

## BOOK REVIEW

*The Risk Theatre Model of Tragedy*. By EDWIN WONG. Victoria, B.C.: Friesen Press, 2019. Pp. xxxvi + 335. Paperback, \$14.65. ISBN: 9781525537561.

I often tell my students that a paper is excellent when I start arguing with it. By this standard, Edwin Wong's *The Risk Theatre Model of Tragedy* may be the best monograph I have ever read. The introductory Preface begins with the premise that "Tragedy today is a tired art" (xvi). The cause of this, according to Wong, is a lack of a "working model," or guidebook, a deficiency which he has taken upon himself to remedy (xviii-xxiii). From his impressively extensive reading of tragic drama – Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides are featured, along with Shakespeare, Corneille, Goethe, O'Neill and many others – Wong has deduced that "each dramatic act in tragedy is a gambling act" (xxv). Thus, tragedy's key components are what he calls "the tragic troika:" temptation, wager and cast (4).

Part I develops this idea. The first chapter, after a brief excursus on the ubiquity of groups of three and a longer section with examples of Wong's troika, discusses the three parts separately. "Temptation" could also be called the disruption of the *status quo*. Tragedy begins with a state of Chaos, during which the hero discovers something that might be: e.g., Macbeth learns he could be king. This is followed by the "wager," where the hero decides what the object of temptation is worth, in Macbeth's case, his humanity. The hero then takes a series of steps to ensure a favorable outcome. Finally comes the point of no return, the "cast," – specifically Macbeth killing Duncan. In addition to Chaos and the troika, however, there are two more, self-explanatory, components: "the unexpected" and "loss and suffering," bringing the parts of tragedy to six. Chapter 2 describes three "tempi," or ways the playwright can arrange the plot: "gradual" if temptation, wager and cast are evenly spaced throughout; "backloaded" when the first two occur early on, but the cast is delayed until near the end; and "frontloaded" if all three parts happen at the beginning. Chapter 3 presents three possible "forms" of tragedy. "Standalone" features just the one troika, whereas "parallel-motion" has multiple risk events and multiple heroes. In "perpetual-motion" tragedy, apparently limited to trilogies like the *Oresteia*, "one risk event triggers the next" (69).

Part II purports to spell out the philosophy of risk theatre. Chapter 4 is a long tangent concerning the development of modern economic systems from bartering to the introduction of coins and paper money. The point seems to be that currency leads to the monetization of human life, hopes and dreams. Tragedy represents a protest against this process, depicting a “shadow market” where life is exchanged for love, humanity for power, etc. Chapter 5 continues the discussion by elaborating “countermonetization,” which seeks to “restore the sanctity of life by forbidding the use of money in existential transactions” (111). Wong gives copious examples from various tragedies of the rejection of money, and the requirements that the wager be paid in full, not on a whim, and by the hero.

Part III promises to show how to write risk theatre, but could just as easily be included in Part I. Chapter 6 goes through “seven telltale signs of tragedy” (137), while Chapter 7 spells out seven “strategies tragedians use to upset heroes’ best-laid plans” (180). None of these are especially earth shattering, but some of the strategies seem repetitive, and mostly seem to revolve around a lack of information or the improper use of what there is.

Part IV continues the philosophizing from Part II. Chapter 8 wants to define tragedy by what it is not, with comparisons and contrasts between history, philosophy, tragedy and comedy. The first two are labelled *ex-post* (arts which “reminisce and look to the past,” 228), the second *ex-ante* (“which look towards the future,” 227). In turn, using the second law of thermodynamics as a model, comedy is an open system where resources may always be brought in, while tragedy is closed. Chapter 9 is a sort of conclusion. In it, Wong laments that the word “tragedy” has drifted far from its original meaning of “goat song;” but he maintains that the art form has always evolved to suit the needs of the time, and ours is “a time fascinated with uncertainty and risk” (259).

Wong is certainly well read, and has clearly put a lot of time and thought into developing his theories. He has also put his money where his mouth is, sponsoring an annual competition for playwrights who follow his model. But I find myself unconvinced by his arguments. There are a number of points with which I simply disagree. But I am most troubled by Wong’s use of sources. As I said before, his breadth of reading is impressive. But he frequently makes reference to non-dramatic literature, music and art to support his claims about tragedy. Except for a brief quote from Albert the Great (253 n. 23), Wong cites translations of others almost exclusively; he takes credit only for the English rendition of the just mentioned Latin of Albert. In addition, he makes little reference to Classical scholarship; one notable exception occurs during his discussion of Aeschylus’

*Seven Against Thebes* (183-189). Wong bases his analysis of the play on the interesting idea that Eteocles assigns a defender to each gate by drawing lots, and not by choosing the most appropriate warrior to face each attacker. To my mind, this is a stretch of the text, supported exclusively by “Hermann’s conjecture” (n. 14). This is not necessarily a problem, especially in a book clearly intended for a wider audience. But it implies that Wong prioritizes the interpretations of other translators instead of going directly to the sources, resorting to secondary scholarship only when the translations do not suffice. Indeed, he would rather look to other art forms before the work of scholars.

The astute reader of this review might suspect that I do not really like this book. But then it was not written for me, a scholar of Classical theatre and a dilettante thespian. Rather, Wong has produced a manifesto, following in the footsteps of Abel, Brecht and Miller, cited in passing in the Preface (xxi, n. 10). His readings of the texts and beliefs about what theatre in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century should be do not always coincide with mine. Nevertheless, this book is worth reading, if only to help clarify a reader’s ideas about what tragedy is.

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