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Review of Rita Felski, ed., *Rethinking Tragedy*.

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Rita Felski, ed., *Rethinking Tragedy*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008. x + 368 pp. ISBN 0801887390.

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In her admirable Introduction to *Rethinking Tragedy*, Rita Felski distinguishes among tragedy the dramatic genre, the philosophical idea of the "tragic" as a way of viewing the human condition, and the popular use of both "tragedy" and "tragic" to describe a bad occurrence (ranging from the truly dreadful to the mildly unfortunate). Felski herself suggests that we can move beyond the "tri-partite definition of tragedy and the tragic" by thinking of tragedy as a "mode" rather than as a "genre" (14). Here Felski draws on Alistair Fowler's monumental work, *Kinds of Literature* (1982), which explores and connects works in terms of their "family resemblances" rather than through rigid taxonomies. Such an approach allows for flexibility while retaining a sense of the aesthetic form that contains and shapes the tragic as experience.

About half the essays in *Rethinking Tragedy* originally appeared in a special issue of *New Literary History* (35:1, 2004); some of the contributors, disconcertingly, cite essays by their fellow contributors in the journal instead of updating their notes to cite the book under review. The contributors range across numerous disciplinary fields (philosophy, anthropology, film studies, theology, and political science as well as modern and classical literature) thereby adding breadth and complexity but also some incoherence of approach to the discussion.

Discussions of tragedy have been bedeviled by issues of canonical status (frequently the term has been judged to be honorific—higher than, say, melodrama—rather than descriptive); political status (as Felski notes, the genre has been seen as conservative, if not reactionary, by post-Brechtian and feminist critics); and by an essentialist unwillingness to acknowledge its diversity (Greek, Shakespearean, neoclassical, modern, and the multiple forms of each). The question also arises of whether tragedy as an art form inhabits genres other than stage drama. Felski and two of the scholars in the collection open up the possibility of filmic tragedy. The Introduction also addresses the problematic status of the tragic individual. I would have thought that this issue had been decided in favor of the view that anyone can be a tragic protagonist. Felski, however, usefully reminds us of the relatively small number of plays (among them *Death of a Salesman* and *Waiting for Godot*) that can exemplify this democratic view. On his title page Beckett called *Waiting for Godot* a "tragicomedy."

Felski does note areas of agreement in critical thinking about tragedy, especially its investment in that which human beings cannot control and for which we are nonetheless responsible: "what distinguishes tragedy is an uncanny unraveling of the distinction between agency and fate, internal volition and the pressure of external circumstance" (11). It is because of our everyday experience of limitation and conflict between goods, she adds, that "ancient tragedies still have contemporary resonance" (12). *Rethinking Tragedy* is divided into four sections: "Defining Tragedy," "Rethinking the History of Tragedy," "Tragedy and Modernity," and "Tragedy, Film, Popular Culture." Some themes are reiterated—the defence of tragedy against the charge of conservative elitism or the relation of tragedy to our understanding of time, for example—and some names are invoked—George Steiner, Terry Eagleton, Friedrich Nietzsche—across these divisions. Essays by Steiner and Eagleton provide bookends to the collection.

In "'Tragedy,' Reconsidered," Steiner finds in "ontological homelessness" deriving from "primordial guilt" "a minimal but indispensable core" that defines "tragedy" (30-32); he asserts that tragedy is devoid of hope and that a work in which melioration of any kind is possible is a melodrama rather than a tragedy. Restating his earlier position in *The Death of Tragedy* (1961), Steiner argues that "absolute" tragedy is no longer possible and that its decline is linked to "the democratization of western ideals" (37). He still believes that tragic protagonists must be of high stature (which, despite his caveat, translates into status) and speak in high verse. He does not consider either ways other than rank in which protagonists might possess "stature" or the poetically heightened possibilities of prose as practiced, for example, by Tennessee Williams, or by Synge or Beckett or Pinter—even in the mouths of tramps such as Martin Doual or Vladimir and Estragon or Davies. Steiner's strict delimitation of tragedy as a genre leaves even Shakespearean tragedies on shaky ground. While one can sympathize with his view that it would be impertinent to frame as aesthetic tragedies the contemporary global horrors of war, famine, literal homelessness, torture, and genocide that engulf millions of people, Steiner offers little by way of an alternative articulation of such surely "tragic" events. Friedrich Dürrenmatt, writing after the Second World War, suggested that tragicomedy might better accommodate the "tragic" in the modern world. Steiner does gesture in that direction at the end of his essay when he writes of "new expressive forms" arising out of *Woyzeck* and *Godot* and calls for "an adequate theory of comedy" (44).

In "Generalizing about Tragedy," Simon Goldhill helpfully and systematically distinguishes between "tragedy" the dramatic genre and the "tragic" as a world view. Examining the history of the term "tragic," he begins by pointing out that Aristotle's definition in the *Poetics* of the dramatic genre tragedy and its emotional/ psychological effects of pity, fear, and *katharsis* in no way implies a particular world view that later theorists have called "tragic." The conception of the universal and timeless "tragic" was mapped onto or derived from their readings of Greek tragedy by thinkers such as Kant and Schelling and by Romantic philhellenists. Goldhill argues that the modern conception of the tragic distorts "the critical understanding of Greek tragedy" (54). Beginning with the *Poetics*, critical discussions of Greek tragedy have omitted any consideration of its socio-political dimension. "The institution of tragedy," Goldhill says, "is a machine to turn epic myth into the myths of the *polis* " (59). He urges critics "to pay due attention to the specific socio-political context of ancient drama, while recognizing the drive toward transhistorical truth both in the plays' discourse and in the plays' reception" (61). The imperative to understand both political specificity and transhistorical reception, I would suggest, offers a paradigm, too, for articulating modern forms of tragedy, including those that incorporate the experiences of masses of ordinary people in disastrous situations that are conventionally excluded from formal generic consideration, and for linking such forms to the canonical members of the genre as manifested over time.

In "After Troy: Homer, Euripides, Total War," Wai Chee Dimock explicitly extends the definition of tragedy to include natural disasters, exemplified particularly by Hurricane Katrina, which, akin to one of the chief motifs in Greek tragedy, destroyed a city. Dimock observes that we commonly and appropriately use the term "tragedy" to describe events such as tsunamis and hurricanes in which a "nonhuman actor" (68) destroys huge numbers of people in a way that seems meaningless and devoid of any kind of justice. If at first Katrina does not seem the best contemporary example that Dimock might have chosen since, many of us believe, the

phenomenon we call "Katrina" was to a great extent a man-made disaster, in its combination of natural force and human callousness and incompetence, it does actually support her further argument even better than she indicates. Drawing on images of war in the *Iliad* and the war plays of Euripides, Dimock goes on to argue that the boundaries between human forces (such as armies in war) and nonhuman forces (such as hurricanes) have always been blurred and that there is a "continuum of harm" (76) from the Greeks to the present that claims the lives of huge numbers of people, not just those who are protagonists. Since from the beginning tragedy has dealt with mass suffering, we should attend more to the tragic chorus representing whole populations than to the heroes, especially as we face such potentially disastrous (and "tragic") *peripeteia* as global warming and climate change.

The final two essays in the section on definition argue for the liberatory efficacy of tragedy. In "Tragedy, Theology, and Feminism in the Time After Time" Kathleen Sands moves from stating what tragedy is to stating what it can do. She challenges "the evasion of tragedy in the theological mainstream and in feminist thought" and asserts the desirability of tragedy's revival (82). Traditional Christian theology, Sands indicates, has no place for tragedy because "tragedy is predicated on the assignment of ultimacy to this world" (92). Among the numerous feminist, and especially Christian feminist, objections to tragedy that she details, perhaps the most significant is tragedy's depiction of the inevitability of suffering as "a universal condition" that is contrary to the liberationist view that "suffering is differentially distributed along with power" and can be ameliorated (95-96). While she concurs with the feminist critique of the tragic canon, Sands insists on the continuing value of tragedy as a way not so much of understanding the human condition but of changing it: by bracketing trauma, tragedy creates a space for the continuation of everything else, and "by uncovering moral lack, tragedies nurture moral desire" (87).

In "Tragedy, Pessimism, Nietzsche," Joshua Foa Dienstag reviews the history of pessimism as a philosophical tradition and its relation to tragedy in order to refute the charge that pessimism (like the tragedy it imbues) is elitist and to argue that, rightly understood, pessimism can be "an energizing and even liberating ethic" (105). In particular, Dienstag explains how Nietzsche's conception of Greek pessimism offers a truer perception of the world as "disordered, untamable, unfair, and destructive" (111) than later Socratic optimism. In the modern world pessimism, though "anti-utopian," yet offers the potential for "distinctiveness and dignity" within the "limitations of a time-bound life" (120). Dienstag offers a helpful corrective to conventional views of pessimism, but his argument for political utility lacks substantive support.

The section titled "Rethinking the History of Tragedy" explores classic tragedies. Page duBois and Martha Nussbaum write on Greek tragedy and Simon Critchley on Racine's *Phèdre*. A contribution rethinking Shakespearean or other early modern tragedy would have been welcome here. In "Toppling the Hero: Polyphony in the Tragic City" Page duBois, like Dienstag, invokes Nietzsche to emphasize the importance of the collective rather than the individual hero in Greek tragedy. duBois argues that later theorists misread Aristotle to establish the central importance of the tragic hero to the genre of tragedy. She urges a return to an understanding of "the threat, the enigma of works of dramatic art that challenge ideas concerning the life centered on the individual self" (136). By focusing on elements of Greek tragedy such as the presence of slaves, the passages of lamentation, and the chorus rather than the protagonist, duBois asserts, we can

find greater relevance for ancient tragedies "in a world of postmodern globalization" (142). By refocusing our understanding of tragedy on the sufferings of the many rather than the one, duBois, like Dimock and Dienstag, successfully defends tragedy against the charge of conservatism or elitism. But while in a few tragedies such as the *Bacchae* the chorus can carry equal weight with the protagonists, in the theatre (or even in reading the plays) most audience members will relate both intellectually and emotionally to individual protagonists like Oedipus or Medea. This may well be due to the privileging of the individual over hundreds of years in Western thought as well as in dramatic theory. But I believe also that we all experience suffering more acutely as individuals than as members of communities (just as we are, selfishly no doubt, more concerned about a small disaster that impinges on ourselves than on a major disaster that destroys the lives of millions of people at a distance, as Martha Nussbaum explicates in the following essay). I would note too that individual protagonists can stand not just for everyman but for the collective. In the twentieth century, as Marianne McDonald has demonstrated, Medea became an icon for the dispossessed fighting back, just as Antigone did for the freedom fighter. This is not to say that we should not re-examine Greek tragedy and its relevance for us in the historicist manner that duBois advocates, but rather to note that for modern audiences to do so goes against the grain.

Martha Nussbaum's essay, "The 'Morality of Pity': Sophocles' *Philoctetes*," also, contributes to the argument over whether tragedy is "democratic" by focusing on the debate over the function and effect of pity—in the sense of compassion without condescension—in tragedy: that is, whether pity debilitates or humanizes. Though asserting that tragedy is an "aristocratic art form" (165) in that it engages with the sufferings of heroes, Nussbaum argues that the *Philoctetes* provides a "democratic" experience for its audience by showing, through its presentation of "extreme bodily suffering," "the equal frailty of all human beings and their fully equal need for . . . food, shelter, relief of pain, conversation, nondeceptive friendship, political voice" (152) that Philoctetes lacks. Nussbaum shows how the *Philoctetes* undermines some Stoic objections to pity. Physical deprivation and pain matter not only in themselves but because, as the Philoctetes shows, they severely impair all other mental and moral activities; pity activates virtuous action (Neoptolemus returns Philoctetes's bow). On the other hand, the play does demonstrate the Stoic position that self-pity inspires revenge, and it does illustrate the "partiality" of pity (Neoptolemus does not pity Philoctetes until he sees his pain at first hand). Nussbaum notes that the problem of "partiality" (having concern for those close to us but not for strangers) "lies at the heart of our ethical lives today" (164). Like Neoptolemus and the chorus in Sophocles's play, we are more inclined to pity the pain of those who are close to us or who are famous than the misery of nameless masses, but the play's focus on the suffering body also reminds us of what we all have in common. Nussbaum concludes by arguing that only effective "global institutions" can lift millions of people out of the deprivations under which they live, but that pity "is needed to prompt the creation of good institutions and, once they have been created, to sustain them" (166-67). This clear and engaging essay is one of the most compelling in the collection.

In "I Want to Die, I Hate My Life—Phaedra's Malaise" Simon Critchley uses Levinas and Heidegger to explore Racine's *Phèdre*. Critchley notes that through Phaedra, torn between the poles of "conscience and desire, of the Sun and Venus," Racine dramatizes "the inner conflict that constitutes Christian subjectivity in Augustine's *Confessions*" (177). He goes on to argue that Phaedra's life is "unique" (179) in that she cannot escape her suffering in death because her

father, Minos, one of the judges of the underworld, will punish her. She is thus irrevocably chained to her suffering self: Phaedra's malaise "is the experience of languor as an affective response to the fact of being riveted to herself" (187). Critchley asks, if Phaedra does not die, "then of whom is this drama the tragedy?" (189). His unconvincing answer is that what dies is "the illusion of the polis, the city, the state, the political order" (191). The play is thus the tragedy of the political order; it is a "*Christian* tragedy" in that its moral is "the utter rejection of the temporal world" (192). While Critchley writes interestingly on Phaedra's dilemma, Racine's heroine is not actually "unique" as the only tragic protagonist who cannot die. In Christopher Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus*, which can also be considered a "Christian" tragedy, Faustus's future torments after death are graphically portrayed as the play ends. Though the attitudes to human beings' relationship to God are different (perhaps even opposite) in the two plays, I would be interested to know how pairing Marlowe with Racine might have inflected Critchley's argument. Critchley observes that the tragic is "only tragic as the comic" (190), a view that has become a commonplace in our understanding of modern drama. However, in citing the idiosyncratic versions of *Phèdre* by the Wooster Group and Sarah Kane, Critchley hardly proves his point in relation to Racine's play.

In "Tragedy's Time: Postemancipation Futures Past and Present," the first essay in the section "Tragedy and Modernity," anthropologist David Scott argues that we are no longer able to experience time as "teleological," progressing to something better, and that tragedy enables us to understand this new view because "tragedy is a dramatic form attuned to an experience of time in which the future resists being narrated as an unambiguously progressive resolution of the present's impasses" (200). Scott contrasts tragedy with romance, which takes a more optimistic view of what individuals can do to make things better. Focusing on colonialism and postcolonialism in the Caribbean, Scott suggests that what was once presented as romance can now be better understood in terms of tragedy. In the rest of the essay, he shows why and how C.L.R. James's *The Black Jacobins*, originally published in 1938, at first presented the "Romance" of Toussaint Louverture and the Haitian Revolution, but with the addition of six paragraphs in the new edition of 1963 turned Toussaint from a mythic romantic to a tragic (specifically Aristotelian) hero. As a tragic hero, Toussaint was forced to choose between ends both of which would entail "incalculable loss"—"a return to slavery or a future without the sources of [French] enlightenment" (210, 213). Scott notes that, for James, "Toussaint, like Hamlet, embodies a social crisis, the collision of embattled and irreconcilable temporalities" (212).

Also writing on tragedy in relation to modernity, Stanley Corngold in "Sebald's Tragedy" explores the genre-crossing "prose" of German writer W.G. Sebald (1944-2001). Sebald "registers the sheer enormity of the destruction inflicted on the human and the natural world in modern times" (220). He is concerned especially with the problem of writing truthfully about such enormity, which becomes a problem of both memory and ethical aesthetics. Corngold argues that Sebald's distinctive style (page-long sentences, embedded allusions, citations, and photographs, etc.) obliquely conveys his sense of "tragedy too big to report" (232). He concludes his essay by listing ten "items" that show how Sebald modifies our conventional understanding of tragedy: "Tragedy involves suffering that is drastic or disproportionate to common sense," but it is now extended to the suffering of all creatures; modern tragedy may not contain an individual *anagnorisis*, but a "collective could give voice to the tragic predicament" (234-36). "Sebald's

Tragedy" thus connects with other essays in Felski's collection that address mass and massive suffering in our understanding of tragedy.

In "Machines and Models for Modern Tragedy: Brecht/Berlau, *Antigone-Model 1948*," Olga Taxidou complicates the received version of Brecht's view of tragedy by examining it through the lens of the *Antigone-Model*, an experiment in both epic theatre and modern tragedy. According to Taxidou, Brecht's *Antigone* project "is about finding a form to accommodate historical catastrophe" (246). Antigone, as well as Creon, is implicated in violence. The work's relevance for modern tragedy, according to Taxidou, lies not so much in the literary text (Brecht's version of Hölderlin's version of Sophocles) as in its embodiment in Helene Weigel's Antigone, performed with a door attached to her back, representing "ruin" (253), and in Ruth Berlau's photographs in the *Model*. One of the many strands of Taxidou's discussion is her view that the convention of men playing women is not a matter of "historical pragmatics" but is "constitutive of tragic form itself" (242-43). How, then, is form related to transcultural reception?

In the final essay in the section on "Tragedy and Modernity," Timothy J. Reiss in "Transforming Politics and Selves: Greek Antiquity, West African Modernity" sets modern West African tragedy alongside Greek tragedy, noting the analogies between the two and ways in which African tragedies rework Greek originals for political purposes. He argues that in ancient Greece the individual was seen as "embedded" in "political society, family, cosmos, biological nature, and material world," not as set against them (267). Our modern Western views of the individual self are thus not applicable to Greek tragedy. Reiss sees a similar kind of embeddedness in plays such as Ola Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame* (a version of *Oedipus*) or Efu Sutherland's *Edufa* (a version of *Alcestis*). But tragedy, Reiss insists, "whatever its continuities," is always "local" (269). What Reiss does not illuminate clearly enough is the relation between "embeddedness" and political activism.

The final section of *Rethinking Tragedy*, "Tragedy, Film, Popular Culture," contains two essays on films and one based on a sociological approach to tragedy. In "Femme Fatale—Negotiations of Tragic Desire," Elizabeth Bronfen draws on Stanley Cavell's argument about tragic "misrecognition" in *King Lear* to offer a tragic approach to *film noir*, specifically to Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity* (1944). Although the film foregrounds the self-justifying version of events of the hero-dupe (Walter Neff, played by Fred MacMurray), Bronfen offers an illuminating reading of the film from the point of view of the *femme fatale* herself (Phyllis Dietrichson, played by Barbara Stanwyck). Through facial close-ups, Wilder presents her not merely as a misogynist fantasy but as a character possessing agency of her own, capable of eliciting pity in the audience and of a final moment of *anagnorisis*. The "*femme fatale* chooses to accept the tragic consequences of her actions" (300). But though *Double Indemnity* contains elements that can be parsed as "tragic," what is dubious is Bronfen's view that the *femme fatale* of *film noir* "can be understood as a particularly resilient contemporary example of tragic sensibility" (289). While offering excellent readings of the scenes she discusses, Bronfen omits too much else that goes into our understanding of Phyllis Dietrichson (her implication in the first Mrs. Dietrichson's death, for example) and that militates against pity. And by unhelpfully conflating "tragedy" and the "tragic," or perhaps, more accurately, separating the tragic figure from structural tragedy, Bronfen undercuts her case for *film noir* (and perhaps film in general) as a site of tragedy.

In the second essay on film, "Spectacular Failure: The Figure of the Lesbian in *Mulholland Drive*," Heather K. Love also focuses on a particular type of filmic female character, the lesbian, whom she presents as "tragic." Love asserts, against Terry Eagleton (in *Sweet Violence* [2003]), that the *pharmakos* (or scapegoat) is always necessarily "marked" (304) as belonging to some kind of (minority) group and, in a statement that strikes me as bizarrely Orwellian, that "some people are more tragic than others" (305) because their suffering seems to be more inevitable. In defining the tragic lesbian, Love begs the question: "As banal and pitiable as the tragic lesbian's experience is, it makes sense to name it as tragic: this is what modern tragedy looks like" (305). By what standard? Like Bronfen, Love offers an illuminating and convincing account of her chosen film, David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* (2001), its doubling and its play of lesbian fantasies and clichés. But also like Bronfen, Love separates her chosen (and, as she admits, clichéd) figure from a broader sense of tragedy. That both of the essays on film focus on a stereotypical "tragic" character leaves unanswered the question of whether tragedy can take the form of film (or film take the form of tragedy).

The final essay in the collection is sociologist Michel Maffesoli's "The Return of the Tragic in Postmodern Societies" (translated from the French by Rita Felski, Allan Megill, and Marilyn Gaddis Rose). Maffesoli argues that in postmodern society the rational individual gives way to the "tribal" group and an orientation to the future to presentism. He sees a "latent tragic mood" in *fin de siècle* "hedonism," for both tragedy and hedonism concern themselves with "living intensely," especially notable in "the practices of the young" (320-21). While hedonism might be construed as Dionysian, Maffesoli assumes a connection between "the tragic sense of destiny" and "the culture of pleasure" (322) that is not helpful in redefining tragedy. *Rethinking Tragedy* concludes with a "Commentary" by Terry Eagleton, which offers a witty, often pungent, and at times unnecessarily rude (about George Steiner, in particular) appraisal of the book's contents.

What emerges as crucial from *Rethinking Tragedy* is the need to accommodate in our critical thinking the unspeakable mass tragedies that engulf huge numbers of people (Corngold). We may do this through the exercise of pity for terrible bodily suffering (Nussbaum), by privileging the chorus of tragedy (Dimock, duBois), or by finding new forms to convey tragic experience that transcend prior traditions.