

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

The Themes in Shakespeare

## TRAGIC FLAW

In chapter 13 of his *Poetics*, and with special reference to Sophocles' *Oedipus*, Aristotle discusses that kind of misjudgment (missing the mark, as with an arrow) which most perfectly characterizes the fall of the tragic hero. We have come to call that character error, which makes downfall acceptable and meaningful, a 'tragic flaw,' some internal trait which makes us accept the hero's downfall.

If we enlarge the notion of tragic flaw, as in modern usage, we can find room in the dramas of Shakespeare to include a variety of 'flaws' which render meaningful the downfalls of some of his most compelling heroes. Our enlargement will spring from adding the notion of 'excess' to the notion of 'flaw,' and from shaping a slightly modified notion of the meaning of 'misjudgment.' We may find ourselves accepting a cast of characters—see following paragraph—which though diverse in its central failings is one in the relevance, and congruity, of those failings, to the fate awaiting the character.

The above list displays a variety of mind states pushed to the extreme, yet in every case the flaw in question is entangled with **excess**: all these characters, and the remainder that apply—Coriolanus, Antony, Caesar, Lear, Othello, Tarquin—become victims of an excess of their own most self-destructive trait.

**ANTONY Passion.** Antony and Cleopatra, in the end, sacrifice all for love; that is give up their lives for one another, in a gesture which profits no one, but illustrates the incandescent hold sexual passion can exercise over two people who catch fire from one another. Passion leads to Antony's downfall.

**CORIOLANUS Pride.** Coriolanus is a proud and invulnerable military puritan; pride is the driving force behind Coriolanus' power and behind his refusal to bend to the norms of his own society. Coriolanus is furious when the citizens and senate of Rome decide to banish him, and he quite naturally turns to revenge against them, as soon as he can.

**JULIUS CAESAR Ambition.** Julius Caesar was an ambitious and effective general, whose relation to the growing polity of Rome was unclear; did he wish to protect the city from barbarian forces, or did he long to take control of the city? The conspirators who acted against him believed Caesar bore the earmarks of a dictator, and wanted to take no chances on his ultimate exercise of power.

**LEAR. Desire to be loved.** Lear is greedy for the praise of his daughters, and when any qualification occurs, in their expression of love for him, he is furiously unsatisfied, and loses his judgement. He is greedy to be loved.

**OTHELLO. Jealousy.** The slightest suspicion of the fidelity of Desdemona is enough to drive Othello mad with jealousy. He immediately clutches at any pretext to doubt her, and drives himself mad, before his dreadful actions shock him into an awareness of his folly.

**TARQUIN Desire.** When Collatine speaks to Tarquin at the beginning of the poem, about his wife's beauty and chastity, he awakens desire in his interlocutor. This desire is still a latent interest, but it grows, and by the time Tarquin has made a return visit to the house of Collatine, his desire has grown stronger. He lets his mind build itself into a fatal lust, and like Othello must commit murder before seeing himself clearly.