

3 KEYS to Shakespearean Tragedy

by Earl P. Holt III

William Shakespeare was the greatest author ever to put ink to paper, and he's easily the most quoted author in history. The timeless moral insights gained from his tragedies have resonance even 400 years later, and are applicable to almost any modern circumstance. Although his tragedies may initially appear inscrutable, there are three keys to their understanding.

The **First Key** is to recognize that the genius of Shakespeare was to resurrect the formula of the ancient Greek Tragedians -- such as Euripides, Aeschylus and Sophocles -- and combine that formula with elements of Medieval Tragedy from the early "*Enlightenment*." The fruits of his labors were the timeless tragedies of *Macbeth*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Hamlet* and several others which have stood the test of time.

Aristotle described this formula of the ancient Greek Tragedians in his book "*Poetics*." It usually involved a "**Protagonist**" (or main character) of "**high estate**," who endures a profound **reversal of fortune** that's attributable to some innate **character flaw** he possessed. For the ancient Greeks, the protagonist's fatal flaw was usually "**hubris**," Greek for pride or arrogance, which so displeased the gods that they contrived the events leading to his undoing.

The Second Key is understanding that Shakespeare united this formula of the Greek Tragedians with the emerging philosophy of *The Enlightenment*. One of its revolutionary ideas is that man is given *free will* by God -- for good or evil -- and that his fate is not predestined. In doing so, Shakespeare discarded the interference of the gods in bringing about the demise of *his* tragic figures. Whatever misfortunes they experienced were of their *OWN* contrivance.

That Shakespeare's tragic figures are destroyed by mistakes and errors they, themselves make -- rather than simply become the victims of angry and capricious Gods -- is clearly and unmistakably reflected in *Julius Caesar's* famous remark to *Brutus* in Act I, Scene 2 of *Julius Caesar*: ***"The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars but in ourselves that we are underlings."***

Hamlet provides the **Third Key** key to understanding all Shakespearean tragedy. In Act 1, Scene 4, *Hamlet* declares to loyal friends that: ***"So oft it chances in particular men that for some vicious mole of nature in them...or by some habit...that these men, carrying the stamp of one defect -- being nature's livery or fortune's star -- his virtues else, be they as pure as Grace...shall in the general censure take corruption from that particular fault."***

In less elegant terms, *Hamlet* opines that no matter how noble some men may be, they can be undone by a fatal flaw they possess. For *Hamlet*, himself, that flaw was **INDECISION**. Time and time again, he agonizes over what course of action to take after his father, Denmark's *King Hamlet*, was murdered by his own brother, *Claudius*, and his throne and wife (*Queen Gertrude*) are wrongly usurped by *Claudius*. Indecision is reflected in *Hamlet's* famous soliloquy where he states, ***"To be or not to be, that is the question: whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, or to take arms against a sea of troubles..."***

Hamlet is a sympathetic and noble character in many respects. Yet, few men would experience indecision over what course of action to take if they were visited by the ghost of their murdered father, who appeared to them demanding revenge for his own ***"foul and most unnatural murder."*** The evil deed is triply onerous since it involved the usurpation of *King Hamlet's* throne and wife by his own murderer. The proper course of action would be even more obvious if it were to be described

in detail by the victim's ghost, leaving no doubt as to its certainty. His father's ghost declares to Hamlet in unmistakable terms that "*The serpent that did sting thy father's life now wears his crown.*"



King Hamlet's Ghost

The indecision that defines *Hamlet's* fatal flaw is demonstrated in a variety of contexts. For example, after years of **courting *Ophelia***, the daughter of the Royal Advisor, *Polonius*, *Hamlet* initially encourages and then spurns and then encourages and then scorns her love. Ultimately, he abruptly advises that she "***get thee to a nunnery.***" *Hamlet's* harsh and vacillating responses to *Ophelia's* sincere love and devotion help drive her to madness and lead her to kill herself, a mortal sin in Catholicism, Denmark's national religion. She is then buried in unconsecrated ground because of her presumed suicide. Thus, *Hamlet's* indecision also costs the life (and *afterlife*) of the woman he loves.



Hamlet with Ophelia



"Mad" Ophelia

Another example of Hamlet's indecision is when he begins to **feign madness**. He has previously had ample opportunities to seek revenge against his *Uncle Claudius*, but has failed to act. Instead, he engages in what psychologists might consider a "*displacement behavior*" by wandering without purpose throughout Elsinore Castle, engrossed in reading a book. When he is questioned about the book, he replies in riddles, puns and *double entendres* that further suggest his madness. Yet, his scheme to appear mad brings him no closer to avenging his late father.



Polonius Asking About Hamlet's Book

In Hamlet's famous soliloquy, he has ascended to the very summit of the castle where he begins to contemplate his **own suicide**. In its first and most familiar stanza, **"To be or not to be..."**, he weighs the decision to take up arms to avenge his father. However, in the following stanza he also considers his own suicide **"...to end the heartache and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to...a consummation Devoutly to be wished."** As he agonizes over the decision to commit suicide and thus end his sorrow, his rash thoughts are abruptly vanquished when he absentmindedly drops the knife (or *bodkin*) into the sea below, which was to be his instrument of suicide.



Hamlet Brandishing His Bare (*unsheathed*) Bodkin

Likewise, when a troupe of actors visit Elsinore Castle, home to Denmark's King and the Danish Seat of Government, *Hamlet* requests that they perform **"The Murder of Gonzago."** The latter is an ancient Danish play whose diabolical plot clearly inspired *Claudius* to murder his brother in an identical manner. (Shakespeare *did* so love the literary device of **"a play within a play."**) As the play unfolds, the Court begins

to stir and murmur as those in attendance slowly recognize the similarity between the recent and untimely death of *King Hamlet*, and the death of the character *Gonzago* in the play. Here, rather than directly confront his father's murderer in a decisive manner, *Hamlet* hints to *Claudius* that he knows of his diabolical misdeed. He ends the scene with: **"The play's the thing, Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king."**



Master of Actors with Hamlet

Later, *Hamlet* is armed when he chances upon *King Claudius* silently praying to God and asking forgiveness for his diabolical acts, but *Hamlet* fails to seize the opportunity to avenge his father's death here, as well. He is partly dissuaded by a nearby *Christian Icon*, but also offers several less substantial rationales to himself. Among these is the notion that if he were to kill *Claudius* during prayer, that act would ensure *Claudius* was immediately received into Heaven rather than Hell or Purgatory, despite his fratricide and adultery. (*Hamlet* assumes that *Gertrude* and *Claudius* began an adulterous affair before his father was murdered, because their marriage occurred so soon after his father's death that **"The funeral's baked meats did coldly furnish forth the wedding tables."**)

Macbeth, *King Lear*, *Hamlet* and *Othello* are generally recognized to be the "*Quartet*" of Shakespearean Tragedies, although there are many others that fit Shakespeare's formula equally well. Each of these tragic figures is considered to be a great and powerful man, but each is undone by his one *tragic flaw* that inevitably manifests in his own destruction.

For *Macbeth*, that fatal flaw is **BLIND AMBITION**, which prompts him to murder his King and the head of his Clan in order to usurp the throne of Scotland. His nefarious and disloyal act is accomplished while *King Duncan* is a guest in *Macbeth's* own castle, where *King Duncan* is presumed to be safe and the guest of a friend. In turn, *Macbeth* is destroyed by those loyal to the murdered *King Duncan*.

Interestingly, *King Lear* is the only one of Shakespeare's "*quartet*" in whom the inherent *tragic flaw* is **HUBRIS**, the fatal flaw usually favored by the ancient Greek Tragedians. Nearing old age and wishing to retire his crown, *Lear* decides to divide his kingdom among his three daughters based on their declarations of love for him. The two older daughters pander to him and engage in excessive and insincere declarations of devotion, while the youngest (*Cordelia*) is more reserved, and merely declares that she "*loves him as a daughter should.*" Based on these declarations, *Lear* divides his kingdom between the two oldest daughters, while excluding *Cordelia*. His rash and prideful decision eventually leads to the loss of his kingdom, as well as the destruction of himself and all three daughters.

The fourth of the traditional Shakespearean Tragedies is the Venetian Army General *Othello*, who is consumed by **JEALOUSY**, his own tragic flaw. Foolishly listening to *Iago*, his disloyal subordinate, *Othello* believes *Iago's* lies about his wife's infidelity, causing *Othello* to slay her in a fit of rage. When *Othello* eventually learns that *Desdemona's* fidelity has actually been exemplary -- and that *Iago* has lied to him -- he kills himself out of grief.

Many other works of Shakespeare demonstrate his *Enlightenment* adaptation of this formula of the ancient Greek Tragedians, including *Richard III*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Julius Caesar*.

Richard III betrays England and the House of York multiple times in pursuit of the Throne of England, but his **DISLOYALTY** eventually generates contempt and disdain within his own army, which abandons him at the Battle of Bosworth. There he is killed for want of a means of escape after losing his horse. (“*A horse, a horse, my KINGDOM for a horse...!*”)

The central character in *Julius Caesar* is not *Caesar*, himself, but *Brutus*, who helped others assassinate his dearest friend, *Caesar*, ostensibly out of fear that *Caesar* aspired to become king and thereby threatened the future of the Roman Republic. *Brutus*’ fatal flaw is **HUBRIS**, a character flaw that made him vulnerable to the flattery of peers with dishonorable motives. His pride permitted *Caesar*’s enemies to successfully recruit him to participate in *Caesar*’s assassination, all the while knowing in his heart that the deed was both wrong and evil and for which there was little justification.

Even *Romeo and Juliet* fits this formula: the families of these two star-crossed lovers are so embroiled in their age-old vendetta against each other, that their **VENGEFULNESS** ultimately leads to the tragic deaths of both *Romeo* and *Juliet*, the very flowers and futures of their respective families.

Most English Literature courses requiring Shakespeare focus on the endless details of his varied and intricate plots. Often, there is little consideration given to understanding the deeper and more profound historical context in which Shakespeare’s genius united the classical elements of Greek and Medieval Tragedy.

This is unfortunate, and helps to fuel the conspiracy promoted by many Cultural Marxists -- among other truly ignorant and hopelessly stupid individuals -- who conspire and contrive to remove the works of Shakespeare from high school and college curricula.

Not only are these ignoramuses oblivious to most of the above, but many are also motivated by a seemingly endless desire to “*water down*” the curriculum so that even dolts might successfully matriculate. Their brilliant “*solution*” is to exclude the works of Shakespeare, aside from the ***Bible***, the greatest literature in the history of the written word.