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STEPHEN CULLEN CARPENTER  
FIRST DRAMA CRITIC OF THE CHARLESTON *COURIER*

CHARLES S. WATSON\*

Stephen Cullen Carpenter, editor of the *Charleston Courier* from 1803 to 1806, was the first important drama critic of a period when the theatre flourished in Charleston. From 1800 to 1825, the city ranked as one of the four theatrical centers of the United States.<sup>1</sup> Charleston possessed the requisites for that position: a talented acting company, large audiences, plays composed by its own residents, and knowledgeable criticism in the newspapers.<sup>2</sup> Carpenter has received attention as a drama critic for national magazines,<sup>3</sup> but his extensive dramatic criticism in the *Courier* has not been appraised. He contributed play reviews from 1803 to 1806 for theatrical seasons lasting from November until May or June, strove to improve the quality of acting and plays at the Charleston Theatre, and discussed at length the principles for judging drama. Most notably he gave full recognition to the first plays by natives of South Carolina: *Independence; or Which Do You Like Best, the Peer, or the Farmer?* by William Ioor and *Foscari, or, the Venetian Exile* by John Blake White (first performances on March 30, 1805, and January 10, 1806, respectively).<sup>4</sup> An analysis of these writings will be the basis for this appraisal of Carpenter's work.

\* Dr. Watson, professor of English at the University of Alabama, contributed a companion article, "Jeffersonian Republicanism in William Ioor's *Independence*, the First Play of South Carolina," to the July issue of this *Magazine*.

<sup>1</sup> Glenn Hughes, *A History of the American Theatre, 1700-1950* (New York, 1951), p. 90.

<sup>2</sup> For a description of these conditions, see W. Stanley Hoole, *The Ante-bellum Charleston Theatre* (Tuscaloosa, Ala., 1946), pp. 3-24.

<sup>3</sup> Mary Atwell Moore, "Stephen Cullen Carpenter," *Dictionary of American Biography*; William Charvat, *The Origins of American Critical Thought, 1810-1835* (New York, 1936), pp. 125, 127, 132, 138; W. Stanley Hoole, *A Check-list and Finding-list of Charleston Periodicals, 1732-1864* (Durham, N. C., 1936), pp. 19-20; and Guy A. Cardwell, "Charleston Periodicals, 1795-1860" (unpublished Ph. D. dissertation, University of North Carolina, 1933), pp. 246-248.

<sup>4</sup> *Independence* was published in 1805 and *Foscari* in 1806, both in Charleston. These plays have been reproduced on microtext in *Three Centuries of Drama: American*, ed. Henry W. Wells, New York: Readex Microprint. Dates of performances have been checked in the *Charleston Courier* and in the listings given in Hoole, *Ante-bellum Charleston Theatre*.

Carpenter was born in Ireland and came to Charleston not later than 1802. His immediate purpose was to assist in the founding of the *Charleston Courier*, the most important accomplishment of the South Carolina Federalists in 1803. The Republicans claimed that Carpenter had been sent by Alexander Hamilton. After Jefferson's second inauguration in 1805, Carpenter was attacked in the Republican *City Gazette* for his opposition to policies of the United States government.<sup>5</sup>

While in Charleston, Carpenter began publishing a national magazine, *The Monthly Register, Magazine, and Review of the United States*. It dealt with American history, current developments, and literary subjects. Guy A. Cardwell describes this monthly as the "most belligerently moral" of all the Charleston magazines.<sup>6</sup> Carpenter transferred publication of *The Monthly Register* to New York in 1806. After arriving there, he wrote an "Introductory Essay" to the second volume of the magazine, in which he apologized for "the non-appearance of the work at the stated and promised periods." This had resulted from his duties in "conducting a daily paper, the *Charleston Courier*." He expressed regret at leaving Charleston: "Of certain high personages in Charleston I can, with Hamlet, truly say—I shall not look upon their like again."<sup>7</sup> This essay was reprinted in the *Courier* on January 29, 1807.<sup>8</sup>

Carpenter was engaged in various publishing ventures after leaving South Carolina. In Philadelphia, he published a magazine devoted to the drama, *Mirror of Taste and Dramatic Censor*, during the years 1810 and 1811. According to William Charvat it was the most successful of the dramatic monthlies before 1815.<sup>9</sup> In 1809 he published *Memoirs of the Hon. Thomas Jefferson*, in which he attacked Jefferson and French influence in the nation. He is thought to have spent his last years in Washington employed by the government and to have died there about 1820.<sup>10</sup>

Carpenter's writing in Charleston holds a central place in his career. It was as drama critic for the *Charleston Courier* that he became acquainted with the American theatre and prepared himself to edit national

<sup>5</sup> John Harold Wolfe, *Jeffersonian Democracy in South Carolina* (Chapel Hill, N. C., 1940), pp. 182-183, 198-199.

<sup>6</sup> Cardwell, p. 247.

<sup>7</sup> *Monthly Register*, II (New York, 1807), 1, 3.

<sup>8</sup> See the *Charleston Courier* for this date. Hereafter, references to the *Courier*, by date, will be given in the text.

<sup>9</sup> Charvat, p. 125.

<sup>10</sup> Mary Atwell Moore, "Stephen Cullen Carpenter," *Dictionary of American Biography*.

magazines. Though considerable dramatic criticism had appeared in Charleston newspapers before 1800,<sup>11</sup> it is significant that Carpenter is named first in a list of local critics given by Dr. John Beaufain Irving in his "Reminiscences of the Charleston Stage."<sup>12</sup> Following the contemporary practice for journalistic essayists, Carpenter wrote under a pseudonym. W. Stanley Hoole states that Carpenter was the essayist using the name "Thespis."<sup>13</sup> Miss Eola Willis also makes this identification.<sup>14</sup> Reviews by "Thespis" stopped in 1806, the year of Carpenter's departure from the city.

The issues of the *Courier* from 1803 to 1806 provide plentiful information on the views of "Thespis." Carpenter dealt with the quality of performances, the literary merits of the plays themselves, dramatic principles, and the social value of drama. The customary position of the essays was on page 2; announcements of plays at the Charleston Theatre were on page 2 or 3. The first essay bearing the name "Thespis" appeared near the end of the 1802-1803 season on March 30, 1803. Entitled "Dramatic Criticism," it summarized the principles of "Thespis" as a drama critic. In the next season, Carpenter began the numbering of essays; the first, on November 7, 1803, was designated "Thespis, No. I." This season contained the greatest number of essays, extending to "No. LXIII," which was printed on June 16, 1804. Numerous other comments on drama appeared without any title or pseudonym; most likely they were also by Carpenter. The next season, 1804-1805, offered fewer articles and numbering was discontinued in the course of the season. "Thespis, No. I" on November 15, 1805, carried the designation "Fourth Season," since it was in fact the fourth season covered by Carpenter; the numbering of essays began again. On December 14, 1805, under "Thespis, No. VI," it was announced that since space for criticism had decreased, fewer reviews would be written and only "The Weekly Thespiad" would appear. The title "Thespiad" was used thereafter.

There is a difficulty in determining when Carpenter stopped writing dramatic criticism for the *Courier*. Three articles bearing the title "Thespiad" appeared in the *Courier* on November 17, 27, and December

<sup>11</sup> See Eola Willis, *The Charleston Stage in the XVIII Century* (Columbia, S. C., 1924), passim, for reviews printed in Charleston papers.

<sup>12</sup> "Dr. Irving's Reminiscences of the Charleston Stage," ed. Emmett Robinson, *this Magazine*, LII (1951), 99.

<sup>13</sup> Hoole, *Ante-bellum Charleston Theatre*, p. 7, n. 16.

<sup>14</sup> Miss Willis identified S. C. Carpenter as "Thespis" in Chapter VIII of an unpublished manuscript dealing with the Placide family of Charleston actors. The manuscript is now deposited at the Charleston County Library.

3, 1806.<sup>15</sup> Yet, Carpenter could hardly have been in Charleston to write them since his "Introductory Essay" to Volume II of *The Monthly Register* specifies that it was written in "New-York, Nov. 5th, 1806."<sup>16</sup> The following facts further indicate that Carpenter did not write these essays. The name "Thespis" is not used at the end of any one of the three, as it had been with the heading "Thespiad" in the preceding season. Furthermore, for the first time since "Thespis" began writing for the *Courier*, another dramatic critic is contributing essays. Using the pseudonym "Momus" this critic wrote reviews on November 22, 24, and December 1, 1806.

It may be concluded that Carpenter ended his criticism for the *Courier* in the 1805-1806 season. The last "Thespiad" for that season, a discussion of the actor Thomas A. Cooper was printed on April 21, 1806. The best dates to give for Carpenter's dramatic criticism in the *Courier* are, therefore, from March 30, 1803, the date of the first essay bearing the pseudonym "Thespis," to April 21, 1806.

Carpenter's writings on drama show that he agreed with the predominant criticism of his time. His basic principle was that the drama should be a school for morals. In his *Mirror of Taste and Dramatic Censor* he described drama as a "powerful moral agent" which may train us in our manners and deportment.<sup>17</sup> He had given expression to this view many times in the *Courier*. In his initial essay, he stated that parents and the public should compel theatre managers to make the stage "a school of morals and manners for the rising generation." Since the drama so interests the heart, it must be "an instrument of astonishing force in moulding, training, and perfecting the dispositions of society" (March 30, 1803).

Carpenter had difficulty in reconciling his ideas about moral instruction with the depraved characters of Gothic plays like Schiller's *The Robbers*.<sup>18</sup> In two articles reviewing a performance of this play at the Charleston Theatre, he acknowledged the appeal of the Gothic elements, but refused to condone the immoral nature of certain characters. In his second essay, Carpenter said that a reader might look through fiction and romance without finding a better example of fidelity than Schiller's character, but "Oh, monstrous!" to tarnish it "with so vile a

<sup>15</sup> Hoole, *Ante-bellum Charleston Theatre*, p. 7, n. 16, gives Dec. 3, 1806, as the final date for Carpenter's criticism.

<sup>16</sup> *Monthly Register*, II (New York, 1807), 3.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Charvat, p. 125.

<sup>18</sup> Schiller attracted general condemnation in the United States for the immorality of *The Robbers*, according to Charvat, p. 124.

depository." He did not believe that vice could coalesce with virtue since God had put barriers between them (December 22, 1803).

Another principle frequently mentioned by Carpenter is that characters should be true to nature. This idea had been stressed by eighteenth-century Scottish critics, who were influential in America.<sup>19</sup> In answer to a letter, "Thespis" wrote in the *Courier* on March 15, 1804, that for instruction to be effective dramatic personages must be drawn so that we may reasonably suppose they exist. They should speak and act, as Falstaff believed, like folks of this world.

Carpenter was particularly concerned with the performances and personal conduct of local actors. If they were negligent, he was quick to point out their errors. On May 24, 1804, "Thespis" scolded the actors for neglecting to study their lines and for their lack of sobriety. He said that neighbors of the theatre had complained to him about their conduct.

Carpenter made specific recommendations for improving the level of theatrical fare. On April 27, 1803, he wrote that actors can make up for the deficiencies of contemporary playwrights by drawing on the "inspired pieces of Shakespeare; on the luminous wit of Congreve" and on other earlier writers. After this criticism, made at the end of the 1802-1803 season, signs of improvement appeared at the Charleston Theatre. In the following season, the number of evenings devoted to Shakespeare increased from three to seven. During 1805-1806, the final season reviewed by Carpenter, Shakespearean plays were performed on fourteen evenings.<sup>20</sup>

It is evident from Carpenter's growing satisfaction with the company at the Charleston Theatre that its professional quality was improving and that he must have felt responsible in some measure. On the opening night of the second season which he reviewed, he praised a performance of M. G. Lewis's *Castle Spectre*, and remarked that the manager, who was at this time Alexander Placide, had now gathered the best company yet to be seen on the Charleston boards (November 12, 1803). In "Thespis, No. III" for the last season of his reviewing, he devoted an entire essay to the company; he found the local troupe superior to any that he had seen in the best country theatres of England (November 20, 1805).

In the sixth essay for the 1805-1806 season, "Thespis" praised his readers as well as the actors. There was less reason now to write criticism. His first purpose, to promote zeal for the drama, had been

<sup>19</sup> Charvat, pp. 30-31, 131.

<sup>20</sup> See Hoole, *Ante-bellum Charleston Theatre*, pp. 68-72.

accomplished. Since he had continually brought before readers the subject of drama, their judgment had emerged and they now engaged in discussions of plays on their own. Furthermore, the merit of the acting company now required little aid from the press (December 14, 1805).

The first play written especially for the Charleston Theatre during Carpenter's editorship of the *Courier* was James Workman's *Liberty in Louisiana*, performed on April 4, 6, and May 21, 1804.<sup>21</sup> Workman was judge of the county of Orleans, Louisiana.<sup>22</sup> The plot of this play concerns the actions of two adventurers: Phelim, an Irishman, and Sawney, a Scotsman. They arrive in New Orleans precisely at the time it is becoming a part of the United States. A Federalist viewpoint pervades the comedy. This bias is evidenced by the dedication to Chief Justice John Marshall, an ardent Federalist, and by the attacks on Jefferson and on Republican hostility to judges.

Although the Federalist *Courier* published two reviews of *Liberty in Louisiana*, the praise of "Thespis" was not based on the pro-Federalist nature of the comedy. I have not found evidence that Carpenter interjects political opinions into his dramatic criticism. The separation of literature and politics was, in fact, a goal of his *Monthly Register*. According to the "Prospectus," this magazine sought the aid "of those gentlemen of letters in Carolina, who are desirous of supporting a LITERARY WORK UNCONNECTED WITH PARTY POLITICS."<sup>23</sup>

Carpenter's most interesting comments on *Liberty in Louisiana* concern "grumblers" in the audience who disliked the portrayal of an Irishman, a Scotsman, and a New Englander as knaves. Without any insinuation against the "conscious purity which dictated such criticism," Carpenter declares that he will keep his opinion that the three (including Fairtrade, the New Englander) are natural, well-drawn characters. In an apparent reference to his Irish background, Carpenter says he knows and loves the country from which one of the characters is drawn. He will not censure a poet, however, who takes a portrait from that country as well as others since he realizes that the honorable character of a nation has its exceptions (April 19, 1804).

As the leading authority on drama in Charleston at this time, Carpenter honored the first plays of South Carolina with the full weight of his prestige. He wrote a prologue and a review for William Ioor's

<sup>21</sup> James Workman, *Liberty in Louisiana* (Charleston, S. C., 1804). This play is included on microtext in *Three Centuries of Drama: American*.

<sup>22</sup> Samuel Austin Allibone, *A Critical Dictionary of English Literature and British and American Authors* (Philadelphia, 1902).

<sup>23</sup> *Monthly Register*, I (Charleston, 1806), "Prospectus," last page.



*Independence* and an epilogue for John Blake White's *Foscari*.<sup>24</sup> He was especially conscious that these plays marked a beginning in the state.

Carpenter's *Monthly Register* expressed a keen interest in the literature of South Carolina while it was still being published in Charleston. Introducing a long poem by a South Carolinian, the author of "Review of American Literature" wrote that although the *Monthly Register* would provide instruction and amusement for readers in the whole nation "we cannot divest our minds of a clinging partiality to every thing more immediately connected with the community in which we live." For this reason, he takes particular delight in placing flowers "round the Muse of Carolina."<sup>25</sup>

William Ioor states in the preface to *Independence* that South Carolinians especially should "foster it, as it is the first play ever produced by a native of their state." Carpenter's review of this play appeared on April 1, 1805.<sup>26</sup> It was entitled "The First Born of Carolina / Independence / A Comedy—By Dr. Joor."<sup>27</sup> This play, he points out, is "the first by a native of Carolina, and the State has a right to be grateful to the author, who has afforded so fair an augury of their future drama." Looking toward the future, he continues: "When the writers of our stage history shall hereafter trace the progress of the drama from its birth, *Independence* will be marked as the foundation stone of the American drama, as well as of its national existence; and it must impart a proud feeling to Mr. Joor, to reflect that his name will be inscribed on it."

Carpenter found many reasons for encouraging Ioor's play. "Its tendency is good; the sentiments it contains are pure; the language is pleasing; and, what we do not often find, *correct*."<sup>28</sup> He makes an appeal for the state's support: "If it does not amply reward both author and

<sup>24</sup> The prologue and epilogue appear at the beginning and at the end of the plays in *Three Centuries of Drama: American*.

<sup>25</sup> *Monthly Register* I, No. 9, Part 2, 270. Though unsigned, it may be assumed that this statement was either written or approved by Carpenter since he was editor of the magazine.

<sup>26</sup> See both the *City Gazette* and the *Charleston Times*, April 1, 1805, for reprints of Carpenter's essay. Though disagreeing on politics, these newspapers joined to support the state's first play.

<sup>27</sup> Ioor's name, of Dutch origin, is sometimes spelled "Joor" and is pronounced "yōr."

<sup>28</sup> Carpenter's *Mirror of Taste*, I (1810), 57, throws light on his use of the term "correct." He there wrote that the dramatic critic must be able "to distinguish the language of the schools from that of the multitude—the polished diction of refinement from the coarse style of household colloquy." Quoted in Charvat, p. 132.

manager, we think the state will be wanting to their country, to themselves, to the author, to gratitude, and to taste." He ends with the observation "All the performers acted as if they felt an impulse from the occasion."

It is to Carpenter's credit that if he disagreed with some opinions in Ioor's play, he did not withhold the recognition the play deserved. Though the setting of this work is England and the plot concerns the efforts of an unscrupulous nobleman to acquire the farm of the hero, *Independence* clearly expresses Jefferson's admiration for the small independent farmer in America. It is, thus, Republican in sympathy.<sup>29</sup> As with *Liberty in Louisiana*, Carpenter's treatment of the play is critically objective.

The prologue to *Independence* was "written by S. C. Carpenter, Esq." It begins with a description of the first settlement of South Carolina and moves to a vision of future American literature. In the opening, Carpenter refers clearly to the terrain around Charleston. Shakespeare, Congreve, and Otway were unknown

When, midst entangled woods, and humid swamps,  
Expos'd to parching suns, and chilling damps,  
Your bold progenitors, with dangerous toil,  
Drew scanty bread, from out this sandy soil.

The race that settled here would not bow to "a tyrant shrine" but overcame that obstacle and others, such as "the Indian's Yew." Those troubles past, the mind found some time "for peaceful exercise." Carpenter then describes the spirit of America: "Columbia's Genius," with "hope prophetic" on her crest, watched "fair Science" advance. Columbia proclaims to Americans: "Art, Science, Poetry shall yet be thine; / Thine too the Drama."

Carpenter, then, tells Americans of their future:

At no distant age,  
Your own great deeds, shall yet adorn your Stage:  
And Shakespeares of your own hand down to fame,  
Each patriot's, sage's, stateman's honored name.  
Whether this prophecy has yet proved true  
In any part, our author leaves to you.

<sup>29</sup> For a discussion of Jeffersonian Republicanism in Ioor's *Independence*, see Charles S. Watson, "Early Dramatic Writing in the South: Virginia and South Carolina Plays, 1798-1830" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Vanderbilt, 1966), pp. 205-211.

He hopes this firstling of your native Stage,  
 Your fond paternal feelings will engage;  
 And, as in ardent fondness you have press'd  
 Your callow offspring, to your throbbing breast,  
 That you will take this to your tender care,  
 Its *merits* foster, and its *errors* spare.

The plea for support by "our author," that is, Ioor, was customary in this period.

The epilogue to John Blake White's *Foscari*, a blank verse tragedy about the young Foscari, who is falsely accused of murder, is not so grandiloquent as the prologue. According to the edition of this play, the epilogue was "by Mr. Carpenter" and "spoken by Mrs. Whitlock," who played the part of Foscari's mother. This actress observed that she and the others on stage had been performing

. . . all this tragic rout  
 About these children of our poet's brain,  
 The Doge, Foscari, and the ladies twain.

But beneath the appearance of sadness, she had felt warm satisfaction to see the audience, "this goodly groupe collected round, / To make our bard with honest transport glow." In the final verses, speaking for Carpenter, she heralded the play as another beginning in the state.

Rejoice with me, to see brought forth to light,  
 The first born of our tragic muse, this night,  
 Applaud the youth—Applaud with heart and hand,  
 Who makes this offering to his native land.

This epilogue was printed in the *Courier* on February 25, 1806.

Carpenter did not review the performances of *Foscari*. At this time he had reduced the amount of dramatic criticism, and perhaps he felt that printing his epilogue gave adequate notice to the first tragedy of the state. His full support had been made known, in any case, since in the advertisement for the first performance of *Foscari*, printed in the *Courier* on January 10, 1806, it was specified that he had contributed an epilogue. The performance of White's tragedy must have given Carpenter genuine satisfaction. In the last year of his residence in Charleston, he could add to his achievements the recognition of the state's first tragedy. Carpenter had expressed his admiration for this dramatic form in the first essay bearing the name of "Thespis." Tragedy was more important than comedy, he had written, since "great and

serious objects command more attention than little or ludicrous ones” (March 30, 1803).

Stephen Carpenter stands out as a central figure in the early cultural life of South Carolina. He endeavored to provide informed dramatic criticism to readers of the *Courier*, to improve the quality of acting and plays at the local theatre, and to increase public support. His influence on the judgment of Charleston audiences cannot be measured, but certainly it was appreciable. The absence of political bias in his dramatic criticism is noteworthy in this time of Federalist-Republican controversy. His enthusiasm for the literature of South Carolina found an excellent opportunity in the review, prologue, and epilogue he composed for the first plays of the state. Finally, Carpenter's achievements as the first drama critic of the *Courier* supply valuable information for the period when Charleston ranked as a theatrical center in the nation.