

A STUDY OF VERSIFICATION

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A study of versification by Brander Matthews

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BRANDER MATTHEWS

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BY

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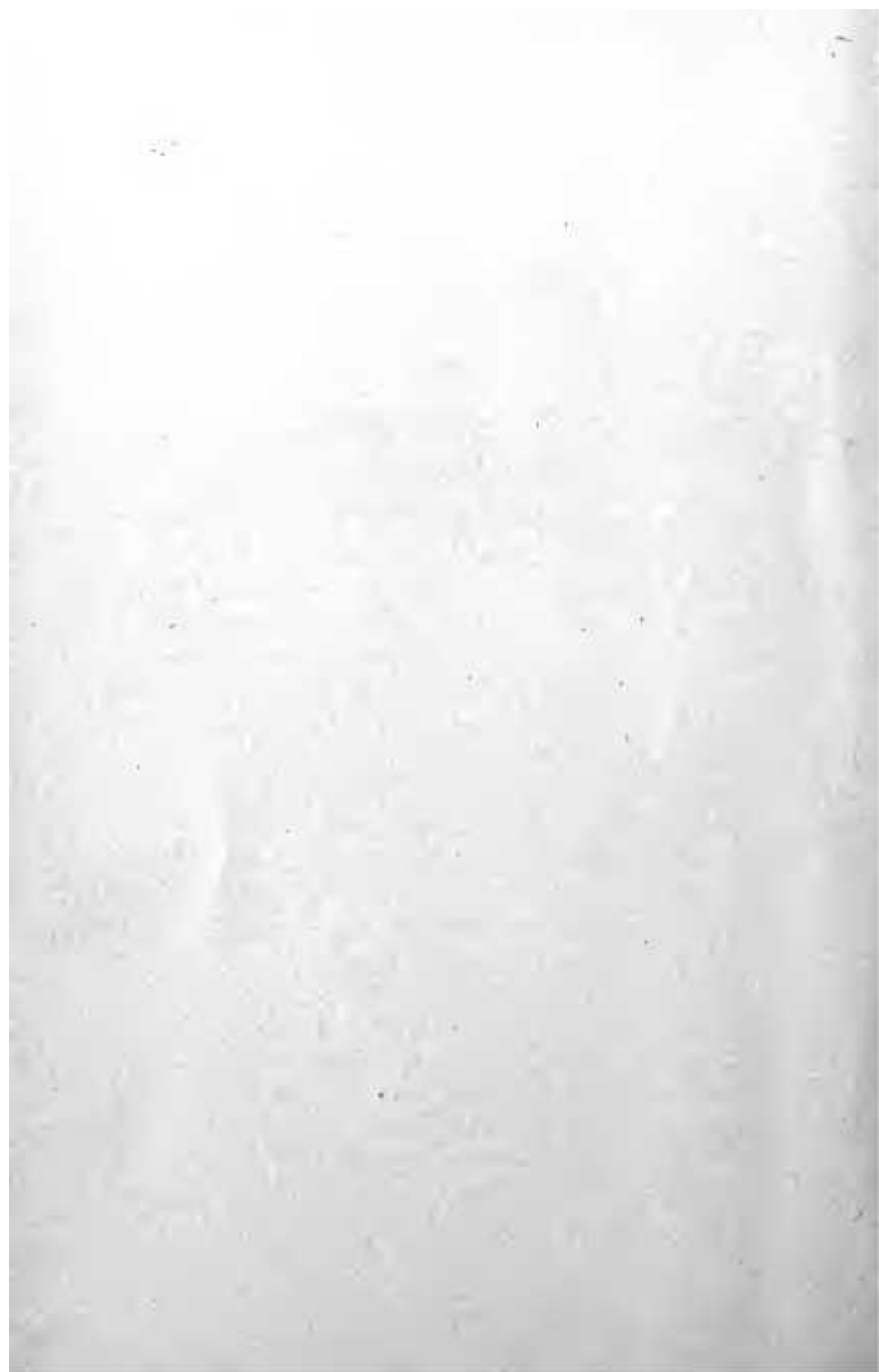
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TO
W. C. BROWNELL
CRITIC OF POETS AND
PROSE-MASTERS



PREFATORY NOTE

It is now about thirty years since I prepared an American edition of a little book by the younger Tom Hood, which purported to set forth the rules of rime (the "Rhymester," Appleton & Co., 1882); and it is just twenty years since I first gave a course in metrical rhetoric to a class of undergraduates in Columbia College. And I have long felt the need of a simple text-book for the beginner, which would serve as an introduction to the study of English versification. There are many volumes devoted to the analysis of poetry, but there are few which confine themselves wholly to the problems of prosody; and scarcely any one of these is exactly adapted to the needs of the novice who knows little or nothing about the principles of the metrical art. The subject is treated casually and cursorily in many grammars and in many rhetorics; but the main purpose of these books is to help the student to express himself accurately and satisfactorily in prose.

This is the simple text-book for the beginner that I have undertaken in the present volume. It is a text-book of metrical rhetoric. Its aim is to explain to the inquirer the technic of verse-making and to show him how the poets have been able to achieve their effects. It sets forth what I believe to be the fundamental principle of the art,— that all poetry is to be said or sung, and that its appeal is to the ear and not to the eye. This

principle is here asserted, unhesitatingly ; and from it all the practices of modern English versification are here derived. No other principle is even discussed, and all controversy has been rigorously eschewed. The student will not be confused by any attempt to refute any other theory ; and his time will not be wasted by the confutation of any code long ago disestablished.

The main object of this book is to provide the student with an understanding of the mechanism of verse, that he may have a richer appreciation of poetry. The metrical mastery of Chaucer and of Milton, of Pope and of Tennyson, will be more keenly relished by the lover of poetry when he has attained to an insight into the methods whereby this mastery was achieved. But while this is its primary intent, the book has also a secondary purpose, to encourage teachers to give courses in metrical rhetoric, — not with any vain hope that they will be able to train poets, but with the firm belief that exercise in verse is the best possible aid to easy flexibility in prose-writing. Verse-making is an admirable gymnastic ; and the necessity of mating his words in rime and of adjusting them to rhythm enriches the student's vocabulary and increases his control over it. Constant practice in composing in stanzas prescribed by the instructor will not tend to puff up the young writer with the conceit that he is a poet. On the contrary, it is likely to take down his vanity by showing him how easy it is to acquire the elements of verse-making and by calling his attention to the technical dexterity possessed by the great craftsmen in verse. Indeed, there is no better corrective of undue pride, there is no more

potent inciter of modesty, than the frequent attempt to pattern ourselves on the masters and to discover how lamentably we fall short of our lofty and unapproachable models.

B. M.

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