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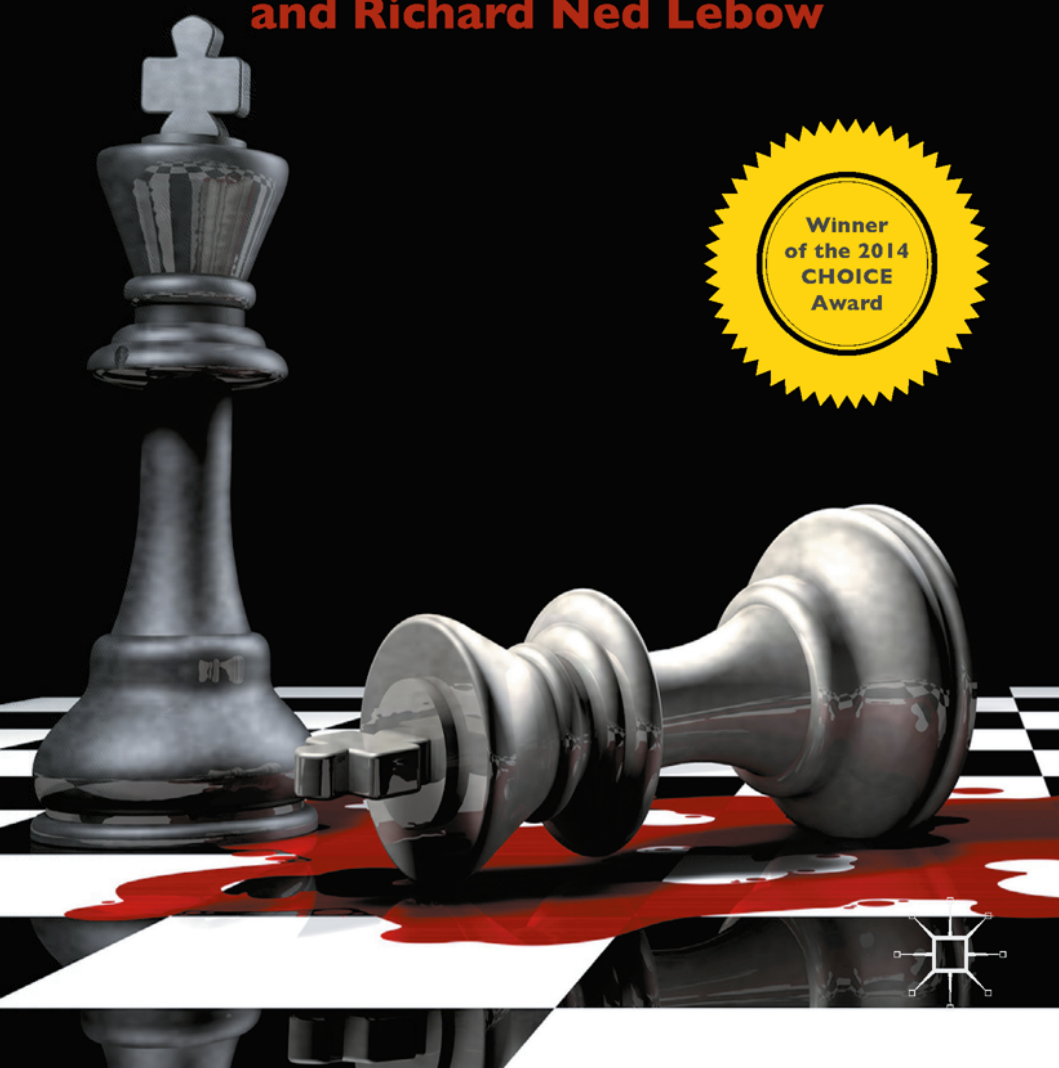

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Tragedy and International Relations

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To our spouses, Michael Drage and Carol Bohmer,
for their love, inspiration and encouragement

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Acknowledgements

This volume is best described as a conversation. It brings together, as our most interesting discussions often do, subjects that may seem at first glance to be quite far removed from each other. The focus of this conversation is how (and, indeed, whether) the concept of tragedy that is revealed in Greek and Shakespearean dramas might inform, and enrich, our understanding of international relations. In approaching this conversation, the reader might, initially, imagine a couple of scholars engaged in a lively – and amicable – debate. This is, in fact, how this conversation actually began. Mervyn Frost and James Mayall started interrogating their respective understandings of tragedy in a diner in Chicago in 2001, between panels at the annual International Studies Association (ISA) conference – each questioning whether the other could adequately account for the tragic dimension of international relations in his work.

A year later, when one of us, Toni Erskine, heard Mervyn present the paper that had resulted from that earlier discussion with James, she was sceptical of the claims he was making about an appreciation of tragedy helping us to think about specifically ethical questions in international relations. Toni was concerned that an appeal to tragedy would somehow obfuscate notions of moral agency and responsibility. Another debate ensued. The fortunate consequence was that she challenged Mervyn to elaborate on his argument and submit it as a short 'debate' piece for the journal at which she was then Associate Editor, *International Relations*. Toni also invited James to revisit the objections he raised in the Chicago diner and provide a response. The interest generated by this initial debate prompted Toni to invite two other scholars, Nicholas Rengger and Richard Ned Lebow, to write on the theme of tragedy and international relations. These invitations brought both Nick's provocative denial of the usefulness of tragedy for understanding international relations (a position that usefully incited further responses) and Ned's passion for a theme on which he had just completed a substantial monograph to bear on the conversation.

In 2006, Toni organized and chaired a panel at ISA in San Diego with Mervyn, James, Nick and Ned presenting papers. Peter Euben had generously accepted her invitation to attend his first ISA conference and act as discussant. Future participants in the project, Chris Brown, Richard

Beardsworth and Tracy Strong, were in the audience in San Diego. The panel was a great success and a number of members of the audience suggested that the papers be collected together in a book. Toni commissioned a few more pieces for *International Relations* as a result of the panel discussion, and Toni and Ned took the audience's comments to heart and decided to edit a book based on revised versions of these articles. We are very grateful to Sage, the publisher of *International Relations*, for sponsoring the 2006 ISA panel in San Diego and for providing permission to print revised versions of essays by Mervyn Frost, James Mayall, Nicholas Rengger, Richard Ned Lebow, Chris Brown and Peter Euben, which were originally published in the journal. We would like to express particular thanks to David Mainwaring at Sage who worked with Toni on the journal, was instrumental in sponsoring the 2006 panel and has been a great source of support since the project's inception.

We not only asked the authors of the journal articles to elaborate and develop their pieces for our book, but, at Palgrave Macmillan's suggestion, we extended invitations to additional scholars to participate. We were lucky to have Robbie Shilliam, Tracy Strong, Kamila Stullerova, Catherine Lu and Ben Schupmann follow the existing contributors in cutting across theoretical perspectives and disciplinary boundaries to join the discussion. Commissioning these pieces over an extended period of time, so that each new contribution could respond to those before them – and approaching a group of outstanding and original scholars who were each willing to engage carefully and critically with the others – has, we think, resulted in a unique project. The book is, indeed, a conversation. Each chapter offers a new argument, and a new perspective on tragedy and international relations, while at the same time variously challenging, extending, rejecting, or correcting particular points from the preceding chapters. If the reader begins reading the chapters by Mervyn and James with the image of two scholars engaged in heated discussion in a diner or coffee shop, it would be apt, as the book progresses, to imagine the diner gradually filling up, with each new arrival listening intently to the on-going conversation, and then making his or her own passionate intervention.

We are very grateful to Knud Erik Jorgensen, Audie Klotz, Christina Brian, Liz Blackmore and Alison Howson at Palgrave Macmillan for their unfailing support of this project, for allowing us to experiment with an unconventional format, and for encouraging us to take it beyond what we had initially envisaged. We also owe a debt of gratitude to Susanna Karlsson for her meticulous and incredibly efficient editorial assistance. Most of all, we wish to thank those who have participated

in this conversation: for embracing the project with such enthusiasm, for responding to a stream of requests and comments that must have seemed unending, and for making us think about tragedy and international relations in ways that we had not even conceived of when we began this book.

Toni Erskine and Richard Ned Lebow

Earlier versions of the chapters by Mervyn Frost, James Mayall, Nicholas Rengger, Richard Ned Lebow, Chris Brown, J. Peter Euben and Richard Beardsworth appeared in *International Relations:* Frost (2003) 'Tragedy, Ethics and International Relations', *International Relations* 17/4, 477–95; Mayall (2003) 'Tragedy, Progress and the International Order: A Response to Frost', *International Relations* 17/4, 497–503; Rengger (2005) 'Tragedy or Scepticism? Defending the Anti-Pelagian Mind in World Politics', *International Relations* 19/3, 321–8; Lebow (2005) 'Tragedy, Politics and Political Science', *International Relations* 19/3, 329–36; Brown (2007) 'Tragedy, "Tragic Choices" and Contemporary International Political Theory', *International Relations* 21/1, 5–13; Euben (2007) 'The Tragedy of Tragedy', *International Relations* 21/1, 15–22; and Beardsworth (2008) 'Tragedy, World Politics and Ethical Community', *International Relations* 22/1, 127–37.

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1

Understanding Tragedy and Understanding International Relations

Toni Erskine and Richard Ned Lebow

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. Writing more than two millennia ago, Thucydides thought that tragedy was an appropriate lens through which to view international relations.[1] 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 sceptically 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 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.

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 analysing 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.[2] 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 definition'.[3] 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 straightjacket.

Our understanding of tragedy can be traced back to fifth-century Athenian plays that the Greeks called '*tragōidia*'. 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 honour of the god Dionysus, was its venue. Tragedies and other plays were performed in a large, open-air amphitheatre on the southern slope of the Acropolis before an audience of citizens and non-citizens, Athenians and foreigners, of all classes. The generals (*stratēgoi*) 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 (*agōn*) 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'.[4] These categories are adopted and discussed throughout the volume, whether or not individual contributors invoke Aristotle explicitly.

For Aristotle, tragedy is a type of 'imitation' (*mimesis*), which is distinct from other modes of imitation such as music, comedy, and epic poetry.[5] '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'.[6] 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.[7] The structure of the drama is accordingly also a fundamental attribute of tragedy.[8] 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.[9] 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).[10] This tragic hero makes choices – and invariably arrives at the 'wrong' 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.[11] Alternatively, the *hamartia* arises from an inflexible and unyielding commitment to an otherwise laudable value like honour, 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.[12] 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 *polis* and its juridical structure to have emerged, but close enough for the conflict in values to have been painfully real.[13] 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 *polis* life and the human condition.[14]

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 analysing 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

'escalation', and may convey Shakespeare's greater pessimism, evident in the contrasting outcomes of the two tragedies.[15] 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.[16] 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.[17] 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.[18] 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.[19] 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.[20] Both variations on 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'.[21] 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.[22] 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'.[23]

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.

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 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, whose cultures and values 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 come together collectively to 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 neighbours, 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 works 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 '[w]hether 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'.[24] With specific respect to Greek tragedy, Vernant 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'.[25] 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 hegemons became sufficiently acute that neither felt any longer restrained by considerations of *xenia* or the responsibilities of

hēgemonia. 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.[26] 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.[27] Tragedies offer people broader understandings of themselves and their place in the world rather than socializing them to specific beliefs or behaviours. 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.

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 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 honour, 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 (*atē*), serious miscalculation (*hamartia*) and, finally, revenge of the gods (*nemesis*). In the case of Oedipus, the tragic hero of the three remaining plays that make up Sophocles' celebrated Theban storyline (*Oedipus Tyrannos*, *Oedipus at Colonus* and *Antigone*), *nemesis* produces an outcome the reverse of what the actor expected to achieve.[28] Oedipus brings his fate upon himself by a double