



The Fortune-Teller

Victor Sejour, Norman R. Shapiro

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Before he was twenty years old, Louisiana-born Victor Sjour expatriated himself to Paris, where his acclaimed dramas would appear alongside those of Alexandre Dumas and Victor Hugo. His mother a free woman of color, his father of Haitian descent, Sjour grew up a free Creole of color in antebellum New Orleans, but was deeply affected by the alienation and discrimination he encountered as a person of mixed descent. Sjour's inventive transposition of the discrimination of mid-nineteenth-century America to other historical incidents of racial persecution was a device in his fiction and drama, creating a provocative and political metaphor for those whose lives blur the lines of racial and religious identity. Now, for the first time, two of Sjour's plays, "The Jew of Seville" and "The Fortune-Teller", have been translated from the French for contemporary audiences. "The Fortune-Teller" was first performed in French in 1859, just one year after six-year-old Edgardo Mortara was removed from his Jewish home by the Bologna inquisitor after being baptized by a maid. The inquisitor, supported by Pope Pious IX, vowed not to return the boy until his parents converted to Catholicism. In Sejour's touching rendering of the Mortara case, the infant girl Nomi is taken from her Jewish family after being baptized by a wet nurse. Seventeen years later, Nomi's widowed and wealthy mother Gema masquerades as a poor fortune-teller in search of Nomi, who, she suspects, is living with the Catholic Lomellini family, under the name Paola. In exchange for money to pay her husband's ransom, Bianca Lomellini reveals to Gema that Paola is indeed the long-lost Nomi. Neither Jew nor Christian, torn between mothers, names, and homes, the young woman grapples with an anomalous identity, testing the bonds of both nature and nurture. With a stirring translation by Norman R. Shapiro and a thoroughly engaging introduction by M. Lynn Weiss, "The Fortune-Teller" is an important and provocative addition to the non-English writings of American-born authors, a historical drama that highlights the discrimination not only of Sjour's time, but of ours as well.

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