Elèna Mortara


This brilliant, painstakingly researched book, carefully organized, makes a distinguished contribution to the Dartmouth College Series in American Studies, Re-Mapping the Transnational. Its main topic is the life and works of Victor Séjour (1817–1874), a Creole born in New Orleans, who immigrated to Paris and became a playwright of international stature. Séjour’s most successful drama, La Tireuse de cartes [1859, The Fortune-Teller] dramatizes conflicts of Jewish and Christian identities, and conflicts of Church and State, echoing the infamous “Mortara Case” of 1858, in which soldiers of Pope Pius IX kidnapped a Jewish boy, Edgardo Mortara, whose nursemaid had secretly baptized him.

For Victor Séjour and many of his contemporaries, the parallels between problems faced by Americans of African descent in the Antebellum South and Jews in Italy were profound and, in the mid-1850s, of international significance. Séjour himself represents the broader theme of “in-betweenness” and the “transnational:”

That liminality found expression in his linguistic identity, as an American speaking French in New Orleans; in his racial identity, as a free Creole of color from Louisiana; in his national identity, for his crossing of national borders and living as a voluntary exile in Paris for most of his life; in his religious identity, as a Catholic from a Protestant country; and, at least partially […], in his writing for justice across religious borders, when writing as a Catholic in defense of a Jewish family, whose human rights had been violated by the Pope (p. xiv).

The historical thread of this pluri-disciplinary work is Emancipation, in Europe and in America, as explained in the introduction (xiii–xxi). Part I,
A Creole American Writer in Paris (pp. 3–27) develops a vivid account of Séjour's life and theatrical output; his dramas were featured in Paris's major theatres. From the start, Séjour remained concerned with race and his own interracial identity. His lengthy story, Le Mulâtre [The Mulatto] and his first play, Diégarias (1837), are tragedies of mixed black identity and both dramatize the problem of vengeance. With great clarity, Mortara interweaves her analyses of La Tireuse de cartes with the Mortara case and mid-century liberation movements.

The key word is indeed Emancipation. Mortara excels in evoking parallels with the Unification of Italy, abolitionist movements in America and England, the American Civil War, at the same moment Séjour’s play about Jews and Christians was being acclaimed in Paris. (The Emperor Napoleon III and his wife princess Eugénie ostentatiously attended the opening.)

The longer Part II, In the Age of Emancipations: The Mortara Case and a Writer's Conscience (chapters 4–15, pp. 31–169) leads us on a scholarly quest that includes American racial issues, the Risorgimento, problems of Church and State. Readers concerned with Jewish identity and relations with the Catholic Church (and the temporal power of the Pope) will be fascinated by parallels between the emancipation of American slaves, the revolutionary events of Italian Unification, and responses to various showings of The Fortune-Teller in France and then in English and Italian translations.

The author’s eclectic methodology features meticulous textual analysis, study of contemporary press reviews, historical narrative—and occasional parallels with Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Walt Whitman, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Victor Hugo, and others. Mortara’s interpretation of vengeance and forgiveness in The Merchant of Venice is especially insightful, backed up by a study of variant endings of The Fortune-Teller. Especially helpful was Mortara’s study of the popular press, as she shares with readers this insightful aside: “[…] newspapers truly are the first draft of history. Reading newspapers of the age we are transported to a new present, sharing the uncertainties of history in progress (while aware of what will actually occur)” (p. 100). The author enriches her text with dozens of illustrations, most of them contemporary, accompanied by careful explanations of meaning and provenance. Readers become, as it were, research assistants, taking delight in the author’s discoveries.

That personal dimension makes this academic tour de force almost unique. Here the scholarly contribution is literally a family matter. The intellectual quest is animated by an ethical imperative. Professor Elèna Mortara concludes by recounting her family’s distinguished history, with photographs including