

## FOREWORD

This book has been a long time in the making. In the mid 1990s, a number of lecturers in the Classics and European Languages & Cultures programmes at Victoria University of Wellington, who were co-teachers of a course on “European Tragedy,” decided to publish a collection of essays on that topic. It was agreed that in showcasing their fascination with tragedy the authors should be free to follow their own research interests and methods. A number of drafts of the essays were made in the years following, but only after the course had been discontinued in 2007 did the plan finally come to fruition. In line with the historical development of European tragedy, the present essays and the interview discuss not only tragedies labelled as such in their subtitle, but also plays linked to the tragic genre by the playwrights’ determination to *transcend* tragedy.<sup>1</sup>

Since many of the plays discussed in this collection may claim the status of world literature, it will come as a surprise to some readers that neither Shakespeare nor Calderón feature in the essay titles (though Shakespeare does feature prominently in the interview): the scope of the collection was limited by the affiliation of the contributing authors to the academic subjects they represent. But the essays do not lose sight of the fact that no strand of European tragedy was developed in isolation. Given that the present essays in their final form are published in a German Studies series, it will suffice to mention some links between *German* tragedy and other strands of European tragedy. It is common knowledge that Goethe based his *Iphigenie auf Tauris* on Euripides’ tragedy *Iphigenia in Tauris*, and Schiller toward the end of his life translated Racine’s *Phèdre* into German. In France, audiences have often commented on similarities between Kleist’s *Penthesilea* and Racine’s tragic oeuvre. Ibsen, who lived in

---

<sup>1</sup> As early as at the beginning of the nineteenth century the limits of the tragic genre were stretched to the point that a self-declared tragedy could be read as the epitome of comedy. See Bianca Theisen’s essay on Kleist’s *Penthesilea*: “‘Helden und Kötter und Frau’: Kleists Hundekomödie,” in *Beiträge zur Kleist-Forschung 2003*, ed. Lothar Jordan (Frankfurt [Oder]: Kleist-Museum, 2004): 129-42.

Germany and Italy from 1864 to 1891 and had many of his plays premiered simultaneously in Norway and Germany, had a strong impact on Germany's Naturalism and Neo-Romanticism. Pirandello, who as a young man lived for some years in Germany, graduating with a PhD from the University of Bonn, had connections with the German theatre director Max Reinhardt, whom in his *Tonight We Improvise* (*Questa sera si recita a soggetto*) he caricatured as Dr. Hinkfuss. At the end of his life he planned to make a film of *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (*Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*) in collaboration with Reinhardt, with himself in the role of the author (see David Groves' essay). The most famous of all Russian tragedies, Ostrovsky's classicist play *Thunder* (*Groza*), better known in Germany and elsewhere in its operatic version *Katya Kabanova* by Leos Janacek, saw at least three translations into German. Beckett insisted that his *Waiting for Godot* (*En attendant Godot*), now hailed all over the world as perhaps the most innovative play of the twentieth century, should see only one translation into German, that authorised by himself.

Taken together, the essays in this collection offer an overview of some key moments in the development of dramatic tragedy and its modern offshoots. Given that the essays and the interview are concerned with tragic *dramas*, the sub-title of the volume, "From Homer to Beckett," perhaps requires an explanation. Tragedy and related dramatic forms as they have developed in European literature would have been inconceivable without the original Homeric models. The Greeks themselves realised that the Homeric epics were the fountainhead of the new genre of tragedy which emerged in Athens perhaps as long as 200 years after the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* attained written form. Aeschylus is famously reported by the second/third centuries AD Greek rhetorician and grammarian Athenaeus as saying that his plays were merely slices from Homer's great banquets, but Homer's influence also extends to the works of Sophocles and Euripides. Homer's role in the development of Greek and European tragedy is discussed in this volume in two essays by John Davidson (on Euripides) and Hansgerd Delbrück (on plays by Goethe and Grillparzer).

John Davidson's opening contribution begins by exploring the genre issue raised by Euripides' *Iphigenia in Tauris*, in the light of Aristotle's seminal discussion of tragedy in the *Poetics*, and goes on to assess the Euripidean play in terms of its debt to Homer, in this case specifically the *Odyssey*. An addendum reveals that the

important Homeric text for Euripides' later *Iphigenia at Aulis* is the *Iliad*. Thus the two defining texts of Greek literature are seen, in different ways, to cast their shadow over the work of the Athenian tragedian, even while he is able to exploit and adapt them for his own tragic dramatic purposes.

Another Euripidean tragedy, the *Hippolytus*, ultimately lies behind the subject of Philip Knight's discussion, the neo-classic Racinian tragedy *Phèdre*. Knight examines the connections between Racine's Jansenist upbringing, his career as a dramatist, his relationship with Louis XIV, and the interaction of pagan/classical thought and Roman Catholicism. His primary focus is on the play's central moment when Phèdre fully confronts her guilt. She feels herself subject to the judgement of the gods, just as members of the audience, living their lives in the *theatrum mundi* before the Christian God as supreme spectator, also face judgement. At the same time, the king in the action of the play, Thésée, misjudges. Is there perhaps a parallel with the Sun-King under whose gaze Racine himself was living his life and pursuing his career?

Prompted by John Davidson's essay, Hansgerd Delbrück investigates the debt owed by Goethe's *Iphigenie auf Tauris* to Homer. Conscious of Goethe's play as a revision of Euripides' *Iphigenia in Tauris* and *Iphigenia at Aulis*, he finds resonances from Homer's epics both in the development of Iphigenie's complex character and in her attempt to harmonise in her soul the image of two goddesses, Athena and Diana/Artemis. In the second part of the essay, Delbrück shows that Goethe's idealism was later parodied by the Austrian playwright Grillparzer in his comedy *Woe to Him Who Lies (Weh dem, der lügt!)*, on the basis of a different reading of Homer's *Odyssey*, including the role of Athena as Telemachus' mentor.

In a second essay, Delbrück examines a tragedy which, in the view of Goethe and many others, pushes the extremes of its genre: Kleist's *Penthesilea*. Focusing on the protagonist's extreme brutality, Delbrück compares her character with Hitler's, concluding that Penthesilea's outbursts of melancholia and madness are triggered by narcissism (in Freudian terms), while Hitler's megalomania, lethal to millions of innocent people, was a highly dangerous character defect, but not a mental illness as such. Despite that difference, Kleist's tragedy *Penthesilea* foreshadows

Hitler's pseudo-heroic and pseudo-tragic perversion of idealism into inhumanity.

With Irene Zohrab's contribution, attention moves to Russia in the middle of the nineteenth century and Alexander Ostrovsky's *Thunder*. Zohrab explores the idea of "Holy Russia" and shows how the polarities in the structure of Russian culture are reflected in Ostrovsky's play. She isolates the family circle, the wider social context, the River Volga, and the forces of the cosmos as manifested in the thunderstorm, as the four crucial dimensions at the point of whose intersection the heroine of the play, Catherine, is positioned as victim and scapegoat. Zohrab also examines the role of free will and concludes by assessing the play in the light of Aristotle's analysis of tragedy in the *Poetics*.

An example of a social tragedy from the late nineteenth century is Gerhart Hauptmann's *The Weavers (Die Weber)* which is the focus of Margaret Sutherland's chapter. With initial reference to Hauptmann's intention to become a sculptor, Sutherland examines how some of the new features in his drama may be attributable to his artistic eye. Just as Rodin's sculpture *The Burghers of Calais* from the same era presents a united group of men with a common purpose but with each individual having his own identity, Hauptmann portrays his suffering weavers in similar fashion, illuminating their characters, backgrounds, encounters with authority and tragic fates from multiple angles, so that by the end of the drama the root causes of their predicament and results of their struggle become clear.

Hansgerd Delbrück shows that in Ibsen's play *The Master Builder (Bygmester Solness)*, the family doctor Herdal fails to detect and cure the protagonist's self-diagnosed "madness," whereas young Hilde Wangel is aware of all the right therapeutic means for Solness' cure. However, she uses them for the wrong, and ultimately fatal, ends. Delbrück argues that when Solness falls to his death, he is the victim not only of his physical weakness and, in terms of pre-Freudian psychiatry, of his neurosis, but also of the unavailability of psychoanalysis as a professional cure. As young Hilde as well as Solness' secretary Kaya and his wife Aline all behave like pathological cases, the play exposes the explosive tension in Ibsen's own time between, on the one hand, an optimistic faith in the blessings of progress and, on the other, a paralysing pessimism about its actual value.

David Groves explores the unconventional dramatic world of Luigi Pirandello who subverts the received norms of tragedy, while always “[reinstating] the fictions of naturalistic drama which he feigns to break.” Groves demonstrates Pirandello’s technique of playing with “tragedy” (both the word and the phenomenon) through his employment of a mixture of the tragic and the comic. His discussion focuses especially on *Henry IV* (*Enrico IV*) and *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. In his treatment of the second of these plays he also elucidates the themes of violence and sacrifice.

Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* is the subject of Keren Smith’s discussion. Smith explores the tragic and comic elements of a play that Beckett himself described as a “tragicomedy.” She unravels the complexities of “an art that affirms even while it denies,” in its portrayal of characters caught in a limbo of waiting and indecision, and experiencing a gamut of emotions. She finds a powerful creative energy that wrestles with contradictions, uncertainties and possibilities in a dazzling display of words whose very meaning is subverted in the process. Unlike tragedy in the traditional sense, Beckett’s tragicomedy “keeps both beginning and ending disconcertingly open, yet static, undecided between alternative uncertainties.”

The final piece in the collection consists of an interview which David Groves conducted with Phillip Mann, a distinguished theatre director who worked for many years in New Zealand. A range of issues are covered in the interview, including ideas about tragedy and discussions of a number of plays from the point of view of performance in the theatre.

It should be noted that the essays on Euripides and on Goethe were written in 2010, while the essays on Kleist, Ostrovsky and Hauptmann, which had been written at an early stage in the project, were updated in the same year. The essay on Beckett was written in 1996, with some updated references added in 2010. The essays on Racine, Ibsen and Pirandello were last revised in 1999, 2000 and 2001 respectively. The interview with Phillip Mann, which had taken place in 1998, was updated by Phillip Mann in 2010.

We wish to thank Irene Zohrab, Philip Knight and Margaret Sutherland for editorial work in earlier stages of the project, and August Obermayer for publishing the collection in the *Otago German Studies* series. We are also indebted to Claudia Pfeil for designing the cover and to David Groves for the photo (with

himself in disguise!) produced by what is now Victoria University of Wellington Image Services.

*John Davidson*  
*Hansgerd Delbrück*

October 2010