

ISAAC HARBY

and the Early American Theatre

N. BRYLLION FAGIN

American drama in the first half of the nineteenth century has little of aesthetic worth to offer to the modern reader, scholar, or critic. Our professional theatre was young and immature; its roving troupes and local stock companies clung to the cultural centers — New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Richmond, Charleston — for precarious seasons; the staple repertoires consisted of English importations and adaptations of French and German melodramas. The tradition of foreign plays was so strongly established with both managers and the public that American writers either ignored the stage altogether or, as sometimes happened, assumed pseudonyms and passed themselves off as British playwrights.

It is, therefore, not surprising that Isaac Harby, a young American of indubitable talent, should have encountered great difficulty in getting a hearing. He was born in Charleston, S. C., in 1788, received an excellent education, was made an instructor in Charleston College at the age of sixteen, and wrote his first play the following year. It was a comedy, entitled *Alexander Severus*, and he hopefully submitted it to the manager of the local theatre, a Frenchman named Alexandre Placide. It was rejected with contempt and the gratuitous advice that M. Harby try again, but only after he had acquired more "adventures" and a better knowledge of "de Englise."

There is a strong possibility that *Alexander Severus* was derivative, but so were nine-tenths of the plays which cluttered the stages of America at the time. The fashionable plots were generally derived from Italian romances or English plays of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which, in turn, had been derived from Italian novellas. The language, usually arranged in iambic pentameter, echoed that of Shakespeare, Webster, Otway, and the lesser known

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eighteenth-century melodramatists. The first American play to be produced by a professional company, Thomas Godfrey's *The Prince of Parthia*, is full of echoes, both in situation and language, of Marlowe, Shakespeare, Beaumont, Ford, Racine, Dryden, and others. Yet this play, produced in Philadelphia in 1767, was received with respect; the promise of a budding talent was easily recognized and encouraged. Isaac Harby was not so fortunate.

He did not, however, permit himself to become discouraged. A little more than a year after the rejection of his first play, he completed a second: *The Gordian Knot, or Causes and Effects*. This "Play in Five Acts" achieved a longer and more glorious history. Upon its completion in 1807 it was submitted to M. Placide and also to Mr. William Warren of Philadelphia. Both managers at first accepted and later rejected the manuscript. Finally, in 1810, M. Placide's company, at the solicitations of one of its actresses, who had read the script and liked it, produced the play in a garbled form. That same year Harby had it published, after restoring the original version.

Professor Arthur Hobson Quinn, whose *History of the American Drama from the Beginning to the Civil War*, although first published more than thirty years ago, is still the only scholarly history of the subject, believes that "*The Gordian Knot* deserved a better fate." And, indeed, reading it today, one cannot help feeling that its author was more than a promising playwright. To discourage a young man of Harby's poetic sensitivity and dramaturgic adroitness was to deprive our theatre of a considerable talent. For *The Gordian Knot*, while it cannot, of course, be compared with the works of Shakespeare, or even of Otway, is a well-constructed and eloquently expressed vehicle for a stage which was given to absurd heroics and ear-splitting bombast.

Harby found the plot in a popular English novel called *The Abbess*, whose author, William Henry Ireland, had borrowed the story from an Italian novella called *Segreto Maligno*. It is a melodramatic revenge story full of twists and turns and Gothic scenery, but in the dexterous hands of young Harby it somehow becomes humanized and almost believable. It is distinguished not only, as Professor Quinn points out, for the charm of its love scenes, but also for the genial freshness of its characterization and dialogue. Harby was amply justified in submitting his play, in published form, to the judgment of his countrymen, whose patriotism, he believed, should feel concern

“when native productions, even so humble a one as mine, are kept and elbowed from their proper sphere of exhibition.” The cold treatment which he had received from the stage people was dangerous for the culture of his country because, while in his case it had almost withered a rose-bud, it might “hereafter blast a noble tree.”

Professor Quinn makes an important point about *The Gordian Knot*. Its two pairs of lovers, he observes, “are a refreshing departure from the usual lovers of romantic plays of the period, in being almost real.” The feat of creating even “almost” real characters in a plot and a tradition which reek with melodrama is a surprising achievement. Harby was able to accomplish it because he had the wisdom and the artistic impulse to use the Italian story — or Ireland’s adaptation of it (*The Abbess* was published in Baltimore in 1801) — only as a starting point and to depart from it, after the second act, in search of truth rather than mere mystification and the thrill of horror. For him the evil plottings of a demented villain and the bloody actions possible in a baroque period, such as that of the Inquisition, were not in themselves a sufficient spur for writing a drama. Nor did the description of what he called “the local manners of man” appeal to him as the worthy end of playwriting. He preferred, he declared with youthful exuberance, to emulate his adored Shakespeare in picturing man in his general nature. His high ambitions, at eighteen, may not have resulted in the creation of another *Macbeth* or *Othello*, but his *The Gordian Knot* is certainly many cuts above the mediocre product of a dramatic period which wallowed in bloody claptrap and unspeakable fustian.

A brief synopsis of the plot will give some indication of the shoddiness of the material with which Harby worked. Count Marcello, a Florentine nobleman, is smitten with the charms of Madalena, the only daughter of Duke Betrocci. The convent in which she is serving her novitiate is presided over by the Abbess Vittoria, who recognizes in Marcello her long-lost son. Vittoria had been married to a nobleman who had been told a villainous story about her and had thereupon cast her off. She had found refuge in a convent and, in time, rose in the hierarchy of her order. Now she sends the monk Ubaldo to bring Marcello to her. The young count is sworn to secrecy and conducted at midnight into the cloisters, where by accident he meets Madalena and has a few minutes of conversation with her. Ubaldo, who was once Duke Betrocci’s servant, then known as Filippo, but had really been in the pay of

Betrocci's enemy, a Spanish nobleman named Ferdinand di Monti, reports the "assigination" to Betrocci. The old duke then orders that his daughter be taken to his castle in Arezzo, where he will deal with her.

In the meantime two subordinate story threads are developed. Both concern the young knight Alphonso, who has fallen in love with Clara, Duke Betrocci's niece, and who at the same time is melancholy over the apparent lack of affection shown to him by his supposed father, Ferdinand di Monti. Actually, Alphonso is Betrocci's son, who was stolen as a child by Philipppo, now the monk Ubaldo, and given to di Monti to bring up as the future murderer of Betrocci, his real father. The time has finally arrived for Alphonso to perform the deed, but being a God-fearing young man, and in love with his intended victim's niece, Alphonso fumbles the job. The end is a happy one. Father and son are reunited; Marcello and his mother are reunited; Alphonso gets his Clara and Marcello gets his Madalena; virtue, innocence, and gallantry are rewarded, and evil is defeated and punished.

Yet out of these doubtful materials Harby was able to create a play which has genuine tension, moving scenes, and fairly rounded human characters. His handling of situation as revelatory of motivation, both evil and humane, is skilful. His play has considerable wit and humor, and a great deal of word-play. "Pray what is love?" Madelena asks her cousin Clara. The answer is:

Love! 'tis a non-descript, head-ach, heart-ach;
 A painful pleasure and a pleasing pain;
 A something, nothing, that torments, delights us;
 Shot, like a basilisk, on the spell-bound eye,
 It heats the blood, and melts the hearts away,
 In sighing out — heighho!

This may be reminiscent of Beatrice in *Much Ado*, and it also anticipates, in a chaste way, Congreve's Millamant in *The Way of the World*, but it is original enough to be both alive and felicitous. And, in fact, nearly all of Harby's dialogue is cleancut, lively, and smooth.

The truth is that Harby used his sources not only to construct an actable play, in the tradition and coloring of his time, but also to carry ideas which were dear to him: comment on love and hate, on revenge, the shedding of blood, and religion. There can be no doubt

that the following little colloquy between Madalena and the Abbess expresses a view of religion which appealed to Harby:

MADALENA: I pray you, madam, pardon my default
That I have spoken on this sacred morn,
With one who wears no veil.

VITTORIA: Nay, Madalena,
If every breach of our rigid rules
Deserved reproach, I should myself be guilty.
Religion is not harsh: Her ways are mild.
Her hand ne'er shuts us out from social joys
Whatever bigots say.

The promise indicated in *The Gordian Knot* was largely fulfilled less than a decade later when *Alberti* was produced at the Charleston Theatre in 1819. The play was well received by the local press, and Harby was immensely proud when, at its second performance, President James Monroe appeared in the audience. By the time the script was ready for publication some adverse criticism also had been heard, but now Harby, having tasted the joys of approbation, was ready with a confident though politely worded defense.

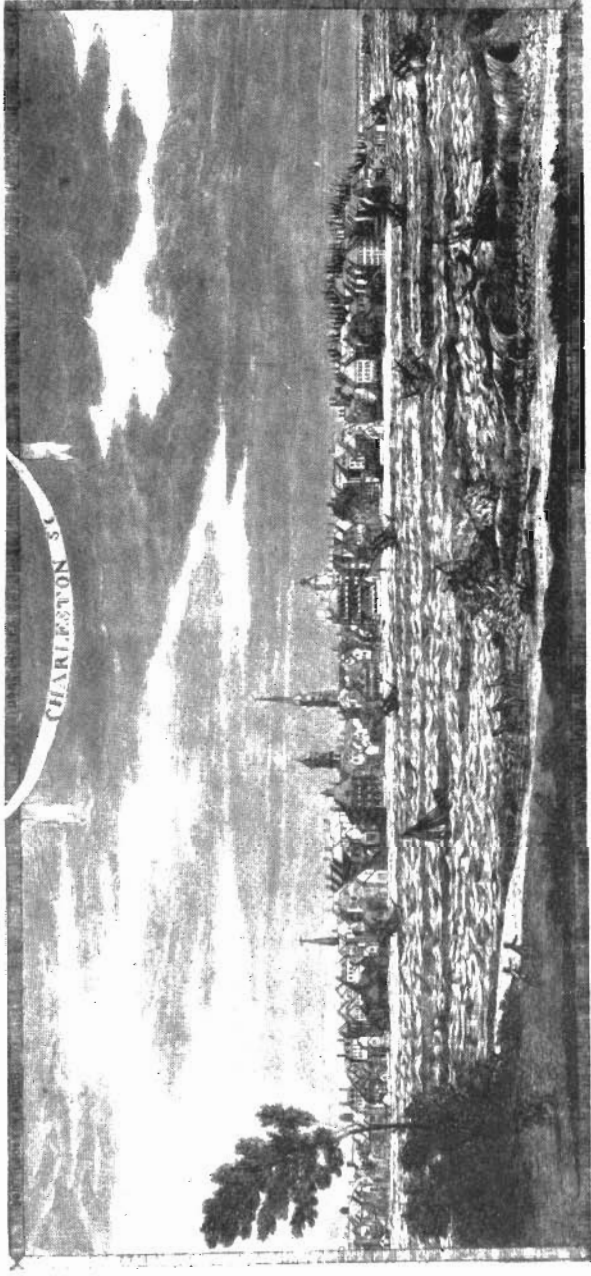
His preface gives the source of his play as Alfieri's tragedy, *The Conspiracy of the Pazzi*, but again, as in the preface to *The Gordian Knot*, he states why and to what extent he departed from his source. Alfieri, in Harby's opinion, had done violence to history in depicting the Pazzi as "the asserters of liberty," whereas actually they had conspired against their country's independence. Harby therefore felt obliged, in the interests of truth, to tell — "to invent" — a different story. Instead of adding another revenge play to a stage cluttered with stories of gory deeds, he preferred to create a drama which elicits "moral feeling from the struggles of natural passion." He admits that he may not have succeeded, but then "who has not found it much easier to *conceive* than to *execute* what is excellent?"

He then proceeds to answer the objections which have been raised against his piece. The first one he cheerfully concedes: *Alberti* has "neither thunder, lightning, assassination, banditti, battles, scenery, nor song to recommend it." His aim, he adds, was higher than that of constructing a melodramatic extravaganza. The second objection which he names is the belief of certain critics that his heroine, Antonia, should have committed suicide when she learns that she can never marry the man she loves. To this Harby replies:

"I am aware that suicide (dramatically speaking) is quite the fashion. But — if I am allowed to know anything concerning beings of my own creation — I can assure the reader . . . that Antonia happened to be brought up religiously and morally; and, however unhappy she might have been, she reflected too correctly to have ever contemplated such an act." In other words, it would have violated her character for her to have even thought of suicide. The third and final objection — that his play is an American production — he accepts as a compliment. "I have even the hardihood," he writes, "openly to acknowledge, nay, be proud of the accident of birth, which has placed me under the protection of laws that I revere, and in the bosom of a country that I love."

It is necessary, of course, to see this play, Harby's maturest dramatic composition, in the context of the theatrical period in which it was created and produced. It represents, for the time, a great advance over the romantic costume contrivances which American dramatists were offering the public. And it is in this context that Professor Quinn hails it as "easily one of the best of its kind." Its blank verse, he notes, "is flexible and interesting, and the construction is more unified than in *The Gordian Knot*. It seems a pity," he concludes, "that Harby should have died on December 14, 1828, shortly after he went to New York, for he is one of the writers of the time whose work has the touch of inspiration." In this Professor Quinn echoes the comment of William Dunlap, the first historian of the American theatre, who wrote, in 1832, that "The author of this tragedy (*Alberti*) died in New York much regretted." Dunlap was in error in calling *Alberti* a tragedy, since it ends happily. Oscar Wegelin was more sound, technically, when, in his list of *Early American Plays, 1714-1830*, compiled for the Dunlap Society in 1900, he evaded the problem by describing *Alberti* as "A Play."

The more modern term of "romantic drama" perhaps best classifies *Alberti*, and it is, as such, still stageworthy and interesting. Harby's ideas do not "date"; his language, for poetic drama, is neither obsolete nor extravagant; and the plot itself, while definitely colored by an earlier tradition, is neither absurd — as that of *The Gordian Knot* might be if revived today — nor fantastic. In fact, it is surprising that dramatic groups, especially Jewish — one of whose aims is, or should be, the preservation of the Jewish contribution to drama — have thus far overlooked this play.



Courtesy, New York Public Library

CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA — 1810



Harper's Weekly, August 20, 1870

BENJAMIN NATHAN

One of New York City's Leading Jewish Laymen in the Mid-Nineteenth Century

L. C. Moïse, in his excellent biographical monograph on Harby, gives a summary of the plot which is so economical that it seems best to quote it here:

The scene is laid in Florence in the year 1480. Alberti, the general, is bitterly hated by his brother Ridolpho. Ippolito, the son of Alberti, is much in love with Antonia, Ridolpho's daughter. Alberti commands his son to cease his attentions, and, after a long delay, causing the lovers much anxiety, he explains that when, long ago, he had returned from the capture and imprisonment of war, Ridolpho had lost his first wife and had married his (Alberti's) young wife. The brothers fought it out and Alberti was wounded and left for dead. But recovering, he snatched away the little boy and fled the country. This made the lovers half-brother and sister. But just when the revelation is made to Antonia, the old friar of the house appears and proves that Ippolito is really the son of Alberti. When the identities are made manifest, the play ends with forgiveness and reconciliation.

The one correction which it is necessary to make in this summary is that when the play begins Alberti is not "bitterly hated" by his brother Ridolpho. On the contrary, Ridolpho suffers the pangs of conscience and would gladly accept forgiveness. This error on the part of Mr. Moïse was carried over probably from his source, an unpublished thesis by Robert Duncan Bass of the University of South Carolina.

Alberti, even more than *The Gordian Knot*, makes it clear that Harby did not write plays merely to provide vehicles for actors or theatrical entertainment for the public. He respected the stage as capable of transmitting moral and philosophical ideas. Being a good playwright, he avoided burdening his play with didacticism, but his characters were conceived as human beings torn by the tensions of good and evil, capable of growth and development, and of arriving at moral responsibility. General Alberti is dominated by a passion for revenge, but after a lifetime of seeing war and bloodshed, conspiracy and rebellion and betrayal, he rises to the nobility of returning good for the evil done to him. He resolves the disorder of his world — which is but a reflection of the disorder in his mind — and achieves harmony and tranquillity. The note of optimism with which the play ends is neither a contrived happy ending with which to bring down the curtain nor a reflection of Harby's starry-eyed idealism. Alberti's final speech is the logical poetic overflow of a strong and morally courageous man who celebrates his greatest victory — that over himself:

Bless thee, my children.

My brother — friends — my country too at peace —
 And Florence independent still! Why then
 Let monarchs wage their wars — truces be made,
 And arms break down the policies of peace; —
 Let empires rise and set, as do those stars
 That glitter in the milky way awhile,
 And then are lost in dark oblivion! —
 The present day is ours — the storm is past,
 In safety we have buffeted the billows,
 And trust we've reach'd the harbour of good welcome,
 Where we may moor securely.

The plays which I have discussed do not constitute all of Isaac Harby's contribution to American drama. His dramatic criticism must be considered as an equally important part of his total contribution. Just why he stopped writing plays — or whether he really did stop — it is impossible to say with any measure of positiveness. At any rate, no more plays from his pen were ever produced. It is certain that the economic factor was a powerful reason for not writing plays. Mordecai M. Noah published a play, *She Would Be a Soldier*, in 1819, the same year in which Harby's *Alberti* was produced, and used the occasion to voice the complaint, in a preface to the play, that American playwrights, even popular ones, such as William Dunlap and James N. Barker, had derived little profit from their works. "And even Harby of Charleston," he added, "whose talents are of the highest order, and who is a bold and chaste poet, gained but little profit from his labors."

Even Harby of Charleston had to eat, and so did his family. His father, Solomon Harby, died when Isaac was still a boy, and all he left him with which to support his mother and her other children was, as the son in later life remarked, "a decent education and sufficient honour and virtue to bar my preferment in this world." Isaac married, at the age of twenty-two, Rachel Mordecai of Savannah; at the time he derived his livelihood from teaching, first at Edisto Island and later in Charleston. He continued to teach all his life, even after his wife died, in 1827, and he moved to New York, where he established a school in his home. His writing and editing had to be an avocation. In Charleston, he edited *The Quiver*, *The Southern Patriot*, and the *City Gazette*; in New York, he contributed to the *Evening Post*.

The most considerable essay which he published in the *Post* was a "Defense of the Drama." It was occasioned by the opening of the Bowery Theatre. Harby had been in New York less than three months when he was honored by an appointment to a committee which was to select the poetical addresses to be delivered at the opening of the new theatre. This appointment indicates the respect which his reputation commanded. Being on the committee, he could not, of course, submit an address, but the occasion stimulated him to the writing of an essay on the cultural values of the theatre as a social institution. The editors of the *Post* received his contribution with enthusiasm and printed it with prefatory remarks in which they praised it highly.

It is indeed a learned and masterly discussion of what the theatre has to offer to a civilized community. He does not — either like a Puritan or like a stuffy highbrow — undervalue mere amusement, but rather finds it "of no inconsiderable consequence." He is, however, aware that the theatre is more than "the source of a people's rational entertainment." It is "the sphere where The Poet lives and enacts his wonders." Like the masters of Greek tragedy and Roman comedy, he looks upon a play on the stage as a spectacle of life, "as it is, and was, and ever shall be." He then proceeds to cite the works of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes, Terence, and Plautus and their influence on the civilizations which they reflected. The stage, he points out, is "a moral lever"; the function of the drama is and always has been to bring to man poetry, life, beauty, and "an understanding heart." His exemplars of great modern dramatic poets are Racine, Corneille, Molière, and, of course, Shakespeare.

He strikes a contemporary note — contemporary for our time — when he turns to the possible effect of drama on the young. "If the dissipations of a city," he asks, "cannot be restrained and broken up in every channel — is it not well to *direct* the torrent which we cannot oppose?" Viewing the world and human nature realistically, he urges men blinded by overfastidious religious scruples to reflect "that our feelings and propensities and passions will exist, and that by turning them into an intellectual course decorated with attractions we *win* what we cannot command, and metamorphose the brute sensualist into a reasoning and polished member of society Let the temples of the dramatic muse," he pleads, "become not only the rendezvous of fashion, and of taste, but let them redeem our youth

from the dull excitement of the tavern, the poisonous contact of the gaming table."

It may be urged that Harby's defense of the drama appears to have been more idealistic than realistic. Did he not see that the Shakespeares happen but rarely in any age and that the dramatic fare on which the stage of his time fed was, for the most part, cheap and far from nourishing? The prefaces to his plays and the reviews which he wrote of plays by other hands give us the answer. Harby knew all the shortcomings of the drama that was to be seen on the stages of Charleston and New York. But he knew also that better plays could be and were written and, occasionally, got produced. He had a keen sense of literary and moral values, and he spoke out as a champion of these values at every opportunity. And is not speaking up in behalf of what a man believes to be right a way of holding on to realities?

Professor Quinn, with his usual caution, says that Harby was a critic of "some ability." Oscar Wegelin, however, claims that Harby was "the finest critic of his time in America." Neither estimate seems to be true. Harby was a critic of more than "some" ability, but he lacked the hardness of a Poe to use the rapier or the sledgehammer — both of which are useful and necessary instruments in an age when the temple of the dramatic muse harbors a great many mountebanks. His mind was first rate, his taste excellent, and his knowledge of his craft comprehensive, but his temperament was gentle. Thus after criticizing a play which deserved demolition, we find him apologizing. "I have stated my objections," he writes, "pointing out what I conceived an excellence, and particularizing what I esteemed a fault (why and wherefore), with perhaps more candour than politeness." He hopes that the author will "prefer one just remark that may correct an error to the indiscriminate praise of a thousand."

He loved great drama and great acting. But he was not blind to the slips of Shakespeare or Edmund Kean. Shylock, it seemed to him, was an implausible character. No Israelite of Venice, a state notorious for its harsh laws and prejudices, would risk his life by demanding, knife in hand, a pound of flesh from one of its powerful citizens. Nor was the extrusion of Gloucester's eyes and the strangling of Cordelia in *King Lear* the work of a great playwright. Shakespeare, Harby concluded, "suffered his mighty mind to be swayed by the passions and false taste of an age he was destined to

instruct and immortalize." Similarly, Kean, the greatest actor of the time, was, in parts of *Othello*, "sketchy, hurried, and ineffective."

Harby's essay on *Criticism* shows that he was essentially Aristotelian. It is the duty of the critic, he believed, "to avoid, as much as possible, all human passions, and their dominion to any degree; and to apply the powers of intellect and the sentiments of justice to the analysis and sensation of outward objects." He was grateful to Aristotle for formulating the best canons of criticism, but he evidently understood that these canons were based on the practice of the ancient Greek dramatists and were not a prescription for later writers, for nowhere in Harby's criticism is there any insistence on the slavish observance of the unities. He appreciated greatness wherever he found it, whether in the neo-classicists, who generally observed the dramatic unities, or in Shakespeare, who ignored them.

In addition to his writings on the theatre, the drama, and literature in general, Harby expressed himself also on numerous other subjects, such as sociology, philosophy, politics, and religion. On the last subject, his "Discourse, delivered in Charleston, South Carolina, on the twenty-first of November, 1825, before the Reformed Society of Israelites, for promoting true Principles of Judaism according to its Purity and Spirit, on their first Anniversary" (*The North American Review*, July, 1826) is still a living document. While I have made no attempt to concern myself with Harby's writings on non-dramatic subjects, I feel that it is important to note that all his literary labors are characterized by an earnest endeavor to be just, honest, and enlightening. His journalistic style was clear and graceful, although perhaps somewhat too learned for the average newspaper reader. His knowledge of history, the classics, art, music, and what was then known of the natural sciences provided him with allusions which only the exceptionally educated reader could find meaningful. It is significant that, when he died, the *New York Mirror*, in paying tribute to him, stressed his erudition no less than his literary gifts. "The death of this accomplished scholar and able writer," it said, "has awakened great and merited regret in the circle of his friends and admirers. Possessing vast acquirements in classical learning, endowed with a chaste and refined sensibility and gifted with lively and active imagination, he was highly successful in his literary pursuits." His remarkable combination of knowledge, character, imagination, and literary skill certainly made him one of the best of America's early dramatists and critics.