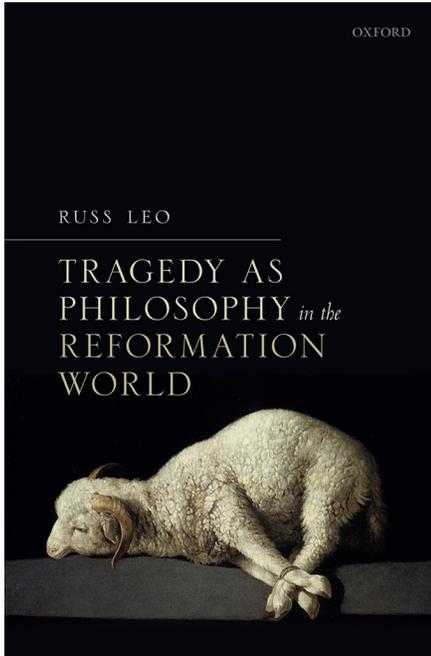


Review

Russ Leo, *Tragedy as Philosophy in the Reformation World*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2019, 320 pp. ISBN 9780198834212.



Set against a black background, a merino lamb with bound feet – an unmistakably sacrificial posture – is awaiting its fate. Francisco de Zurbarán’s ominous painting *Agnus Dei* (1635-1640) graces the cover of a book that describes the rise and fall of a specific Aristotelian and philosophical view on tragedy in Reformed debate between the 1570s and the 1630s. Author Russ Leo is associate professor of early modern English literature at Princeton University. His research, which focuses on the origins and histories of affect in poetry, philosophy, and faith in early modernity, features many Dutch thinkers and authors, such as Spinoza, Vossius, and Brandt. In this first monograph, the Leiden professor Daniel Heinsius (1580-1655) plays a major role. The chapter on Heinsius can be considered the climax of the ‘tragic action’ that the book performs over six chapters, each dedicated to a specific author. The first

three chapters, brought together in Part 1 (Prostasis), discuss David Pareus, Lodovico Castelvetro, and John Rainold, who aimed – each in his own way – to gain philosophical-theological insights into providence and divine intervention through tragedy. Part 2 (Epistasis) evolves from Heinsius to John Milton’s catastrophic questioning of the philosophical capacities of the genre.

Aristotle’s *Poetics* forms a common thread running through all chapters, since it was Aristotle who first dealt with tragedy as a source of dialectic and apodictic knowledge. As the *mimesis* of an action, tragedy enabled the investigation of notions of necessity, probability, and credibility. Leo argues that it is in its philosophical capacity that tragedy

informed Reform, rendering Scripture, nature, and divinity intelligible in tragic terms. Within the scope of this book, 'philosophy' should therefore be understood in its dialectic and apodictic form, precluding anthropology, psychology, and even ethics. Furthermore, this book aims to discuss merely a small portion of all early modern theatre: readers should expect a discussion of tragedy, not of drama or performance. My aim in this review is to briefly describe the introduction and the first three chapters, and then to discuss the chapters on Heinsius and Milton in more detail.

The extensive introduction offers more than an overview of the explorations of tragedy for reformatory (without capital) purposes before Pareus. By successively discussing Martin Bucer's Reformed programme of edification, Erasmus's philological studies of Euripides, and Philip Melancthon's combination of both thinkers in drawing Christian meaning from the antique plots, Leo clears a path that links many traces in the thinking of tragedy.

The first three chapters then set out to demonstrate how Reformed dramatists and theologians alike turned to tragedy to comprehend escalating tensions in Reformation Europe. Chapter one features the Heidelberg professor David Pareus (1548-1622), who contended that the book of Revelation was structured like a prophetic tragedy, invoking poetic concepts for exegetical purposes. Tragedy provided Pareus with a formal language in which plot, history, and meaning of Scripture became tangible and intelligible. It made visible how poetics could inform theology, but also how the Reformation could be seen as a series of poetic and theological developments. Chapter two discusses how Lodovico Castelvetro criticised Roman Catholic theatrical and devotional practices in his *Poetica D'Aristotele Vulgarizzata, Et Sposta* (1570), emphasising the more philosophical and rhetorical vision of tragedy in the *Poetics*. The *Poetics* thus helped Castelvetro sharpen Reformed arguments concerning faith and authority. John Rainolds's *Th'overthrow of stage-playes* (1599), in mobilising the *Poetics* against theatre in the name of Reformation, concludes the 'Prostasis'. In chapter three, Rainolds advances an anti-theatrical Aristotle; he recognised the value of tragedy for Reformation to the extent that tragedy's rhetoric and dialectic precision are uncompromised. The chapter includes a fascinating interpretation of *Hamlet's* 'play-within-the play', demonstrating how Shakespeare countered Rainolds's assumptions, defending the rich sources of spectacle and stage-playing.

More than any other author, Heinsius, in *De Tragoedia Constitutione* (1611), focused on the philosophical province of tragedy in the *Poetics*. Contending that tragedy should help men to comprehend matters in terms of cause and effect, Heinsius prioritised plot out of Aristotle's six elements of tragedy. The plot should carry the tragedy on its own; any other art or technique would muddle its reality or verisimilitude. Collating Aristotle's comments on spectacle with his guidelines for using machines, Heinsius arrived at a profound critique of a *deus ex machina*, which did not achieve fear and pity, yet prodigious wonder in the audience. A powerful detail involves Heinsius supporting his philosophical reading of the *Poetics* by pointing out Aristotle's use of theatrical metaphor in the *Metaphysics*. Indeed, Aristotle compared Anaxagoras's explanation for the making of the world to a *deus ex machina*, dismissing the mind as a ridiculous solution for a problem Anaxagoras was desperate to solve. Finally, Leo analyses Heinsius's own tragedy *Herodes Infanticida* (1632) with respect to its use of devices. Although miracles and interventions

are not absent from the plot, they do not fundamentally alter it, functioning as adornments or representations of the passions. In fact, it is Heinsius's scriptural interpretation that draws the different acts together, turning *Herodes Infanticida* into a true study of divinity and necessity, and of prophecy and predestination.

De Tragoedia Constitutione is a book of the Arminian controversy, as Leo rightly indicates. It has puzzled scholars that Heinsius chose the side of the Contra-Remonstrants and even worked as secretary of the Synod of Dordrecht, but that he seemed hesitant to support Gomarus's theology. Based on his poetic writings, Leo presents a convincing view on Heinsius's position in the conflict. Leo suggests that when Heinsius refers to the Arminian controversy as 'tragedies beyond the stage', he deems the conflict 'tragic' in its indifference to the probability that theological disputes will bring nothing but division and discord. Heinsius suspended all theological questions in his poetic work, which he thought should be dealt with by theologians. However, as Leo observes with great sense of nuance, Heinsius draws important questions concerning nature, causality, and agency, which were formerly considered theological questions, under the *aegis* of poetics. Without suggesting that philosophy or poetics could replace theology for Heinsius as an orthodox thinker, Leo ingeniously explains how Heinsius's strict division between plot and device coheres with a crisis of understanding and faith in the Dutch Republic.

Chapter five and the conclusion, finally, involve two dissimilar visions of tragedy in John Milton's 1671 volume *Paradise Regain'd ... To which is added Samson Agonistes*. Chapter five concentrates on Book IV of *Paradise Regain'd*, where the devil offers a rich description of Greek learning and tragedy in order to seduce Christ. Jesus's response manifests clear knowledge of ancient Greek literature, philosophy, and rhetoric, none of which yields true wisdom however, as one cannot know truth without Christian faith. Attic tragedy, Jesus claims, is 'ill imitated' of Hebrew wisdom, expanding the tragic archive to include accounts of catharsis and purification beyond the *Poetics*. Remarkably, Milton translates *catharsis* as *lustratio*, a word that carries a long Mosaic and Christian tradition of purgation. *Lustratio* here is an initiatory rite involving trial and exposure through which humans might come to understand themselves with respect to God. This understanding grounds their relationship to the passions. As Leo sees it, Milton does not 'Christianise' catharsis, but rather understands catharsis as an unoriginal expression of a long tradition of purgation since Moses. In laying bare the sacred origins of catharsis Milton is nonetheless heavily invested in tragedy as philosophy.

In the book's conclusion, entitled 'Catastrophe', *Samson Agonistes* offers a different view. Leo starts by demonstrating from the short essay preceding the play, 'Of that sort of dramatic poem which is call'd tragedy', that Milton followed Heinsius's *De Tragoedia Constitutione* and *Herodes Infanticidia* more than scholars have heretofore recognised. Similar to Heinsius and deviating from Aristotle, Milton minimises the importance of spectacle in tragedy and recognises the degree to which tragedy is compromised by the 'common', or artless recourse to devices and miracles. Next, Leo shows that Milton also questioned Heinsius's thesis, pointing to the limits of tragedy. What is at stake is the extent to which one can rationally understand or depict the causality of divine inspiration. Divine intervention may be all too 'common' in the action or lie outside of the action of the tragedy altogether. At some point Samson reaches an important insight, which is described by

the chorus as 'secret refreshings'. This 'inward persuasion' is traced over different counters, suspending the reader between two different interpretations: either the refreshings involve divine intervention, indicating that Milton considers God necessary for the plot, or they involve the human capacity to convince oneself. The latter would indicate that Milton eschewed devices, yet it might also question the necessity of supplementing human actions with divine inspiration in general. It would affirm how common God is, 'in the sense that it comprises all of the immanent actions and affects across the drama – a vision of God that approaches monism' (254). It is by this afterthought that Leo reveals this book as a prelude to a bigger project.

Russ Leo's keen eye for tragic worlds, in which human actions and affects are themselves constitutive of 'divinity', point forward to a second book, which is currently in the making: *Milton, Spinoza, and the Genres of Enlightenment*. The present book, an extremely sophisticated and important study in itself, may be outlining the playing field for an even greater study of 'aesthetic' modes of thinking in the early Enlightenment. Realising that 'aesthetic' is not an early modern notion, the forthcoming book does, however, seem to concern a thinking *through* poetry, of which tragedy concerns but one genre. Another prominent motif in *Tragedy as Philosophy in the Reformation World* seems to be Leo's appreciation of literary criticism. Leo describes his book as 'also a historical account of the origins of a notably *literary* criticism' (41); he calls Heinsius's *De Tragoedia Constitutione* 'not a common commentary of the *Poetics*, but a sustained critical account' (170). When Heinsius regrets 'how few there are today who recognise the usefulness of true and real criticism' (173), I could not help reading that quote in a twenty-first-century context and relate it to Leo as a former student of the American literary critic and political theorist Fredric Jameson. The processes by which different modes of thinking – be it theology, poetics, the sciences, or the humanities – acquire the right to speak truth for society, demand our critical attention at any time.

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