

The New Art of Writing Plays in this Age

BY

LOPE DE VEGA

TRANSLATED BY

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Addressed to the Academy at Madrid.

1. You command me, noble spirits, flower of Spain, who in this congress and renowned academy will in short space of time surpass not only the assemblies of Italy which Cicero, envious of Greece, made famous with his own name, hard by the Lake of Avernus, but also Athens where in the Lyceum of Plato was seen high conclave of philosophers, to write you an art of the play which is today acceptable to the taste of the crowd.

2. Easy seems this subject, and easy it would be for anyone of you who had written very few comedies, and who knows more out the art of writing them and of all these things; for what condemns me in this task is that I have written them without art.

3. Not because I was ignorant of the precepts; thank God, even while I was a tyro in grammar, I went through the books which treated the subject, before I had seen the sun run its course ten times from the Ram to the Fishe;

4. But because, in fine, found that comedies were not at that time, in Spain, as their first devisers in the world thought that they should be written; but rather as many ruffellows managed them, who confirmed the crowd in its own crudeness I and so they were introduced in such wise that he who now writes them artistically dies without fame I and guerdon; for custom can do more among those who lack light of art than reason and force.

5. True it is that I have sometimes written in accordance with the art which few know; but, no sooner do I see coming from some other source the monstrosities full of painted scenes where the crowd congregates and the women who canonize this sad business, than I return to that same barbarous habit J and when I have to write a comedy I lock in the precepts with six keys, I banish Terence and Plautus from my study that they may not cry out at me; for truth, even in dumb books, is wont to call aloud; I and I write in accordance with that art which they devised who aspired to the applause of the crowd; for, since the crowd pays for the comedies, it is fitting to talk foolishly to it to satisfy its taste.

6. Yet true comedy has its end established like every kind of poem or poetic art, * and that has always been to imitate the ac-

/tions of men and to paint the customs of their age. Furthermore, all poetic imitation whatsoever is composed of three things, which are discourse, agreeable verse, harmony, that is to say music, which so far was common also to tragedy; comedy being different from tragedy in that it treats of lowly and plebeian actions, and tragedy of royal and great ones. Look whether there be in our comedies few failings,..-

7. *Actos* was the name given to them, for they imitate the actions and the doings of the crowd. Lope de Rueda was an example in Spain of these principles, and today are to be seen in print prose comedies of his so lowly that he introduces into them the doings of mechanics and the love of the daughter of a smith; whence there has remained the custom of calling the old comedies *entremeses*, where the art persists in all its force, there being one action and that between plebeian people; for an *entremes* with a king has never been seen. And thus it is shown how the art, for very lowness of style, came to be held in great disrepute, and the king in the comedy to be introduced for the ignorant.

8. Aristotle depicts in his 'Poetics', altho obscurely, the beginning of comedy; the strife between Athens and Megara as to which of them was the first inventor; they

of Megara say that it was Epicarmus, while Athens would have it that Magnetes was the man. Elias Donatus says it had its origin in ancient sacrifices. He names Thespis as the author of tragedy, following Horace, who affirms the same, as of comedies, Aristophanes. Homer composed the 'Odyssey' in imitation of comedy, but the 'Iliad' was a famous example of tragedy, in imitation of which I called my 'Jerusalem' an epic, and added the term tragic; and in the same manner all people commonly term the 'Inferno,' the 'Purgatorio,' and the 'Paradise' of the celebrated poet Dante Alighieri a comedy, and this Manetti recognizes in his prolog.

9. Now everybody knows that comedy, as if under suspicion, was silenced for a certain time, and that hence also satire was born, which, being more cruel, more quickly came to an end, and gave place to the New Comedy. The choruses were the first things ; then the fixt number of the characters was introduced; but Menander, whom Terence followed, held the choruses in despite, as offensive. Terence was more circumspect as to the principles; since he never elevated the style of comedy to the greatness of tragedy, which many have condemned as vicious in Plautus; for in this respect Terence was more wary.

i o/" Tragedy has as its argument history, and comedy fiction; for this reason it was called flat-footed, of humble argument, since the actor performed without buskin or stage. There were comedies with the pallium, mimes, comedies with the toga, fabulae atellanae, and comedies of the tavern, which were also, as now, of various sorts.

11. With Attic elegance the men of Athens chided vice and evil custom in their comedies, and they gave their prizes both to the writers of verse and to the devisers of action. For this Tully called comedies "the mirror of custom and a living image of the truth," a very high tribute, in that comedy ran even with history. Look whether it be worthy of this crown and glory !

12. But now I perceive that you are saying that this is merely translating books and wearying you with painting this mixed-up affair. Believe me there has been a reason why you should be reminded of some of these things; for you see that you ask me to describe the art of writing plays in Spain, where whatever is written is in defiance of art; and to tell how they are now written contrary to the ancient rule and to what is founded on reason, is to ask me to draw on my experience, not on art, for art speaks truth which the ignorant crowd gainsays.

13. If then, you desire art, I beseech you, men of genius, to read the very learned Robortello of Udine and you will see in what he says concerning Aristotle and especially in what he writes about comedy, as much as is scattered among many books; for everything of today is in a state of confusion.

14. If you wish to have my opinion of the comedies which now have the upper hand and to know why it is necessary that the crowd with its laws should maintain the vile chimera of this comic monster, I will tell you what I hold, and do you pardon me, since I must obey whoever has power to command me, that, gilding the error of the crowd, I desire to tell you of what sort I would have them; for there is no recourse but to follow art observing a mean between the two extremes.

15. "Let the subject be chosen and do not be amused, may you excuse these precepts ! if it happens to deal with kings; tho, for that matter, I understand that Philip the Prudent, King of Spain and our lord, was offended at seeing a king in them ; either because the matter was hostile to art or because the royal authority ought not to be represented among the lowly and the vulgar.

16. This is merely turning back to the Old Comedy, where we see that Plautus in-

troduced gods, as in his 'Amphitryon' he represents Jupiter. God knows that I have difficulty in giving this my approbation, since Plutarch, speaking of Menander, does not highly esteem Old Comedy. But since we are so far away from art and in Spain do it a thousand wrongs, let the learned this once close their lips.

17.^ Tragedy mixed with comedy and Terence with Seneca, tho it be like another minotaur of Pasiphae, will render one part grave, the other ridiculous; f^r this variety causes much delight. Nature gives us good example, for through such variety it is beautiful.

18. Bear in mind that this subject should contain one action only, seeing to it that the story in no manner be episodic; I mean the introduction of other things which are beside the main purpose; nor that any member be omitted which might ruin the whole of the context. There is no use in advising that it should take place in the period of one sun, tho this is the view of Aristotle ; but we lose our respect for him when we mingle tragic style with the humbleness of mean comedy. Let it take place in as little time as possible, except when the poet is writing history in which some years have to pass; these he can relegate to the space between the acts, wherein, if necessary, he can have a character

go on some journey; a thing that greatly offends whoever perceives it. But let not him who is offended go to see them.

19. Oh ! how lost in admiration are many at this very time at seeing that years are passed in an affair to which an artificial day sets a limit; tho for this they would not allow the mathematical day I But, considering that the wrath of a seated Spaniard is immoderate, when in two hours there is not presented to him everything from Genesis to the Last Judgment, I deem it most fitting, if it be for us here to please him, for us to adjust everything so that it succeeds.

20. vThe subject once chosen, write in \\
prose, and divide the matter into three acts of time, seeing to it, if possible, that in each one the space of the day be not broken. Captain Virues, a worthy wit, divided comedy into three acts, which before had gone on all fours, as on baby's feet, for comedies were then infants. I wrote them myself, when eleven or twelve years of age, of four acts and of four sheets of paper, for a sheet contained each act; and then it was the fashion that for the three intermissions were made three little entremeses, but today scarce one,, and then a dance, for the dancing is so* important in comedy that Aristotle approves of it, and Athenaeus, Plato, and Xenophon treat of it, though this last disap-

proves of indecorous dancing; and for this reason he is vexed at Callipides, wherein he pretends to ape the ancient chorus. The matter divided into two parts, see to the connection from the beginning until the action runs down; but do not permit the untying of the plot until reaching the last scene ; for the crowd, knowing what the end is, will turn its face to the door and its shoulder to what it has awaited three hours face to face; for in what appears nothing more is to be known.

Very seldom should the stage remain without someone speaking, because the crowd becomes restless in these intervals and the story spins itself out at great length; for, besides its being a great defect, the avoidance of it increases grace and artifice. X''

22. I Begin then, and, with simple language, do not spend sententious thoughts and witty sayings on family trifles, which is all that the familiar talk of two or three people is representing. But when the character who is introduced persuades, counsels or dissuades, then there should be gravity and wit; for then doubtless is truth observed, since a man speaks in a different style from what is common when he gives counsel, or persuades, or argues against anything. Aristides, the rhetorician, gave us warrant for this ; for he wishes the language of comedy to be pure, clear, and flexible, and he adds also that it should be taken from the usage of the peo-

ple, this being different from that of polite society; for in the latter case the diction will be elegant, sonorous, and adorned. Do not drag in quotations, nor let your language offend because of exquisite words; for, if one is to imitate those who speak, it should not be by the language of Panchaia, of the Metaurus, v pf hippogriffs, demi-gods and censors.

23. | If the king should speak, imitate as much as possible the gravity of a king; if the sage speak, observe a sententious modesty; describe lovers with those passions which greatly move whoever listens to them manage soliloquies in such a manner that the recitant is quite transformed, and in changing himself, changes the listener, Let him ask questions and reply to himself, and if he shall make complaints, let him observe the respect due to women. T,et not ladies disregard their character, and if they change costumes, let it be in such wise that it may be excused; for male disguise usually is very pleasing. Let him be on his guard against impossible things, for it is of the chiefest importance that only the likeness of truth should be represented. The lackey should not discourse of lofty affairs, nor express the conceits which we have seen in certain foreign plays; and in no wise let the charter contradict himself in what he has said^I mean

to say, forget, as in Sophocles one blames Oedipus for not remembering that he v has killed Laius with his own h;iml. .,. Let the scenes end with epigram, with wit, and with elegant verse, in such wise that, at his exit, he \ who spouts leave not the audience disgusted.

* In the first act set forth the case. In the y second weave together the events, in such o> wise tKat until the middle of the third act one may hardly guess the outcome. Always trick expectancy; and hence it may come to pass that something quite far from what is promised may be left to the understanding. Tactfully suit x your verse to the subjects being treated. " Dccimas are good for complainings; the sonnet is good for those who are waiting in expectation; recitals of events ask for romances, though they shine brilliantly in octavas. Tercets are for grave affairs and redondillas for affairs of love. Let rhetorical figures be brought in, as repetition or anadiplosis, and in the beginning of these same verses the various forms of anaphora; and also irony, questions, apostrophes, and exclamations.

24. To deceive the audience with the truth is a thing that has seemed well, as Miguel Sanchez, worthy of this memorial for the invention, was wont to do in all his comedies. Equivoque and the uncertainty arising from ambiguity have always held a large place among the crowd, for it thinks that it

alone understands what the other one is saying. Better still are the subjects in which honor has a part, since they deeply stir everybody; along with them go ^ifitwous deeds, for virtue is everywhere loved; 'hence we see, if an actor chance to represent a traitor, he is so hateful to everyone that what he wishes to buy is not sold him, and the crowd flees when it meets him; but if he is loyal, they lend to him and invite him, and even the chief men honor him, love him, seek him out, entertain him, and acclaim him.

25. Let each act have but four sheets, for twelve are well suited to the time and the patience of him who is listening. In satirical parts, be not clear or open, since it is known that for this very reason comedies were forbidden by law in Greece and Italy ;

1 wound without hate, for if, perchance, slander be done, expect not applause, nor aspire to fame.

26. These things you may regard as aphorisms which you get not from the ancient art, which the present occasion allows no further space for treating; since whatever has to do with the three kinds of stage properties which Vitruvius speaks of concerns the impresario; just as Valerius Maximus, Petrus Crinitus, Horace in his epistles, and others describe these properties, with their drops,

trees, cabins, houses, and simulated marbles.

27. Of costume Julius Pollux would tell us if it were necessary, for in Spain it is the case that the comedy of today is replete with barbarous things: a Turk wearing the neck-gear of a Christian and a Roman in tight breeches.

28. But of all, nobody can I call more barbarous than myself since in defiance of art I dare to lay down precepts, and I allow myself to be borne along in the vulgar current, wherefore Italy and France call me ignorant. But what can I do if I have written four hundred and eighty-three comedies, along with one which I have finished this week? For all of these, except six, gravely sin against art. Yet, in fine, I defend what I have written, and I know that, tho they might have been better in another manner, they would not have had the vogue which they have had; for sometimes that which is contrary to what is just, for that very reason, pleases the taste.

How Comedy reflects this life of man,

How true her portraiture of young and old;

How subtle wit, polished in narrow span,

And purest speech, and more too you behold;
What grave consideration mixed with smiles,

What seriousness, along with pleasant jest;
Deceit of slaves; how woman oft beguiles

How full of slyness is her treacherous breast;
How silly, awkward swains to sadness run,

How rare success, though all seems well begun,

Let one hear with attention, and dispute
not of the art; for in comedy everything will
be found of such a sort that in listening to it
everything becomes evident.

(Translated by William T. Brewster.)