The Flaw in the Flaw

RUSS MCDONALD
UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT GREENSBORO

Modern thinking about Shakespearean tragedy derives from three main sources: the descriptive theory of Aristotle as set forth in the *Poetics*, Shakespeare's own practice, and the early-twentieth-century commentary of A. C. Bradley. But the distortions of time and translation, not to mention the difficulties of passing on complex ideas to millions of high-school and college students, have led us to simplify the question of tragic character, to seek ways of smoothing out its hairy and unruly surfaces. The most familiar and enduring of these simplifications is the doctrine of the tragic flaw, the notion that the tragic figure is cursed by an inescapable weakness of character leading inevitably—and perhaps properly—to death. Comfortable and useful though it seems, thinking about Shakespeare's heroes in terms of a tragic flaw amounts to a kind of intellectual bypass, a means of proceeding that permits us to move quickly but causes us to miss too much. It is time to challenge this orthodoxy and to replace it with a more balanced and appropriate conception of the Shakespearean protagonist and of tragedy in general.

The law of the flaw is a relatively recent phenomenon. To read Aristotle himself is to find the notion of tragic error associated specifically with an act, a mistake in judgment, not with a weakness of character, and while it is true that Bradley identifies a "fatal imperfection or error" and speaks of the hero's "trait" or "characteristic action," these nouns are part of a complex and balanced analysis in which Bradley pays equal attention to the competing energies in Shakespeare's creation of the tragic figure. The prevalence of the flaw theory owes much to its value as an instructional device: it permits us to apprehend a complex representation of a mysterious human experience and, by naming it, to master that mystery. It is a convenient way of explaining what happens to Hamlet and Oedipus and the other tragic heroes who are alien to us and, more importantly, to our students. It allows us to put the tragic hero in a box labeled "procrastination" or "ambition" or, in the somewhat fancier model, "hubris."

What is worse, its utility as a pedagogical aid has led us to overlook its serious and far-reaching interpretive implications. Deriving from the Victorian notion that "God's in his heaven, all's right with the world," the theory of the flaw suggests that those who experience bad fortune get what they deserve, that suffering must be the result of some kind of weakness, that the great tragic figures shouldn't have been surprised by and shouldn't resent their misery, that anybody who gets into big trouble is probably a pervert who ought to be punished. Phyllis Rose has complained that the doctrine of the tragic flaw "encourages self-satisfaction and the turning of one's back on other people's problems," and she wittily recounts her efforts to contest such conclusions in teaching *Oedipus the King:*

> Oedipus was my ace in the hole, because I think there's no way he can be seen as deserving his fate. An oracle has prophesied that he will sleep with his mother and kill

> his father, so, horrified at the prospect of committing these crimes, he leaves the people he thinks are his parents. Of course, he runs smack into his real parents and commits the crimes he has been fleeing from. But how can he be seen as morally responsible? My students say he should never have left Corinth. He shouldn't have tried to escape the prophecy. His tragic flaw was arrogance. He flew off the handle. He shouldn't have killed that guy at the crossroads. Under the circumstances, he shouldn't have gone to bed with any woman without checking very carefully whether or not she was his mother.
> ("Hers," *New York Times*, Mar. 1, 1984)

If the flaw in the flaw is that it blames the tragic figure and exonerates the world—"I'm OK, Hamlet's not"—we must also be wary of the sentimental error involved in reversing the terms, which is to excuse the hero and assign the blame entirely to his environment.

An alternative to both positions is to see the dramatic action as a kind of tragic incompatibility between the hero's particular form of greatness and the earthly circumstances that he or she is forced to confront. In Shakespeare's tragic conception of the world, heroic ability becomes a handicap; distinctive talents constitute an ironic form of fallibility. Rather than thinking of the tragic figures as "flawed," we might regard them as gifted, as possessing a surplus of talent that puts them into immediate conflict with a hostile world. So widely credited is the image of the proud, irresponsible, foolish, or doomed protagonist that apparently we need to be reminded that Shakespeare's tragic figures are heroes, and since heroes are out of fashion, we need to put some pressure on the word to make it accessible and meaningful to a contemporary audience. What follows are some guidelines for refreshing our thinking—and that of our students—about these compelling people.

Hamlet, Romeo and Juliet, Brutus, Macbeth—all are exceptional, superhuman, different from the rest of us. A way of putting it that might make them more sympathetic is to say that they are outsiders. We sense this distinction before we arrive at the theater because we know that we are going to see Olivier's Othello or Mel Gibson's Hamlet: casting directors don't give these roles to nobodies. Once the play begins, greatness is signified most obviously by extraordinary patterns of speech: nobody else sounds like Hamlet ("Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer / The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune") or Juliet ("And when I shall die, / Take him and cut him out in little stars") or Macbeth ("The multitudinous seas incarnadine, / Making the green one red"). A primary effect of this brilliant language is to signify exceptional imagination. These men and women speak differently from the rest of us, and from the rest of the cast, because they see differently.

Shakespeare's tragic characters are visionaries, purists, idealists. Believing in a strict correspondence between the way things are and the way things appear to them, they commit themselves imaginatively to the fulfillment of an ideal, whether personal or political or both. This is what Alfred Harbage notices when he remarks on "their *unworldliness*, their incapacity for compromise," and speaks of them as "imperfect ones torn by their dreams of perfection, mortals with immortal longings in them" (*The Complete Pelican Shakespeare*, p. 821). Most of the qualities commonly associated with the Shakespearean tragic figure—pride, solipsism, endurance, nobility, sensitivity—either support or arise from this habit of idealization. Hamlet demands absolute honesty ("I know not seems"); Brutus insists that the assassination of Caesar is not a murder but a noble act of patriotism; King Lear believes that his daughters mean what they say. The action of each of the tragedies represents a heroic attempt to impose this personal vision upon a hostile and recalcitrant world.

Another way of framing these characters' experience is to say that they are like children, for their idealistic conception of the world is usually marked by a radical

simplicity or naiveté. Even Hamlet, the most intellectually capable and sophisticated of the lot, displays a youthful confidence and optimism in his capacity to know the truth and by that means to set himself free. That Othello is sometimes thought of as a simpleton is partly a function of his devotion to an elementary and clearly defined sense of honor, honesty, loyalty, and conjugal love. Romeo and Juliet conform well to such a pattern because, relatively speaking, they are children. Brash and independent, the young lovers seek to realize an ideal union in a deceptive and corrupt world. There is, to be sure, haste in their wooing and wedding, not to mention their deaths; and the carelessness with which they act has been taken by some as Shakespeare's indictment of their behavior as thoughtless and foolish. "They stumble that run fast," says Friar Lawrence, a statement often quoted as final evidence of Shakespeare's disapproval. And yet to narrow the meaning of *Romeo and Juliet* to the cliché that "haste makes waste" is surely to misrepresent the destruction of innocence that gives the play its extraordinary poignance. Passionate love, both physical and spiritual, is what destroys them, but it is also what draws us to them. Shakespeare does not present their passion as a flaw.

Macbeth may be difficult to think of as a hero or a visionary, since it is easy to condemn him as ambitious and leave it at that. And it is true that Shakespeare's practice is more complicated here: Macbeth becomes a criminal very early in the play, the shocking nature of his crimes making him much less sympathetic than Hamlet or Romeo. In other words, it is hard to discern idealism in a murderer. Nevertheless, knowing that he should not, Macbeth acts upon a faith in his own strength and privilege. He hopes that by his own will he can transform wish into fact: the great soliloquy delivered during the first banquet reveals a desire for certainty:

> If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well
> It were done quickly. If th' assassination
> Could trammel up the consequence and catch
> With his surcease success, that but this blow
> Might be the be-all and the end-all . . .
>
> (1.7.1–5)

If only we could be sure that it would be finished, if only we could control every possibility, if only we could be sure that all the consequences could be accounted for as soon as the deed is done. But such hopes are naive: all the conditionals, the "if"s, remind us that Macbeth's vision of the perfect crime is quixotic. His fantasy is undermined not only morally but also verbally, by the slippage of meaning that we see in the puns. In these few lines alone, the meaning of "done" changes with each of its three uses (and the echoes *Dun*can and *Dun*sinane and "the *dun*nest smoke of hell" are audible in the background). The proximity and similarity of "surcease" and "success," with their equivalent sounds and related meanings, add further complications, since "success" signifies both achievement and continuation (as in "succession"). Macbeth believes erroneously that he can move directly and without resistance from what he calls the "happy prologue" spoken by the witches into the "swelling act," believes that he can exert absolute control over his destiny. If only Fleance had not escaped, Macbeth "had else been perfect" (3.4.23), but evil is never complete, perfection never possible.

But the tragic hero behaves as if it were, as if the world could be remade by strength of will. Coriolanus' mother goes to the heart of the matter when she says to her son, "You are too absolute." The single-mindedness with which the hero pursues the ideal vision produces the central conflict of each play, for the world resists transmutation

or control, and this conflict leads to a kind of dislocation, usually geographical (as in Hamlet's trip to England, or Romeo's banishment) but psychological as well. Despite the fierceness of the pressures that frustrate the heroic will, the tragic hero refuses to compromise or to relinquish the object of desire. As Macbeth puts it, in a speech that demonstrates both the power of his will and the tendency of the world to challenge his desire,

> But let the frame of things disjoint, both the worlds suffer,
> Ere we will eat our meal in fear, and sleep
> In the affliction of these terrible dreams
> That shake us nightly. (3.2.18–22)

The dreams of perfection have become the nightmares that torture Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. Each of the heroes is betrayed by commitment to a vision of perfection and by the force of will dedicated to that commitment. Even when it becomes clear that the ideal vision cannot be sustained, the hero remains faithful to it; and this rigidity is both self-destructive and ennobling.

And what of the world that resists the hero's attempts to change or control it? Shakespeare ensures that our attitude toward that world, like our attitude toward his heroes, is mixed. It is a place of evil, disappointment, and mortality: its characteristics are apparent in the deceptions and illness of the Danish court that frustrate Hamlet, or in the misunderstandings and revenges that Romeo and Juliet attempt to escape. At the same time, however, we recognize it as our own world, the realm of the ordinary, the everyday, the nonheroic. These are the conditions that Malcolm and Macduff manage to restore at the end of *Macbeth*. The tragic figures imagine something extraordinary, seek to transcend the compromises of the familiar, and we both admire that imaginative leap and acknowledge its impossibility. The contest between world and will brings about misery, insanity, and finally death; it also produces meaning and magnificence.

In *Romeo and Juliet* Shakespeare dwells on the attractions of the heroes' dream. Surrounded by an urban environment of hate and violence, the lovers retreat into a nocturnal realm of moonlight and privacy. They create a space free of the restrictions and prejudices implicit in the names Capulet and Montague. In this space, inherited ideas can be discarded ("deny thy name") and feelings truly expressed. Custom requires one kind of behavior; the lovers choose another. As Juliet puts it in the balcony scene:

> Fain would I dwell on form; fain, fain deny
> What I have spoke. But farewell compliment.
> Dost thou love me? . . .
>
> In truth, fair Montague, I am too fond,
> And therefore thou mayst think my havior light.
> But trust me, gentleman, I'll prove more true
> Than those that have more coying to be strange.
> (2.2.93–95, 103–6)

This innocent appeal to frankness and feeling is surely one source of the play's enduring popularity: in setting the simple candor of youth against the compromises and obstacles of their heritage, present against past, Shakespeare invites the audience to sympathize with the lovers and to wish for a world in which quarreling parents could be brought to their senses, Tybalt could welcome his enemies to the banquet, and Friar John, undeterred by the plague, could have delivered his message to Romeo. "If only" is the persistent theme.

On the other hand, an audience is less inclined to sanction Macbeth's ambitious fantasy of sovereignty than to endorse the young lovers' passionate dreams of fulfillment. Although it is possible early in the play to sense the seductive power of Macbeth's wishes—if only this were a world where desires could be realized by an "easy" act, where "it were done, when 'tis done," where a little water could cleanse us of our wicked deeds—in this tragedy Shakespeare emphasizes the danger of illusion: the ideal itself is associated with murder, the visionary and courageous hero rapidly degenerates into a bloody tyrant, and most of the tragedy is given over to the appalling consequences of Macbeth's wickedness. In this respect *Romeo and Juliet* and *Macbeth* represent the two extremes of the tonal range that Shakespeare draws upon in all the tragedies: in the early play, he concentrates on the loveliness of the ideal, teasing us with the hope of its realization; in the later one, he dwells on the hideous personal and political effects of the hero's subjective view. In both, however, he simultaneously stimulates and deflates our imaginations, teasing us with the promises of illusion and forcing us to feel the pain of disillusionment. The struggle against imperfection is doomed, but to label the heroes as "flawed" is to conclude that the attempt is not worth making, and such a judgment falsifies the balances and paradoxes of Shakespearean tragedy.

One final paradox. Although the tragic hero is dead and the vision dispelled, both visionary and vision are revived every time the play is read or performed. The pessimistic lines about life as a "poor player" should remind us that Macbeth himself survives—in the work of fiction. Shakespeare's tragedies are all to some extent plays about reading and misreading. Macbeth's error is that he misinterprets to his advantage the prophecies and warnings of the witches; he does, in other words, precisely what all of us do every day—he misreads a text, only we do it with literary texts, and so the consequences for us are relatively minor. The text that Macbeth misreads is the text of the world, of the shadowy moral world of good and evil in which misunderstanding can have fatal results. The impulse to dream is safest in the theater, or on the painter's canvas, or in the lyrics of a song. Shakespeare has imagined the stories of heroes and turned those lives into art. The theater is the medium by which we may briefly inhabit a more nearly perfect world, and even though it is transient, our participation in the imaginative world of the tragic hero momentarily enriches our experience of this one.