

George Henry Miles: Poet-Playwright in the Greek Tradition

by Wayne E. Hamilton, Assistant Professor of Theatre

The roots of Western theatre lie in Ancient Greece. The Athenian playwrights were called poets because of the form the plays took and the respect in which they were held by the people of Athens. The best of these playwrights were awarded prizes for the plays they offered to the Greek god Dionysus. Mount Saint Mary's College had its own poet-playwright, George Henry Miles, on the faculty from 1859 to 1866. Perhaps it was Miles' excellence as a poet which has overshadowed his contributions as a playwright. Nevertheless, the information herein is offered to illuminate a little-known side of Miles' talent.

Miles began his first tragedy at age 20 in 1844. This was *Michael di Lando, Gondolier of Florence*, which was completed early in 1847 and sent to the great American tragedian Edwin Forrest. Forrest kept the manuscript for nearly a year. When he returned it, Forrest suggested that Miles compete for the \$1000 prize he was offering for the best five-act tragedy. Miles promptly produced *Mohammed, the Arabian Prophet* and sent the manuscript to Forrest. In December of 1848, Miles received the following letter from Forrest:

Dear Sir—I have just finished reading the large number of Mss. [nearly 100] with which my countrymen have favored me in consequence of certain proposals made by me in June, 1847. Among all the plays which have been presented to me I do not find one that I could venture to put upon the stage; but as your tragedy of Mohammed has been considered superior to all the others as a dramatic poem I herein enclose you a cheque for the sum of one thousand dollars. . . .

Forrest's assessment was correct. *Mohammed*, published in 1850, was frequently performed but was not a theatrical success.

Miles' blank verse tragedy *De Soto* was completed in 1851 and produced in 1852 by another fine tragedian, James E. Murdock. *De Soto* met with a great deal of success for many years. His comedy, *Blight and Bloom* (1854) was produced by the English actress Laura Keane and had a long run in New York and other cities. By this time, Miles had met and become an intimate friend of John T. Ford, owner of theatres in Washington and Baltimore. It was at Ford's in Baltimore that J.W. Wallack played the leading role in another Miles play, *Señor Valiente*. In 1859 Miles wrote *Mary's Birthday* for Ford, which had a successful run in Boston. *The Seven Sisters*

was a play which symbolized the first seven states to secede from the Union. It was performed in the winters of 1861 and 1862 in New York.

While teaching at Mount St. Mary's, Miles was commissioned by Edwin Forrest to write a tragedy on Oliver Cromwell. Although Forrest retired before the play was finished, J.T. Ford intended to produce *Cromwell* with E.L. Davenport in the title role. Unfortunately, Davenport died while the play was in rehearsal and it remains to this day unperformed. Another unperformed five-act tragedy, *Afraja the Sorcerer*, was written during the Civil War. Miles wrote several other unsuccessful plays while teaching at the Mount, including *The Parish Clerk*, *Emily Chester*, *Love and Honor*, *The Old Curiosity Shop* (from Dickens) and another five-act tragedy, *Thiodolf the Icelandic*.

After his retirement, Miles continued to write plays for John Ford. In 1868 and 69 he wrote *Abou Hassan the Wag*, a musical burlesque from the Arabian Nights, *The Maid of Mayence*, a four-act play which had a long Boston run, a comedy called *Behind the Scenes, or The Girl of the Period* and his last play, a farce, *The Picture of Innocence*. In 1870 his famous essay on Hamlet was published in book form, but Miles died of Bright's disease before completing similar essays on *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, *Othello* and *Henry IV*.

The unfortunate part of this knowledge about George Henry Miles and his success as a playwright is that no evidence can be found to indicate that any of his plays were produced on campus. Nor is there any mention of such productions in correspondence to or from Miles. We know that plays were being performed on campus while Miles was on the faculty, but we don't know why his plays weren't acted here. Perhaps the students weren't interested, or perhaps Miles forbid it; nevertheless, we can only mourn for this missing piece of our history.



George Henry Miles

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