

## Mosher on Mortara (2015)

Mortara, Elèna. *Writing for Justice: Victor Séjour, the Kidnapping of Edgardo Mortara, and the Age of Transatlantic Emancipations*. Dartmouth College Press, 2015, pp. 330, ISBN 978-1-61168-790-3

Sarah E. Mosher, University of North Dakota

In this seamless and exceptionally original study, Elèna Mortara examines the life and work of the Louisiana-born Creole American playwright Victor Séjour (1817–74) alongside the kidnapping case of Edgardo Mortara (1851–1940). Written in French, Séjour’s play *La Tireuse de cartes* (1859) was inspired by the story of a six-year old Italian Jewish boy who was “legally” kidnapped from his home in 1858 in Bologna, Italy by the guards of Pope Pius IX. While Victor Séjour and his many publications are still relatively unknown to most readers of the French and American literary canons, the kidnapping of Edgardo Mortara created an international scandal that, at the time, was widely followed by the public and covered by the press on both sides of the Atlantic. By exploring the unlikely intersection of the life of Edgardo Mortara and the literary career of Victor Séjour, *Writing for Justice* brings to light the themes of social justice, personal and collective freedom, plural identities, and nineteenth-century transatlantic cultural exchanges. At the same time, the text creates a cross-cultural space for dialogues on topics that implicate France, Italy, and the United States.

Part one, “A Creole American Writer in Paris,” consists of three chapters that detail Séjour’s early life in Louisiana, his move to France, and his success as an expatriate playwright in Paris. Although Séjour is credited as the first black American writer to publish a fictional narrative, he has generally not been included in the canon of American literature. Born in New Orleans to a free woman of color and a mulatto father with familial ties to Haiti, Séjour is described as both a francophone and a free Creole of color. In 1836, Séjour moved to Paris to continue his studies and to pursue a literary career that included poetry, fiction, and theatre. Séjour frequented the Parisian literary circles and his twenty-two plays were well attended. In 1860, he was awarded the French Legion of Honor for the body of his literary works. Despite these accomplishments, Séjour’s works are still unknown to most American readers. This is largely due to his status as an expatriate writer who wrote and published his works in French rather than in English.

In part two, “In the Age of Emancipations: The Mortara Case and a Writer’s Conscience,” chapters four to fifteen explore the Mortara kidnapping and Victor Séjour’s adaptation of the scandal into the play entitled *La Tireuse de cartes*. This section also situates Séjour’s works within the larger context of nineteenth-century literary production on both sides of the Atlantic. While the scandal inspired the writing and publication of many literary and nonliterary texts, *La Tireuse de cartes* represents the first play to address the circumstances surrounding the child’s removal from his parents. The laws in Italy during this time period made it illegal for any Catholic child to live in a non-Catholic home. Thus, when the local Inquisitor learned that Edgardo had been secretly baptized by one of the family’s servants at the age of two, the child was forcibly and legally removed from his family home and sent to live in Rome in the House of Catechumens where he would receive a Catholic education.

As an expatriate with plural identities, Séjour was drawn to and likely identified with the lack of religious freedom in the Papal States that led the child to be caught in a conflict between two religions. Thus, in creating a work of art about the young boy’s kidnapping, a work that advocated for the child’s return, Elèna Mortara argues that Victor Séjour served, at least metaphorically, as a social justice advocate for all members of persecuted minority groups. Although inspired by the Mortara kidnapping, Séjour’s five-act problem play does not faithfully follow all the events of the real case. Rather, the play takes place in the towns of Bisagno and Genoa, Italy, in 1728 and the kidnapped child in *La Tireuse de cartes* is female. In addition, it is the mother rather than the father who led the cause to have the child returned in Séjour’s work. By changing the gender of both the child and the main parent-advocate, Séjour hoped his play would move the spectators to lend their support to the real Mortara family since female protagonists were often viewed by the public as more relatable and sympathetic.

Readers cannot help but notice that the author of *Writing for Justice* shares the same last name as the kidnapped child. Thus, in chapter sixteen, “Family Recollections: A Personal Note,” Mortara reveals that Edgardo was her paternal great-grandmother’s younger brother. The author’s great-grandmother was eleven years old when she saw the Pope’s guards kidnap her younger brother from the family home. Mortara’s revelation of this personal context in the book’s final chapter engages the reader in a unique, intimate, and most unexpected manner, uncommon in academic publications. When the author illuminates her familial relationship to the kidnapped child, the reader is reminded of the often surprising interconnectedness of individual lives.

To accompany the original subject matter, the text features abundant complementary images and illustrations. Part three of the text consists of the final chapter, followed by more than seventy-five pages of chapter notes, an appendix, and an extensive

bibliography. These materials demonstrate the depth and sophistication of Mortara's research and further enhance the scope and quality of this publication. This well-researched and substantially interdisciplinary work would serve scholars whose area of research considers transatlantic history, nineteenth-century American literature, theater, social justice, cross-cultural exchanges, the Inquisition, and/or Jewish Studies. I recommend this book to scholars and students who wish to expand their knowledge of one or more of these rich topics.

**Volume:** 46.3-4

**Year:**

- 2018