AND THEY CHANGED THEIR LIVES FROM THAT VERY HOUR:
Catharsis and Exemplum in the Baroque Trauerspiel

The depiction of tragedy in Aristotle’s Poetics, the primary authority for most later theorists of drama, focuses on a particular effect upon the audience which Aristotle perceives for the tragedies of his contemporaries. While the interpretations of Aristotle’s tragic theory and the translations of the key terminology vary greatly from one theorist or century to another, the basic outline of Aristotle’s theory is fairly clear: the tragedy, through the imitation of pathetic and fearful events, arouses the emotions of eleos (pity or empathy) and phobos (fear or horror) which bring about a catharsis (purging or purification of these or other emotions).¹ Like those of other centuries, the theorists and dramatists of seventeenth-century Germany felt they had to come to grips with Aristotle’s key concepts. Whether Jesuit schoolmaster or Protestant bureaucrat, each confronted Aristotle’s ideas and either worked to utilize them, to revise them, or to counteract them. The result is a new tragic drama based on Christian principles.¹ᵃ Unlike German drama of the previous

1. Since Aristotle’s Poetics does not define “catharsis,” most interpreters have used the definition provided in the Politics: catharsis is a therapeutic purging of emotions or passions. A recent scholar avoids looking beyond the Poetics for a definition and thus contradicts the centrality traditionally ascribed to catharsis in the theory. See Gerald F. Else, Aristotle’s Poetics: the Argument (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 1957), pp. 224-232 and 423-447. While his argument may be philologically sound, it is irrelevant for study of earlier reception of Aristotle.

¹ᵃ Few scholars have applied themselves to the problem of the use or non-use of Aristotelian concepts by the German Baroque dramatists. Emil Staiger dismisses Aristotle in his study on the Christianization of tragedy by claiming that a latter-day reader must forget all about classical drama in order to approach seventeenth-century Trauerspiele (“Die christliche Tragö-
century – Protestant school drama, Protestant Fastnachtspiel, Humanist allegorical masque – which affected the audience solely through an appeal to reason in the exemplum and Sentenz traditions, the neo-Aristotelian drama accomplished its purposes through the arousal of emotions in the audience.

Jacob Pontanus, a Jesuit theorist at the threshold of the Baroque (his Institutio Poetica appeared in 1594), began the chain of German theorists to address themselves to Aristotle’s discussion of the effect of the arousal of the “tragic emotions” upon the audience. Pontanus views tragedy as a mode of moral dissuasion and catharsis as the primary instrument for bringing about the moral betterment of the audience. He sees catharsis as the purification or moderation in the audience of those passions or vices which cause the catastrophe for the protagonist, an effect accomplished through the arousal of empathy with the protagonist and fear that the same fate could befall oneself.

Georg Harsdörffer, without directly addressing Aristotle’s