GEORGE HENRY BOKER'S FRANCESCA DA RAMINI, A JUSTIFICATION FOR THE LITERARY HISTORIAN

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George Henry Boker (1823-1890) of Philadelphia stands among an impressive list of American men of letters who, in the nineteenth century, served their country in various political capacities. His political activities were more intense, more widely diversified than his fellows, and, indeed, his claim to fame might as well be political as literary. In Philadelphia, he was one of the first Democrats to recognize Lincoln's great strength, joining the newly formed Republican party and becoming "one of the most prominent in its councils." He helped organize and became secretary of the Union League, uncompromising as a center for the preservation of the Union during the Civil War. Following his work during the war with the Sanitary Commission, he served as Minister to Turkey from 1871 to 1875, and as Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary to Russia from 1875 to 1878. Unlike his fellows, Boker turned to politics only after years of disillusion with himself as a man of letters. Despite twelve plays, a number of verse satires, one on General McClellan, a series of war sonnets, various other poems and political tracts, among them The Will of the People (1864), and calling for Lincoln's reelection, Boker suffered endless frustration in his attempt to become a successful, self-supporting playwright.

Within the text of Boker's greatest play, Francesca da Rimini (1855), a number of statements lie buried which reveal the author's disappointment with his family for insisting that he pursue a way of life in keeping with his station in society and which indicate his anger toward a local (Philadelphia) and national

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frame of mind, so bent upon materialism that it is blind to the importance of the creative arts in society. By pointing up Boker's personal frustrations, this paper hopes to substantiate once again the validity of the historical approach to literary criticism.

Boker was a sensitive, creative artist born into a family with many commercial interests. His father had been a commission agent in boots and bonnets. In 1842, he sold out to become manager of the Girard Bank of Philadelphia, and he expected his son to follow in his footsteps:

This Philadelphia in which Boker was now finding his place was very different from the city of his birth. . . . Already, one of the marks of the socially eligible was the dollar mark, and the meanings of price and value were becoming confused in the minds of many people. . . . In such an environment, Boker found his inclination to poetry very little encouraged. His father and his older friends advised a "practical" career in banking or law, for what was practical was respectable. This point of view harassed his entire life.¹

Boker's conflicts with his family and the society in which he lived prodded him to escape into his art and to other worlds and times for the themes and titles of his plays, Anne Boleyn, Lenora de Guzman, Francesca da Rimini; moreover, his attempts to break away explain to a degree why the factual matters of American contemporary life emerge from beneath the surface of his best play. "Not until Boker had satisfied his father's desire for a definite arrangement by agreeing to undertake the study of law, an evil still somewhat in the future, and one that might be prevented by some unforeseen chance," could he find the peace of mind to pursue his desire to write.²

Francesca da Rimini (written in 1853) was acclaimed in glowing superlatives during the decade 1917-1927.³ The play was viewed

¹ Bradley, George Henry Boker, pp. 36-39.
² Ibid., p. 31.
³ Arthur Hobson Quinn, "George Henry Boker, Playwright and Patriot," Scribner's Magazine, LXXIII (1923), 706: "[Francesca is] the greatest play that was written in English during the first three quarters of the nineteenth century." Bradley, George Henry Boker, pp. 132, 160: "The greatest American romantic tragedy, and one of the greatest poetical tragedies in the language [Francesca] remains one . . . of the greatest American dramas." Bradley in Literary History of the United States, ed., Robert E. Spiller et al. (New York, 1959), p. 1003: "With this play, romantic tragedy in
in the light of what it appears to be, a version of a historical event which has long been utilized as a theme for drama and opera: the illicit love shared by Paolo and his brother's wife, Francesca, their ultimate discovery by the brother, Lanciotto, and their murder by his hand. For all purposes, Boker's play does place us, as Quinn has explained, "in the midst of Italians of the Thirteenth century, and yet their joy and sorrow appeal across the centuries to us today."6 Edward Sculley Bradley has pointed out, however, that in America

The earlier heroic play, as befitted the literature of a country recently born of a democratic revolution, had shown a marked preference for the theme of popular revolt against the oppression of a ruling class or a foreign despot. From Dunlap to Bird it mattered little whether the protagonist were an American patriot, Peruvian Indian, Greek slave, or British commoner, so long as he struck for freedom. Boker was the first American playwright to enlarge this concept and to deal with the tragedy of the great individual at desperate odds with society, with his own nature, or with malign destiny. . . . Boker was in revolt against his own environment.7

Verification of Bradley's commentary on pre-Civil War American drama and on Boker can be found in Boker's play, Francesca da Rimini, but it seems that neither Bradley, nor any other critic, has recognized the intrusions of nineteenth-century Americanisms which Boker included in Acts I and III. They are literary, political, social, and scientific in character and have nothing to do with the ongoing movement of the play. I plan to discuss first the Americanisms in the play; then, to propose that their being there is a manifestation of Boker's revolt against his environment. The basic story is:

The city states of Rimini and Ravenna have feuded, and in America achieved the dignity of art." Joseph Wood Krutch, "George Henry Boker," Sewanee Review, XXV (1917), 463: "We have a play which is not an idyll of guilty love, but the tragedy of a lonely soul which stirs for a moment in ecstasy when it believes itself loved, only to sink into a deeper despair when it realizes itself betrayed." John Calvin Metcalf, "An Old Romanic Triangle," ibid., XXIX (1921), 58: In comparing Boker's play with two others of the same title, Metcalf declares that "each [author] has . . . interpreted it in harmony with his own temperament. . . . The American's [being] the most sanely human."8


Bradley, L'HUS, p. 100.1
the most recent battle, Lanciotto, son of Malatesta, Lord of Rimini, has completely routed the enemy. Settlement of indemnity for the victory is passed over in the proposal of marriage between Lanciotto and Francesca, daughter of Guido da Polenta, Lord of Ravenna, a proposal made by the parents without consulting the bride and groom to be. Lanciotto, a superb soldier and deformed cripple, longs for a wife but is ashamed and self-conscious of his physical appearance. Upon hearing of the proposed marriage to Francesca, he sends his younger brother, the physically perfect and handsome Paolo, to woo Francesca. She, not informed of Paolo’s role as messenger for Lanciotto, falls in love with Paolo on sight; he with her. After learning the truth and despite terrible misgivings, she marries Lanciotto, only to find herself unable to escape from her great love for Paolo. Their love is revealed by Pepe, Rimini’s court jester. Lanciotto murders Paolo and Francesca and takes his own life. Into this romantic tragedy of thirteenth-century Italy, Boker interjected the following concepts which were popular among the intellectuals of his day: appearance and reality, equality, “modern science,” contemporary political matters.

Appearance and reality as a philosophic principle and a literary theme is a timeless universal, Poe, Hawthorne and Melville, all contemporaries of Boker, were engrossed with it, for it leads to the type of introspection which all three and Boker were concerned with. It is too well known to require further documentation, but Boker’s spelling out in so many words his interest in seeming and being provides the first evidence of his awareness of and use of concurrent American literary practice. Lanciotto is speaking and attempting to allay his fears concerning the coming marriage:

Lanciotto:

Array this lump—
Paolo, hark! There are some human thoughts
Best left imprisoned in the aching heart,
Lest the freed malefactors should dispread
Infamous ruin with their liberty.
There’s not a man—fairest of ye all—
Who is not fouler than he seems. This life
Is one unending struggle to conceal
Our baseness from our fellows.8

The final sentence bears out Bradley’s assertion that Boker was writing with a view to describing the individual in conflict with society, whereas lines two to five suggest Boker’s personal problems.

The second nineteenth-century Americanism which Boker discusses is that of égalité, the worth of the individual and the American dream. James Truslow Adams described it as “that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability, or achievement . . . a dream of a social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position.” Although the belief stems from the beginnings of the United States, it was not until Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman, all contemporaries of Boker, set the idea into lecture, essay, and poetry that it became a part of our literary heritage. Pepe, the court jester, whom Lanciotto heralds as a philosopher, speaks:

Pepe: I’d have no families, no Malatesti,
    Strutting about the land, with pedigrees
    And claims bequeathed them by their ancestors;
    No fellows vapouring of their royal blood;
    No one to seize a whole inheritance,
    And rob the other children of the earth.

    Mere sons of women—nothing more nor less—
    All base-born, and all equal. There, my lord,
    There is a simple commonwealth for you!
    In which aspiring merit takes the lead,
    And birth goes begging.10

Here, Boker has attacked his family by indirection. Using the first six lines to echo the American dream, he deftly, in the final five lines, alludes to the type of control which his parents hold over him by refusing him the opportunity to exercise his “aspiring merit.”

Nor is Pepe finished outlining the American dream. From 1840 to 1860, the United States was bent on internal and external

10 Quinn, Representative American Plays, p. 340.
expansion. At the time of Baker's writing of *Francesca*, Wisconsin, last of the States on this side of the Mississippi, gained statehood in 1848. Texas followed in 1845, California in 1850, the Gadsden Purchase in 1853, thereby rounding out our present southwestern border. These are but a few of the territories which came to us by means of "a natural and inevitable process . . . a process well hit off by the phrase 'manifest destiny.'" We became enamoured with the idea of expansion, casting eyes as well on Mexico and Canada; "there had been wild talk in 1848 of annexing Ireland and Sicily." Finally, in 1854, the year between Baker's writing the play and its performance in 1855, our expansionist policy climbed to the ridiculous. In the Ostend Manifesto, we offered to buy Cuba from Spain, telling the world that Spain was obligated to sell, for with the money she might "become a centre of attraction for the travelling world" and "her vineyards would bring forth a vastly increased quantity of choice wines. Should she . . . refuse . . . we shall be justified in wresting it from Spain." We were sophomores, convinced that we had the solutions for all of mankind's problems. "France adopted a constitution which was a centralized edition of that of the United States. Republicanism and democracy appeared to be sweeping the world. A 'Young America' movement sprang up within the Democratic party, a movement devoted at first to creating ideals of service and duty, then to enlisting young America's aid for democratic movements beyond the seas. . . ." Pepe, like America, seeks proselytes for his commonwealth:

Pepe: Noise it about the earth, and let it stir  
The sluggish spirits of the multitudes.

It is a great seed dropped, I promise you,  
And it must sprout. Thought never wholly dies;

Spread our new doctrine, like a general plague:  
Talk of man's progress and development,  
Wrongs of society, the march of mind,

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Ibid., p. 610.
I am a politician,
A wrongs-of-man man.

I have an itching to reform the world.

Heaven picked me out to teach my fellow-men.¹⁴

Yet another manifestation of Boker's awareness of contemporary matters is found in Lanciotto's remarks about "science." The nineteenth century was fraught with pseudo-science and medical cure-alls. It was the beginning of that period of time which believed that science was about to cure all of man's ills. Even though Oliver Wendell Holmes in his book Homeopathy and Kindred Delusions (1842) had discredited Homeopathy, Emerson and Bryant still believed in it,¹⁵ and it was at the time of Boker's writing of Francesca that Walt Whitman found justification for himself in the readings of a phrenologist who examined the bumps on his head. Lanciotto has been listening to Pepe's proposal for a commonwealth and for a need to "noise it about the earth." His reply explains itself:

Lanciotto: Mechanic means advance;
Nature bows down to Science' haughty tread,
And turns the wheel of smutty artifice;
New governments arise, dilate, decay,
And foster creeds and churches to their tastes:
At each advance, we cry, "Behold, the end!"
Till some wonder breaks upon the age.¹⁶

Finally, one short remark of Lanciotto's seems to reflect contemporary political thought on Hungary. We might recall that in March of 1848, the Hungarian Republic was established when the Hungarians revolted against the Austrians. (See Pepe's speech, footnote 14 above.) The leader was Louis Kossuth. "When the news came that Hungary had fallen, [It collapsed in 1849 when invaded by Austrian, Slavic, and Russian troops] the legislatures of New York, Ohio, and Indiana called for action. In Congress most of the western senators voted for a resolution offered by

¹¹ Quinn, Representative American Plays, pp. 340, 341.
¹⁴ Quinn, Representative American Plays, p. 341.
Lewis Cass, to suspend diplomatic relations with Austria. . . .

Even Webster indulged popular sentiment by insulting the House of Hapsburg in a diplomatic note. Louis Kossuth, brought to New York as guest of the nation in 1851, was given an overwhelming ovation; and a Harvard professor who exposed Hungarian humbug was voted out of office by state senators."

Kossuth came to Philadelphia on December 26, 1851. According to Hans Habe, Kossuth, while in America, made a speech calling for war: "With this speech he definitely violated the laws of hospitality. Slaveholders, isolationists, Irishmen, and Catholics all combined against the man who was a master of the 'gentle art of making enemies.'" The Hungarian revolution and its ultimate defeat, the appearance of Kossuth in America, and his final descent into discredit occupied the minds of Americans, politicians and citizenry. Boker mentions the matter in the play:

Lanciotto: We can understand
All business but our own, and thrust advice
In every gaping cranny of the world;
While habit shapes us to our own dull work,
And reason nods above his proper task.
Just so philosophy would rectify
All things abroad, and be a jade at home.
Pepe, what think you of the Emperor's aim
Towards Hungary?

Pepe: A most unwise design;

Because the Emperor has more need of wisdom
Than the most barren fool of wit."

Here again, Boker reflects his feelings about parental and social restrictions. His strictures on the intolerance of the American viewpoint and on the dullness of conformity parallel his difficulties with his family.

With the exception of appearance and reality which appears in Act I during a discussion between Lanciotto and Paolo, the matters concerned with politics, society, and science are found


within one scene at the opening of Act III and take place between Lanciotto and Pepe. At no other time in the play does Boker veer in the slightest from the inexorable rush to the ultimate tragedy. The question is: Why? They are not needed to carry the plot to its conclusion. The play would not suffer in the slightest were they absent. To suggest that the inclusions represent an effort at attracting contemporary interest hardly seems worth offering. In so short a space and in a play not political, but romantic and tragic in nature, they would be an incongruity not in keeping with a play taking place in the thirteenth century nor with a playwright interested in capturing the style and spirit of Elizabethan drama. Two conjectures seem worthy of consideration: one based upon the relationship of Pepe to Lanciotto, that of the uninhibited artist refusing to be intimidated by the existing order; a second, upon Pepe as jester, during the middle ages a deranged person who had special insight, who was untouchable because of his derangement, who was, therefore, permitted to speak about anything without fear of reprisal. In order to discuss the possibilities, we need reconsider Boker's life as the son of an upper-middle class Philadelphia businessman who wanted his son to enter the world of banking.

By 1853, Boker had not solved the problem as to his life's work. The limited success of his earlier plays had depressed him, for in no way was he able to prove to his family that he could make a living, financially or honorably, from his poems and plays. Family pressure was as great as ever. Consequently, it is conceivable to see Pepe as the artist—Boker's counterpart—ridiculing the control which Lanciotto, for example, Boker's family, the "Malatesti,/ Strutting about the land with pedigrees/ And claims bequeathed them by their ancestors" has imposed upon him, preventing him from controlling his own fate as a man of letters in a commonwealth "In which aspiring merit takes the lead,/ And birth goes begging." In his art, then, Boker has expressed his unhappiness with his plight within his family and his immediate society, the existing order which tried to prevent him from being what he wanted to be.

The second possibility focuses on Pepe, that is Boker, as medieval jester who uses his office to criticize the existing order. We know that Boker's life was a series of frustrations with regard
to his desire to write. They were produced by his family and also
by the limited success of his plays and poems written up to the
time of his writing of Francesco. I believe that his frustrations
are expressed in the play by Pepe, indicating that the freedom
to speak afforded to Pepe as court jester was an expression which
Boker desired for himself. These following quotations suggest
Boker's feelings about our expansionist policies, our crass Amer-
ican materialism which was thwarting him and which was too
unsophisticated to appreciate the need for and the place of the
sensitive artist in society:

Pepe: Spread our new doctrine, like a general plague;
   Talk of man's progress and development,
   Wrongs of society, the march of mind,
   The Devil, Doctor Faustus, and what not;
   And, lo! this pretty world turns upside down,
   All with a fool's idea!

His frustrations break out more intently a few lines later:

Pepe: Home is not my sphere;
   Heaven picked me out to teach my fellow-men.
   I am a very firebrand of truth—
   A self-consuming, doomed, devoted brand—
   That burns to ashes while I light the world!
   I feel it in me. I am moved inspired,
   Stirred into utterance, by some mystic power
   Of which I am the humble instrument.20

Boker's invoking of mystic inspiration as justification for his de-
sire to be a writer was likewise expressed in a letter to Richard
Henry Stoddard, an intimate friend:

This is one of peculiarities, by the bye. A subject seizes
me soul and body. . . . My muse resembles a whirlwind;
she catches me up, hurries me along, and drops me all
breathless at the end of her career. . . . While I am
writing, I eat nothing, I drink nothing, I meditate my
work, literally, all day. By the time night arrives I am
in a highly nervous and excited state.21

20 Quinn, Representative American Plays, pp. 340, 341.
21 Bradley, George Henry Boker, pp. 123, 124.
Within Pepe's speech and within Boker's letter resides the most plausible explanation for the inclusions of the Americanisms in the play. Boker sought to escape into art, but his frustrators were too close to permit him to escape very far; consequently, he used his art, *Francesca da Rimini*, not only to escape but also to excoriate the society and the national policies which forced him, in final analysis, to agree to a life satisfactory to his family. Boker's subtle interpolations reflect to a startling degree the sentiments he put into the mouth of Lanciotto: “There are some human thoughts/ Best left imprisoned in the aching heart,/ Lest the freed malefactors should disspread/ Infamous ruin with their liberty.” Had he openly revolted, he might have had to pay a price which he considered himself unwilling to pay. By having Pepe, the jester, utter his feelings, Boker seems to be saying that not only does no one listen to me, but even if someone were to, he would not understand what I am attempting, what I am searching for.

The literary historian explains literature as a product of artist, place, and time. Boker's *Francesca da Rimini* establishes Boker as a sensitive artist, aware of contemporary American literary, social, and political life. By so doing, it emphasizes the immediacy of the artist and his environment, and in the case of Boker, it reflects his latent interest in national politics which, in time, were to become his consuming interest.