

## Chapter 2

# Understanding Tragedy and Understanding International Relations

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Tragedy is one of the oldest conceptual lenses of Western culture. Indeed; it would not be an exaggeration to say that tragedy is constitutive of Western culture itself.<sup>1</sup> Writing more than two millennia ago, Thucydides thought that tragedy was an appropriate lens through which to view international relations.<sup>2</sup> We interrogate this assumption. Does tragedy offer a plausible framework for examining international relations? If so, in what ways can the concept of tragedy revealed in ancient Greek, Shakespearean, and later dramas inform and enrich our understanding of international relations today? And, perhaps most importantly, if the lens of tragedy *does* illuminate aspects of international relations for us, can this knowledge enhance our chances of avoiding or reducing tragic outcomes in the future? The contributors to this volume by no means agree on the answers to these questions. We do, however, agree that these are crucial points of enquiry.

Importantly, we also share a common conceptual starting-point. When we invoke the idea of tragedy, we all refer to a particular genre and set of constitutive concepts—albeit sometimes skeptically or critically, and often with subtle differences of interpretation. In this chapter, we, the editors, comment on this understanding of tragedy and say something about its genesis—a move that takes us back to Athens in the fifth century BCE. We suggest that this understanding of tragedy

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<sup>2</sup>Thucydides, *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War* (revised edition of the Richard Crawley translation), ed by Robert B. Strassler (New York: Free Press (1996)).

remains relevant to us today, even though we are steeped in profoundly different circumstances than the audiences of Euripides or Aeschylus, Sophocles or Shakespeare. Tragedy, we contend, continues to offer prescient and important insights into international relations, a proposition that is thoroughly explored and debated in subsequent chapters.

## 2.1 Understanding Tragedy

The most frequent associations between tragedy and international relations involve the everyday, English-language use of the word tragedy as connoting, quite simply, horrible things happening to generally innocent people. ‘Tragedy’ and ‘tragic’ are routinely used to describe circumstances of seemingly inexplicable suffering. It should perhaps not be surprising then to find that these terms are regularly invoked in commentaries on international relations to punctuate declarations of grief and disbelief in the face of cataclysmic events. Earthquakes and floods, wars and famines, epidemics and environmental disasters are all described as ‘tragic’ in this sense. Standard shorthand for the 1994 genocide in which approximately 800,000 people were murdered is the ‘Rwanda tragedy’; the 2010 *Deepwater Horizon* oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico has been branded the ‘BP tragedy’. We acknowledge this colloquial use of tragedy, but explore a different, more specific, historical understanding of the term; one that we argue has particular purchase for analyzing international relations.

Our conception of tragedy has roots in ancient Athens where it was associated with a form of theatre that not only had a profound impact on the *polis* but also on the subsequent development of European philosophy and culture.<sup>3</sup> Attempting to reduce our understanding of tragedy to a single definition would be difficult and counterproductive. Stephen Booth observes that ‘[t]he search for a definition of tragedy has been the most persistent and widespread of all nonreligious quests for

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<sup>3</sup>For useful introductions to this genre, see the following: ‘Tragedy’, in M. Banham (ed.) (1995) *Cambridge Guide to Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 1118–20; S. L. Feagin (1998) ‘Tragedy’, in E. Craig (ed.) *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (London: Routledge), vol. 9, pp. 447–52; M. Weitz (1967) ‘Tragedy’, in P. Edwards (ed.) *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (London: Collier-Macmillan), pp. 155–61; J. Drakakis and N. Conn Liebler (1998) ‘Introduction’, in J. Drakakis and N. Conn Liebler (eds) *Tragedy* (London: Longman), pp. 1–20; and J. Wallace (2007) *The Cambridge Introduction to Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press). For an introduction to this genre and its constitutive concepts in the specific context of international relations, see R. N. Lebow (2003) *The Tragic Vision of Politics: Ethics, Interests and Orders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

definition'.<sup>4</sup> This is not a quest we wish to join. Tragedy is a multifaceted genre whose many faces tell us different and not always compatible things about life—and about international relations. While abstract and spare in its presentation, tragedy revels in complexity. We want to highlight this complexity rather than forcing tragedy into a conceptual straight jacket.

Our understanding of tragedy can be traced back to fifth-century Athenian plays that the Greeks called '*tragoidia*'. These plays flourished in a short-lived moment—the second half of the fifth century BCE in Athens—when drama, politics, and philosophy were intimately connected. The Athenian Dionysia, a large festival held every year in late March in honor of the god Dionysus, was its venue. Tragedies and other plays were performed in a large, open-air amphitheater on the southern slope of the Acropolis before an audience of citizens and non-citizens, Athenians and foreigners, of all classes. The generals (*strategoi*) poured the libations to open the festival, and this was followed by a public display of allied tribute, an announcement of the names of the city's benefactors (including those who underwrote the cost of producing the plays), and a parade of state-educated boys, now men, in full military panoply provided by the city. The plays themselves were organized as a contest (*agon*) in which playwrights competed with words in the same way that personal and political disputes were transformed into verbal contests in the law courts and assembly.

Despite these very specific origins, tragedy was not limited to ancient Greece. As a genre, tragedy survived and assumed a variety of forms and features in different historical and social contexts. Our understanding of tragedy has evolved and broadened to accommodate these latter examples. Playwrights and scholars alike have stretched and reinterpreted the parameters of the genre. Recognizing this evolution and diversity is critical to understanding not only tragedy but also the changing circumstances to which it has been adapted. It nevertheless makes sense to begin our overview with the account of tragedy provided by Aristotle, our most impressive secondary Greek source and near-contemporary of the great fifth-century playwrights. Aristotle established formal categories! That have remained central to contemporary understandings of tragedy, even though, as John Drakakis and Naomi Conn Liebler observe, 'their discursive force has been transformed over time'.<sup>5</sup> These categories are adopted and discussed throughout the volume, whether or not individual contributors invoke Aristotle explicitly.

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<sup>4</sup>S. Booth (1983) *King Lear, Macbeth, Indefinition and Tragedy* (New Haven: Yale University Press), p. 81.

<sup>5</sup>Drakakis and Liebler (1998) 'Introduction', p. 3. For a more critical account of the esteem given to these Aristotelian categories in analyses of tragedy, see Booth (1983) *King Lear, Macbeth, Indefinition and Tragedy*, p. 82: 'we still use Aristotle's dicta on tragedy in the way we use a source of truth that, like the revealed truth of the Bible, is not available to human beings first hand.'

For Aristotle, tragedy is a type of ‘imitation’ (*mimesis*), which is distinct from other modes of imitation such as music, comedy, and epic poetry.<sup>6</sup> ‘A tragedy, then’, Aristotle famously extols in the *Poetics*, ‘is the imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself... with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions’.<sup>7</sup> Central to the Aristotelian interpretation is the audience’s emotional response to the suffering of the hero and the release (*katharsis*) this ultimately engenders. Aristotle maintains that only a particular type of plot is capable of eliciting these emotions.<sup>8</sup> The structure of the drama is accordingly also a fundamental attribute of tragedy.<sup>9</sup> To qualify as a tragedy, the plot must contain some great miscalculation or error of judgement (*hamartia*) on the part of the protagonist. In ‘complex tragedies’, this miscalculation sets in motion a chain of events that lead to a reversal of fortune (*peripeteia*) and recognition (*anagnorisis*) in the sense of a transformation from ignorance to knowledge as the protagonist realizes his error.<sup>10</sup> Aristotle describes the protagonist as being ‘one like ourselves’ (and thereby eliciting fear of our own vulnerability), but also as being of ‘great reputation and prosperity’ who is, in some respects, better than the average man (and thereby having farther to fall).<sup>11</sup> This tragic hero makes choices—and invariably arrives at the ‘wrong’<sup>1</sup> decisions in that they ultimately but ineluctably lead to disastrous outcomes. The agent is often presented to us as someone who has considerable free choice but is deeply affected by forces and structures beyond his control.<sup>12</sup> Alternatively, the *hamartia* arises from an inflexible and unyielding commitment to an otherwise laudable value like

<sup>6</sup>Aristotle, *Poetics*, in J. Barnes (ed.) (1984) *Complete Works of Aristotle, Volume 2; The Revised Oxford Translation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 1447a 15–18. (With Aristotle we follow the standard numbering procedure, which refers back to Immanuel Bekker’s 1931 edition of the Greek text and consists of a page number, column and line. Thus, *Poetics* 1447a 15–18 refers to lines 15 to 18 of the first column of page 1447 of Bekker’s edition.)

<sup>7</sup>Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1449b 23–7.

<sup>8</sup>Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1452a 2–10; See also the discussion in Feagin (1998) ‘Tragedy’, p. 448.

<sup>9</sup>Wallace highlights both the ‘functional’ and ‘formal’ aspects of Aristotle’s definition of tragedy along these lines in Wallace (2007) *The Cambridge Introduction to Tragedy*, p. 118.

<sup>10</sup>Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1452a 10–1452b 10. Aristotle defines both ‘simple tragedies and those that distinguish themselves as superior, ‘complex’ examples.

<sup>11</sup>Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1453a 1–20.

<sup>12</sup>We have put scare quotes around ‘wrong’ simply as a reminder of the complex understanding of outcomes as the result of both actions (and misjudgements) of agents and forces and circumstances beyond the control of these agents. It would be misleading to present this conception of tragedy as involving the protagonist choosing a course of action that is clearly wrong over one that is unambiguously right. As Drakakis and Conn Liebler note, the drama would then be devoid of the Aristotelian understanding of dilemma and, instead, take on ‘the shape of simple melodrama, pitting forces clearly identifiable as ‘good’ and ‘evil’ respectively against each other, and not tragedy’. Rather, ‘*hamartia*, “missing the mark”, is understood not as an optional or avoidable “error” resulting from some inadequacy or “flaw” in the “character” of the protagonist but as something that *happens* in consequence of the complex situation represented in the drama’. See Drakakis and Liebler (1998) ‘Introduction’, p. 9. Mervyn Frost makes a similar point in Chapter 2 of this volume, pp. 21–43.

honor, family, or civil order. The pity and fear of the members of the audience is a response to what they understand, at least in part, to be ‘undeserved misfortune’ by the protagonist.<sup>13</sup> The fact that people of noble character can make profound and consequential mistakes drives home the realization that fortune is precarious for the mighty and powerless alike. We too can take wrong turns, antagonize the gods or our fellow human beings, and stumble into adversity.

Greek tragedies flourished for less than a century. Jean-Pierre Vernant suggests that tragedy could only exist when the distance between the heroic past and its religious values was great enough to allow new values based on the *polls* and its juridical structure to have emerged, but close enough for the conflict in values to have been painfully real.<sup>14</sup> For tragic man to appear, the concept of human action must have emerged but not yet acquired too autonomous a status. By the first decade of the fourth century BCE that moment had passed. Athenians had lost a war and an empire, and, perhaps, the inner strength and confidence necessary to confront, let alone relish, critical portrayals of *polls* life and the human condition.<sup>15</sup>

Most classicists encourage us to consider tragedy a culturally specific phenomenon. For classicists, tragedy must be situated in context, and is a vehicle for helping us understand fifth-century Athens and Greek life more generally. We respect this focus, but insist that just as texts take on meanings beyond those intended by their authors, so do genres. Moreover, by analyzing these genres we can ask and perhaps answer questions that could not have been framed in fifth-century Greece.

Tragedy was revived during the Renaissance, and the tragedies of William Shakespeare arguably reached an artistic level equal to those of ancient Athens. There can be little doubt that Greek tragedy was a model for Shakespeare. *Romeo and Juliette* addresses the same theme as Aeschylus’ trilogy, the *Oresteia*: how private feuds threaten the city. To suggest the link between the two dramatic representations, Shakespeare names the prince of Verona ‘Escalus’, a thinly veiled reference to Aeschylus. The prince’s name is perhaps also a play on the word

<sup>13</sup>Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1453a 1–5.

<sup>14</sup>J. -P. Vernant (1990) ‘Tensions and Ambiguities in Greek Tragedy’, in J. -P. Vernant and P. Vidal-Naquet (eds) *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece* (New York: Zone Books), pp. 29–48.

<sup>15</sup>J. -P. Vernant (1972) ‘Greek Tragedy: Problems of Interpretation’, in R. Macksey and E. Donato (eds) *The Structuralist Controversy: The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press), pp. 273–88, and Vernant (1990) ‘Tensions and Ambiguities in Greek Tragedy’; C. Segal (2001) *Oedipus Tyrannus: Tragic Heroism and the Limits of Knowledge*, 2nd edn (New York: Oxford University Press), pp. 15–18, 20–2; S. Goldhill (1986) *Reading Greek Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), and Goldhill (1990) ‘The Great Dionysia and Civic Ideology’, in J. J. Winkler and R. I. Zeitlin (eds) *Nothing to Do with Dionysos?: Athenian Drama in Its Social Context* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), pp. 97–129; J. J. Winkler (1990) ‘The Ephebes’ Song: *Tragoidia* and Polis’, in Winkler and Zeitlin (eds) *Nothing to Do with Dionysos?* pp. 20–62; F. I. Zeitlin (1986) ‘Thebes: Theater of Self and Society in Athenian Drama’, in J. P. Euben (ed.) *Greek Tragedy and Political Theory* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press), pp. 101–41; J. P. Euben (1990) *The Tragedy of Political Theory: The Road Not Taken* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), pp. 50–9.

‘escalation’, and may convey Shakespeare’s greater pessimism, evident in the contrasting outcomes of the two tragedies.<sup>16</sup> Not only did classical Greek tragedy provide inspiration for Shakespeare, but the genre of tragedy has been strongly influenced by the Elizabethan playwright—an *influence* that is apparent in the attention paid to Shakespearean dramas in a number of the chapters that follow. Of course, as Chris Brown notes in his contribution, Shakespearean tragedies differ in significant ways from their classical predecessors.<sup>17</sup> In his acclaimed analysis of (Shakespearean tragedy; A. C. Bradley observes that Shakespearean tragedies have, ‘up to a certain point, a common form or structure’ that distinguishes them from Greek tragedies.<sup>18</sup> Bradley characterizes Shakespearean tragedy as ‘the story... of human actions producing exceptional calamity’, thereby rejecting the role of fate found in Greek tragedy and highlighting the challenging theme of moral responsibility that we will return to in our concluding chapter.<sup>19</sup> Another difference that is frequently noted is the interiority of Shakespearean characters in contrast to their Greek counterparts. The characters of Greek tragedy are distinguished by a particular combination of traits, skills, and commitments and are presented as universal archetypes, not as unique individuals.<sup>20</sup> Yet, these and other differences between Greek and Shakespearean tragedy should not detract our attention from their many common features that have led generations of critics to categorize them within a single genre. Indeed, Bradley repeatedly refers to the defining capacity of Shakespearean tragedy to evoke fear and pity, thereby aligning it with the Aristotelian understanding of Greek tragedy, even though the means by which Shakespearean tragedies evoke these emotions sets them apart.<sup>21</sup> Both variations on

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<sup>16</sup>Athena’s intervention saves Orestes in Aeschylus’ trilogy, putting an end to the feud that has all but destroyed the house of Atreus and making the city and its courts the proper; venue for dispute resolution. By contrast, Escalus’ intervention, which takes the form of Imposing the death penalty on dueling, compels Romeo to See Verona and sets in motion the **chain** of events that culminates in his arid Juliette’s suicides.

<sup>17</sup>C. Brown, ‘Tragedy, “Tragic Choices” and Contemporary International Political Theory’, Chapter 6, this volume, 75–85 (p. 75).

<sup>18</sup>A- C, Bradley ([1904] 2007) *Shakespearean Tragedy*, 4th edn (London: Palgrave Macmillan), p. xlviii.

<sup>19</sup>For this definition of tragedy, see Bradley ([1904] 2007) *Shakespearean Tragedy*, p. 9; for Bradley’s analysis of the role of fate in Shakespearean tragedy, see Bradley, pp. 16–20. It should be noted, however, that the degree to which Greek tragedy relies on fate, and the degree to which it allows for the influence of agency, are open to debate. We return to these questions in Chapter 14 and note that-although outcomes in Greek tragedies may seem preordained, the audience retains the impression that these outcomes also rely on the decisions and actions of individual agents.

<sup>20</sup>*Lebow makes this point in In Search of Ourselves: The Politics and Ethics of Identity (forthcoming).*

<sup>21</sup>It is interesting to note that Aristotle’s categories frequently seem very well-suited to Shakespearean as well as Greek tragedy. Not only does A. C. Bradley (implicitly) draw on Aristotelian concepts in his *Shakespearean Tragedy*, but Walter Kaufmann notes in *Tragedy & Philosophy* (New York: Anchor (1969)), p. 317, that ‘it is one of the great ironies of history that some of Aristotle’s ideas about tragedy seem to apply rather better to Shakespeare than to Aeschylus or Sophocles’.

tragedy, according to our contributors, yield important insights for international relations.

Moreover—and importantly for a volume that looks at the relationship between tragedy and politics—the genre attracted the attention of a number of prominent eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European philosophers who have exerted a significant influence on contemporary political thought. David Hume, G.W.F. Hegel, Karl Marx, and Friedrich Nietzsche, among others, either use tragedy to establish theoretical frameworks or employ their own frameworks to reflect on the relationship between tragedy and political life. Hegel, for example, reflecting on Greek tragedy, but breaking from the focus on human suffering and purgation of the Aristotelian tradition, reads tragic plots as explorations of conflicting conceptions of duty, ‘the collision of equally justified powers and individuals’.<sup>22</sup> Such conflicts are at their core identity conflicts, which, for Hegel, reflect a particularly modern dilemma. Nietzsche rejects Hegel’s valorization of the ‘rational’ in Greek tragedy and celebrates the ‘Dionysian’ irrational element of tragedy which he compares to the spirit of music.<sup>23</sup> Nietzsche remains focused on suffering, but maintains, optimistically, that it can [be transcended: ‘despite every phenomenal change, life is at bottom indestructibly joyful and powerful’].<sup>24</sup>

If Shakespeare’s borrowing from Greek tragedy can enrich his dramas and encourage us to find in them deeper levels of meaning, and if philosophers such as Hegel and Nietzsche can draw on the same source to enhance their own work, we lesser mortals can mine the rich trove of tragedy and reflections about it to help us interrogate contemporary realities. Of course, defending such a project requires that we anticipate the concerns of those who might question our move of transposing the genre of tragedy from the time and place in which it originally flourished, to our own, markedly different, circumstances.

## 2.2 Contemporary Relevance

A critic might object to our attempt to view today’s world through a lens borrowed from a radically different time and context and argue that any image produced by it would necessarily be blurred and distorted. In the second half of the fifth century BCE, Greek city states shared a common culture and relations among them were considered an extension of interpersonal and family relations. There was not even a word for foreign policy, and *xenia*, or guest friendship, was most often invoked to

<sup>22</sup>Hegel, *Hegel’s Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. by T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press (1975)), vol. II, p. 1213.

<sup>23</sup>Wallace (2007) *The Cambridge Introduction to Tragedy*, p. 124.

<sup>24</sup>F. Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. by Douglas Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press (2000)), p. vii. Benjamin Schupmann and Tracy Strong offer valuable analyses of Nietzsche’s account of tragedy in Chapters 10 (pp. 129–143) and 11 (pp. 144–157) of this volume, respectively.



describe inter-polis relations. Greeks expected these relations to be governed by the same pattern of mutual obligation, generosity and self-restraint that applied to relations between households. Fifth-century Greeks never thought that *xenia* could be extended to non-Greeks, were different from their own. Few contemporary countries remotely resemble city states, and even those few existing city states have much larger populations than Athens, which was the largest Greek polis. Face-to-face relations among citizens who *i* make (or at least debate and ratify) policies are no longer possible. A critic of our comparative enterprise might also point out that even countries that comprise reasonably robust regional political systems differ significantly in their cultures, making modern day regional relations, let alone international relations, much closer to relations between Greeks [and their non-Greek neighbors, than to inter-polis relations. Not only have we left the specific setting of the Greek tragedy, but, more importantly, we lack the kind of political and civic structure in which it thrived—and made sense.

To underline this point, our critic might note the decline and all but disappearance of tragedy at the end of the fifth century BCE. At a certain moment, tragedy was no longer regarded as an appropriate vehicle for Athenians to work through contemporary political and ethical issues and consolidate civic identity. No great Greek tragedies were written after the death of Euripides in about 406. If tragedy is so culturally specific that it was no longer an appropriate trope in fourth-century Athens, what possible relevance can it have today? In our twenty-first-century world of climate change and clones, ‘medical miracles’ and weapons of mass destruction, cyberspace, and international courts, what can world intended to negotiate and sustain civic culture in pre-industrial settings possibly teach us? Many of the ethical choices and dilemmas that face us now could not have been conceived of in ancient Greece or in Elizabethan England for that matter. Arguably, the way we perceive life and death has changed irrevocably; our capacity to understand and manipulate our environment has been enhanced; our conceptions of obligation, human agency, nature, and religion would be foreign to the audiences who attended tragedies in Greek or Elizabethan times. We bear radically different moral burdens and are heirs to distinct cultural legacies and political problems. The questions posed by Greek and Shakespearean tragedies, our sceptic would challenge, are no longer *our* questions.

Finally, our critic might, with reason, doubt our ability to experience tragedies in the ways their authors intended. The performance and role of tragedies in fifth-century Athens and Elizabethan England were phenomena whose significance and meanings are elusive to us. Adrian Poole contends that ‘[t]he theatre itself does not occupy for us the kind of cultural centrality that it did for the Greeks or for Shakespeare’ and ‘whether one reads [tragedy] in Greek or English translation, what we have to play with are the shadows of what was once the substance of an occasion, a performance’.<sup>25</sup> With specific respect to Greek tragedy, Vernant

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<sup>25</sup>A. Poole (1987) *Tragedy: Shakespeare and the Greek Example* (New York: Basil Blackwell), pp. 5, 7.



emphasizes that this spectacle was not merely an art form, but a ‘social institution that the city, by establishing competitions in tragedies, set up alongside its political and legal institutions’.<sup>26</sup> Tragedy no longer fills this role, nor can it for us.

We acknowledge all of these differences, but then we do not intend to use tragedy as political theatre to negotiate change and build legitimacy. Tragedy served additional purposes in Athens and these ends may be more relevant to our world. As we shall see, tragedy was also used to understand and challenge foreign policy at the moment when competition between hegemonies became sufficiently acute that neither felt any longer restrained by considerations of *xenia* or the responsibilities of *hēgemōnia*. In addition, Greek tragedies conveyed ethical insights; they were an important source of moral guidance. The ethical questions that we face differ from those of the past, yet broad tragic themes endure, such as human limitation and fallibility, painful deliberation in the face of conflicting ethical commitments, and the ambiguity of evolving norms and values. Tragedies were written at a time when values were in flux.<sup>27</sup> These works have achieved particular resonance during instances of upheaval. If, as Poole suggests, ‘[t]he very substance of these plays is the rejection of precedent, or the need to break new bounds, to move into uncharted territory’, then tragedies have the potential to outlive the particular context in which they were first written and performed.<sup>28</sup> Tragedies offer people broader understandings of themselves and their place in the world rather than socializing them to specific beliefs or behaviors. They might be said to impart a tragic view of life and politics which, some of our contributors maintain, transcends time and culture because it describes fundamental verities of human existence. Indeed, one of our key assumptions in editing this volume is that the insights achieved through an appreciation of tragedy are as relevant today as they were in the very different circumstances that inspired the emergence of this genre.

## 2.3 Two Insights for International Relations

Of the many insights revealed by tragedy, two seem particularly relevant to contemporary international relations: its enduring capacity to warn us of the dangers of power and success and its problematization of all conceptions of justice. The ‘first

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<sup>26</sup>Verdant (1990) ‘Tensions and Ambiguities in Greek Tragedy’, pp. 29–49, (pp. 32–3).

<sup>27</sup>We have been particularly influenced on this point by Vernant. See his (1990b) ‘The Historical Moment of Tragedy in Greece: Some of the Social and Psychological Conditions’, in Vernant and Vidal-Naquet (eds) *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, pp. 23–8, and ‘Tensions and Ambiguities in Greek Tragedy’. In ‘Tensions and Ambiguities’, p. 33, Vernant observes that ‘although tragedy, more than any other genre of literature ... appears rooted in social reality, that does not mean that it is a reflection of it. It does not [reflect that reality but calls it into question]’. For a similar argument that ‘tragedy’s point ... was the breaking of conventional boundaries,’ see J. P. Euben, Chapter 7, this volume, pp. 86–96 (p. 92).

<sup>28</sup>Poole (1987) *Tragedy: Shakespeare and the Greek Example*, p. 12.

of these two insights has to do with hubris and its likely consequences. The more powerful and successful an actor becomes, the greater the temptation to overreach in the unreasonable expectation that it is possible to predict, influence, or control the actions of others and by doing so gain more honor, wealth, or power. Hubris for the Greeks is a category error; powerful people make the mistake of comparing themselves to the gods, who have the ability to foresee and control the future. This arrogance and overconfidence leads them to embrace complex and risky initiatives that frequently have outcomes diametrically opposed to those they seek. In Greek tragedy, hubris leads to self-seduction (*ate*), serious miscalculation (*hamartia*) and, finally revenge of their gods (*nemesis*). In the case of Oedipus, the tragic hero of the three remaining plays that make up Sophocles' celebrated Theban storyline (*Oedipus Tyrannous*, *Oedipus at Colons* and *Antigone*), *nemesis* produces an outcome the reverse of what the actor expected to achieve.<sup>29</sup> Oedipus brings his fate upon himself by a double act of hubris: he refuses to back off at the crossroads when confronted with a stranger's road rage, and he trusts blindly in his ability to reason his way to a solution to the city's infertility, despite multiple warnings to the contrary. In *Antigone* (chronologically, the third of these Theban plays), Creon, who succeeds Oedipus as the ruler of Thebes, refuses to bury the traitor Polynices in order to assert his power as the undisputed ruler of the city, and, for the same reason, sentences Antigone to a live burial for attempting to give her brother the proper rites in violation of his edict.<sup>30</sup> After being warned by Tiresias, the same blind prophet who warned Oedipus, Creon tries in vain to save Antigone, but she has taken her own life, as do Creon's wife and son after learning of her death. Creon's actions were intended to save the city, but brought disorder and the downfall of his house. We all have a dangerous propensity for overestimating our capacities. By making us confront our limits and recognize that chaos lurks just beyond the fragile barriers we erect to keep it at bay, tragedy can help keep our conceptions of ourselves, and our societies, from becoming infused with hubris.

As far as we know, Herodotus was the first to reveal this important insight by applying the tragic plot line to history in his account of the Persian Wars. Xerxes' decision to invade Greece is portrayed as an act of hubris and the defeat of his fleet at Salamis in 480 BCE as his fitting *nemesis*. Thucydides tells a similar tale in his account of the Peloponnesian War, with Athens cast as Persia, the decision to ally with Corcyra and the Sicilian Expedition as a double *hamartia*, and the destruction of the Athenian fleet and army in Syracuse, defeat by Sparta and loss of empire as a

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<sup>29</sup>We have avoided the label 'trilogy' here simply because the plays were not written as such, but, rather, are what remain of three different sets of plays, written by Sophocles for three separate competitions.

<sup>30</sup>Sophocles did not compose these plays in chronological order. Rather, they were written in the order of *Antigone*, *Oedipus Tyrannos* and *Oedipus at Colonus*.

fitting *nemesis*?<sup>31</sup> In modern times, hubris has been found a useful and revealing framework to explain Louis XIV's drive for hegemony, Germany's expectation of a limited war in the east in 1914, Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, and the behavior of the US after the end of the Cold War. The 2003 Anglo-American invasion of Iraq arguably revealed all the hallmarks of hubris. The invasion of Iraq was expected to be a short-term, low-cost operation that would replace Saddam Hussein's regime with a pro-American one and make Iran, North Korea and the Palestinians more compliant.<sup>32</sup> It turned into a costly, open-ended commitment that undermined British and American prestige and may have emboldened Iran and North Korea to accelerate their nuclear programs. Analysts—including the editors of this volume and three of our contributors—are not shy about attributing this outcome to the hubris of the Bush administration, which led its senior officials to assume the presence of weapons of mass destruction, a quick victory with minimal forces, a joyous welcome by 'liberated' Iraqis, and, given their power and popularity, no need to plan their occupation of the country beyond occupation of the oil ministry.<sup>33</sup> A tragic understanding has the potential to make us more cautious in formulating foreign policy goals in recognition of the self-defeating outcomes of excesses of power and confidence.

A second insight for contemporary international relations revealed through tragedy has to do with our understanding of justice. Tragedies often present the audience with contrasting and equally valid conceptions of justice, as in, again, *Antigone*, where Creon and Antigone are absolutely unyielding in their respective commitments to civil and religious authority. In Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, which tells the tragic tale of the house of Atreus, the audience confronts the moral dilemma caused by Orestes murdering his mother, Clytemnestra. The Furies, who pursue him, insist that it is wrong to murder a parent, while Orestes maintains that he was fulfilling his duty as a son by avenging his father's murder at the hands of his mother and her lover. The killing by Orestes is only the last of a series in his family and the trilogy. Each murder is conceived as necessary, even just, and each provokes more violence in return—violence carried out, as was the murder of Clytemnestra and her lover, in the name of justice. There is no clear villain and no discernible or 'just' solution, which is reflected in the deadlocked jury when Orestes

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<sup>31</sup>F. M. Comford (1907) *Thucydides Mythistoricus* (London: Arnold), pp. 176–82; G. Crane, *Thucydides and the Ancient Simplicity*, pp. 241–6; T. Rood (1999) 'Thucydides' Persian Wars', in C. Shuttleworth Kraus (ed.) *The Limits of Historiography: Genre Narrative in Ancient Historical Texts* (Leiden: Brill), pp. 141–68; Lebow (2003) *The Tragic Vision of Politics*, pp. 126–41.

<sup>32</sup>R. N. Lebow (2008) *A Cultural Theory of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), Ch. 9 for an analysis of the Bush administration's motives.

<sup>33</sup>B. Woodward (2004) *Plan of Attack* (New York: Simon & Schuster); M. R. Gordon and B. E. Trainor (2006) *Cobra II: The Inside Story of the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq* (New York: Pantheon); M. Isakoff and D. Com (2006) *Hubris: The Inside Story of Spin, Scandal and the Selling of the Iraq War* (New York: Crown); T. E. Ricks (2006) *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York: Penguin). Also, see the contributions to this volume by [James Mayall, Richard Beardsworth, and Tracy Strong, in Chapters 3 (pp. 44–52), 8 (pp. 97–111) and 11 (pp. 14–157) respectively.

is brought to trial. Such tragedies demonstrate that our conceptions of justice are parochial, not universal, and are readily undercut by too unwavering a commitment to them.

Many prominent students of IR who consider tragedy to be central to international relations emphasize this second insight, among them the classical realist thinkers Hans Morgenthau and Reinhold Niebuhr, and Herbert Butterfield, a theorist of what is widely known as the English School within IR.<sup>34</sup> They associate the potential for tragedy with ethical, religious, and cultural diversity. Any effort to impose one's own code on other actors in such a world will encounter resistance because it threatens the identities of these others and not merely their interests. Also drawing on tragedy's depiction of multiple and often competing conceptions of justice, Brian Orend advocates introducing the notion of what he calls 'moral tragedy' to the just war tradition, a prominent body of thought within normative IR theory.<sup>35</sup> When Orend proposes that just war theory would gain from hitherto neglected 'reflection on war's tragedy', he is urging us to appreciate situations in which one is confronted with competing demands of both justice and obligation, so that, sometimes, one has no choice but to commit a wrong. For Orend, '[a] moral tragedy occurs when, *all things considered*, each viable option, you face involves a severe moral violation. It is a moral blind alley: there is no way to turn and still be morally justified'.<sup>36</sup> The same course of action can be seen as morally required and prohibited—and one is left with no solution to the dilemma regarding what is the right action. The specific dilemma upon which Orend focuses is one in which a particular community faces certain massacre or enslavement, and can only be saved if sacrosanct norms of restraint against its enemy—such as non-combatant immunity—are temporarily disregarded. This is the situation that Michael Walzer, taking a phrase from Churchill, described as a "supreme emergency"; that is, an instance in which extreme and otherwise prohibited measures might legitimately be taken to

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<sup>34</sup>See, for example, H. Morgenthau (1958) *Dilemmas of Politics* (Chicago: Chicago University Press), R. Niebuhr (1938) *Beyond Tragedy: Essays on the Christian Interpretation of History* (London: Nisbet and Company), and H. I. Butterfield (1931) *The Whig Interpretation of History* (London: Bell). As cited by Mervyn Frost in Chapter 1 of this volume, pp. 1–18; H. F. Gutbrod provides—an analysis of each theorist's account of tragedy in (2001) *Irony, Conflict, Dilemma: Three Tragic Situations in International Relations* (University of London: unpublished dissertation). For a concise account of IR's classical realism, with particular attention to its relationship with the notion of tragedy; See R. N. Lebow (2010) 'Classical Realism', in T. Dunne, M. Kurki, and S. Smith (eds) *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 58–76.

<sup>35</sup>See B. Orend (2006) *The Morality of War* (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press), pp. 154–7. 'Normative IR theory', 'international political theory, and 'international ethics' are broadly interchangeable labels for a field of study within IR that variously draws on moral philosophy and political theory to explore moral expectations, decisions and dilemmas in world politics. For an introduction to this field, see T. Erskine (2010) 'Normative IR Theory', in Dunne, Kurki, and Smith (eds) *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity*, 2nd edn, pp. 37–57.

<sup>36</sup>Orend (2006) *The Morality of War*, p. 155 (Emphasis in the original). Note that this type of tragic moral dilemma is addressed in Chapters 2, 6 and 12 of this volume by Mervyn Frost, Chris Brown and Catherine Lu respectively.

ensure the survival of one's political community.<sup>37</sup> It thereafter became the subject of heated debate within the ethics of war. For Orend, the paramount point is the direct and irreconcilable conflict between the obligation to protect one's community and the obligation to respect principles of restraint in war. The most accurate way to describe the inescapable resulting violation of one of these obligations, he reasons, is in terms of 'moral tragedy'. Orend maintains that such a violation is unavoidable and can be excused, but can never be morally justified.

Orend's example of a seemingly intractable moral dilemma is important. Yet, in the spirit of ethical, religious, and cultural pluralism highlighted by Morgenthau, Niebuhr, and Butterfield, we might take an additional lesson for the ethics of war from tragedy's depiction of justice. An appreciation of tragedy not only has the potential to inform our *thinking* about the perceived dilemmas that arise in war when there appear to be multiple, conflicting obligations and, therefore, no obvious right course of action. It also provides a valuable check on the equally consequential wartime ethical considerations that we make when we are confident both that there *is* an obvious legitimate course of action—and, indeed, only *one* legitimate course of action—and that we know what this is. In the context of just war judgments, a tragic understanding might encourage us to question the robustness of our seemingly unassailable claims to just cause and reflect before acting, perhaps precipitously, on policies we believe can be justified in their name.<sup>38</sup> The lack of readily discernable external evaluative criteria to adjudicate between competing conceptions of what is morally permissible] or indeed required, means that our conviction in the justness of our cause needs to be tempered with knowledge of both our own limits and the difficulty of championing one set of principles over another.

Tragedy, as we suggest above, makes us aware and more respectful of competing conceptions of justice. This is not a concession to moral relativism, according to which any conception of justice would necessarily be rendered undecipherable when transmitted beyond its specific context. There is a crucial distinction to be made

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<sup>37</sup>M. Walzer ([1977] 2006) *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations*, 4th edn (New York: Basic Books), pp. 251–68. Note that Walzer does not present this as a 'moral tragedy'; this is Orend's unique contribution. Walzer, Orend would maintain, overlooks the tragic dimension of this situation. Nevertheless, as we note below, Walzer's rationale for the division between *jus in bello* and *jus ad bellum* considerations—for which his "supreme emergency" argument is a controversial exception—is an excellent illustration of one of the insights that we have taken from tragedy.

<sup>38</sup>The same insight into the dangerous repercussions of assuming that one has exclusive access to interpreting *the* just course of action in cases of conflict underlines the call of 'Walzer and other just war theorists to separate *just ad bellum* from *jus in bello* considerations, thereby preventing subjective under-standings of the justness of going to war from lending legitimacy to evading principles of just conduct; See Walzer ([1977] 2006) *Just and Unjust Wars*. See also F. de Vitoria, 'On the Law of War', in *Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1991)), pp. 306–7 [2.1], for his argument that one of the reasons for waging a just war with restraint is that one can never be sure of the ultimate! justice of one's cause. Indeed, the difficulty of discerning the justice of any war should make us both humble in our claims to justice and moderate in our use of force. We are very grateful to Cian O'Driscoll for drawing bur attention to this passage.

between denying that standards of good and evil and right and wrong exist, and acknowledging our own limits and fallibility in definitively discerning what these standards are. Tragedy teaches the latter without assuming the former—and warns that the blind pursuit of one conception of justice is self-defeating. The insight that we presume our conceptions of justice to be absolute at our peril has the potential to contribute to a more sophisticated treatment of international conflict. Specifically, this insight might foster an understanding of why certain conflicts appear intractable, the dynamics by which they escalate, and the importance of restraint. To the extent that relevant actors are able to learn lessons from tragedy and see it as an appropriate frame of reference, it might also foster an understanding of the means by which the frequency and intensity of conflicts can be reduced.

This account of two insights that we contend are particularly relevant to international relation is by no means exhaustive. Further examples are explored in the chapters that follow. Moreover, our contributors debate and adopt different stances on the points that we have just proposed. Our dual purpose has simply been, first, to illustrate how adopting the lens of tragedy has the potential, retrospectively, to enhance our understanding of international relations, and, second, to intimate that such a lens might also offer guidance, prospectively, on how to avoid repeating and perpetuating past mistakes. The lively conversation that follows builds on our preliminary examples and fleshes out these broader themes.

## 2.4 Structuring the Conversation

The contributions to this conversation are grouped under three headings. In Part I, ‘Recovering the tragic Dimension of International Relations’ Mervyn Frost, James Mayall, Richard Ned Lebow, and Nicholas Rengger discuss why how; and—in Rengger’s case—whether insights from tragedy can help us to understand international relations as a field of study and realm of politics. What would it mean to recover the tragic dimension of international (relations)? Frost initiates the discussion with a provocative set of proposals about what tragedy can tell us about ethics in international relations. Each subsequent contributor weighs in on the preceding arguments while forcefully setting out his own position Frost and Mayall spar over the possibility of progress and reform at the international level. Rengger, in alliance with Michael Oakeshott who debated the relevance of tragedy to politics over 60 years ago in correspondence with Morgenthau—insists that art and politics are distinct domains. Lebow concludes this section by offering a counter-argument to Oakeshott and Rengger. All four contributors introduce themes that become central points of discussion and debate throughout the volume.

In Part II, ‘Tragedy and International Relations as Political Theory, Chris Brown, Peter Euben, Richard Beardsworth, and Kamila Stullerova demonstrate the utility of using political theory to interrogate international relations theory and practice—and, moreover, lend support to the claim that international relations can just as effectively be used to evaluate political theory Brown begins by arguing that

tragedy also has I political purchase outside debates over classical realism, where, he observes, it receives the most attention both within IR circles and (either implicitly or explicitly) In the first section of this volume. He focuses instead on international political theory (IPT), and specifically on cosmopolitan theorists in the analytical tradition, who, he laments, has neglected the notion of tragedy to their detriment. Euben agrees with Brown that poetry and drama, ambiguity and unresolved dilemmas) ‘better capture the rhythms of actions and so of politics than closely-reasoned, unbreakable chains of analytical reasoning.’<sup>39</sup> Yet, he cautions, the lessons of tragedy remain elusive. Tragedy is not something that one can hope to master. In the context of a final reading of Thucydides through the lens of tragedy, Euben extols the challenges and (necessary ambiguity but also the value and enduring relevance, of looking to tragedy to better understand politics. In his correspondence with Oakeshott, Morgenthau insisted that tragedy ‘is a quality of existence, not a creation of art’.<sup>40</sup> Beardsworth offers a very different reading of tragedy Ethics, he insists, is always immanent to politics and tragedy explores this recognition. Art and politics are distinct practices but tragedy is inherent in both. Stullerova advances a comparable argument; tragedy is distinct because of its focus on suffering and death that cannot be explained as just or, at times, even as meaningful. IR seeks to explain similar phenomena and does so by looking for patterns of behavior. Tragedy is one of these patterns.

In Part III, ‘On the Nature of Tragedy in International Relations’, Benjamin Schupmann, Tracy Strong, Catherine Lu, and Robbie Shilliam reflect on and challenge the understandings of tragedy invoked to this point. Strong and Schupmann introduce a new perspective on tragedy by joining the conversation via their respective readings of Nietzsche. According to Schupmann, Nietzsche understands tragedy as an imitation of human affairs and a better vehicle than science for understanding social reality. Tragedy can serve as an antidote for hubris. Schupmann, in effect, makes a powerful claim for the relevance of tragedy to political action. Strong reminds us that tragedy was a political practice even before it was theatre. The Greek word *tragoidia* is a contraction of *tragos* (goat) and *aeidein* (to sing). Its initial reference was to a ritual conducted to benefit the city as a whole at which a goat was sacrificed while being sung to. In its dramatic form, tragedy stays faithful to its roots and is an expression of politics, and of life more generally Lu and Shilliam both suggest that other contributors envisage tragedy too narrowly and in a way that unnecessarily circumscribes its potential to contribute to political analysis. For Lu, while moral incoherence and human vulnerability are central to all tragedies, it is important to acknowledge that the sources of such incoherence differ. For Shilliam, the symbolic association of Ancient Greece with European (and colonial) modernity prevents tragedy from including people standing elsewhere from European civilization as both subjects and objects of the drama.

<sup>39</sup>J. P. Euben, ‘The Tragedy of Tragedy’, Chapter 7, this volume, pp. 86–96.

<sup>40</sup>H. J. Morgenthau, letter to Michael Oakeshott, 22 May 1949, Morgenthau Papers, Library of Congress.



Lu calls for a recognition of ‘tragic visions’ rather than a single ‘tragic vision’; Shilliam implores the reader to engage in geo-cultural travel and view the tragic drama from ‘elsewhere’. Together they highlight (the diversity and potential dynamism of this genre—both of which we Submit make tragedy a particularly valuable and challenging lens through (which to interrogate international relations.

In this volume we draw on a particular yet multifaceted and dynamic conception of tragedy and ask how such a conception might help us to better understand international relations. Perhaps even more provocatively, we also question whether it is possible to learn from tragedy in ways that would allow us, practically to avoid future tragedies, and, conceptually, to rethink prominent assumptions within IR. We focus on these latter points of enquiry in the final chapter of this volume in light of the varied and sophisticated arguments of our contributors. Both how tragedy can help us to understand international relations and whether we can learn from tragedy in a way that positively informs future policies and intellectual pursuits pose important problems. This collection is the result of our joint conviction that attention to them can make us better scholars and practitioners of international relations.

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