

Classical Dramatic Theory & Eighteenth-Century Thought

or

OVER-ENTHUSIASTIC READING OF THE ANCIENTS; HOW FRENCH & ENGLISH NEOCLASSICISTS GOT ARISTOTLE WRONG BUT REALLY DIDN'T CARE AND IT TURNED OUT OKAY ANYWAY.

Aristotle's *Poetics* and Horace's *Ars Poetica* held (and continue to hold) the greatest influence over literary conceptions of Tragedy. One of the strange by-ways of literary history is the effects of classical dramatic theory upon English drama (especially tragedy) between 1660 and 1737 often via French neoclassical theorists with their own refined understanding of classical dramatic theory.

I used to rail against the "over-use" of the word "tragic": "Hubble Telescope Tragically Flawed" or "Grape Embargo Tragedy for Dock Workers." Tragic? Where is the high seriousness of these things, how do they raise pity or fear? What sort of cathartic feeling is NASA trying for this time? What was the hamartia, the mistaken act, of the dockworkers? Has their Hubris caused this embargo? I didn't realize that Aristotle's *Poetics* is the starting point for a discussion of tragedy, but it isn't the preeminent guidebook. French and English dramatists and theorists understood this a long time before I did.

The Renaissance hit England a bit late, but by 1530-1560, English authors were increasingly aware of the works of the ancients, often through the influence of Italian and French authors who had recently rediscovered the classics. After 1570 English authors fashion the literature of the continent into uniquely English work. Renaissance dramatists were aware of Seneca's tragedies and knew the dramatic principles of Aristotle and Horace but did not disconnect themselves from their literary past. Medieval Church drama was dead by 1570, but not its influence. For hundreds of years English audiences had watched raucous comedy set alongside serious and devout religious themes, accepting dramatization from Eden to Gethsemane in a single play.

Renaissance dramatists included the wonderful irrationality and gruesome slaughters of medieval drama as well as classical elements. Interplay between English and continental, medieval and classical, was the groundwork upon which English drama developed until 1641 when all continuity was disrupted by the war between Charles I and parliament (led by the Puritan roundheads). In 1641 Puritan leaders, in control of London, outlawed drama proclaiming that "all stage players are hereby declared to be, and are, and shall be taken to be, rogues."

For 18+ years after 1641 the theaters were closed. A few private performances were produced, quietly, at the houses of nobility. But during Cromwell's commonwealth actors were dispersed, took up, new trades, died, as did the playwrights. By 1660, the Restoration under Charles II, England had changed politically, socially, and intellectually. Drama was legal once again. But there were few trained actors, no large theaters, very few dramatists, and no attentive audience. Aspiring dramatists had to recreate a dramatic tradition and looked to the French dramatic tradition. Charles II, after the defeat of his father's supporters, had spent much of his exile at the French court, acquiring a taste for French fashion and French entertainment, specifically French drama.

French dramatic theorists, as early as Julius Caesar Scaliger (1561), had elaborated rules of dramatization based on Aristotle, who had maintained that a play should have the unity of a living organism and that the action it represents should last, if possible, no longer than a single revolution

of the sun. But his 'Rules' were no step-by-step how-to process, which the French now approximated. Rules and theories developed by the French included:

- 1) Unity of action (subplots kept to a minimum; comedy and tragedy not mixed).
- 2) Unity of place (action limited to a single location).
- 3) Unity of time (time represented limited to the 2-3 hours it takes to act the play, at most 12-24 hours)
- 4) Poetic Justice (good rewarded, evil punished).
- 5) Unbroken scenes (The French stage was never unoccupied; a 2nd character was always introduced before the 1st exited).
- 6) Love a featured emotion of tragedy (contra Aristotle)
- 7) Finally, the neoclassical approach to the usefulness of terror and pity was to broaden into entertainment: "In effect, when the soul is shaken by emotions so natural and so humane [as terror and pity], all the impressions it feels become delightful; its trouble pleases, and the emotion it feels is a kind of charm to it, which does cast it into a sweet and profound meditation, and which insensibly does engage it in all the interests that are managed on the theatre."

Charles II gave theatre patents to Thomas Killigrew and William Davenant, authorizing them to start new acting companies and thus select and produce plays. They saw the opportunity for reassessment and change: women acting on the English stage, moveable scenery, costuming changes. Dramatists asked: what are the origins of tragedy and comedy? What are their correct uses? Which are their correct forms?

The vast differences between the work of Shakespeare and his contemporaries and the work of the ancients perplexed them. English drama became more self-conscious. The English dramatist becomes theoretician and critic as well as playwright.

The leading tragic dramatist from 1665 until his death in 1700, John Dryden, did not wholly subscribe to French neoclassicism -he admired the way Shakespeare broke the rules and still wrote great plays. Thomas Otway a master of Pathetic tragedy, could wring the tears from an audience's eye. He subscribed to the neoclassical rules less than Dryden, but was deeply influenced by themes of tested friendship, honor and love, so frequent in neoclassical works. With Dryden's *Heroic Drama*, the unities were often observed and moaning over love and ranting over honor had equal place; in a new twist, the heroic couplet was used.

These plays of the 1670s and 1680s, embody the classical-or neoclassical influence in England but with punctilious observation of 'rules.' Still, a formal, self-conscious drama, based on neoclassical dramatic theories, evolved:

- Formal, in part via elevated language.
- Plots that revolved around the concerns of Kings and rich upperclass;
- conventional themes of honor (for one's country, one's friends, or one's self) or love (love of wronged spouse, love of friend, love gone bad). All of these themes must be treated in a glorified and noble way. If the themes were not treated in a glorified and noble way, they must be treated in a highly emotional way. -formal, rhetorically-rich language through stylized plots, conventional themes of honor and love and overstated acting.

Diverse English Tragic dramatists worked under the influence, more or less, of neoclassicism between 1660 and 1698. [N.B.: John Milton, in his preface to *Samson Agonistes* (1671), praised classical drama over modern. Within the work he follows Greek tragedy, even to the inclusion of the chorus.] Most English dramatists, however, did not follow strictly such rules of content and form but strove for high seriousness and emotional impact to imitate, or improve upon, classical tragedy.

By the 1690s neoclassical influence was wearing thin. Little new tragedy was written and almost none successfully staged. Comedy, however, was alive and well. Restoration comedy had been lively, licentious satire that alternately celebrated and poked fun at the manners of the upperclass. By the end of the century, the bawdiness of the stage had gone too far. For some people, Jeremy Collier, a well-known clergyman, published *A Short View of the Profaneness and Immorality of the English Stage* (1698):

*The business of plays is to recommend virtue
and discountenance vice; to shew the
uncertainty of human greatness, the sudden
turns of fate, and the unhappy conclusions of
violence and injustice; 'tis to expose the
singularities of pride and fancy, to make folly
and falsehood contemptible, and to bring
everything that is ill under infamy and neglect.'*

Collier wanted to do away with, or at least reform the stage, so it showed mankind in his truly poor colors. Within the rather *Short View*, Collier showed the weaknesses of one play after another not only by pointing out racy passages, but also, pedantically, showing where plays did not conform to basically French neoclassical rules. His argument was timely and effective. What followed in comedy was the *Rise of Sentimentality* and a small renaissance of tragedy that conformed to neoclassical ideals.

Suddenly, after about 15 years of almost nothing, Rowe is writing his *She-Tragedies*; Addison his famous *Cato*; Thomson begins writing tragedies; Edward Young is writing (*Busiris* 1719 and *The Revenge* 1721); John Hughes' writes the successful *Siege of Damascus* 1720; Colley Cibber is working on comedies and tragedies. Things have shifted since the 1670s-1680s. But this is still recognizably High-Formal, and in many ways neoclassical, Tragedy.

Until 1730, the two original 1660 patents were in force, at times collapsed into one operating company, and at others split back into two. But from 1660 until about 1730 there were at most only two playhouses in London plus a rather large opera house. In 1728, John Gay's ballad opera, *The Beggar's Opera* broke attendance records, with a phenomenal run of performances. Interest in theatre-going shot up in London. A variety of smaller, un-licensed playhouses opened while authorities looked the other way.

Henry Fielding, an aspiring dramatist who couldn't make his traditional five-act plays work at the two patent houses, wrote & produced non-traditional fare in one of the smaller houses. Fielding, and others like him, performed truly experimental theater during the 1730s. Even the patent houses, pushed by the more innovative smaller theatres, started to produce farces and burlesques. Tragedy, which hadn't been doing badly during the 1720s, was revitalized as a comic vehicle. The butt of most jokes, of course, arose from the neoclassical trappings of the drama.

During the 1730s Fielding and others not only spoofed the by- then-conventional neoclassical Tragedy, but were helping to change it. The most significant Tragic playwright during this period was George Lillo, who wrote two plays: *The London Merchant* (1731) and *The Fatal Curiosity* (1736). Lillo's language was slightly earthier than that of the Tragedians before him. And Lillo's characters were real, middle-class people. [An apprentice falls madly in love and the wicked woman (a courtesan) asks him to rob his master. / A long-lost son shows up at his parents country cottage, but disguises his identity to see how they are now living and to heighten their eventual surprise. They are very poor; he is clearly very rich. They kill him during the night for his money, finding out the next morning he is their son.] Lillo (d 1739) had little impact on Tragedy in

England during the rest of the century. But he was quite an influence on nineteenth-century German playwrights.

Fielding's satire was too topical, too effective. In 1737 Robert Walpole, the prime minister, stung by one too many satirical jabs from the theaters, passed the Stage Licensing Act. Every play now had to be submitted to and licensed by the Lord Chamberlain. George Bernard Shaw once said something like: 'If Fielding had been allowed to stay in drama he would have been greater than Shakespeare.' Perhaps. But certainly, out of a job in 1737, Fielding turned to novels. In 1742, with his publication of *Joseph Andrews* hot on the heels of Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*, the modern novel was clearly visible.

With the smaller houses closed by the Stage Licensing Act, the two remaining patent houses became highly conservative. The old tragedies were performed, but nothing new stirred until 1747 when David Garrick became manager of the Dury Lane patent House. Garrick set about restoring Shakespeare plays to something like their original stage appearance. Most of Shakespeare's plays, if they stayed in repertoire, had been radically altered after 1660-to conform with neoclassical rules. Once Garrick showed up, the influence of the classics, distant as it had been, disappeared.