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Review: Antebellum Charleston Dramatists by Charles S. Watson

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For the first twenty-five years of the nineteenth century, Charleston, South Carolina, was one of the four most significant centers of theatrical activity in the United States. But while playwrights of note emerged from New York, Boston, and Philadelphia, no Charleston playwright achieved national prominence. Even now, only scholars of nineteenth-century southern American drama would be likely to have heard of - much less to have read - the plays of Charleston's early dramatists. But it is Charles S. Watson's thesis that these playwrights made significant contributions to the emerging American drama, principally because they accurately reflected the ideas and attitudes of their time and place.

Watson focuses primarily on three Charleston dramatists: William Ioor (1780-1850), John Blake White (1781-1859), and William Gilmore Simms (1806-70), whose works he discusses in detail. Numerous other playwrights are treated in more cursory fashion. Ioor, White and Simms all used the drama as a vehicle for the expression of their political/social views. Ioor's plays, Independence and The Battle of Eutaw Springs, express his support for the Republican party; Modern Honor and The Forgers, by White, are reform plays, the former representing the first anti-dueling play in America, and the latter an argument in favor of temperance; White's The Triumph of Liberty defends and praises the military and political exploits of Andrew Jackson; and Simms's Michael Bonham and Norman Maurice - both written after 1825, when Charleston's 'golden age' had passed - were composed in order to support the annexation of Texas, to present the author’s concept of the ideal political leader, and to advocate the continuation of slavery, both in the southern states and in the western territories.

Professor Watson's claim that Charleston's antebellum dramatists were significant influences in the formation of an American dramatic tradition rest upon the topicality of the playwrights’ works rather than upon their intrinsic merit. He confesses that the plays are frequently melodramatic, excessively romantic, and dramatically ineffective. He contends, however, that ‘it is now well accepted by scholars that early American plays possess a historical value not dependent on their literary merit’. True enough. The historical value of such early American plays as Tyler’s The Contrast, Mowatt’s Fashion, and Uncle Tom’s Cabin all exceeded their worth as dramatic literature. But each of these plays was performed frequently, so that each became familiar to American theatergoers and, in time, influenced their tastes and ideas. Ioor’s two plays, however, were performed on only ten occasions (two of them were never produced, and that for only three performances. Nor can it be said that these playwrights were indifferent to production. Simms, for example, spent much of his life trying to persuade Edwin Forrest to produce and act in his plays. Forrest declined, either because he was shortsighted or because he accurately perceived the plays to be unworthy of production. Unfortunately, modern readers who would like to form independent judgements will have little opportunity to do so; the plays discussed by Watson will not be available in most libraries, and when they can be found, it will generally only be in microprint reproduction.

The Charleston theatre produced no professional dramatists. Ioor, White and Simms were distinctly amateur playwrights who made their livings outside the theatre. Taking into account their inability to persuade professionals to produce their plays, and realizing that the literary/
dramatic merit of their plays is questionable, one does find it difficult to accept Professor Watson’s claim of significance for these playwrights. His contention that the drama in Charleston ‘served as a political platform reflecting the predominant view of its audience’ is convincingly documented, but the notion that the plays ‘assisted importantly in the formation of American drama’ remains to this reader a rather questionable assumption.

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