[*Romeo and Juliet* concludes with] a kind of "happy ending." The feud will be ended, the lovers will be remembered. We may be reminded of the commonplace utterance that we have two deaths: the moment of actual ceasing to be, and the moment when the last person who remembers us dies. These lovers have their being enshrined in a famous play. So they are remembered in perpetuity, and their lives, according to the play itself, will be recorded in their statues. Certainly this is a sad affair, like that of Paolo and Francesca in *The Divine Comedy*. But we may ask, is it tragic?

Tragedy seems to demand a figure or figures that represent us in our ultimate recognition of evil. We need to feel that such figures are our kin, privileged to be chosen for the representative role and coming to the destruction that we necessarily anticipate for ourselves. The boy and girl figures in *Romeo and Juliet* are perhaps acceptable as appropriate representatives for humankind: after all, they do grow up. What worries us more, I think, in trying to see this play as fully achieved "tragedy," is the speech of the Duke at the end, which suggests that some atonement will be made through the reconciliation of the Montague and Capulet families. We are bound to ask "Is this enough?" It appears to be offered as such, but we remember that the finest among Verona's people are dead.

Shakespearean tragedy commonly ends with a suggestion of a return to normality, to peace. Fortinbras [in *Hamlet*] will rule in Denmark, Malcolm [in *Macbeth*] in Scotland, Iago [in *Othello*] will be put out of the way. But these later tragedies leave us with a doubt whether the peace is other than a second-best, whether indeed it is in man's power ever to put things right. In *Romeo and Juliet* the ending of the feud is laboriously spelled out.

But there is also the matter of Fate and Chance. Romeo kills Paris: at first glance that was a quite fortuitous happening. Paris was a good man, devoted to Juliet, who unfortunately got in the way of Romeo's approach to Juliet's tomb. At this point Romeo's doom is sealed: he might kill Tybalt and get away with it; he could not get away with killing an innocent Paris, who was moreover the Prince's kinsman. Now it is inevitable that he will die, whatever the moment of Juliet's awakening. There is indeed a "star-cross'd" pattern for the lovers, there is no way out for Romeo once he has come back to Verona. But perhaps Paris's important function in the last scene is not sufficiently brought out: the spectator may feel that there is simple chance operating in Romeo's arrival before Juliet wakes, in his killing himself a moment too early, in the Friar's belated arrival. Later I must return to the matter of the play's references to the "stars": for the moment I merely want to refer to the fact that tragedy can hardly be dependent on "bad luck."

Even so, though simple chance will not do, we may say that tragedy properly exists only when its events defy reason. The Friar thought the marriage of the young lovers might bring the feud to an end, and that was a reasonable assumption. Ironically, it did end the feud but at the expense of Romeo's and Juliet's lives, at the expense too of Mercutio's, Tybalt's, and Lady Montague's lives. The element of *non sequitur* in the train of events common to tragedy—despite the fact that, with one part of our minds, we see the operation of "probability or necessity," as Aristotle has it—is well described by Laurens van der Post in his novel *The Hunter and the Whale*:

I was too young at the time to realise that tragedy is not tragedy if one finds reason or meaning in it. It becomes then, I was yet to learn, a darker form of this infinitely mysterious matter of luck. It is sheer tragedy only if it is without discernible sense or motivation.

We may balk at "luck," as I have already suggested, but "mysterious" is right indeed (as Bradley splendidly urged on us in the First Lecture of *Shakespearean Tragedy*), for what "sense" or "motivation" does there seem to be in tragedy's gods? The sense of mystery is not, however, firmly posited in *Romeo and Juliet.* Rather, it is laboriously suggested that the Montagues and the Capulets have been taught a lesson in a particularly hard way.

Thus we have several reasons to query the play's achievement in the tragic kind. Do the lovers take on themselves the status of major figures in a celebration of a general human woe? Is the ending, with its promise of reconciliation, appropriate to tragic writing? We have seen that the lovers grow up. and they give us the impression of justifying human life, in their best moments, more than most people do. But the suggestion that their deaths will atone, will bring peace back, seems nugatory: no man's death brings peace, not even Christ's—or the Unknown Soldier's. The play could still end tragically if we were left with the impression that the survivors were merely doing what they could to go on living in an impoverished world: we have that in *Hamlet* and the later tragedies too. Here the laboriousness with which Shakespeare recapitulates all the events known to us, in the Friar's long speech, is surely an indication of an ultimate withdrawal from the tragic: the speech is too much like a preacher's resume of the events on which a moral lesson will be based. We can accept Edgar's long account of Gloucester's death in *King Lear*, because we need a moment of recession before the tragedy's last phase, where we shall see Lear and Cordelia dead, and because no moral lesson is drawn from Gloucester's death; but at the end of this earlier play, when Romeo and Juliet have already eloquently died, we are with difficulty responsive to the long reiteration of all we have long known through the play's action.

Shakespeare has not here achieved the sense of an ultimate confrontation with evil, or the sense that the tragic figure ultimately and fully recognizes what his situation is. Romeo and Juliet die, more or less content with death as a second best to living together. Montague and Capulet shake hands, and do what is possible to atone. The lovers have the illusion of continuing to be together—an illusion to some extent imposed on the audience. The old men feel a personal guilt, not a realization of a general sickness in man's estate. But perhaps only Lear and Macbeth and Timon came to that realisation.

We can understand why Shakespeare abandoned tragedy for some years after this play. It had proved possible for him to touch on the tragic idea in his English histories, making them approach, but only approach, the idea of humanity's representative being given over to destruction, as with the faulty Richard II, the saintly Henry VI, the deeply guilty yet none the less sharply human Richard III. He had given his theater a flawed yet impressive Titus Andronicus and in the same play an Aaron given almost wholly to evil but obstinately alive. But in these plays the main drive is not tragic. The histories rely on the sixteenth-century chronicles, *Titus* on that tradition of grotesque legend that came from both Seneca and Ovid. The past was to be relived and celebrated in the histories; *Titus* was more of a literary exercise in antique horror than a play embodying a direct reference to the general human condition. In *Romeo and Juliet* Shakespeare for the first time essayed tragedy proper— that is, by wanting to bring the play's events into relation to things as they truly are—and he used a tale often told but belonging to recent times and concerned with people whom the spectators were to feel as very much their own kin. He may well have been particularly attracted to the story he found in Brooke's poem for the very reason that its figures and events did not have the authority of history and belonged to the comparatively small world of Verona. No major change in the political order can result from what happens in this play's action. No individual figure presented here is truly given over to evil. Without any precedents to guide him, he aimed at writing about eloquent but otherwise ordinary young people in love and about their equally ordinary friends and families. Only Mercutio has something daemonic in him, in the sense that his quality of life transcends the normal level of being. (pp. 68-71)

[If] Shakespeare had no useful dramatic precedents in this task, he had a manifold heritage of ideas about the nature of love; and many parts of that heritage show themselves in the play. The immoderateness and rashness that the Friar rebukes seem, on the one hand, to lead—in the fashion of a moral play—to the lovers' destruction. On the other hand, not only is our sympathy aroused but we are made to feel that what Romeo and Juliet achieve may be a finer thing than is otherwise to be found in Verona. Both views are strongly conveyed, and either of them might effectively dominate the play. Of course, they could coexist and interpenetrate—as they were to do much later in *Anthony and Cleopatra*—but here they seem to alternate, and to be finally both pushed into the background in the long insistence that the feud will end because of the lovers' deaths. The "moral" is thus finally inverted: the lovers' sequence of errors has culminated in the error of suicide, but now we are made to turn to their parents' error and to the consolation that Romeo and Juliet will be remembered through their golden statues. And it is difficult for us to get interested in these statues, or to take much joy in the feud's ending.

Yet the deepest cause of uneasiness in our response to the play is, I believe, to be found in the relation of the story to the idea of the universe that is posited. We are told in the Prologue of "star-cross'd lovers" [1. 6], and there are after that many references to the "stars." So there is a sense of "doom" here, but we are never fully told what is implied. Many coincidences operate: Romeo meets Tybalt just at the wrong moment; the Friar's message to Romeo about Juliet's alledged death goes astray; Romeo arrives at the tomb just before Juliet awakens; the Friar comes too late. I have already drawn attention to Shakespeare's device by which Romeo has to kill Paris, so that, even if he had arrived at the right time, there would have been no way out for him. We may feel that a similar sequence of chances operates in *Hamlet.* If Hamlet had not killed Polonius in a scared moment, if he had not had his father's seal with him on the voyage to England, if he had not managed to escape on the hospitable pirates' ship, if the foils had not been exchanged in the fencing bout with Laertes, if Gertrude had not drunk from the poisoned cup, things might indeed not have been disposed so as to lead him to Claudius's killing at the moment when it actually occurred. Even so, we can feel that, after all, the end would have been much as it is. Hamlet was a man in love with death, far more in love with death than with killing: we may say that only in the moment of death's imminence was he fully alive, freed from inhibition, able to kill Claudius: somehow or other, whatever the chances, this play demanded a final confrontation between the uncle-father and nephew-son. In *Romeo and Juliet*, on the other hand, we could imagine things working out better: the lovers are doomed only by the words of the Prologue, not by anything inherent in their situation. It is not, as it is in Hardy's novels, that we have a sense of a fully adverse "President of the immortals": there is rather an insufficient consideration of what is implied by the "stars." Of course, in *King Lear*, in all later Shakespearean tragedy, there is a sense of an ultimate mystery in the universe: "Is there any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts?" [*King Lear*, III. vi. 77-8], Lear asks in his condition of most extreme distress. Bradley recognized that this mystery was inherent in the idea of tragedy, as is implied too in the passage from Laurens van der Post I have already quoted. But in *Romeo and Juliet*, we have to accept the lovers' deaths as the mere result of the will of the "stars" (the astrological implication is just too easy), and then we are exhorted to see this as leading to a reconciliation between the families.

The final "moral" of the play, as we have seen, is applied only to Old Montague and Old Capulet: they have done evil in allowing the feud to go on, and have paid for it in the deaths of their children and of Lady Montague. But, largely because Romeo and Juliet are never blamed, the children themselves stand outside the framework of moral drama. They have, albeit imperfectly, grown up into the world of tragedy, where the moral law is not a thing of great moment. They have been sacrificed on the altar of man's guilt, have become the victims of our own outrageousness, have given us some relief because they have died and we still for a time continue living. … To that extent, *Romeo and Juliet* is "tragic" in a way we can fully recognize. But its long-drawn-out ending, after the lovers are dead, with the pressing home of the moral that their deaths will bring peace, runs contrary to the notion of tragedy. There is a sanguineness about the end of it, a suggestion that after all "All shall be well, and / All manner of thing shall be well," as Eliot quotes from Julian of Norwich in *Little Gidding*, and we can hardly tolerate the complacency of the statement. (pp. 71-3)

[In *Romeo and Juliet* Shakespeare] attempted an amalgam of romantic comedy and the tragic idea, along with the assertion of a moral lesson which is given the final emphasis—although the force of that lesson is switched from the lovers to their parents. But tragedy is necessarily at odds with the moral: it is concerned with a permanent anguishing situation, not with one that can either be put right or be instrumental in teaching the survivors to do better. When Shakespeare wrote "love-tragedy" again, in *Othello* and in *Antony and Cleopatra*, he showed that love may be a positive good but that it was simultaneously destructive and that its dramatic presentation gave no manumission from error to those who contemplated the destruction and continued to live. Nowhere, I think, does he suggest that love is other than a condition for wonder, however much he makes fun of it. But in his mature years he sees it as not only a destructive force but as in no way affording a means of reform. That *Romeo and Juliet* is a "moral tragedy"—which, I have strenuously urged, is a contradiction in terms—is evident enough. It is above all the casualness of the play's cosmology that prevents us from seeing it as tragedy fully achieved: we have seen the need for a fuller appreciation of the mystery. As with *Titus Andronicus*, the nearest play to *Romeo and Juliet* overtly assuming a tragic guise in the chronology of Shakespeare's works, the march toward disaster is too manifestly a literary device. (p. 73)

Clifford Leech, "The Moral Tragedy of 'Romeo and Juliet'," in *English Renaissance Drama: Essays in Honor of Madeline Doran & Mark Eccles*, Standish Henning, Robert Kimbrough, and Richard Knowles, eds., Southern Illinois University Press, 1976, pp. 59-75.