

CAMWS Classical Association of Middle West and South Presentation  
116<sup>th</sup> Virtual Annual Meeting  
May 26-30, 2020

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Thursday, May 28 Session 10, Section A: Greek Drama 4

Abstract Link:

<https://camws.org/sites/default/files/meeting2020/abstracts/2028AeschylusSeven.pdf>

### ***Aeschylus' Seven Against Thebes, Probability, and a New Theory of Tragedy***

I'd like to tell you about my new theory of tragedy called "risk theatre." In risk theatre, risk is the dramatic fulcrum of the action. To illustrate it, I'll use a play full of gambling references and high-risk action: Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes*.

Drama, I argue, dramatizes risk. Comedy dramatizes upside risk. Tragedy dramatizes downside risk. Tragic heroes are gamblers who gamble with something other than money. They make delirious bets that trigger devastating low-probability, high-consequence outcomes. Audiences ask: "How did such a good bet go awry?"

To begin a risk theatre read, look for a bet where much is at stake. High stakes entertain. When you go to the casino, you don't go to watch nickel and dime bets. You go to watch the heroes at the no-limit tables who lay down dignity, honour, or compassion, the milk of human kindness. You go to experience the emotions of *anticipation* and *apprehension*: anticipation for the magnitude of their wagers and apprehension for how they blow up. Even though heroes are smart, swift, and well-accoutered, they lose all. To see how they had every expectation of being crowned the ivy, yet lose all evokes wonder.

What's the bet in *Seven*? As civil war rages, Eteocles bets the gods are on his side. It's a high-risk bet, as Thebes' existence hangs on the line. It's a good bet, as he's defending native shrines from foreign aggressors. Why wouldn't the gods be on his side?

How will Eteocles know the gods are on his side? In this play, seven attacking captains are posted by lot—in other words randomly—to Thebes' seven gates. Eteocles, in turn, draws seven lots to post seven defenders. By drawing lots, he entrusts the outcome to the gods. If the gods smile, the matchups will be favourable. If the gods turn away, the matchups will be unfavourable. Through the crack that is probability and chance, the gods reveal their intent.

I follow Fritz-Gregor Hermann's conjecture that a stage direction instructing Eteocles to draw lots on stage was lost in transmission. Hermann's conjecture solves the problem of the tenses, as Eteocles shifts between the future, perfect, present, and aorist when announcing the defenders. Before, commentators were divided: some thought he decided the postings prior to the shield scene. Others thought he decides during the shield scene. And yet others thought he decided some before and some during.

If Eteocles draws lots on stage he can easily shift between tenses because he can be speaking before he draws the lot (“I *will* announce the winner”), as he’s drawing the lot (“I *see* the winner is”), or after he’s seen the lot (“A winner *has been* chosen”). Not only does the conjecture rehabilitate the shield scene, rebuked for being static, but it also heightens the suspense. Drawing lots is dramatic in itself, a device Aeschylus would revisit in the *Oresteia*.

Do the random matchups favour Eteocles? In aggregate, yes. Take the first gate, where the attacker shouts out impieties. Eteocles just happens to draw a defender who is “a noble man who honours the throne of Reverence (503).” Or, take the fourth gate where the attacker bears an image of Typhon on his shield. By a strange synchronicity, Eteocles draws a defender who has Zeus—Typhon’s slayer—emblazoned on his shield. Eteocles, pleased at this stroke, invokes Hermes, the god of luck, saying: “Hermes, by divine reason has matched this pair (625).” Through the crack in randomness, the gods reveal their will.

Additional subjective cues hearten Eteocles. There’s the enemy’s disarray. Their morale is so low that they prepare their obituaries. One of their captains says: “I’m going to die.” Dark omens hang over them. They harangue one another. Contrast this with the chorus of Theban women, who function as a barometer of morale within the city. They start by singing the fall of Thebes. But, by the first stasimon, they sing the ode to joy. From the matchups to the unfolding action, Eteocles has subjective reasons to believe.

Eteocles also has objective reasons to believe. With seven attackers, seven defenders, and seven gates, the worst-case scenario is buried deep in the odds. The worst-case scenario happens if he confronts his brother at the seventh gate. At the final gate, substitutions would no longer be possible, as all the captains are posted. Kindred blood would spill. It’s the worst-case scenario because there’re rituals to purify spilt blood, but no rituals to purify spilt kindred blood.

We can use this play to prove the theory of risk theatre because, with seven attackers, seven defenders, and seven gates, all the possible permutations of the attackers and defenders fall under the rules of probability. When Birnam Wood came to Dunsinane Hill, we felt it was a low-probability, high-consequence event, but failed to quantify it. When the detective on the trail of regicide finds out that he himself was the regicide, we felt it was a low-probability, high-consequence event, but failed to quantify it. Because of *Seven*’s unique construction, it’s the one play in the entire canon where we may calculate the odds of what did, and did not happen. With these odds, we may prove the risk theatre hypothesis. Let’s do math.

Mathematically, the likelihood of a compound event is the product of its individual probabilities. The odds of rolling snake-eyes, or two ones on six-sided dice, is 1:36, or 1:6 \* 1:6. On that analogy, the odds of the worst-case scenario are 1:49, the product of Polyneices’ odds (1:7) and Eteocles’ odds (1:7) of going to the final gate. The probability of the worst-case scenario happening is exceedingly low, about 2%. Most of the time—in fact, 48 out of 49 times—the worst case scenario is averted. Of course, Aeschylus doesn’t dramatize what

happens most of the time, but the lowest-probability, highest-consequence event. And that is exactly what risk theatre theory predicts.

If 1:49 odds aren't enough to entice you, if you say, "I need, at minimum, 1:1000 odds to be convinced that risk is the dramatic fulcrum of the action," then I offer you this. The odds of the brothers meeting at the seventh gate are 1:49, to be sure, but that figure hardly reflects the chance of *all* the matchups taking place *exactly* as they did. The play, argues Gilbert Murray and others, is structured so that the matchups from gates one to six bolster Eteocles' confidence with the result that, when he falls, he falls from a greater height. The play would be less if the captain with the Typhon device encounters anyone but the captain bearing Typhon's slayer. The question we need to ask, then, is: what are the odds of *all* the matchups taking place *exactly* as they did? This fascinating question has not been asked until today.

According to the law of permutations, the formula to find how many unique arrangements there are with seven captains at seven gates is seven factorial (7!) or  $7 * 6 * 5 * 4 * 3 * 2 * 1$ , which equal 5040. Since there are seven attacking and seven defending captains, to find out how many unique pairings exist at seven gates, multiply 5040 by 5040. With seven gates, seven attackers, and seven defenders 25,401,600 permutations are possible. The odds, therefore, of Eteocles being raised up from gates one to six only to be struck down at gate seven are 25,401,599:1 against. Aeschylus has transformed the fated outcome, known to all, into an exceedingly improbable event. This is exactly what the theory of risk theatre predicts.

If Birnam Wood coming to Dunsinane Hill couldn't convince you, if the uncanny reunion of Oedipus with the Corinthian messenger and the shepherd couldn't convince you, then I hope today's reading convinces you that the function of tragedy is to dramatize low-probability, high-consequence risk events. I give you over twenty five million reasons to believe.

This concludes my reading. Tragedy starts with a bet. An all-in bet with much at stake. It's a good bet with a high likelihood of success. But the hero's expectations are dashed when, against all odds, the unexpected happens. Tragedy functions by suppressing the subjective odds of the fated event happening so that, when it happens, the audience is dumbstruck. Fate suppressed rages and explodes.

To take risk theatre from page to stage, I founded the world's largest competition for the writing of tragedy with Langham Court Theatre, one of Canada's oldest and most respected theatres. Every year, winners receive over \$11,000 in cash and a trip to Victoria which culminates in a workshop and staged reading. Congratulations to Brooklyn playwright Gabriel Jason Dean for winning the inaugural competition with his play *In Bloom*, a story of a well-meaning journalist who crosses the line. The website is at [risktheatre.com](http://risktheatre.com).

Risk theatre is inaugurating a new tragic age in drama and literature that will rival fifth century Athens and the English Renaissance. Aeschylus' *Seven* leads the charge as risk theatre's paradigm play. "Risk" dominates today's headlines and, to understand risk, we return to the

ancients who began by dramatizing the consequences of what happens when more things happen than what we think will happen.

Risk theatre is literary theory's finest hour in the 21<sup>st</sup> century because it recalls something that has been forgotten so long, namely, that risk is the dramatic pivot of the action. I challenge you to use it on all your favourite works, whether they're novels, history, biography, opera, or films, and I promise you you'll never read a work of literature the same way. Please tell everyone about this bold new tool of interpretation and ask your local library to carry my book: *The Risk Theatre Model of Tragedy: Gambling, Drama, and the Unexpected*. Review copies are available at *Classical Journal* and *The Bryn Mawr Classical Review*. An audiobook version, narrated by Greg Patmore of *Coronation Street*, is also available.

Thank you, and welcome to the new tragic age.