

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

In Euripides' *Bacchae*, the worst-case scenario happens to Pentheus if the stranger spreading a seditious cult happens to be a god, and not a hobo. In Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, the worst-case scenario happens to Macbeth if his opponent happens to be not born of woman. In Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, the worst-case scenario happens to Loman if he discovers that his insurance policy makes him worth more dead than alive. In Sophocles' *Oedipus rex*, the worst-case scenario happens to Oedipus if he finds out that he is the regicide. What were the odds of the worst-case scenario happening in each of these cases? Although the odds appear to be a longshot, they are impossible to quantify. In the tragic canon, there is one play—and one play only—where it is possible to quantify and demonstrate the odds of everything that does happen and does not happen. This fascinating play is Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes*.

In Aeschylus' *Seven*, seven attacking captains—one of whom is Polyneices—lay siege to seven-gated Thebes. Seven defending captains—one of whom is Polyneices' brother Eteocles—defend Thebes' seven gates. The worst-case scenario takes place if brother confronts brother at the seventh gate: brother will kill brother, kindred blood will be shed, and, in addition to the normal hazards of warfare, miasma results and the Furies will be unleashed. Because the captains are assigned their gates by a random, lottery process (Hermann, 2013), it is possible to precisely quantify the odds of the worst-case scenario. The worst-case scenario odds are 1:49. Conversely, the odds that the worst-case scenario does not happen are 48:49. The worst-case scenario is therefore an unexpected, low-probability outcome with odds 48 to 49 against. Most of the time, Polyneices will not encounter Eteocles at the seventh gate. Because the peculiar structure in *Seven* (seven attackers, seven defenders, and seven gates) allows us to work out all the

permutations and combinations of the captains at the gates, we can determine the odds of the worst-case scenario. And, because we can determine the extent to which Aeschylus paradoxically brings about the fated event seemingly against all odds, we can quantitatively verify what we had suspected from watching *Bacchae*, *Macbeth*, *Death of a Salesman*, *Oedipus rex*, and other tragedies, and that is that unexpected and unanticipated low-probability events happen with alarming frequency in tragedy. What is more, these low-probability events carry the highest consequences. Heroes' best-laid plans are often dashed because of such events and all is lost.

The observation that low-probability events (low-probability from the point of view of the characters who do not see them coming) can have high-consequences leads to an interesting conjecture: what if tragedy is a theatre of risk, a stage where risk is the dramatic fulcrum of the action? In other words, the mystique of tragedy is not so much wrapped around motivations and nobility and flaws but around a hero who, by taking on too much risk, triggers exceedingly low-probability, high-consequence events?

My paper will close by exploring, as a point of further thought, how tragedy can be thought of as “risk theatre” and how risk theatre can be the basis of a bold new 21st century theory of tragedy, one which resonates with modern preoccupations with chance, uncertainty, and probability. Risk theater asks, “What if something happens that we did not think would happen?” and understands that tragedy dramatizes the limitations of intention against the vastness of the possible. Tragedy, in this view, is an exercise in risk management: by dramatizing risk, audiences emerge from the theatre with a higher sensibility of unintended consequences. By understanding this, ancient tragedy can powerfully speak to modern audiences who see scientists, engineers, and policy-makers gamble with the future of the world: it might happen the way they

think it will happen, but, then again, more can happen than what their models project. With our technological, financial, and military wherewithal, we have a moral imperative to better understand risk, and the best way to examine risk is through tragedy.

Bibliography

Hermann, Fritz-Gregor. "Eteocles's Decision in Aeschylus' *Seven against Thebes*." In *Tragedy and Archaic Greek Thought*, edited by Douglas Cairns, 39-80. Swansea: Classical Press of Wales, 2013.