

*Shakespeare in Hindsight: Counterfactual Thinking and Shakespearean Tragedy.*  
Amir Khan.

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Amir Khan's monograph appears in a new series, Edinburgh Critical Studies in Shakespeare and Philosophy, which aims to take "seriously the speculative and world-making properties of Shakespeare's art." With this ambition in mind, *Shakespeare in Hindsight* is a natural fit for the series. The book is a study in speculation, which can be a thought-provoking and a frustrating thing, and sometimes both at the same time. Khan is heavily influenced by Stanley Cavell's work on the "experience of continuous presentness." Setting his stall out early, Khan describes his project "as making a case for reading 'in the present'" (1); *presentness* is later defined as "an immediate intimacy to the particular unfolding of the play, where we as readers are uncertain of what comes next" (3). Essentially, this means that a reader must be attentive to the endless alternative possibilities that exist at each point in the play to the accepted linear narrative—that is, reading without the subsequent narrative action already in mind, but reading "in the present" at the juncture the reader (or, presumably, audience member) finds themselves in the narrative.

Khan provides an example of this from *King Lear* by taking Stephen Greenblatt to task for his reading of the opening scene of the play (in, one might add, the *Norton Shakespeare*, aimed squarely at student readers). Greenblatt makes the fairly straightforward point that Shakespeare deviates from the play's principal source, *King Lear*, in omitting any reason for the staging of the love test in the opening scene. This deviation, Greenblatt observes, would have made Lear's actions appear more "arbitrary" and "strange." Early audiences who may have seen *King Lear* in performance or may be already familiar with the reputation of King Lear's madness, would think that Shakespeare's Lear is already showing signs of madness. Khan counters that a modern reader, without any knowledge of *King Lear* or Lear's subsequent madness, would at first

have little reason to consider Lear's love test as unusual or as possible evidence for early onset madness. Rather, he argues, modern readers must "decide, for themselves, if and when exactly Lear's madness takes hold."

Here's the rub, and one which Khan readily admits: "how can we possibly read Shakespeare, nowadays for the first time" while avoiding the "pitfalls of 'post-facto criticising and historicising'" (10). The answer, Khan believes, lies in counterfactual thinking. Niall Ferguson's 1997 collection *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals* included some ten essays, or thought experiments, on the riff of counterfactual "what ifs": What if JFK lived? What if Russia won the Cold War? Etc. Khan's study takes this idea and runs with it. What was "counterfactual" thinking in Ferguson's collection may be more properly termed "counterfactual" (or at least "alternately fictional") thinking in Khan's book. Reading "in the present," Khan asks, "what if Macbeth had chosen not to act?" after hearing the prophecy (17); "what if the narrative of the Ghost is Hamlet's hallucination?" (54); "what if Iago were no longer a character in [*Othello*]?" (126). By pondering these possibilities, Khan argues, we can become more intimate with "the narrative unfolding of the play" (2). In Khan's sophisticated theoretical introduction, throughout which he attempts to reanimate responses to tragedy (to make us "feel" tragedy rather than explain away the tragic effect), he formulates his approach as a "type of reader response" in which the tragic effect can be articulated outside of the "historical contingencies" that produced the dramatic work and the "immediate historical realities" of the present reader.

Sometimes this works splendidly. The chapter on *Hamlet*, a version of which appeared in *Shakespeare Quarterly*, is perhaps the book's strongest. Khan discusses the importance of Claudius's confession to the play. Without the confession, verifying the Ghost's word, how could we know that Claudius was guilty, and how would that impact upon our reading of the prince's delay? This thought experiment, as Khan notes, puts us neatly into the position of those in the play not privy to the confession. Also provocative is the book's fifth chapter about *The Winter's Tale* (in what might seem initially a rather odd choice in a book with "Shakespearean Tragedy" in its title), where, drawing upon Hegelian dialectics, Khan argues that Leontes transcends his tragic fate through his commitment to suffering.

Many readers will be skeptical about the speculative nature of counterfactual criticism and its broader application. A clearer distinction between the experience of reading and seeing a play might have been helpful throughout (it is discussed briefly on 22–23), as surely the many variables at play in performance (including cuts) alter how we interpret "in the present." And, moreover, Cavell's original argument largely concerned the experience of tragedy being "present" to us, the audience, and its immediacy in the moment of performance. So, too, one might wish for less heavy use of critical quotation, which tends at times toward reporting rather than engagement. Overall, though, there is much to admire in this original study.

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