heart for the sake of survival. She represents the gypsies, who lead a free life, independent from any social or legal constraints, and Pushkin’s admiration is evident in his portrayal of them. In contrast, Aleko and the society he represents are the targets of Pushkin’s criticism and condemnation:

The bagpipes’ wails, the rattle of wheels,  
Everything is dissonant, crude, tasteless,  
Yet everything is so lively and vibrant.  
Unlike our deathlike tranquility,  
Unlike our lazy, changeless lives,  
This monotonous song of slave-like existence. (Pushkin, 2020, p.238)

In a sense, Aleko is also a reflection of Pushkin himself. “Aleko despises the shackles of civilization, / and seeks freedom like them, freely and leisurely” (Pushkin, 2020, pp.246). Pushkin, who was exiled for several times by the society he lived in, loathed and even detested it as a result. He once stayed with the gypsies for quite some time, and he admired or even envied their way of life. However, Aleko, who ultimately belongs to the civilized society,

is unable to cope with the gypsies' spontaneous and straightforward behavior. In the end, out of jealousy, he kills Zemfira, demonstrating his inability to fully escape the societal norms he was raised in. Through Zemfira's father, Pushkin condemns Aleko's "selfish and cruel" actions as a product of civilization:

Get away from us, you proud one.  
We are barbarians, with no law to abide by.  
We will not punish, nor will we sentence,  
As we want no bleeding or moaning,  
But we do not want to live with a murderer.  
You were not born for this barbarous life,  
And you pursue freedom just for yourself. (Pushkin, 2020, p.266)

In his discussion of the tragic nature of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, Professor Ye Lang describes the Grand View Garden as a "world of emotions", where the various talented young women lead lives governed by "affection". These women are emotional, intelligent, pure, and kind, but they are surrounded by an endless "world of law", a feudal society manipulated by various rules and rituals. Under the pressure of this "world of law", the "world of emotions" ultimately disintegrates, as fragile as an egg hitting a rock (Mérimée, 2015). In this sense, the gypsy tribe where Zemfira lives is also a "world of emotions". Under the siege of the external "world of law"—the various nation-states—this "world of emotions" is besieged on all sides, outnumbered, and forced to wander aimlessly, struggling to survive.

### III. Carmen: Zemfira in Mérimée's Writing

As mentioned earlier, Mérimée was the first to introduce Pushkin's works to French readers. He translated Pushkin's *The Queen of Spades*, "The Gypsies", and "The Shot" into French and wrote an academic paper "Alexander Pushkin", in which he offered a comprehensive critique of Pushkin's works. Mérimée had high praise for "The Gypsies": "The

poem ‘The Gypsies’ shows us Pushkin’s growing confidence as he carves his own path. It is a series of tightly interconnected fragments, with no breaks, sometimes a brief narrative, sometimes dialogue, sometimes interspersed with lyrical passages. There are no detailed descriptions, no philosophical reflections, and the scenery is described only in passing, yet the plot remains compelling. I have never seen a more concise work; if I may use the term as a compliment, not a single line or word could be omitted; every word is in its place and serves its purpose” (Mérimée, 2014, p. 342).

This shows that Mérimée was not only familiar with Pushkin’s “The Gypsies”, but was also deeply influenced by it. His novella *Carmen*, published in 1845, is clearly a reinterpretation of “The Gypsies”. Mérimée retains the basic story framework of “The Gypsies”, while adding the “detailed descriptions” and “philosophical reflections” that were absent in Pushkin's work. He expands greatly on the “scenery descriptions” that Pushkin mentioned only in passing. This was the style of 19th-century realist novels, so much so that later English writer Somerset Maugham criticized the 19th-century greats for their habit of devoting excessive ink to extensive scenery descriptions, regardless of whether it was necessary.

In the novel *Carmen*, Aleko becomes Don José, Zemfira becomes Carmen, and the gypsies become the Bohemians. The setting shifts from the Moldavian steppe in southern Russia to the Andalusian province of Spain and the Strait of Gibraltar.

Don José, a Basque nobleman from northern Spain, is stationed in the southern province of Andalusia as a soldier. During one assignment to handle a brawl, he meets the Bohemian woman Carmen. Tempted by Carmen, he releases her from custody, for which he is punished and demoted to the rank of a soldier. Sent to stand guard, he encounters Carmen again. Seduced



by Carmen, he visits her after his shift, spending a passionate night with her, and becomes infatuated. Afterward, while on guard duty, he assists Carmen's smuggling gang. Later, when Carmen seduces a lieutenant in their gang, José, overcome with jealousy, kills the lieutenant and becomes a fugitive, joining Carmen's smuggling gang as they flee. During their activities, José meets Carmen's husband, the "One-Eyed" García, and, driven by jealousy, he provokes García and kills him in a duel, thereby becoming Carmen's "Rom" (husband). However, Carmen's love for José does not last long. Soon, in Granada, she falls in love with a bullfighter, Lucas. Exhausted by the emotional turmoil, José tries to force Carmen to run away to America with him to start a new life. Carmen refuses, and in despair, José kills her before turning himself in to the police. He is eventually sentenced to death by hanging.

In terms of narratology, the main narrative layer of the story is José's confession, but there is also a meta-narrative layer above it, where the first-person narrator ("I") describes how he came to know the bandit José. This is clearly influenced by Pushkin's novel *The Captain's Daughter*, in which the first-person narrator ("I", or Pyotr) recounts how he encountered a mysterious figure who led them through a snowstorm, only to later discover that the figure was the leader of the peasant rebellion, Pugachev. Similarly, in *Carmen*, the narrator meets a mysterious man on a hot summer day. After sharing food and cigars, they travel together, and the man leads them to the Cuervo Inn. Later, the narrator realizes that his companion was none other than the fugitive José Navarro.

Mérimée's Carmen shares similarities with Pushkin's Zemfira. Both are gypsies without a sense of national identity and do not belong to any country. They disdain social conventions and laws, following only the call of their hearts, living and dying for love. Neither remains

faithful to a single man; both are fickle, easily drawn to new loves, and would rather die than live with someone they no longer love. When José tries to coerce Carmen into running away to America with him, Carmen says to him, “I cannot fulfill your demand. I no longer love you, but you still love me, and that is why you want to kill me. I could easily lie to you and deceive you, but I don’t want to go through that trouble. Our fate is sealed. You are my Rom, you have the right to kill your Romi, but Carmen will always be free. She was born a Gypsy, and she will die a Gypsy” (Mérimée, 2015, pp.54). Her words are an echo from Zemfira’s declaration to Aleko, “I will love, even if it means death.”

However, while Pushkin portrays Zemfira as a pure, kind, and beautiful “daughter of natu”, Mérimée’s Carmen is depicted as a “flower of evil”. Mérimée offers little praise for Carmen; instead, he uses many negative terms to describe her. “It is difficult to find a single word of praise for her in the text. On the contrary, there are many words of disdain.(Xie, 1985)” The narrator describes her as “lewd and shameless”, so much so that people cross themselves when they see her; José says she “stood with her hands on her hips, flirting with everyone around her, in a way that only a true Bohemian could” (Mérimée, 2015, pp.21). José states, “That girl lies, sir; she lies habitually. I doubt she has ever told the truth in her entire life” (Mérimée, 2015, pp.25). Carmen is not only promiscuous but also reckless and greedy. She seduces wealthy men, sets them up, and kills them to steal their money. She refuses to engage in legal work, instead she chooses to make a living through smuggling, and

occasionally acts as a fortune-teller to swindle money away from the other people. She feels no remorse for her crimes, considering national laws to be nothing but empty words. The narrator admires Carmen's beauty: "Her skin, though delicate and beautiful, was bronzed like copper. Her large eyes were wild and vibrant, though slightly crossed. Her lips were somewhat thick but beautifully shaped, revealing a set of teeth whiter than almonds. Her hair might have been a bit coarse, but it was black and shiny, like a raven's wings reflecting blue light" (Mérimée, 2015, pp.15). Despite this, Mérimée takes a cautious, even critical, stance on Carmen's concept of freedom. In the novel's concluding reflections, the author notes that the Bohemians have little regard for religious beliefs, are "impoverished and often repulsive", though "they are respected among less civilized people" (Mérimée, 2015, pp.59).

This demonstrates that as a Romantic writer, Pushkin appreciated and endorsed the freedom exemplified by the gypsies. In contrast, Mérimée, as a Realist writer, lacked Pushkin's romantic imagination. He questioned whether Carmen's natural freedom was good or bad for humanity, adopting a cautious and even critical attitude towards Carmen's version of freedom. As a Romantic writer, Pushkin appreciated and endorsed the freedom exemplified by the gypsies. In contrast, Mérimée, as a Realist writer, lacked Pushkin's romantic imagination. He questioned whether Carmen's natural freedom was good or bad for humanity, adopting a cautious and even critical attitude towards Carmen's version of freedom.

#### **IV. The Lament for Anarchists**

Anarchist thought has a long history in the West, with the Stoic philosopher Zeno of ancient Greece discussing it, arguing that people should not relinquish their freedom for the sake of government. Proudhon, the French philosopher, and also a contemporary of Mérimée,

was “the first person in history to call himself an anarchist,” (Lin, 2023) and he coined the term “anarchism.” As a result, he is known as the “father of anarchism”. Anarchism opposes all forms of government and authority, advocating for self-reliance among individuals and emphasizing individual freedom and equality. In this sense, both Zemfira and Carmen can be considered anarchists, as they live in self-organized communities with no concept of nationhood and refuse to submit to any government authority. They value freedom above all else and are willing to die for it.

As a Romantic writer, Pushkin affirms Zemfira’s anarchistic lifestyle, praising and sympathizing with her. While Mérimée’s literary taste includes some elements of Romanticism, such as a love for exoticism and mysticism, he was ultimately a rational Realist writer when it came to his novels. He did not indulge in unrealistic fantasies about the society he portrayed or its people; instead, he scrutinized and critiqued them with a realist’s rational eye.

Regarding anarchism, Mérimée undoubtedly adopts a negative or at least cautiously negative stance. Mérimée was both a literary figure and a historian, but he studied law at the University of Paris, a representative of the continental legal system. The rule of law is the foundation of government, while anarchism is characterized by individualism and opposition to the rule of law.

The British political theorist Thomas Hobbes argued in *Leviathan* that if the state did not exist, human society would enter a “state of nature”, in which competition, distrust, and the pursuit of honor inherent in human nature would inevitably lead to a state of war between individuals, plunging human life into misery. Natural law is the set of general principles discovered by reason, prohibiting individuals from engaging in actions that would destroy their

own lives or deprive themselves of the means to preserve their lives, and requiring them to do whatever they believe is most conducive to preserving life. However, adherence to natural law requires some authority “that people fear and which restrains them through the threat of punishment,” and this authority comes from the state. Therefore, human society needs to establish a state (Duan, 2024).

As mentioned earlier, both Zemfira and Carmen are anarchists, with no sense of nationhood or allegiance to any government. They act according to their personal preferences, with their only guiding principle being their internal desires. Anarchists live in a “state of nature”, which inevitably puts them in a state of conflict with others. Aleko and José kill their rivals in order to win their lovers and then threaten to kill their lovers to force them to remain faithful. Carmen despises authority, mocking those who follow the law. She jokingly refers to José, who follows orders to stand guard, as a “caged bird”. She is greedy by nature, earning her living through deceit, theft, smuggling, and murder. These behaviors are the chaotic competition of human nature in the “state of nature”, inevitably leading to the destruction of others and themselves. If Pushkin sang a hymn for the anarchist Zemfira, Mérimée undoubtedly composed a lament for the anarchist Carmen.

The pure and gentle Zemfira, as portrayed by the Romantic Pushkin, becomes the wild and untamed Carmen in the hands of the Realist Mérimée. Yet, it seems that people have overlooked Mérimée's scrutiny and critique of this brilliant “flower of evil”, focusing instead on Carmen's wild beauty, as radiant as summer flowers, just as they are captivated by the mad but mesmerizing Salome in Oscar Wilde's work. Later, the French musician or composer Bizet

adapted *Carmen* into an opera, in which the stage depiction of Carmen is even more breathtakingly beautiful and stunning.

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