

**THE ART OF PLAYWRITING:
BEING A PRACTICAL TREATISE
ON THE ELEMENTS OF
DRAMATIC CONSTRUCTION**

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The Art of Playwriting: Being a Practical Treatise on the Elements of Dramatic Construction by
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ALFRED HENNEQUIN

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THE
ART OF PLAYWRITING

BEING A PRACTICAL TREATISE ON THE
ELEMENTS OF DRAMATIC
CONSTRUCTION

INTENDED FOR THE PLAYWRIGHT, THE STUDENT,
AND THE DRAMATIC CRITIC

BY
ALFRED HENNEQUIN, Ph. D.



BOSTON AND NEW YORK
HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY
The Riverside Press Cambridge

To

BRONSON HOWARD,

IN REMEMBRANCE OF A PLEASANT WINTER WHEN THE
SHENANDOAH WAS ON THE STOCKS.

THE AUTHOR.



INTRODUCTION.

THERE are two classes of readers for whose needs a book of this sort should aim to provide: (1) those who know much about the practical workings of the theatre, but have little constructive knowledge; and (2) those whose instinct for dramatic construction is strong, but who, through lack of opportunity, have acquired little insight into the practical details of stage representation. With this end in view, the work has been arranged in two principal divisions, the first dealing with the minutiae of the theatre, the second with the principles of dramatic construction.

In the first the reader is inducted into the twilight region which lies beyond the scenes, told the name and function of the pieces of stage machinery, introduced to "wings," "flats," "set-pieces," "grooves," "tormentors," — taught the office of the various exits and entrances, initiated into the mysteries of stage conventionalities — in short, made acquainted with every feature of the modern stage which concerns him as a working playwright. In the second part, an endeavor is

made to set forth the theory and art of playwriting, first, by a thorough classification and analysis of the drama, and second, by a practical exposition of the actual process of building up a play from the first crude suggestion.

To very many readers doubtless an attempt to teach an art notoriously so subtle and complex as that of playwriting will seem like proposing a recipe for "Paradise Lost" or a formula for "The Mill on the Floss." They will say (and with much plausibility) that if playwriting is an art, its rules are airy, impalpable, elusive. To set them down in prosaic black and white is to imprison Ariel in the rived oak where he can no longer work his magic for us. The force of all this may be granted, and yet we may insist that there are special reasons why a work on playwriting, if properly conceived, should be entitled to greater consideration than one which pretends to explain the secrets of poetry or fiction. The poet or novelist is at arm's length from his audience. He has only to get his poem or novel into type and his thought is within reach of every man that reads. With the dramatist the case is far otherwise. Between him and his audience looms up a monstrous, unwieldy, mysterious instrument of interpretation, rusty with traditions, top-heavy with prejudices, stuffed to bursting with curious, antiquated, crazy machinery of which few know, or care

to know, the meaning. It is through this instrument — the theatre — that the dramatist must convey his conception to his hearers. No matter how brilliant his genius, how fertile his imagination, unless he has studied the intricacies of this ponderous machine his labor is likely to go for nothing. His play may be most delightful reading, but unless it will lend itself to the peculiar requirements of the stage it is not worth, for dramatic purposes, the paper it is written on.

Now there are three methods by which the beginner may acquire this knowledge. He may go on the stage; he may converse with actors and playwrights; he may have recourse to books. The first plan is unquestionably an excellent one. The young dramatist can spend a year in no more profitable way than as "walking-gentleman" in a traveling or stock company. By no other means is he likely to acquire so intimate a knowledge of the highways and by-ways of the world behind the scenes.

But there are two considerations which preclude the universal application of this method. In the first place, the young playwright may not know what to observe. He may never have learned that first great art — the art of seeing with his eyes open. That being the case, the time and perhaps money which he expends for his stage experience may be virtually thrown away; for the stage, while a good school for those who know how

to take advantage of its instruction, is one of the worst in the world for those who do not. Nowhere is the student unguided by sound principles more likely to acquire a taste for small theatrical artifices, hackneyed phrases and forced, unmeaning situations. As a proof that mere presence on the stage is not sufficient of itself to inculcate valid dramatic principles, any reader of plays could cite the case of hundreds of actors of the day whose familiarity with stage matters has become second nature, and who yet betray the most absolute misconception of the application of their technical knowledge to the business of playwriting.

But there is another and a less debatable objection to the stage as a dramatic educator. What this is, will appear as soon as we try to answer the question, Who writes plays? Upon this point, no one but a professional "reader" can pretend to furnish accurate statistics. It will be interesting, therefore, to quote a private letter to the author from one whose right to speak in matters of this kind cannot be called in question.

"There are *thousands* of plays written every year in this country. . . . It would be easier to enumerate the classes of those who do not write plays than of those who do. . . . We receive MSS. from journalists, novelists, dramatic critics, theatrical reporters, amateur performers, merchants, brokers, bankers, lawyers (not only the young and obscure but