

**Presentation Delivered to Peter Lech's Greek and Roman Tragedy Class
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The Myth of Risk Theatre

How do myths function? One of their functions is to translate nature and culture into human terms. By telling a story, they instill human significance onto natural and cultural phenomena. How did the custom of young women dedicating a lock of hair prior to marriage arise? Why is there a temple of Aphrodite at Troezen? The Hippolytus myth answers these questions by incorporating nature and culture into a story filled with human significance. According to the myth, Phaedra built the temple after Aphrodite caused her to fall in love with Hippolytus. As for the custom, it was initiated by Artemis as a consolation to the dying Hippolytus: he would die, but his dedication to her would be remembered forever. Here's another one: why does that star seem to blink every six days? Science would tell you it's a variable star called Algol. But what myth would tell you is that that star is part of Medusa's head in the constellation Perseus—you have to imagine that he's holding up her severed head—and, what is more, that star denotes her eye: it blinks because by blinking, it signifies her power to turn to stone. So, one function of myth is to inscribe meaning onto patterns found in nature and culture, patterns which otherwise lack meaning. Myth helps us to understand the world in human terms.

What I'm going to give you today is a myth of tragedy called 'risk theatre'. Just as the myth of Medusa or the myth of Hippolytus humanize the world around us, my 'myth' of risk theatre provides a framework of tragedy. I call it a myth because it's not right or wrong, but a story of how tragedy works. In particular, risk theatre addresses a peculiar question: how can tragedy create suspense if it dramatizes popular, well-known myths? The stories of the Labdacid House (that's Oedipus' family) or the House of Atreus (that's Orestes' family) are so well-known that everyone knows how the story ends. Since the outcomes are foreknown, it's hard for the stories to generate suspense. Take a look at Homer's handling of the Oedipus myth. In Book 11 of the *Odyssey*, commonly referred to as the *nekuia* (after the ancient rite used to summon ghosts), Odysseus tells the story of his journey to the underworld where he sees the shade of Jocaste, Oedipus' wife. He speaks a matter-of-factly about Oedipus' crimes and how Jocaste committed suicide. There's no suspense in Homer's rendition of the myth. It's bare bones. And it can be bare bones because everyone knows the tale. For Sophocles to keep audiences sitting on the edge of their seats, he has to get around the spoiler alert. How does he do this?

Here's the solution risk theatre proposes: the dramatic kernel of tragedy is a gambling act in which the protagonist wagers all-in. Because each dramatic act is a gambling act, unexpected things can happen. Bets can go wrong. And the bigger the bet, the more it can go sideways. The dramatist's role is to suppress the odds of the

foreknown outcome to make it seem like what must happen is not going to happen. Then, when it happens, it's exciting.

In other words, the hero makes a big bet. Things seem to go the hero's way. Because of the hero's intelligence, skill, or strength, the hero appears to avert the outcome everyone knows is coming. But then an unexpected low-probability, high-consequence event happens which brings about the foreknown outcome. Tragedy dramatizes a bet which has gone horribly sideways. That's why I call tragedy risk theatre.

That tragedy is a gambling act and that dramatists trigger the foreknown outcome by a low-probability, high-consequence event are the two postulates of risk theatre. Let's look at both these postulates, beginning with how tragedians deliberately suppress the likelihood of what must happen to the point where, when it happens, it *seems* to have happened against all odds.

By a low-probability event, I mean an event that is unlikely, an event that is 1000:1 against, an event such as Birnam Wood coming to Dunsinane Hill. In Shakespeare's play the witches tell Macbeth that nothing can harm him until Birnam Wood removes to Dunsinane Hill. It's highly unlikely for the trees to take up their roots and hike up the hill. But when the troops camouflage themselves under Birnam Wood, the low-probability, high-consequence event unfolds. Macbeth is caught flat-footed. All is lost. The play generates suspense by making it seem like the foreknown event (Birnam Wood's going to come) is unlikely. Let's take a look at some of the tragedies you've studied to see how ancient tragedians entertain audiences by suppressing the likelihood of the outcome everyone knows is coming.

Euripides' play, the *Bacchae*, pits man against god. Although you know from the myth that Pentheus dies, Euripides' goal as a dramatist is to suppress the foreknown conclusion so that when it takes place, it's exciting. How does he do this? Look at how he portrays the rivalry between Dionysus and Pentheus. Dionysus is portrayed as a ninety-eight pound weakling who waltzes into Thebes with a retinue of eastern women. He's cast as a drunk foreign dandy with long hair and scented locks who spends his days and nights cavorting around town. Pentheus, on the other hand, is cast as a capable warrior-king. He's at the prime of manhood, fights before the home crowd, and has at his beck and call slaves, guards, archers, and soldiers. Pentheus has every expectation of prevailing. With all his resources, he's going to throw this hobo out of town. But when, against all odds, the effeminate stranger turns out to be god, the fated outcome takes place and Pentheus is torn limb by limb. The closing lines—the same ones Euripides uses in many other plays—make it absolutely clear that he too conceived of tragedy as a theatre where unexpected low-probability events happen. Closing line are critical and ought to be read with care. That Euripides writes these lines confirms the risk theatre model of tragedy. Here are the lines as spoken by the chorus leader:

What heaven sends has many shapes, and many things the gods accomplish against our expectation. What men look for is not brought to pass, but a god finds a way to achieve the unexpected. (1388-1392)

Now, let's look at the next play: Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. This trilogy culminates in a showdown between Orestes and the Furies. The foreknown outcome is that the spirits of vengeance, the Furies, are transformed into the 'Kindly Ones' or the Eumenides, benevolent spirits who watch over Athens. Aeschylus' goal as a tragedian is to suppress the foreknown conclusion so that when it takes place, it's unexpected. How does he do this? He does so by emphasizing the extraordinary length of time the Furies have been engaged as spirits of vengeance. The Furies are the daughters of Night (*Eum.* 321). And Night is the offspring of Chaos, the eldest of all deities. That means the Furies have been persecuting blood crimes from the beginning of time, in fact, from way back when Kronos first castrated his father Ouranos. When the Furies come to the court of the Areopagus, they have every intention of winning. Who would have guessed that Orestes' act of violence, from all the acts of violence from the beginning of time would result in the Furies being transformed into the Eumenides? The way Aeschylus frames it, it's unlikely, and because it's unlikely, when it takes place, it's shocking.

Think of these events as 'black swan' events. This is the term popularized by Taleb, a mathematician and Wall Street trader in his books *Fooled by Randomness* and *The Black Swan*. The term 'black swan' goes back to the Roman poet Juvenal, who used it as a byword for something that doesn't exist. But then in 1697, to the shock of the world, they sighted a black swan in Australia. Taleb uses the black swan as a visual analogy of low-probability, high-consequence events. What I'm arguing today is that tragedy is full of black swan events: the bum who happens to be god, the forest that up and attacks the ramparts, or the day the Furies became the Eumenides.

Now, let's look at a third play, Sophocles' *Oedipus rex*. We touched earlier on Homer's bare bones narration of the Oedipus myth. Not very exciting. How does Sophocles add fire to the dramatization?—easy, he transforms the outcome into a black swan event. Everyone watching knows that Oedipus' patricide and the incestuous relationship is going to be revealed. Sophocles, however, structures the play so that it looks like that no one will ever figure it out. How does Sophocles achieve this? Let's take a look. The one eyewitness' account of Laius' murder is so garbled that they don't bother to fetch him. At least not right away. So, we're not going to hear from him. Tiresias, who knows since he's the prophet, obstructs the investigation. So, we're not going to hear from him either. Jocaste, who has been warned by the oracle she would give birth to a patricide, tells Oedipus point blank that the oracle must be wrong, since she exposed the child. She doesn't know that the child survived. So, we're not going to hear from her. In fact, the evidence against the truth coming out is so overwhelming that the chorus stops dancing in the second stasimon and asks: "Why should I dance?" (896). The gravity of their jarring pronouncement should not be underestimated. Their question would have shocked audiences who knew that the chorus' role in tragedy is to dance. Tragedy is part of

the ancient liturgy and the chorus dances to honour the gods. But if the gods are a fraud—and it's beginning to look that way because the oracle is just looking plain wrong—why should they honour the gods?

Look: the eyewitness isn't going to tell them because they didn't summon him. Not yet. Tiresias isn't going to tell him. And Jocaste tells him that the oracle dead wrong. If the Delphic oracle is mistaken and the gods can't be trusted, what's the point of dancing? Even after the chorus stops dancing, things appear to get even worse: the Corinthian messenger comes out of nowhere to tell Oedipus that he's inherited the Corinthian throne because his dad Polybus died. This really throws Oedipus into shock: years ago, when the oracle prophesied that he would be a patricide, he had run away from home. And now, he finds out that dad died of natural causes. Things are looking worse and worse for the oracle. It looks like the truth will never come out. But when Oedipus tells the messenger why he left Corinth, the truth finally tumbles out. "Don't worry about your dad" says the messenger, "he's not really your dad." "How do you know this?" "Well I saved you when you were a babe and your real parents had exposed you. You're actually from Thebes." "Who are my real parents?" "Well you have to ask the shepherd. He gave me to you." "Oh, you mean the shepherd that I just summoned?—the one who is the sole surviving witness of Laius' murder at the crossroads." "Yes, that's the one." See where this is going? What are the odds of a messenger, and not any messenger, but this messenger coming to Thebes at this exact moment? And what are the odds that the shepherd who had saved Oedipus when he was a babe just happens to be the sole surviving witness of Laius' murder? I'll tell you: the odds are as likely as Birnam Wood coming to Dunsinane Hill or the madman actually being a god or the Furies being transformed into the Eumenides: it's a billion to one against. And when it's a billion to one against, when it happens, it's dramatic.

Okay, by definition, low-probability events don't happen very often. But, as we've seen, in tragedy, they happen every time. How does the dramatist set up the low-probability event so that it always happens? Do any of you gamble? Then you know, the more you wager, the more things can go wrong, up to the point when you bet everything, anything can go wrong. Lay down the bankroll, leverage yourself up 100:1, go in with all your friends' and family's money: if the odds are anything less than perfect, the consequences are huge. Even if the odds are 99.99 percent in your favour, when you go all-in, that 0.01 percent can ruin you. Risk theatre is where that 0.01 percent happens.

The secret of how the dramatist tees up the low-probability, high-consequence risk event is that in tragedy, each dramatic act is also a gambling act. And not any gambling act, but an all-in leveraged up to the gills gambling act. For a chance to be king, Macbeth lays down the milk of human kindness. Like the game of gambling, in tragedy you have to ante up for a chance to play. But unlike the game of gambling, where you lay down cash instruments, in tragedy, you lay down human instruments. For world domination, Faust lays down his soul. For revenge, revengers lay down their humanity. For the American dream, Loman (in *Death of a Salesman*) lays down

his dignity. Pentheus bets everything that the stranger is some bum and not god personified. He lays on the line his authority as king: no bum is going to start seditious rites while he sits on the throne. Oedipus bets that he can outwit the oracle: “You prophecy I’ll kill dad?—I’ll show you! I’m Oedipus, the master riddler. I can solve anything, and I’ll solve you!” And the Furies stake their prerogative as the punishers of blood guilt on the precedence of tradition.

When you lay so much on the line, you expose yourself to low-probability, high-consequence events because you’ve taken up too much risk. For Macbeth, Birnam Wood came. For Loman, he finds out that he’s worth more dead than alive. For Pentheus, the bum happens to be god. And for the Furies, this time was different. Who would have thought?

At the beginning I promised you a myth of tragedy. What I’ve given you is risk theatre, and its framework helps you find your way around tragedy in the same way as constellations light up a road map of the night sky. And just like constellations, risk theatre works brilliantly most of the time. The constellation Orion works great: there’s the shoulders, the belt. But then there’s a constellation like Gemini where you have to squint pretty hard to see Castor and Pollux. And just as you wouldn’t throw out the whole system of constellations because one or two don’t work, you wouldn’t throw out risk theatre for the one or two tragedies that defy it. Ultimately, risk theatre adds to our understanding because it answers the question of how tragedy can be exciting even though spoilers have marred the ending.

Think of tragedy as a theatre of risk where heroes go big or go home. Because heroes make risk run riot with their wagers, think of each dramatic act as a gambling act. When characters stake their souls, allegiances, and reputations, and leverage all their military, social, and political capital to achieve their aims, things get interesting real fast because we see by how they set up their wagers how much they value life. A gallon of milk is worth \$4.99, but how much is the milk of human kindness worth?—to Macbeth, it’s worth a Scottish crown, because that’s what he antes up: the milk of human kindness for the crown. Tragedy is an arbiter of life’s value. Think of the tragic emotions not as pity and fear, but rather anticipation and apprehension: anticipation for *what* the hero wagers and apprehension for the black swan event that’s going to dash the hero, the hero’s friends and family, and the community at large.

Think of the downfall of the hero as something brought about by pure chance rather than a tragic flaw or error. The aged Oedipus, in Sophocles’ final play *Oedipus at Colonus*, says this exactly: “Okay, when it happened, I thought I had done something wrong, but now, looking back, how else *should* I have acted? Where exactly was my error?—I was dealt a certain hand and I played the game flawlessly.” To blame an Oedipus or a Macbeth or a Pentheus for a tragic flaw is as inane as to blame, say, the Cincinnati Kid for going all-in on the final poker hand against Lancey in Richard Jessup’s novel. He has to play that hand, and it’s only when Lancey makes the most unexpected move that he loses. He could not have known that Lancey would “make

the wrong move at the right time.” In the same way, what was Pentheus supposed to do when the seditious foreign stranger waltzes into town: kneel down and worship him? Folks, it’s chance. Not error. Stop looking for error and look instead at the role chance plays. The point of risk theatre is that it enlightens us that chance plays a much larger role in our lives than what we’re comfortable admitting. In tragedy, even fate must work through the mechanisms of chance.

This idea of risk theatre I’ve been developing for over ten years, and I’m very happy to let you know it’s more than theory. Langham Court Theatre, one of the most storied and successful community theatres in Canada, has just now signed on to inaugurate a 2019 Risk Theatre Modern Tragedy Competition. We’re challenging dramatists worldwide to write bold and exciting risk theatre tragedies. We’re giving away over \$10,000 in prize money. And we’re going to produce the winning play. Not only this year. Every year. We’re going to reinvent tragedy. The site is at risktheatre.com. Theatre spelled with a -re ending. The site’s not quite live. But I can give you the password: 1974. Take a look. See if you can figure out that poker hand on the illustration.

Here’s a parting thought I’d like to leave you with. I’ve known Peter for a long time. We went to Brown together in the 2000s. He was studying speech patterns in Roman comedy and I was grappling with how tragedy functions. Thank you, Peter for the opportunity to speak today. After Brown, I came back to Canada to take up my old job. You know, by trade, I’m not an academic and not a thespian. I’m a plumber. But I never lost sight of my goal. And despite the long odds, it looks like the goal’s getting closer. And you know the odds are long when the border guard looks at you real funny when you say that you’re speaking on theatre and your occupation is plumbing. So I encourage you all, no matter what your goals are, to chase them down. If I can do it, you can too. Because, you know, if you stay hungry and keep going, despite the long odds, sometimes the low-probability, high-consequence event will work out in your favour. Thank you.