

Tom Kinsella - March 21st, 1993

## 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

of the sun. But his

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

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.