

**Counterfactual Thinking and Shakespearean Tragedy:
Imagining Alternatives in the Plays**

Amir Khan

Thesis submitted to the
Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for a doctoral degree in English Literature

Department of English
Faculty of Arts
University of Ottawa

© Amir Khan, Ottawa, Canada 2013

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iii
Acknowledgments.....	v
1. Introduction	1
2. My Kingdom for a Ghost: Counterfactual Thinking and <i>Hamlet</i>	38
3. Reversing Good and Evil: Counterfactual Thinking and <i>King Lear</i>	68
4. The Banks of Finitude: Counterfactual Thinking and <i>Macbeth</i>	91
5. Reversing Time: Counterfactual Thinking and <i>The Winter's Tale</i>	111
6. "Why Indeed Did I Marry?" Counterfactual Thinking and <i>Othello</i>	134
7. Conclusion.....	153
8. Endnotes	167
9. Bibliography	173

Abstract

This dissertation project is the application of counterfactual criticism to Shakespearean tragedy—supposing we are to ask, for example, “what if” Hamlet had done the deed, or, “what if” we could somehow disinherit our knowledge of Lear’s madness before reading *King Lear*. Such readings, mirroring critical practices in history, will loosely be called “counterfactual” readings. The key question to ask is not why tragedies are no longer being written (by writers), but why tragedies are no longer being *felt* (by readers). Tragedy entails a certain urgency in wanting to imagine an outcome different from the one we are given. Since we cannot change events as they stand, we feel a critical helplessness in dealing with feelings of tragic loss; the critical imperative that follows usually accounts for how the tragedy unfolded. Fleshing out a cause is one way to deal with the trauma of tragedy. But such explanation, in a sense, merely explains tragedy *away*. The fact that everything turns out so poorly in tragedy suggests that the tragic protagonist was somehow doomed, that he (in the case of Shakespearean tragedy) was the victim of some “tragic flaw,” as though tragedy and necessity go hand in hand. Only by allowing ourselves to imagine other possibilities can we regain the tragic effect, which is to remind ourselves that other outcomes are indeed possible. Tragedy, then, is more readily understood, or felt, as the playing out of contingency. It takes some effort to convince others, even ourselves, that the tragic effect resonates best when accompanied by an understanding that the characters on the page are free individuals. No amount of foreknowledge, on our part or theirs, can save us (or them) from tragedy’s horror.

For Arden, my perdita

Acknowledgments

A page like this offers an opportunity one hardly wants to squander, so rather than say too little, it is better, I feel, to say too much (whatever the risks), because it is difficult for me to know, at this writing, how many more opportunities I will have to say what must be said in a forum I know at least a handful of others will attend to.

This research would have been impossible without the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Doctoral Fellowship, and the Ontario Graduate Scholarship. Prior to these, I was fortunate enough to make my way through the meritorious summer-student program at Rio Tinto Alcan. It was no choice of mine to grow up in Kitimat, British Columbia; but I managed to finance my early years of graduate study by virtue of this single, strange contingency (and by virtue also of repairing studs in the rebuild shop).

Teachers and professors are supposed to inspire and many pushed me forward and along. I cannot say it was *because* of their encouragement that I ended up here rather than elsewhere. But anticlimactically, I can say that the aggregate of such encouragements, both small and large, have brought me far enough to warrant the unfolding of *this* acknowledgment at the outset of *this* dissertation project, which in itself is perhaps not a terribly special occasion, but not an insignificant one either. Professors whom I would like to mention are Eric Levy, Dennis Danielson, Ashok Aklujkar, Steven Savitt, Alex Dick, Richard van Oort, and Michael Zeitlin, all at the University of British Columbia; Stephen Pender, Tom Dilworth, and Richard Douglass-Chin at the University of Windsor; at the University of Ottawa, Janice Fiamengo, David Staines, Irena Makaryk, Victoria Burke, and Bernhard Radloff. Ian Dennis, my supervisor, has been a superb ally during my time in Ottawa; contingencies have changed the name on the dedication page, but in some counterfactual world it remains his.

Other professional colleagues whom I'd like to thank, and whom I've seen several times on the Conference circuit are Eric Gans, Andrew Bartlett, Adam Katz, Chris Fleming, John O'Carroll and Matthew Schneider. Also, Larry Jackson and Adam Gonya, as well as Sérgio Dias Branco and Matthew Taylor, all of whom I know more "virtually," if less personally. And to those editors who have taken a chance on my work – perfectly willing, I mean, to accommodate my unusual digressions – all of them have helped me to achieve, by allowing me to put down in print, some version of my best self. These editors are (once again) Eric Gans, Susan Fast, Stan Hawkins, Gary Morris, Scott Forsyth, and Susan Morrison.

I also had the pleasure of assisting very interesting and accommodating Instructors, including David Sacks, Christa Zeller Thomas, Trevor Tucker, and Cyril Dabydeen. And I appreciate and recall fondly conversations with departmental colleagues Zac Schnier, Keith Friedlander, Rory Tanner, Arby Siraki, and Marie Comisso.

I have had to lean on my sister, mother, brother, and sister-in-law more than I would have liked in order to complete this dissertation; but they have all responded as family should. Others, who are more family than friends, include Noah Richmond, Kevin Mo, and Jonas Ng. I love you all.

Lastly to my daughter Arden, to whom this dissertation is dedicated: I can only hope the words which appear here will one day reduce some of the painful distance between us. I love you very much.

1. Introduction

Negative capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason—Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetralium of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half knowledge.

- John Keats

Now to me the total works of Shakespeare are like a very, very complete set of codes and these codes, cipher for cipher, set off in us, stir in us, vibrations and impulses which we immediately try to make coherent and understandable.

- Peter Brook

Discussing tragedy is tricky business. One is immediately tempted to outline a definition of tragedy, or, at the very least, to account for certain criteria that allow tragedy to function. Yet here, in reading Shakespeare's four great tragedies, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, plus *The Winter's Tale* (which contains a "tragedy-redux" in its first three acts), we will instead be putting forward reading strategies that allow a "tragic effect" to resonate. In particular, we will make a case for reading "in the present," what Stanley Cavell calls inhabiting "an experience of *continuous presentness*" (his emphasis, *DK* 93). The most expedient way to do this, we will argue, will be to consider alternative possibilities to the accepted linear (i.e. narrative) developments of the plays at hand: assuming Macbeth had done x instead of y, for example, or that we, as readers, know x and not y. But this not in order to get away from the narrative unfolding of a play but, on the contrary, to become more intimate with it. These

readings will be defined, somewhat loosely, as “counterfactual” readings. Furthermore, the tragic effect will be linked to “discovery”– what Northrop Frye, and before him Aristotle, calls “anagnorisis” – emphasizing in particular a sense of “wonder.” We will argue that 1) the sorts of discoveries to be made are those that reveal or sustain a sense of wonder, the “uncertainties, mysteries, doubts” that Keats associates with “negative capability” and 2) this sense of wonder is key to the functioning of tragedy. Therefore, *what* is to be discovered cannot be prescribed because if we articulate beforehand just what it is we are looking for, we have removed ourselves from the realm of negative capability and just because of that, the tragic effect is lost. One could make the case that these plays, in order to be tragic, must initiate a discovery procedure. This could be a criterion. But what we find in no way accounts for tragedy but merely reminds us of the possibilities open to a tragic play.

A.C. Bradley’s *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904) isolates a particular literary device (hamartia, also taken from Aristotle) and links it to the functioning of tragedy. In Bradley’s estimation, tragedy is inescapably tied to character. We can no longer conceive of tragedy without first discovering a tragic character, and then, by discovering that character’s “tragic trait” (12). Yet the trait or flaw in question does not originate at any specific point in the narrative but governs the unfolding of the entire play. Othello is not thought to *become* jealous because he is egged on by Iago. His tragic flaw is that he *is* jealous. Just because of this, we are never allowed to ask – hence to discover, for ourselves – when exactly *we* are convinced of Othello’s jealousy; Bradley’s criticism makes such a question specious. What do we lose when we *know* that Othello is jealous? We lose, first and foremost, our presentness to the play. “Presentness” we

shall define as an immediate intimacy to the particular unfolding of the play where we are uncertain of what comes next. And if, as we will argue, the articulation of tragedy is linked to an articulation of the conditions of our present experience of a play, then what an application of Bradley's criticism has managed, in fact, is to negate a discussion of tragedy.

Moreover, by "presentness" we are not isolating and analyzing the present *social* conditions which mediate our relationship to the play from without. Rather, we are emphasizing an experience of the play that coalesces around contingencies internal to the play itself. A "present" reading is present to the immediate narrative unfolding of the play and questions whether one set of events or conditions is destined to occur instead of another. The "presentness" we are establishing is, first and foremost, the reader's, but then, only through the convincing subjective claiming of possibilities suggested either by a specific character or what we take to be the specific conventions *internal* to the world of the play. The types of knowledge we are afforded within the play, i.e. about the past (the Ghost in *Hamlet*) or about the future (i.e. the prophecy in *Macbeth*) have a bearing on how we consider the possible (as we shall see). This is not to say that a consideration of external tragic convention in limiting what Shakespeare could or could not have done is not worth attending to. But asking ourselves how and why Shakespeare may have chosen to end a play one way and not another is not the end of the discussion, merely the beginning. To assume that Shakespeare was limited by formal constraints of genre is not necessarily hasty but does more to quash a discussion of possibilities than foster it.

The linking of presentness to tragedy is intuited by George Steiner (1961) in his

claim that the “metaphysics of Christianity and Marxism” (324) make the rendering of tragedy impossible because the narrative contiguity of these “configurations of belief” (324) presuppose redemption. This belief in redemption is not necessarily utopian. Rather, the means to achieving it depend on reason or understanding where we are to believe (through an understanding of God’s divine plan or the rational unfolding of the dialectic) what Cavell says in his discussion of *King Lear*—namely, that we can “save our lives by knowing them” (DK 94). In seeking to know, in this case, not our lives but those of the characters before us – and then, by appealing to external dialectics – we are removing ourselves from their presentness and subsequently, the presentness of the play at hand. Any a priori knowledge applied to the play after the fact risks such removal. Because Bradley’s formulation or discovery of a character’s tragic flaw occurs beyond the text, it can only be applied a priori and in hindsight. It may be compelling enough to discover that all plays we consider tragic seem to have a character who possesses a tragic flaw; but this does not explain why we felt the play tragic in the first place, lacking this prior knowledge. This may indeed be because the more we think about tragic plays, the more likely we are to move from the “unknown to the known” (16), reflecting Aristotle’s original definition of anagnorisis; though where he was talking about the discovery made by a particular character in a play (say, Oedipus’s discovery of his fate, linked closely to peripeteia), what we have here is our *own* move from unknown to known occurring at certain removes from the text. Indeed, this version of anagnorisis has more in common with Northrop Frye’s reformulation of the term. “When a reader of a novel asks ‘How is this story going to turn out?’ he is asking a question about the plot, specifically about that crucial aspect of the plot Aristotle calls

discovery or *anagnorisis*. But he is equally likely to ask, ‘What’s the *point* of this story?’” (Frye 49, his emphasis). Though Frye himself does not digress on the gravity of his reformulation, Terence Cave elaborates on Frye’s achievement:

[Frye’s] definition assigns anagnorisis to ‘us’, the readers or spectators: we recognize the unifying shape of the whole design.... In one sense, what he is doing here is parallel to the accounts of peripeteia in which the ‘surprise’ it occasions is the spectators’ rather than the characters’: anagnorisis is the structural feature producing an effect outside the fiction. But the effect in this instance isn’t purely local. It shifts the whole reading from a linear, narrative movement to a grasping of ‘unifying shape’ and ‘simultaneous significance’; plot gives way to theme and interpretation. This appropriation by the reader of anagnorisis as a recognition both of overall form and of thematic coherence is a radical manoeuvre.... (Cave 194)

But Frye’s reformulation of anagnorisis does not immediately place us in a play’s continuous present. Even if a character’s internal discovery procedure is superseded by the reader discovery – thus making the penetralium of experience open to discussion of theme and interpretation rather than consideration of the linear movement of narrative – the consideration of theme also occurs in hindsight and begs the reader to seek something out after the fact. For example, G.W. Knight’s influential interpretation locates the meaning of *Hamlet* in “death” (31), or, more precisely, nominates death as the “predominating human theme ... suffused through the whole play” (32). Though he is less explicit about what makes the play tragic, it would not be

unfair to assume that Knight thought tragedy more accessible to thematic interpretation (and less to specific character criticism). Yet in seeking to explain the play in this way, he errs precisely as Bradley does. That is, he provides a reading of the play that can only be applied post-facto thereby removing us from the presentness of the play and its tragedy. By explaining the “atmosphere” (15) that governs the play, Knight, like Bradley, has explained tragedy away.

The obvious objection at this point is that *all* criticism is done in such “post-facto” manner. Certainly we must read the plays in their entirety before commenting on specific occurrences. Even Aristotle, when considering discoveries made by a character at certain points in the narrative, did so not outside of, or beyond, a knowledge of the play as a whole. What we can take from Aristotle’s version of anagnorisis, however, is an immediate narrative intimacy to the play lacking in Frye’s. Yet what we want from Frye is his understanding that the reader must claim, or appropriate, a discovery about a play as his or her own, though not by articulating the thematic criteria which allow a tragedy to function, but by being open to other (narrative) possibilities the play, at once, hints at, and, at once (through the progression of the narrative), denies. We will say that these possibilities are housed in what Frye calls an “anagogic” (119) universe of both poetry *and* criticism. The discovery of textual possibilities and reader assumptions *lost* is how the term anagnorisis is to be used here. Because there can be no limit to the sorts of suggestions a play makes at any given point in its narrative, the subjective and convincing claiming of these hypothetical alternatives could also be counted as a criterion for the effective articulation of tragedy—which is to say an effective articulation of one’s presentness to a play. This

particular criterion of anagnorisis does not prescribe what a reader ought to look for but merely models a strategy of reading—say, a strategy of skepticism towards our inherited assumptions about a given play. Finally, we will not take issue with post-facto criticism per se; what we will attempt to show is how such readings, imposed on texts after the fact, can be deleterious to readerly reception of tragedy.

For example, Stephen Greenblatt's historicist approach to the plays can highlight the sense of wonder Shakespeare himself may have intended to elicit from his audiences. Commenting on *King Lear*, Greenblatt's assessment of the historical contingencies surrounding the narrative assumptions of Elizabethan audiences is apt:

Why does [Shakespeare's] Lear, who has, as the play begins, already drawn up the map equitably dividing the kingdom, stage the love test? In Shakespeare's principal source, an anonymous play called *The True Chronicle History of King Leir* ... there is a gratifyingly clear answer. Leir's strong-willed daughter Cordelia has vowed that she will marry only a man whom she herself loves; Leir wishes her to marry the man he chooses for his own dynastic purposes. He stages the love test, anticipating that in competing with her sisters, Cordelia will declare that she loves her father best, at which point Leir will demand that she prove her love by marrying the suitor of his choice. The stratagem backfires, but its purpose is clear. By stripping his character of a comparable motive, Shakespeare makes Lear's act seem stranger, at once more arbitrary and more rooted in deep psychological needs. (*Norton* 2309-10)

We see that Shakespeare sought to undermine and play with audience expectations, to indeed make Lear “seem stranger” and “more arbitrary.” Yet this bit of knowledge does not ally us with Elizabethan audiences because the narrative contingencies surrounding *The True Chronicle History of King Leir* are no longer resonant to our present day experience of the text. That is, if reading Shakespeare’s play *today* elicits a comparable sense of awe and wonder, it is *not* because of any prior knowledge of what Lear (i.e. Leir) is expected to do. Indeed, there is simply no guarantee, today, that Lear’s initial motives *will* seem arbitrary and strange simply in staging the love test as he does. Elizabethan audiences may have had reason to doubt Lear’s motives in Act 1, scene 1; but a reader nowadays has little reason to do so unless he or she brings knowledge of Lear’s madness to the play *before* reading it. What readers nowadays must do is decide, for themselves, if and when exactly Lear’s madness takes hold.

Greenblatt’s historical explanation applies to Elizabethan audiences only. It does not follow that *we* feel a comparable sense of awe and mystery at Lear’s motives at the same point in the narrative. As an explanation for a present day reception of the text, this knowledge is clearly inadequate. Nor does Greenblatt *explicitly* say that historical explanation *ought* to account for our present day reception of the text. Yet such historicizing risks lulling us into the belief that because Elizabethan audiences were skeptical of Lear’s motives at this particular point in the narrative, *we too are justified in assuming Lear to be mad in Act 1, scene 1*. Greenblatt’s reflections ought to initiate a second look at our own assumptions about the play, hence an attempt to relocate where exactly we are likely to believe Lear mad. What happens instead is we feel validated by this bit of historical exegesis. We feel the same sense of awe and

mystery at the unfolding of events. But Greenblatt's explanation becomes a cause rather than an effect, as though our present day understanding of the text somehow *inherits* this bit of historical knowledge.

In the opening pages of his *Shakespearean Negotiations*, Greenblatt says that the most "satisfying intensity" (1) he feels as a reader of literature comes from reading Shakespeare. Greenblatt is not seeking to account for an intensity associated with Shakespearean tragedy but an intensity he associates with a confrontation between the text in hand and the "totalizing society" (2) in which the text was bred. The particular makeup of such a society encompasses, most immediately, "religious and state bureaucracy" (2), so that an understanding of the interplay between a work of art and its existence within the fabric of religious and state institutions is a necessary condition to account for its power, or "social energy" (2). Such confrontations, though historically specific, "continu[e] to generate the illusion of life for centuries" (7).

One immediate objection to this strategy arises from knowing, or feeling, that we are just as likely to react to the power of Shakespeare's play *before* making the sort of historical discoveries that Greenblatt would have us commit to. Greenblatt himself is sensitive to this:

Does this mean that the aesthetic power of a play like *King Lear* is a direct transmission from Shakespeare's time to our own? Certainly not. That play and the circumstances in which it was originally embedded have been continuously, often radically, refigured. But these refigurations do not cancel history, locking us into a perpetual present; on the contrary, they are signs of the inescapability of a historical process, a structured

negotiation and exchange, already evident in the initial moments of empowerment. That there is no direct, unmediated link between ourselves and Shakespeare's plays does not mean that there is no link at all. The "life" that literary works seem to possess long after both the death of the author and the death of the culture for which the author wrote is the historical consequence, however transformed and refashioned, of the social energy initially encoded in those works. (6)

Articulating the historical realities surrounding a play is one way to account for its social energy. Indeed, such discoveries can be both illuminating and liberating. But do we really believe that the power of Shakespeare's plays, upon reading them *for the first time*, resides in some secret, even "coded" negotiations going on that we are not exactly privy to in the present, but which reside in our present experience of the play nonetheless? Such reasoning is dubious and confuses cause and effect. That is, this sort of historical commentary is an *effect* of the power of Shakespeare's plays and not the cause, as Greenblatt would have us believe.

Let us clarify further what is meant by "presentness." Obviously the term denotes the temporal, i.e. our awareness or experience of time or time passing. But the time we are after is the sort internal to the play—not the sort where we know, from without, that one thing is going to happen rather than another. It is the time, or perception of time, linked to being in ignorance of the world, to discovering, rather than charting out, its rhythms. Only when we don't know what is going to happen are we attuned to the present. So the temporal element denoted here by presentness also denotes a narrative or affective intimacy predicated not on seeing the narrative play

out as we expect (as in, arguably, melodrama), but on experiencing it as yet to be written. Furthermore, as mentioned previously, our presentness to a play is fundamentally altered from *within* the play itself—that is, based on prior knowledge we are privy to from the world of the play (the testimony of a Ghost, as in *Hamlet*), or in knowledge we are granted about the future (a prophecy, as in *Macbeth*). Far from being needlessly cryptic here, what we must emphasize in proposing the achievement of presentness as a legitimate goal for literary criticism is that it is, indeed, a task “as rigorous as [that] of any spiritual exercise” (Cavell, *DK* 93). Some measure of historical forgetting is in order; rather than assume that such forgetting is all too common, what this project assumes is that such forgetting is exceptionally difficult. Indeed, how can we possibly read Shakespeare, nowadays, for the first time?

We have hinted at an answer thus far, which would be to accept that which Greenblatt summarily dismisses. If we accept, that is, that our experience of a play *does* come from being locked into a “perpetual present,” we begin to understand that an articulation of the conditions of presentness is necessary to account for the power of Shakespeare’s tragedies. But how to account for the presentness of the text and avoid the pitfalls of post-facto criticizing or historicising?

The use of “counterfactual” discussion in other academic disciplines (History, for example) has been taken up by Niall Ferguson. In his *Virtual History* (1999), he gathers together nine historians and has each explore counterfactual alternatives to nine major historical events. The essays are drawn out thought experiments, and, though informed by rigorous research, are (obviously) highly speculative. The point is not to arrive at a definitive counterfactual reading, but to better understand the ramifications of such

thinking on *this* world. Geoffrey Hawthorn (1991) highlights a minimal ethic guiding the enterprise of counterfactual reasoning. He notes that “[e]xplanations ... are not fixed” and that to “consider the possibilities suggested in explanation ... [is] thereby [to] enhance our understanding” (26). Furthermore, the “narrative fallacy” (63) expounded on at length by Nassim Nicholas Taleb in *Black Swan* (2007) suggests that isolating cause and effect relationships, whether personal or historical, leads us to make speculative judgments about the future anyhow. Taleb calls this “our vulnerability to overinterpretation and ... predilection for compact stories over raw truths” (63). One starting assumption the present thesis makes is that the narrative fallacy is not to be avoided, but multiplied. Here is Daniel Kahneman on Taleb:

In *The Black Swan*, Taleb introduced the notion of a *narrative fallacy* to describe how flawed stories of the past shape our views of the world and our expectations for the future. Narrative fallacies arrive inevitably from our continuous attempt to make sense of the world. The explanatory stories that people find compelling are simple; are concrete rather than abstract; assign a larger role to talent, stupidity, and intentions than to luck; and focus on a few striking events that happened rather than on the countless events that failed to happen. Any recent salient event is a candidate to become the kernel of a causal narrative. Taleb suggests that we humans constantly fool ourselves by constructing flimsy accounts of the past and believing they are true. ... A compelling narrative fosters an illusion of inevitability. Consider the story of how Google turned into a giant of the technology industry. Two creative graduate students in the

computer science department at Stanford university come up with a superior way of searching information on the Internet. They seek and obtain funding to start a company and make a series of decisions that work out well. Within a few years, the company they started is one of the most valuable stocks in America, and the two former graduate students are among the richest people on the planet. ...

I intentionally told this story blandly, but you get the idea: there is a very good story here. Fleshed out in more detail, the story could give you the sense that you understand what made Google succeed; it would also make you feel that you have learned a valuable general lesson about what makes businesses succeed. Unfortunately, there is good reason to believe that your sense of understanding and learning from the Google story is largely illusory. The ultimate test of an explanation is whether it would have made the event predictable in advance. No story of Google's unlikely success will meet that test, because no story can include the myriad of events that would have caused a different outcome. The human mind does not deal well with nonevents. The fact that many of the important events that did occur involve choices further tempts you to exaggerate the role of skill and underestimate the part that luck played in the outcome. Because every critical decision turned out well, the record suggests almost flawless prescience—but bad luck could have disrupted any one of the successful steps. (Ch.19)

Annexing this critique of narrative to our understanding of tragedy, we could say “because every decision turned out so poorly, the record suggests tragedy—but good luck could have disrupted any one of the disastrous steps.” The goal for us is not necessarily to “flesh out” complete counterfactual worlds, but to begin, at the very least, to consider alternatives. Furthermore, what Kahneman and Taleb call the “narrative fallacy” calls into question the authority of *any* established narrative, or, at the very least, makes “the” narrative as contingent on a certain outcome of events as any other. Taken to the extreme, favouring any one narrative over another leads to a sort of fatalism, or belief in historical necessity. The idea behind using counterfactual alternatives is to force the mind to consider *nonevents*, which is to remind the reader (say, of Shakespearean tragedy) that the characters on the page are free individuals.

For example, note Hegel’s remarks on *Hamlet*:

[W]e may see the tragic issue also merely in the light of the effect of unhappy circumstances and external accidents, which might have brought about, quite as readily, a different result and a happy conclusion. ... Such a course of events can insistently arrest our attention; but in the result it can only be horrible, and the demand is direct and irresistible that the external accidents ought to accord with that which is identical with the spiritual nature of such noble characters. Only as thus regarded can we feel ourselves reconciled with the grievous end of Hamlet From a purely external point of view, the death of Hamlet appears as an accident occasioned by his duel with Laertes and the interchange of the daggers. But in the background of Hamlet’s soul, death is already present

from the first. The sandbank of finite condition will not content his spirit. As the focus of such mourning and weakness, such melancholy, such a loathing of all the conditions of life, we feel from the first that, hemmed within such an environment of horror, he is a lost man, whom the surfeit of the soul has well-nigh already done to death before death itself approaches him from without. (*Hegel on Tragedy* 90-91)

This is a clear example of the sort of fatalism mentioned earlier. Because we know Hamlet is destined to perish at the hands of contingency, it is for reasons of consolation and comfort that we assume he is doomed from the outset. To this sort of post-facto criticism, Hegel ties the “tragic conclusion.” Yet once again, as an explanation of tragedy, such criticism merely explains tragedy away and denies the tragic effect’s relationship with presentness. Nor does explaining what may have happened had Hamlet avoided Laertes’s swipe *necessarily* make the tragic effect more resonant. Considering its possibility merely reminds us that no law dictates that Hamlet was destined to perish. In oscillating between a consideration of what actually happens and what could have happened, we are inhabiting the realm of tragedy, which in itself elicits in the imagination a sense of mystery, awe and wonder, and, for the most part, is not definitive—not the final say. The so-called “comfort” we feel when reading tragedy occurs not because tragedy makes sense, has a moral, but because it reminds us that there is no moral—that human lives and fates are subject to contingencies beyond our control.

This sort of thinking is anathema to that championed by Hegel, the “dialectical” unfolding that has had scholars since 1807 trying to articulate a definitive version of *the*

narrative that dictates the course of our lives (whether based on class, religion, nationality, or, more recently, culture, gender, and race). Yet it is beyond the scope of this study to delineate the sorts of assumptions and biases created by the narrative tendency in general. This project is not historiography. What we will focus on is the effect of post-facto narration and historicizing on reading Shakespearean tragedy.

Cavell's idea of continuous presentness is firmly rooted in the reading, and less the viewing, of Shakespeare's plays. Though elsewhere he hints that tragedy is enhanced in viewing a character on stage (thereby participating, directly, in that character's presence), the achievement of putting poetry to narrative – perfected, he says, by Shakespeare (*DK 94*) – is ultimately what gives us the feeling of a world unfolding before us rather than merely behaving according to convention. Comparing the achievement of Shakespeare's poetry to music, Cavell says

[i]t is not uncommon to find Shakespeare's plays compared to music, but in the instances I have seen, this comparison rests upon more or less superficial features of music, for example, on its balance of themes, its recurrences, shifts of mood, climaxes – in a word, on its theatrical properties. But music is ... dramatic in a more fundamental sense, or it became so when it no longer expanded festivals or enabled dancing or accompanied songs, but achieved its own dramatic autonomy, worked out its progress in its own terms. (91-92)

The “dramatic autonomy” Cavell describes in music is the move to tonality and the sonata form (92). Shakespeare achieves an analogous dramatic autonomy in putting verse to narrative, which means, in a sense, that the working out of contingencies

occurs within the play itself, is less subordinate to outside influences (i.e. its “theatrical properties,” or, in the case of music, as an appendage to “festivals” or “dancing”). This is reason enough, perhaps, to make the case *for* a type of narrative necessity, as if, in the very achievement of this sort of autonomy, the case for whatever does happen is guaranteed by the internal power and “directedness” (92) of the play’s particular language. But what such poetry manages to achieve is an “imitat[ion] [of] the simplest facts of life” (92), an understanding that “life is lived in time,” which means “that what will happen is not here and now and yet may be settled by what is happening here and now in a way we cannot know or will not see here and now” (93). Cavell is championing a break from the past, “to let the past go and to let the future take its time” (93)—that is, a break from convention in favour of a dramatic autonomy that places us in the here and how.

The question of page versus stage, or reading versus viewing, will be dealt with in more detail in chapter 3. Let us note here that our experience of Shakespeare’s words, passing either before our eyes on the page, or past our ears on the stage, tunes us into the present. So the unfolding of a particular type of speech, either written or spoken, which captures certain rhythms of a life lived in time, is another criterion of presentness and hence of tragedy. Yet once we are awake to the present, another criterion of tragedy, as a logical extension of poetry’s ability to mark time in narrative form, is the nature of the words themselves—that is, their *suggestiveness*.

Marjorie Garber is not the first to comment on the inexhaustibility of Shakespeare’s texts:

The plays are tough, durable, rich, flexible, capacious, and endlessly evocative. They are also provocative, alluring, suggestive, and challenging.... That these plays can sustain so many powerful and persuasive interpretations is in fact as close as I can come to explaining the elusive nature of their greatness. (*Shakespeare After All* 40)

Shakespeare's achievement, aided not only by the anomaly of our knowing nothing about the man's personal views, but also, by the sheer range of his output, is that he created a universe in which anything can be said to exist and nothing, which is again to suggest that Shakespeare's plays, and more importantly, his language, are in a privileged position to sustain a discussion of possibilities. The suggestiveness of the language uttered by his characters gives voice not to the necessity of events as dictated by convention or narrative, but to the possibility of other outcomes. David Scott Kastan notes that "[p]ain and loss remain the central tragic facts" (9) of Shakespeare's tragedies. One reason Shakespeare's *tragic* texts are particularly effective is not simply because of the sudden and seemingly gratuitous loss of life, but also the gratuitous loss of possibilities, say human subjectivities, as though Shakespeare is reminding us, more than other tragic poets, of the possibilities inherent in the characters he has created through their suggestive speech. Considering possibilities latent in speech is one way to further immerse ourselves in the Shakespearean universe.

For example, very early on in the play, just after discovering that he has been named Thane of Cawdor, Macbeth remarks: "If chance will have me king, why, chance may crown me/ Without my stir" (1.3.142-43).¹ The eerie possibility suggested in these lines is that it has, indeed, *crossed* Macbeth's mind that he should *not* act. In our

knowledge of how badly things are to turn out, we may be pleading in our minds for Macbeth, at this point, to simply follow his own advice. The counterfactual question worth pursuing here is: *what if Macbeth had chosen not to act?* What manner of play would we have then? Would we still have a play? If the immediate answer is, “Of course not!”, the next step would be to ask why he *does* act, how and if the call to act, for Macbeth, restricts his agency or promotes it. Attending to such matters bears fruit, is a way of reading, rather than explaining, the play and its horrors. We will take up such a reading of *Macbeth* in the fourth chapter.

Finally, it could be argued that reading counterfactual alternatives into these plays actually moves us away from the plays; and if, ultimately, the words on the page dramatically unfolding in time are what open up the penetralium of experience, then it seems by focusing not on what is there, but on what isn't, we are moving away from presentness and hence from tragedy. But by being attuned to speech unfolding over time – in such a way that we do not know what will happen next – what is being created in the mind is the space for a type of affective intimacy that exists only in the moment. The post-facto attempt to articulate this intimacy, by default, is drawn to what actually happens in the play via consideration of content. Yet the content we want to draw out is that which does not exist—that which, though suggested by speech, is, usually and from a position of hindsight, silenced. Yet if it is merely the suggestiveness of speech articulated poetically in time that elicits presentness to events as they unfold, then why shouldn't we be “present” to all of Shakespeare's plays, not merely his tragedies?

The idea is that “presentness” could only be enhanced by an ending we could not possibly want. Tragedies, more than comedies, elicit feelings of awe and wonder

because when they end, we are left reeling unequivocally in the subjunctive mood. Asking “what if” questions are not posed with the same sense of urgency with comedies (though, indeed, they *could* be posed). The true horror of tragedy entails an immediate desire to fight off a sense of helplessness—to remove ourselves from the burden of its inexplicability, usually through explanation. The burden, that is, is one of being entirely *too* present to these characters; for criticism of tragedy to remain homologous to that which it seeks to describe (rather than explain, or explain away), remaining in the subjunctive register is of critical importance. Reader presentness is to be enhanced not simply by considering the narrative or poetic power of Shakespeare’s words, but also by considering the power of these plays to elicit thoughts about what didn’t happen. Establishing such reader presentness is a means, ultimately, of engaging with the burden of the (characters’) present.

Susan Sontag calls tragedy an “ennobling vision of nihilism” (136), a seemingly contradictory definition, for what could possibly be ennobling about meaninglessness? The equation of tragedy with nihilism, with a sort of aesthetic stasis, means that to discuss tragedy is to invite an end to discussion, as though the tragic effect has something to do with what Stephen Booth calls “helplessness” (84). The question for critics of Shakespearean tragedy is what to do with, or about, this feeling of helplessness. The natural response is to try to locate the feeling, whether in the audience or the play. But to locate tragedy is not to make the tragic resonant in the reader imagination, but to circumvent feelings of helplessness, and then, for the sake of what?

For the sake of a discussion—to extend the life of a conversation about tragedy. We cannot say that the critical push towards historicism, particularly in Shakespeare studies, is *directly* related – that is, is a critical response to – a feeling of critical helplessness. What historicism does, however, is locate our understanding of aesthetic pleasure in neither the play in hand nor in reader (or viewer) response, but in something *else*—say, the social and cultural forces that are said to mediate the type of response already identified. In such a case, reader or viewer response is *subordinate* to consideration of such mediating forces. Such an approach is perhaps suitable to cultural historians but is rather inadequate to critics who want to have a discussion about tragedy *now*, i.e. the tragic effect itself, and not how it comes to be. Putting forward a project or critical strategy that seeks to make the tragic effect resonant in readerly imagination means that setting aside those that locate the tragic effect in (forgone) historical realities is merely step one.

Nietzsche is not often thought of as a historian, but his critique of tragedy, locating it within an ancient schema of gods and Titans seems to be a critique or disavowal of what we are here taking to be a critical component of tragedy, i.e. its intimate relationship to presentness. Yet Nietzsche's idea is that "presentness" cannot occur in *our* present. Because we are at removes from certain historical contingencies that allow presentness to happen, we cannot hope to recover it and this *just because* of our present (i.e. our present circumstances, whether social, economic, political). His idea of the "birth" of tragedy overlaps, and is not in opposition to, Steiner's later critique of the "death" of tragedy. Nietzsche says that tragedy is born only within a society that seeks not to overcome Dionysus – by branding it, as Christianity does, as

“evil” – but in one, supremely optimistic, that embraces and celebrates what is otherwise thought to be its (own) destructive properties. Only in such a society can tragedy be “ennobling.” Steiner, analogously, says tragedy is dead because we have moved away from “myth,” and though “the myths which have prevailed since Descartes and Newton are myths of reason” (321), such mythology is detrimental to art, let alone tragedy. We could say that the myth of reason encompasses the critical desire not to explain, but explain away. Tragedy, as an institution, is located in the particular social makeup of ancient societies in which a belief in gods and giants is taken for granted because, in such a society, no ennobling vision of the human race *based on redemption* exists. With the death of pagan gods, so it follows, comes the death of tragedy and a type of corrupted optimism that seeks to repress the Dionysian element of tragedy. (This inverted view of optimism, in repressing rather than embracing Dionysus is, for Nietzsche, a veritable transvaluation of values.) To avoid tragedy, our post-sacral, godless, and secular order becomes one of shifting relativisms, each one likely to be verified and then abandoned in time, none carrying any concrete meaning, all encompassed by that dispiriting term, “post-modernism.” What about such an order could possibly elicit the tragic? What we do have, undoubtedly, is a vision of “nihilism,” and if we have *that*, then part of the critical procedure to follow in wanting to make such a vision “ennobling” is to make the tragic effect resonant in, hence necessarily tied to, present conditions of secular post-modernity. Terry Eagleton’s critique of Steiner is pertinent:

[T]ragedy, that privileged preserve of gods and spiritual giants, has now been decisively democratized – which is to say, for the devotees of gods

and giants, abolished. Hence the death-of-tragedy thesis. Tragedy, however, did not vanish because there were no more great men. It did not expire with the last absolutist monarch. On the contrary, since under democracy each one of us is to be incommensurably cherished, it has been multiplied far beyond antique imagining. ... Far from there being 'nothing democratic in the vision of tragedy', as George Steiner asserts, absolutely nobody is safe from tragedy in such a world. The Enlightenment, commonly thought to be the enemy of tragedy, is in fact a breeder of it. It is worth recalling that tragic art began in a society which called itself a democracy.... (94-95)

If tragedy nowadays has indeed been multiplied far beyond antique imagining, it isn't the case that tragedy has simply disappeared but that greater (critical) efforts must be made to make it resonant, because to say that each life is, or has the potential to be, tragic, means that expressing the truth of tragedy no longer occurs via the definitive account of its function across a particular cultural or interpretive community, but in the unique individual response to tragedy. How then to increase subjective claims to tragedy while still wanting to say, in the last instance, that tragedy is a *genre*, i.e. encompassed by something general, or generic?

The first step is to locate tragedy, definitively, within the text, i.e. the printed text on the page. Where Eagleton seems to want to unmoor the term "tragedy" from (mere) aesthetic considerations, what is really required is to make *an* aesthetic consideration of tragedy matter to readers today. The tragic effect is not to be recovered by immersing ourselves in a world elsewhere, historical or otherwise, or more deeply in

the immediate social, political, or ecological disasters of the present. The claim that tragedy does not exist today speaks not to the fact that tragedies are no longer being written but that they are no longer being read, or *felt*, today. The holocaust may or may not be “tragic”; such a debate is beyond the scope of this study. The more salient critical question is, faced with horrors like the holocaust, should we care to read about the tragic fate of a Danish prince?

That tragedy, whatever it is, exists outside of, or operates beyond, perfect human understanding is perhaps no lesson we should impart on others, particularly if we take the goal of any critical endeavour to be greater understanding. But one cannot *begin* with an understanding of helplessness; one must *discover* one’s helplessness. The trajectory is not of moving from limitlessness to suitable limits; rather, beginning with limits, we must discover limitlessness. The limits to begin with, then, are located in the play, or written speech; the discovery of limitlessness, squarely in the reader imagination. In the oscillation between a consideration of limits and limitlessness (the play immediately before us versus counterfactual reader responses to that play) is where the tragic effect resides.

We will say more about limits in the fourth chapter on *Macbeth*. For now, let us say that counterfactual speculation is a type of reader response and, further, that the tragic effect *can* be felt, which is to say articulated, outside of 1) the historical contingencies that first led to the production of the work in question and 2) direct reference to immediate historical realities the reader, interpreter, or viewer now finds him or herself in. Not that reference to either 1 or 2 is to be avoided outright. But the principal limiting factor of our discussion of tragedy will be the play itself and not the

society that bred it. In moving towards limitlessness, rather than grounding our discussions in facts and figures taken from the world beyond the immediate experience of the text, what this project proposes is multiplying and analyzing some of the countless number of narrative contingencies suggested within the play, prioritizing these over the myriad number of contingencies no doubt available without.

We have noted how Cavell places an emphasis on speech in regards to reader presentness. But how to square this emphasis on speech with an emphasis on counterfactual reading, rather than viewing? Surely speech is more “present” to us when spoken in the present, i.e. in our presence, as on stage. And no doubt a play being performed has as much opportunity to develop a particular interpretation as it does to elicit thoughts about how else a performance could have been staged, based on not only language (delivery), but on costume and set-design, for example. Yet the move into the subjective realm of possibility is the sort that haunts our psychic, rather than immediate physical, existence. Here it seems, once again, that our critical enterprise entails a move *away* from what is immediately present, i.e. present to our senses. Yet in insisting on attending to speech, rather than props, we are merely attempting to limit ourselves to spoken language in the consideration of possibilities. That spoken language can appear on paper as well as on stage carries one immediate ramification. On stage, not only is the time and metre of the language imposed on us, but so too is the time it takes for the play to unfold. When reading a play, we have more opportunity to break free from the intrusion of time – to go back over lines, pages, scenes – to attend to possibilities lost. So while actors can make a claim to be in *our* present, what we want, in a way, is to increase our ability to be in their (i.e. the characters’, and not the actors’)

present. The ability to do so is not negated when watching a play; there are all sorts of ways a given actor's interpretation of lines can point to, or enhance, or leave something to be desired from, the suggestiveness of certain lines. But, as Cavell reminds us, it remains a fact that as far as actors on a stage are concerned, "they are in our presence" (*WV* 103) though we are not in theirs. We could entertain breaking down the so-called "fourth wall" in hopes of achieving the type of presentness *we* desire, though this is not the sort of effect Antonin Artaud and Bertolt Brecht have in mind in proposing their particular alterations of theatrical convention. The intimacy they seek, certainly in Brecht's case, has less to do with aesthetics than social engagement (more in chapter 3). But a break from the external time imposed on the play when reading the play (in private) is a boon to counterfactual thinking.

Nonetheless, speech does carry its own rhythms; in establishing the limit as the play itself, we are not emphasizing reading *new* lines into the play because to do so would be to betray the particular rhythms that tune us into the present in the first place. Such rationale speaks to why pursuing counterfactuals is perhaps unsuited to reading novels. Novels, that is, chart out their own internal "directedness" based on much more than merely the speech of its characters. To ask if one thing had happened rather than another would be analogous to asking, in plays, if one character had *said* one thing, or said the same thing in a different (i.e. *prosy*) way, rather than another. For example, to ask, what if Jeanie Deans had simply lied to save her sister in Sir Walter Scott's *Heart of Midlothian* (1818) would be to demolish the novel as a whole, or to presuppose an entirely different text. Furthermore, it would not be entirely clear, in pursuing counterfactuals in novels, whose presentness we would be seeking to

establish intimacy with, the author's or the character's. Surely Scott is saying something about the world at large in describing the world he does as he does. Shakespeare, on the other hand, working exclusively with speech, presents us with subjectivities. Novelists, like theorists, present us with *a* subjectivity—his or her own. Part of unpacking a novel is to establish the author's worldview; we may *try* to do the same with Shakespeare, but his plays demand criticism of a different sort.

Going back to our critique of historicism and not wanting too hastily to caricature historicist inquiry, let us note how, indeed, practitioners of the “New” sort are sensitive to some of the very concerns we have raised. First, in emphasizing E.M.W. Tillyard's influence as a practitioner of the “old” sort – where the goings on in any of Shakespeare's plays are merely an addendum to, or propagation of, an already existing “Elizabethan world picture” – Jean E. Howard wants

to sketch what must of necessity be a simplified picture of some of the assumptions underlying the historical criticism of a figure such as Tillyard. These assumptions include the following: that history is knowable; that literature mirrors or at least by indirection reflects historical reality; and that historians and critics can see the facts of history objectively. (This last assumption is particularly paradoxical since it rests on the premise that while literature is implicated in history, historians and critics are not.) (461)

For New Historicism to distinguish itself from the positivistic predilections of the old, the historicist must now attempt to answer and effectively deal with these assumptions. The pertinent dichotomy to consider is whether a text (in the

Renaissance or otherwise) works to entrench established meanings on the one hand, or create meanings and hence, by so doing, subvert, rather than prop up, existing social relations on the other. Indeed, Howard notes that Greenblatt's "degree of methodological self-consciousness" (469) comes in his refusal to grant primacy to either side, with his New Historicist insistence that a text, while often buttressing social norms, does indeed carry subversive potential. Commenting on Greenblatt's obsession with identity formation and self-fashioning, Howard says

[Greenblatt] seems to suggest that discourse about the self has no single point of origin but constantly evolves in response to various forms of cultural authority, manifesting itself both in literary paradigms and in the construction of actual lives. In short, by stressing that he wishes to "investigate both the social presence to the world of the literary text and the social presence of the world in the literary text" ... Greenblatt moves to replace metaphors of mirrors and grounds with an interactive model of how the literary and the social texts relate. (473)

Yet in pursuing this methodology, however humane, it remains to be seen whether Greenblatt is not simply refashioning old historicist assumptions anyhow. The first, "that history is knowable," speaks to the second, i.e. whether or not a "ground" of history can be established at all. Greenblatt seems to provide an answer by presupposing no stable ground of reference for the literary text, instead emphasizing its existence in an in-between and circulatory space in which meanings are created. But what Greenblatt is doing *is* providing a "ground," that is, an objective ground, however liminal, allowing us to construct a stable and supra-historical space which we are to

conceive of as the cradle of meaning. The problem is not in an insistence on creating a “ground,” but in the assumption that *this* ground, or intermediate or interactive space, is itself *not* influenced by present conditions of discourse (the paradox Howard alludes to).

In the work of Stephen Greenblatt one can find a somewhat different and more varied historical criticism ... but Greenblatt’s recent writings also lead one, ultimately, to a consideration of the subversive or contestatory role which literature plays in culture. Up through his important book *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, Greenblatt’s main concern was identity formation. In that book he showed the historical moment defined the conditions of possibility for constituting selves in sixteenth-century England. In a series of careful analyses he examined how selves took shape in the sixteenth century in relationship to specific authorities and their culturally-derived antitheses or demonic others. Among the many influences on the book is Lacan’s neo-Freudian psychology with its assumption, not of a unified and autonomous self, but of a provisional and contradictory self which is the product of discourse. Consequently, the book repudiates the humanist notion that man, the protean actor, is in control of his own identity formation; rather, he is presented in Greenblatt’s work as the product of impersonal historical forces largely inimical to individual control. (473)

The heavy irony of this passage, not called out by Howard but, indeed, begging to be, is that Greenblatt himself exists within, is the product of, impersonal historical forces and

influences (i.e. Lacan) that allow his particular methodology to resonate in the first place. All criticism, historical or otherwise, is itself a refashioning, and can itself be interpreted as a response to existing power relations.² The idea behind using counterfactuals is to deny the need for objective space through the proliferation of subjective experiences of the text based not on a consideration of our historically determined presence to a text, but our presentness within the text, i.e. our ability to inhabit the world of possibilities suggested by the text itself rather than those possibilities imposed upon it from without.

Of course, after the fact, the historian will come along to weigh in on just why such counterfactual questions were posed, why *these* counterfactuals resonated (and not others), and certainly there will be historical reasons why. This project starts with the assumption that however valuable such post-facto commentary may or may not be, it is of no relevance to the literary critic whose job is to read the text at hand rather than document how it came to mean what it does. That is, literary critics, if they allow themselves to move beyond the historicist method, are in the position of *making meaning*; the historian, in his or her effort to create meaning, can only comment on how meaning is made. Striving for a supra-historical and objective view of the world, the historian not only passes up the opportunity to create meaning, he or she also actively, if perhaps not intentionally, works to quash any new meanings. New meanings always come from elsewhere, are methodologically “knowable,” reflect less on our present-day and historically contingent needs than on a supra-historical past necessity and thus knowable future. But is the future ever knowable? Why past necessity should take precedence over present-day needs is not entirely clear, particularly if we believe, as

does Louis Montrose, that all modes of writing proceed “from our own historically, socially and institutionally shaped vantage points” (23) situated first and foremost in the present.

This leads us back to Eagleton’s concern. If we already have enough historical material on which to “ground” a discussion of tragedy, why insist on reading (i.e. rereading) Shakespearean tragedy, or tragic texts at all? Indeed, such an inquiry speaks to our present-day needs. Do we still *need* Shakespeare? Isn’t the holocaust tragic enough? The idea that possibilities are particularly rife in Shakespeare’s texts, through particularly suggestive speech, has been hinted at earlier. There are “historical” reasons for turning to Shakespeare, rooted in tradition and custom. But Shakespeare has achieved the particular standing he has because he and his plays have managed to avoid a great deal of historical scrutiny. He remains, in many respects, aloof. We need not force ourselves to deny that Shakespeare was a committed Catholic (for the sake of one reading over another), because we do not know, will never know, for certain, that he was a committed Catholic. Not that his views should influence our reading of his plays; but in the peculiar case of Shakespeare, we need not deal – as we would with novelists – with his example in life because we can never hope to know his example in life.

Furthermore, the only way to circumvent “interested” readings ultimately rooted in a consideration of power relations is to place ourselves in a disinterested aesthetic atmosphere where an honest consideration of events and nonevents do not carry immediate social and political repercussions. Such is the value of turning to the written texts, concomitant with academic study. Of course, some will say that no

reading can ever hope to be completely disinterested, or composed entirely outside of present-day conditions. But it is the locale of such “interest” that counterfactual reading hopes to shift. That is, we take as fundamental that the only way to speak outside of so-called “objective” social forces is to increase subjective claims about a text. A “reading,” counterfactual or otherwise, cannot hope to be prescriptive. The minimal condition of posing “what if” questions does not dictate how a text should be read. In proposing a reading strategy, we are not out to apply any type of counterfactual taxonomy. Rather, pursuing counterfactuals is merely an invitation to the reader to pursue a minimal “methodology” in which significance (because everything that didn’t happen is now possible) has to be created rather than discovered. Or, rather, the discovery or meaning to be made is one that occurs after a convincing subjective consideration of limitlessness *from within* some manner of acknowledged limits (not vice versa). That is, reality *is* limitless; how we impose limits on that reality, how we reason our way out of limitlessness is a critical task that could only be generative, not definitive. We can always revisit texts, and only in revisiting texts anew are we open to tragedy.

The historicist method cannot continue in any meaningful way without first assuming that history is knowable. Even those, like Howard, who concede that history is an intervention, are still reaching, in a sense, for supra-historical and objective knowledge; the belief in an objective way forward persists. What such reconfigurations speak to, of course, is our present-day needs. That is, our present-day needs, for whatever reason, depend upon the assumption that we cannot move forward subjectively, but only – carefully, responsibly – *objectively*. Yet if objectivity is

impossible to achieve, as even the historicists concede, then this way forward is as grounded in myth, social forces, or historical contingency, as any other.

For example, the endless debates about textual authority, obviously, reach into the classroom. Which version of the plays – with which information footnoted, or presented on opposing pages – should be taught in class? Whatever the answer, it seems clear that the myth of objectivity strives to present the plays as Shakespeare himself had set them down (originally) on paper. How seriously did Shakespeare take the alterations? For a man who signed his own name six different ways, and open, no doubt, to the improvisations of the theatre when composing, it is easy to believe that he himself had no well-wrought opinion on what an authoritative version of his plays would look like.

This is not to say that we shouldn't pursue such scholarship but to reiterate that the choices we make are always based on present-day needs or, even, the particular proclivities of present-day mythologies. The need for a type of "objectivity" reigns for now. But it would not be too difficult to imagine a time (far off in the future) when we align ourselves more intimately with the spoken, rather than written, word (for whatever reason) and suddenly, we find that what were once the good quartos become the bad and the bad become the good. This does not mean we need not identify the "bad" and "good" (for now)—only that the nomenclature is contingent on needs.

One final quotation from Howard on the value of reading, rather than explaining (i.e. historically), a text:

A good reading can be a masterpiece, but it usually has the status of an isolated event. Essays which explain how and why one does and should

read in a particular way are both more generous and more risky since they do not try to seal themselves off from what is polemical by aspiring to a timeless commonsense, but expose what is difficult and what is at stake in “making knowledge” at *this* historical moment. (Her emphasis 469)

The value of historicist inquiry is that it *does* seek to explain why or how we read in a certain way. Close-readings, on the other hand (according to Howard), in their appeal to “timeless commonsense” without foregrounding their historical assumptions, are less generous simply because they refuse to engage with the stakes or implications of their presumptions. But close readings themselves can be a form of generosity. How generous is it to present a definitive way to read a text simply to be imitated, or a taxonomy simply to be applied, particularly if reader subjectivity is quashed? Is this then to suggest that a reader, who manages to express a subjective relationship to a text through close reading, is, by default, appealing to a timeless commonsense? What such a reader is doing is creating, or refiguring, what we *ought* to take to be commonsensical, which is not timeless, but addresses a need for a particular significance at a particular moment in time. A certain critical generosity is *necessary* to accept a multitude of so-called isolated events. This doesn’t mean that assumptions ought not to be called into question and analyzed; but such an endeavour has less to do with “making knowledge” than it does with making knowledge uniform. The tension, perhaps, is healthy; but to overemphasize, continually, our inability to get outside language games is a stance not of critical generosity, but critical patrimony. If meaning is made in isolated events, we need more of those events, not less. Nor does this exclude a consideration of stakes.

The stakes, that is, of pursuing counterfactuals can best be addressed by looking at another text of Nietzsche's, one that does not mention tragedy explicitly but which carries implications for the project at hand. In his *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, Nietzsche advocates in favour of a historical forgetting for the sake of life. His emphasis, however, is not on a total disavowal of history but on reclaiming the value of what he calls the "unhistorical condition" (11).

It [the "unhistorical condition"] is the most unjust condition in the world, narrow, ungrateful to the past, blind to dangers, deaf to warnings, a little living whirlpool in a dead sea of night and forgetting: and yet this condition—unhistorical, contra-historical through and through—is the cradle not only of an unjust, but rather of every just deed; and no artist will paint his picture, no general achieve victory nor any people its freedom without first having desired and striven for it in such an unhistorical condition. As the man of action ... is always without conscience, so he is also without knowledge; he forgets a great deal to do one thing, he is unjust to what lies behind him and knows only one right, the right of that which is to become. (11-12)

Nietzsche does not say that any action beneficial to life must never look to history, but that more often than not, a present action comes first, in unhistorical conditions, to which historical explanations are later tied. To assume that one can know, beforehand, what is just and what not, or what is tragic or what is not, is to seek out knowledge disadvantageous to life. Of course, one can get carried away with this rhetoric; but speaking strictly in terms of critical acts here, what are some of the

ramifications of Nietzsche's thoughts? Where the tragic effect is located in Apollo's realization that he "could not live without Dionysus" (46) in *The Birth of Tragedy*, tragedy here can be linked homologously to the idea that whatever historical methods we use to explain the tragic effect, none is more powerful than understanding that the historical *requires the unhistorical*. In making our case for the unhistorical consideration of possibilities, we next run into a consideration of limits. Is *everything* now possible open to critical scrutiny? How does this serve a condition of the unhistorical particularly when, as Nietzsche says, forgetting is contingent on establishing limits, not limitlessness, what he calls "horizon[s]"?

And this is a general law: every living thing can become healthy, strong and fruitful only within a horizon; if it is incapable of drawing a horizon around itself or, on the other hand, too selfish to restrict its vision to the limits of a horizon drawn by another, it will wither away feebly or overhastily to its early demise. Cheerfulness, clear conscience, the carefree deed, faith in the future ... depends on one's being able to forget at the right time as well as to remember at the right time; on discerning with strong instinctual feelings when there is need to experience historically and when unhistorically. (*Advantage* 10)

The horizon we are proposing, mentioned previously, is the play itself, or written speech. We are not imagining alternate voices, speech, or subjectivity, but alternate *events*. Nietzsche notes that "the animal, which is quite unhistorical and lives within a horizon ... nevertheless is in a certain sense happy, or at least lives without boredom and dissimulation" (11). Part of the urgency in pursuing counterfactual readings is to

make Shakespeare, for pedagogical reasons, *less boring*, to increase the value of the text by divorcing it from the a priori buttressing of historical truths of a time gone by. Only when students are allowed to make the plays relevant to a subjective response in the present will they then have the stamina and desire to go digging through the past. In this way is counterfactual criticism open-ended, generous, and *not* definitive. Nor does it exclude other methods of inquiry (say, historicism) but rather anchors their discussions first and foremost to a present experience which must first be articulated in the present. Appeals to other subjective responses or mediations of a time gone by is not an explanation of tragedy, but merely the attempt to explain tragedy away by avoiding the present. Once historical assumptions are made, present assumptions are invalidated, disparaged, or thought to exist merely as an extension of the past. We are saying counterfactual thinking (particularly in the classroom, and particularly vis-à-vis tragedy) is a departure point only, the beginning of a discussion and not its end, leading eventually to any and all other forms of inquiry. Whatever we discover about the past can only make sense, or be meaningful, as an extension of a response made and acknowledged in the present. *So what students require immediately is the space to tease out possibilities in texts without attending to historical data.* Shakespeare – i.e. Shakespearean tragedy, which elicits subjunctive longings – is as good a place to start as any in initiating some version of the examined life.

2. My Kingdom for a Ghost: Counterfactual Thinking and *Hamlet*

We should note that Bradley's use of character criticism as a means of explaining tragedy away is not a pitfall he is insensitive to. Bradley recognizes that the very act of explaining risks explaining (something like tragedy) away.

Any answer we give to the question [of the source of tragic power] ... ought to correspond with, or to represent in terms of the understanding, our imaginative and emotional experience in reading the tragedies. We have, of course, to do our best by study and effort to make this experience true to Shakespeare; but, that done to the best of our ability, the experience is the matter to be interpreted, and the test by which the interpretation must be tried. But it is extremely hard to make out exactly what this experience is, because, in the very effort to make it out, our reflecting mind, full of everyday ideas, is always tending to transform it by the application of these ideas, and so to elicit a result which, instead of representing the fact, conventionalizes it. And the consequence is not only mistaken theories; it is that many a man will declare that he feels in reading a tragedy what he never really felt, while he fails to recognize what he actually did feel. It is not likely that we shall escape all these dangers in our effort to find an answer to the question regarding the tragic world and the ultimate power in it. (15)

Why should conventionalizing Shakespeare's tragedies be more of a threat today than in 1904, enough of a threat as to warrant radically different interpretive approaches? One reason is that New Historicist critical practices which root our "experience" of the

plays at a crossroads of text and society unabashedly consigns, even prescribes, our experiences of reading a play to a time gone by. If we take a Historicist method to encompass what Bradley above calls “interpretation” – here highlighted as possible misinterpretation – then we are saying that the Historicist method entails the types of misperceptions that Bradley alludes to: a replacement of feeling with explanation. However unlikely it may be that any interpretation will allow us to avoid conventionalizing the tragic effect, Bradley is sympathetic to our critical efforts. Yet, we noted that Bradley, or at least the manner in which his brand of character criticism has been taken up, also consigns us to search for conventional prescriptive answers, if not in immediate historical contingencies of Elizabethan England, then in definitive character traits, known in tragedy as “flaws.”

Certainly Bradley perceives the tragic effect, comprehends its mystery as being open-ended. But why insist on isolating a tragic flaw at all? Does this not guarantee that we will in fact conventionalize the mystery of tragedy through character interpretation? The explicit question to be taken up in this chapter concerns Hamlet’s delay—that is, *how to read it?* In addressing the question, we will show how the need to read it *as problematic*, which Bradley clearly does, conventionalizes tragedy. In our attempt to achieve “presentness,” we must attend to our first responses to the play, which means attending to the possibility that we would, without prior knowledge, perceive the delay as something relatively unproblematic. We are not discussing the possibility of competing Hamlets, but competing readers of *Hamlet*.

Bradley very astutely begins his discussion of Hamlet by attending to possible first responses:

Suppose you were to describe the plot of *Hamlet* to a person quite ignorant of the play, and suppose you were careful to tell your hearer nothing about Hamlet's character, what impression would your sketch make on him? Would he not exclaim: 'What a sensational story! Why, here are some eight violent deaths, not to speak of adultery, a ghost, a mad woman, and a fight in a grave! If I did not know that the play was Shakespeare's, I should have thought it must have been one of those early tragedies of blood and horror from which he is said to have redeemed the stage'? And would he not then go on to ask: 'But why in the world did not Hamlet obey the Ghost at once, and so save seven of those eight lives?'

(64)

In fact, what Bradley is highlighting is not a possible first reaction to the play, but to its later summarization, hearing of the play rather than attending to it. The play has been reduced through post-facto description in a way that presupposes the delay as a problem a priori. But Bradley goes on to note that in the first instance, say of performance, the above reaction is perhaps not likely to be felt:

The exclamation [that Hamlet should have killed the King instantly] and this question both show the same thing, that the whole story turns upon the peculiar character of the hero. For without this character the story would appear sensational and horrible; and yet the actual *Hamlet* is very far from being so.... We are all aware of this, and if we were not so the history of *Hamlet*, as a stage-play, might bring the fact home to us. It is ... the most popular of Shakespeare's tragedies on our stage; and yet a large

number, perhaps even the majority of the spectators, though they may feel some mysterious attraction in the hero, certainly do not question themselves about his character or the cause of his delay, and would still find the play exceptionally effective, even if he were an ordinary brave young man and the obstacles in his path were purely external. And this has probably always been the case. Hamlet seems from the first to have been a favourite play; but until the late eighteenth century, I believe, scarcely a critic showed that he perceived anything specially interesting in the character. (64-65)

If it “has probably always been the case,” prior to the eighteenth century, that Hamlet’s delay was not perceived as particularly problematic, it is difficult to understand why Bradley turns to the question of Hamlet’s character so explicitly. How, that is, do we go from not noticing the delay, to exclaiming, as Bradley’s hypothetical reader does, that Hamlet *should have* killed the King? Where, when, or why does the delay gain the normative hold it does—or, rather, where, when, and why does a certain brand of criticism arise that focuses on Hamlet’s character? Why should the whole story suddenly turn on the question of the hero? When Bradley later says that “whatever we ... may think about Hamlet’s duty, we are meant in the play to assume that he *ought* to have obeyed the Ghost” (his emphasis 72), he is making the type of error he himself warns against. He does not mean to conventionalize Hamlet’s character; but in posing the question the way he does, he is well on his way to making the delay a problem a priori without consulting posterior experience of the play. If the play is, or once was, intelligible without calling attention to the delay, then it is not necessarily true that we

would 1) ask why Hamlet had not obeyed the Ghost right away and 2) assume that Hamlet *ought* to have obeyed the Ghost at all. It is perfectly reasonable, upon first reading or viewing, *to go along* with Hamlet's doubts, to demand, as he does, verification of the Ghost's testimony, to wonder whether the Ghost is a "spirit of health or goblin damned" (1.4.21).

We will note here a distinction between verification and necessity. Verification occurs *within* the unfolding of the play and both Hamlet and we, as readers, require it *vis-a-vis* the Ghost's testimony. Necessity, on the other hand, occurs without or beyond the play, is established by acts of criticism after the fact. Only we as readers require necessity; Hamlet has not the luxury of demanding it. The mix up occurs as soon as we hear Claudius's confession. At that point, we as readers exit the realm of the verifiable while leaving Hamlet to the world of contingency. The problem of Claudius's guilt, for us, is no longer *to be* verified; it *is* verified. But if it makes sense to go along with Hamlet as he seeks verification, we cannot suddenly begin to read the delay, or establish a critical necessity for it while Hamlet himself still seeks verification. Surely Hamlet laments *that* he delays; but he never laments *his delay*, i.e. the particular moment when he reneges on the opportunity to kill Claudius at prayer. That he wishes Claudius to hell and not heaven may not be reason good enough for us; but nowhere in the play is it suggested that *this* reason is particularly troubling to Hamlet. The real moral question to ask is not "Why does Hamlet delay?" but "What if we as readers had not heard Claudius's confession?" How would we then *read* the delay?—as a moment pregnant in dramatic significance?—or as a rather unremarkable occurrence consistent with Hamlet's character that attests not necessarily to his weakness, but to a type of

prudence and wisdom fitting, say, to a Prince?

Yet even without Claudius's confession, we would still have all sorts of instances calling attention to Hamlet's procrastination – his “blunted purpose” (3.4.101), his “dull revenge” (4.4.9.23),³ his tardiness – enough, once the play is over, to make the case convincingly that Hamlet believes he ought to have done the deed; but it remains to be seen, at such a point, if *we* would concur. It is perfectly reasonable, that is, without Claudius's confession, to read Hamlet as a character troubled by the fact that he delays. We could still very well and very easily recognize that procrastination is a problem for him. But Hamlet's procrastination would not become so palpable a problem *for us*. Without the confession, we would have no way of either endorsing or condemning Hamlet's vacillations. We could not say he is *wrong* to vacillate, to say as convincingly as Bradley does, that he *ought* to have killed the King. Yet we could not exactly say that he is right to vacillate either because in the end, he does the deed—so his vacillations are redeemed in a way.

This asymmetry in knowledge, between what we know about *Hamlet* from without, and what Hamlet knows about goings on at court from within, is touched upon, rather humorously, by René Girard:

Why should a well-educated young man have second thoughts when it comes to killing a close relative who also happens to be the king of the land and the husband of his own mother? This is some enigma indeed, and the problem is not that a satisfactory answer has never been found but that we should keep looking for one.

Should our enormous critical literature on *Hamlet* fall someday

into the hands of people otherwise ignorant of our mores, they could not fail to conclude that our academic tribe must have been a savage breed, indeed. After four centuries of controversies, Hamlet's temporary reluctance to commit murder still looks so outlandish to us that more and more books are being written in an unsuccessful effort to solve that mystery. The only way to account for this curious body of literature is to suppose that back in the twentieth century no more was needed than the request of some ghost, and the average professor of literature would massacre his entire household without batting an eyelash. (287)

Girard is obviously being facetious because what we do know is that the average professor of literature is not, at least not right away, ready to accept that Hamlet *ought* to massacre his uncle or his household. Even if the average professor of literature believes that Hamlet is procrastinating, none will deny the relative sagacity and temperance behind Hamlet's desire to verify his intuition once and for all before taking any rash action. Up to (though perhaps not after) the dumb-show and player-scene are we prepared to read Hamlet's doubts not as some symptom of sickness, but indicative of a mind displaying some measure of foresight and healthy skepticism. But, of course, once the King rises, once he has betrayed his guilt, surely *this* should be enough to remove both us and Hamlet from the realm of contingency. That is, both Hamlet and the reader now have all the verification required. Only the deed remains to be done. Surely at this point we can agree with Bradley that Hamlet *ought* to obey the Ghost.

But the question then is, *how* should Hamlet proceed? Hamlet cannot spring to the King's throat at just that instant. No matter; the King retires to his chambers. Soon

enough, Hamlet has a terrific opportunity as he stumbles upon Claudius at prayer. Now armed with the certainty afforded us by the dumb-show and player-scene, we are indeed screaming for Hamlet to do the deed. But our perception of Hamlet's delay is here tainted by the asymmetry in knowledge highlighted earlier. Do *we* know for a fact that Claudius *is* guilty? We do, but not *because* of the dumb-show and player-scene (which is all, at this point, Hamlet has to go on), but by the fact that Claudius has just verified, for us exclusively, his guilt beyond a shadow of a doubt. So the question is whether Claudius's confession merely entrenches something we know already, or whether Claudius's confession is, in fact, the first instant in the play that we do know, conclusively, that he is guilty. Between the time that the King rises and before he confesses, how certain are we of his guilt?

Such a question has been raised before. W.W. Greg's reading of the play throws enough ambiguity on the events of the dumb-show and player-scene to call into question our certainty of the Ghost's existence. Greg points to the Ghost's testimony as a manifestation of "Hamlet's Hallucination" (1917). The easy rebuttal here is that Hamlet is not the only one who sees it; its appearance is confirmed by Horatio, Barnardo, and Marcellus, hence not the very coinage of Hamlet's brain alone. But Hamlet is the only one who *hears* the Ghost. This fact, coupled with the ambiguous turn of events during the dumb-show and player-scene, has Greg conclude that *the story* the Ghost tells Hamlet is a complete fabrication.

To recap briefly Greg's argument, let us remember that Hamlet's play-within-the-play in Act 3 is itself made up of two mini-productions. The first is the dumb-show, in which anonymous characters act out a given argument. The second is the player-

scene (called by Hamlet *The Mousetrap*), in which the player King (Gonzago) is murdered not by his brother, but his nephew (Lucianus), a point reiterated explicitly by Hamlet to Claudius (3.2.216-223). In *both*, however, Hamlet has “the actors play ‘something like’ the murder of his father ... a minutely accurate representation of the whole story as told by the Ghost” (396). So the King is *twice* faced with the representation of his crime in minute detail, yet only rises after the second.

The King, it will be observed, gives not the smallest sign of disturbance during or after the all-important dumb-show. ... Any unprejudiced reading of the text will, I think, make it at once apparent that the only hypothesis consistent with the King’s behaviour is that in the dumb-show he actually fails to recognize the representation of his own crime. ... The manner in which the poison is administered makes even the shadow of a doubt absurd. There is but one rational conclusion: *Claudius did not murder his brother by pouring poison into his ears.* (His emphasis 401)

Moreover, it is not entirely clear to Greg that Claudius rises after the *second* pouring:

[T]he supreme moment, so long anxiously expected, has arrived. The murderer empties his poison into the sleeper’s ears [for the second time], and—the King rises? Not a bit of it. Hamlet is unable to restrain himself any longer; he breaks out, hurling the crude facts of the story in the King’s face, shouting, gesticulating, past reason and control. It seems as though the next moment he must sprint at his throat.^[4] Naturally the court breaks up, the King rises, calls for lights, and retires to his private apartments, convinced—not that his guilt has been discovered, but that

Hamlet is a dangerous madman, who has designs on his life, and must, at all costs, be got quietly out of the country, and, if possible, out of the world. (406)

According to Greg, the King rises because he sees, acted out before him, the *nephew character* of the player King (and *not* a brother character) committing regicide.

Claudius sees not some past representation of a crime which he has committed, but the future possibility of his nephew taking his life. Claudius, and not Hamlet Senior, is Gonzago, and Hamlet is, fittingly, Lucianus, “nephew to the King” (3.2.223).

Greg’s argument is convincing to say the least. The first counter to Greg’s claims is to reiterate that the King’s initial non-reaction is hardly worth attending to because the Ghost’s story is later verified by Claudius’s confession anyhow. But if we are to imagine a version of *Hamlet* without the confession, we have to ask if there is enough ambiguity during the unfolding of events to make the forward progress of the play unacceptable, i.e. unintelligible. As Bradley noted, we are not likely to exit the realm of verisimilitude at any point during the play; it is largely effective. So is Greg’s criticism of the play merely a criticism of hindsight—the sort which indeed 1) seeks to establish some narrative anomaly otherwise glossed over and 2) provide reasons for this anomaly? If we say that one is not likely to fuss all that much over the delay during one’s initial reading or viewing of the play, what has us *skip* over the fact that Claudius is indeed faced with the pantomime of a crime he supposedly committed to no apparent alarm?

Dover Wilson’s second counter to Greg is that it is obvious, from the text alone, that Claudius does not see the pantomime. Ophelia nominates the dumb-show as “the

argument" (3.2.126), and Claudius later asks the question in no uncertain terms: "Have you heard the argument?" (3.2.214), hence implying that he has not seen the dumb-show. So we have, in reading, textual evidence that Claudius indeed was not attending to the argument of the play. But when staging the play, this anomaly is more difficult to resolve. That is, how should Claudius be staged during the dumb-show? For some, like Wilson, the only way is to depict Claudius distracted while the poison is poured the first time. Claudius is, in fact, frequently shown to be distracted while the dumb-show unfolds despite the fact that no explicit stage direction appears in the text. To some, this forced management of events without direction from the author is somewhat disconcerting. To say that Greg's criticism of the play is salient in hindsight is to deny the particular challenge of how to stage Claudius during the dumb-show. Greg's criticism, in fact, could be *validated*, rather than overlooked, simply by staging the play as directed. The equivalent in reading would be, perhaps, to pause after reading that the poison has been poured for the first time to wonder why Shakespeare does not *immediately* have the King rise.

The reason we largely do not, however, has little to do with the fact that Claudius goes on to ask what the argument is. Eventually, he *does* rise and not necessarily to our satisfaction, but to Hamlet's. He is convinced of the King's guilt when he says to Horatio, "I'll take the Ghost's word for a thousand pound" (3.2.263-64). However much we may be confused by, hence gloss over, events upon reading the dumb-show and player-scene, it is Hamlet's reaction that mediates our own. His conviction becomes our conviction; if he has all the evidence and corroboration he needs, why should we not follow along? So all that remains is to kill the King and follow

through on the Ghost's imperative. The King retires before Hamlet can do so right away. Next, though, we must consider how we would read his delay *without* the King's confession and armed only with Hamlet's conviction in the rightness of his cause. By the time the delay scene arrives, we now only have Hamlet's conviction mediating our own. Hence, it is perfectly reasonable to assume that Hamlet's vacillation would mediate our own response, that we would be quite willing to accept that, for whatever reason, killing Claudius in private would not be the best means to achieve any sort of desired ends. Even if read as an example of ratiocination, the key would be in perceiving the justness or aptness of such ratiocination. This is why criticism prior to the late nineteenth century did not bother all that much with the question of Hamlet's character or his delay. Hamlet did not delay all along and then suddenly find his resolve in the end *because* the five-act structure demanded a concluding bloodbath. Rather, Hamlet, in perfect consistency of character, "delays" because he has as much, or as little, conviction at the time he delays as he always has. How definitive, that is, is the King's reaction to the dumb-show and player scene? Greg shows us that we would be wise indeed to doubt it.

What we are doing here is keeping possibilities open, i.e. possibilities of *both* interpretations, say Greg's on the one hand (of Hamlet's, and our, uncertainty), and Wilson's (of Hamlet's certainty) on the other. In the rush of the present, it is equally possible that such an anomaly be overlooked as it is that such an anomaly be caught. Hamlet chooses the former. Why? Such a question is not to be taken up here, as though his subjectivity were a matter of causation. In either scenario, one can assume a certain consistency of character. Hamlet is not fated to do one *or* the other; rather, he could

have, in equal consistency of character, done either. It is perfectly reasonable, that is, to move in either direction, either towards conviction in the rightness of one's cause, or towards skepticism of one's cause—and the reason *we* as readers move towards the former is because this is how Hamlet instructs us to perceive the unfolding of events. After Hamlet first *suggests* that the King is guilty, we are then lucky enough to stumble upon definitive verification. But audiences in the past were not interested in, or necessarily as swayed by, such verification. Despite Claudius's confession, they were willing to keep going along with Hamlet's doubts because he is all that has been mediating their understanding of events. In a way, past audiences were far more *consistent* spectators of the play.

Now, such glossing over can be said to be the result of a type of spectator laziness, so that to go along wholeheartedly with Hamlet's interpretation or perception of events is to renege on the work of actual criticism, which is to take a second look at the unfolding of events, hence to problematize what ought to be problematized, what is glossed over in the rush of performance. Allying ourselves uncritically to the main protagonist's view of unfolding is not, perhaps, a fruitful critical strategy to pursue.

But once we are given Claudius's confession, and the time to ponder over it in hindsight, we stake our claim as readers as *separate* from Hamlet; we now occupy a position of knowledge of events to which Hamlet does not have access, and we use this knowledge, in a certain sense, to enact a type of revenge on Hamlet. But this narrative anomaly (of hearing Claudius's confession) causes us to lose sight of how much we are indebted to Hamlet to chart out for us the appropriate response of a Prince who suspects that something is rotten in the state of Denmark. As soon as we leave the

realm of contingency, we castigate Hamlet for not acting fast enough, thus turning his delay into a problem. But Hamlet, mortal soul that he is, must find the means and will to act within a world of contingency, a world lacking verification.

So is the Ghost a hallucination or isn't it? Is it right for Hamlet to act upon his intuition (made "ostensible" by the figure of the Ghost) or to delay upon feeling it, to then seek out verification? It is a matter of interpretation and both possibilities remain open. The Ghost says A (that Claudius murdered the King). Either A is true or it isn't. *With* Claudius's confession, A is most certainly true. But let us assume that A is untrue, or *could* be—an assumption we indubitably hold the entire time of the play prior to Claudius's confession. What if the Ghost *is* Hamlet's hallucination? Without the confession, A is not true, or rather, we would have no definitive way of knowing that A is true. When the play ends, Claudius's *original* crime of regicide is not exposed to the court. Claudius is tried and executed for his most immediate crimes only, including the inadvertent murder of his Queen and Laertes, and the murder of the Crown Prince. Horatio says he will tell Hamlet's story, but what exactly *is* that story? Will Horatio reveal that Hamlet and the others on the watch were visited by a Ghost? There is still no *proof* that Claudius killed the King. Establishing such a wild story would only reduce Hamlet's standing at Court, not bolster it. Why not just leave Claudius tried and executed for the crimes he only very apparently committed rather than further try him for another based on nothing more than the testimony of a Ghost? In a way, Claudius's original crime is beyond redress. There is no indication at play's end *how* the Court will proceed; but if Horatio has any sense, he would be wise to put the Ghost story to bed. Moreover, without the confession, we, like Hamlet and the court at the end of the play,

would have no access to truth, or, put more succinctly, to verification. So what are we left with?—untruth? Surely we are left with something, say, the contingency of the unverified. The tragedy of *Hamlet* is one of not knowing how to act in a world of contingency, of knowing that the truth cannot set us free because there is no reason to believe the truth is *ever* forthcoming. And the question is not whether or not Hamlet knows, but whether or not *we* know, and, if we insist that we do, asking ourselves *how* we know in contradistinction to how Hamlet knows (or doesn't).

Where does this leave us in terms of tragedy? We began with Bradley, who said that Hamlet's soul is sick, "diseased" (88) with melancholy. Greg also says that Hamlet suffers from hallucinations. For Greg, the fact that the Ghost is incorrect does not have us sympathize with Hamlet's vacillations; rather, Hamlet's vacillations lend credence to the understanding that Hamlet's original intuition, in taking something to be rotten in the state of Denmark, is founded on nothing more than unhealthy psychological disturbances resulting from the normal day-to-day repressions of "feelings, memories, and almost instinctual beliefs" (413-14). For Girard, moreover, the possibility that the Ghost is incorrect is never an issue. In Girard's reading, Hamlet's sickness is not some sign of prudence or foresight. Though there is a moral element to Hamlet's aversion to carry out revenge, that he ultimately capitulates and does the deed is not read by Girard as an ending "proper" to the play, but one which Shakespeare was forced to write as a means of appeasing the bloodlust of Elizabethan spectators. A "proper" ending, for Girard, would have been for Hamlet *to keep on vacillating*. The question of justice, of Claudius's ostensible guilt, is not discussed. No reprisal of any kind could be the right kind for Girard. Hamlet should have turned the other cheek. It is difficult to know if the

ending of *Hamlet* makes it failed tragedy for Girard (something more akin to spectacle), or if the tragedy is that Hamlet forgoes his hesitation, committing the deed Girard would have him relinquish. But what we are saying is that it is not the bloodbath of the final act that satisfies the bloodlusts of the audience; *it is Claudius's confession*. What kind of play, that is, would *we* have without the confession? If you say at such a point that the play would immediately become unintelligible, would run its course, in such a case, unsatisfactorily, you are saying that something we demand has not been adequately fulfilled. What we demand is not the final bloodbath we get, *but the reason or rationale attesting to the justness of that bloodbath*.

Claudius's confession allows us to take a position of strength against Hamlet, to validate our distance from him, hence to enact a type of revenge on him for not knowing what we have the pleasure of knowing. Making the delay a problem, even implicitly as Girard does (Girard discusses the delay as an objective correlative attesting to the fact that Hamlet is indeed sick), is to validate the cycle of revenge. *We* are happy, satisfied, appeased, *knowing* Claudius is guilty. But no one else does, no one at court, and not even, arguably, Hamlet.

Hamlet is tragic because it charts out the terror of a world of contingency, of half-knowledge, and of how to justify oneself lacking knowledge armed only with a hunch. The idea that sometimes, one can know something, but not (ever) have it verified invites philosophical speculation as to what constitutes knowing. That there are limits to what we can know, even empirically, is the sort of uncomfortable truism, even taboo, *Hamlet* highlights. By taboo we mean that which cannot be expressed in either thought or language because certain a priori information blocks our ability to

conceptualize it fully. The a priori knowledge we have once the play has ended is of Claudius's ostensible guilt. Our knowledge of his guilt blinds us to the likelihood that without it, we would have no way of making the play intelligible *to us*. The play would remain unresolved. Indeed, the ending we get puts Claudius's crimes beyond redress *absolutely*. If we were not privy to Claudius's confession, we would be left to fend for ourselves in a world of contingency unable to hide from the fact that a perfect knowledge is beyond our grasp.

So what has any of this to do with the delay in particular? Are we not more concerned here with Claudius's confession than with Hamlet's delay? But the two are intimately linked. Our perception of the latter only becomes problematic *after* we hear the former. Hence in order to speculate on how we might receive the play anterior to the knowledge that Hamlet's delay is indeed an enigma or riddle to be solved, we must ask ourselves how we would read the delay without the preceding confession. And why should such an exercise be useful at all? Any number of events could be negated, and in each of these instances we would have a different play with different ramifications. The work of criticism is to talk about the play we *do* have; engaging in these sorts of hypothetical narratives betrays or denies the possibility of explaining what is ostensibly before us.

But we are not advocating abandoning the text. Rather, we are advocating a strategy that would allow us to see it better. For instance, Claudius's confession is spoken to *no one*. Nothing he says elsewhere is negated or contradicted to the point where the play's coherence is compromised; removing the confession *does not* cause the play to unravel. The confession, moreover, as an event in the play, does not simply

acquaint us with Claudius's subjectivity in the manner of a soliloquy or an aside. Claudius's confession serves a function that allows the narrative to progress. To imagine what sort of play we would have without it does not take us into some esoteric realm of counterfactual speculation which *no one* inhabits. Rather, it gives us access to the world of contingency that *all of the characters within the play are situated in immediately*. We are not more present to some "other" play and less present to this one. We are, in fact, *more* present to a world just adjacent to us and lived out by the players before us on stage; so in removing the confession, we are fleshing out not alternate events per se, but an alternate perception of the same events. By attending to our perceptions, rather than focussing solely on Hamlet's character, we are shifting the locale in which tragedy functions from something inner (which can be explained via manner of "necessity" or "flaw") to something outer. And if the occurrence of outer events, including our perception of them, has more to do with contingency (i.e. something as contingent as the *order* in which events take place, or happen to be perceived), then to emphasize the play of the contingent in the occurrence and reception of tragedy, one must consider not the necessity of outer events which do occur, but the contingency of their occurrence. The only way to do this is not to assume that what happened *had* to happen the way it does, but, at least, to entertain other possibilities not only in terms of what happens to the characters in the story, but also in terms of our perception of those characters.

What such knowledge of contingency brings to bear is the terrifying possibility that we live in a world where perfect knowledge is not forthcoming and that conditions can exist in our finite perception of the world that puts perfect knowledge beyond our

grasp. And we are not talking about some sort of otherworldly, or “infinite,” knowledge, but about an absolute inability to access the sort of knowledge we require to construct, in the case of *Hamlet*, a meaningful notion of justice. This is the taboo *Hamlet* thematizes—not of how to move forward in a world lacking perfect knowledge, but how to exist in a world in which such knowledge is beyond reach, until death. That flagrant crimes can indeed go unpunished, nay, can go *unknown*, is almost too frightening a possibility to bear. Does it matter that Claudius killed the King if the State thrives afterward?

What is at stake is a certain type of knowledge, call it intuition, the sort which exists anterior to verification. The question then is, how can we *know* something if it has yet to be verified? In the case of Hamlet, is it a matter of honour that he be guided by his intuition, or a matter of responsibility that he put such unverifiable longings to rest? This is arguably what Hamlet tries to do. At the very least, he tests his intuition (against the dumb-show and player-scene) and is, in many ways, excoriated for it—but this because his intuition is no longer an intuition for us. His intuition is our truth. But Hamlet can never, at least not in the time that we perceive him, *know* this, i.e. have it verified. So how indeed is it that Hamlet, as Dover Wilson so boldly puts it, “knows” (100). He is not privy to any more empirical data than we are.

How to move forward armed only with intuition is a point taken up, albeit in historicist register, by Carl Schmitt in his reading of *Hamlet*. According to Schmitt, Shakespeare achieves the stuff of high tragedy (as opposed to mere *Trauerspiel*) by allowing time – taken to mean real, historical time – to intrude on the play. By allying itself within and addressing, as carefully as it does, a prevailing social taboo of

Elizabethan and Jacobean England, *Hamlet* manages to elicit awe and wonder not because it gives vent to something its audience knows to be true, but because it displays and thematizes, while simultaneously protecting, something virtually “un-ventable,” hence reaffirming the existence, however implicitly, of a taboo. The societal taboo Schmitt refers to is the one surrounding the dubious history of Mary Queen of Scots, mother of then reigning King James I.

I can mention by name this wholly real taboo. It regards Queen Mary Stuart of Scotland. Her husband Henry Lord Darnley, James’ father, was assassinated in a horrible way by the Earl of Bothwell in February 1566. In May, the same year, Mary Stuart married that very Earl of Bothwell, the murderer of her husband. Hardly three months after the assassination. Thus one may rightly talk of an unseemly and suspicious haste. To what extent had Mary Stuart taken part in the murder of her husband, or perhaps had been its instigator, that question has not been clearly answered to this day, and still remains controversial. (16)

James I inaugurated the reign of the house of Stuart, which only ended decisively after the overthrow of James II in 1688. According to Schmitt, then, the tragedy of *Hamlet* is lost once the taboo against the sovereign no longer commands power in the social imagination and not because some new knowledge is unearthed thus removing said taboo once and for all. Indeed, Schmitt reminds us that a certain controversy surrounds the subject even to this day. What Schmitt highlights is that in order to appreciate the high tragedy of *Hamlet*, the student of literature must immerse him or herself in the historical taboos surrounding the reception of the play in Elizabethan

England. This is not to prescribe, say in traditional historicist register, the immersion of oneself in what the elites of the time were perhaps discussing freely, but rather, in those types of discussion less blatantly in circulation in the public discourse. But if historians today contend that Mary Queen of Scots was, in fact, guilty of murdering her husband, on what evidence can they stake their claim *definitively*?—the sort that exists in absentia, i.e. by virtue of its *non-appearance* in public discourse? In hindsight, the nature of this taboo is transformed. Where once it was taboo to discuss the possibility that the mother of the reigning King could murder her husband, what is difficult to face now is that we have not the means, may never be able to obtain the means, to *know* definitively one way or the other. One reason the topic remains controversial is because it cannot be put to rest definitively, hence risks exposing limits to our knowledge not of the present, which is contingent, but the past, which (supposedly) is not. So if this sort of taboo can never be resolved, what does that entail? That we put our hunches, or intuition about Mary's guilt, away?

The taboo is perfectly explained by the time and the location of the composition of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and of its first performance between 1600 and 1603 in London. It was the time when everybody was awaiting the death of the old Queen Elizabeth of England, while her successor was still undecided. They were years of extreme tension and incertitude for the whole of England. ... Nobody dared to talk about that delicate situation openly. An Englishman who did talk had his hand cut off in punishment. The queen did not want to hear 'funeral tolls'. But

under cover, everybody was talking and the various groups and parties were betting on different candidates. (17)

What Schmitt is telling us is that no one dared, openly, to discuss who should succeed Queen Elizabeth; but in making one's case for or against the ascension of James VI of Scotland, one invariably touched upon and discussed, however covertly, the possible murder of James's father by his mother. Only when James finally ascended to the throne was not such a taboo removed, but the possibility of openly discussing his legitimacy put beyond reach; verifying something many knew (i.e. "suspected") to be true was no longer *possible*. Whatever one thought of Mary, one was not likely to gain traction moving forward on any sort of indictment of the King's mother, especially when her son had come to terms with it. James I's ascension, in a sense, erased or denied a certain possibility of thought or thinking at the time. Even if Mary's treachery were true, even if she somehow could have *confessed*, her confession would be marred by "those effects for which [she] did the murder" (3.3.54).

We need not historicize *Hamlet* to attune ourselves to Schmitt's reading, however. We can simply engage in counterfactual speculation. That is, without the confession, in regards to *Hamlet*, we too are in the same position as James's subjects, unable to voice something we *know* to be true, that something is rotten in the state of Denmark. But *how* do we know, particularly if we are reading the play without the confession? If such is the case, then indeed, we do not *know*. This touches on the particular relationship to knowledge that *Hamlet* thematizes, so succinctly described by Eric Levy in his sympathetic reading of Hamlet's quest for a certain type of knowing:

[T]he problem of knowledge in *Hamlet* – the problem of ‘things standing thus unknown’ (5.2.350) – entails more than the intrinsic or constitutional inability of “flesh and blood” (1.5.22) cognition to understand objects that by their very nature exceed its comprehension. ... [T]he fundamental epistemological problem in the play concerns, not the inherent deficiency of reason, but the disruptive effect of acquiring knowledge. ... [I]n *Hamlet*, the knowledge most urgently needed but most reluctantly acquired is *self-knowledge*. Ironically, Hamlet – the character whose motives remain obscure to others and who himself remains uncertain ... – becomes the agent provoking painful self-knowledge in others. (His emphasis, 126)

It is true that Hamlet seeks to account for his own suspicions in a rather dialectical fashion—i.e. he seeks to “uncover” truth in time, to verify his intuition. But the fundamental problem, as Levy points out, is much deeper, for it is the nature of how one relates to a type of inner knowledge lacking outer verification (particularly when the inner knowledge in question has profound ramifications on the outer life of the state). Hamlet harbours a supposition about the world, yet the nature of his suspicions is an inner affair which requires inner verification. The painful self-knowledge that Hamlet, the others in the play, Elizabethans, and even readers today, are reluctant to face is not the possibility that power is capable of committing crimes beyond redress per se, but that conditions *can* exist that put a type of knowledge beyond reach eternally. So how indeed to move forward when something inner begs to become outer but, for whatever reason, cannot, ever, definitively?

The bearing such inquiry has on us as readers concerns how we read Hamlet's delay—how, or if we can, once and for all, *resolve* it. If we cannot today, do we simply wait for some definitive reading to come to our aid at some point in the future? But what if we commit to competing interpretations now? Just as no amount of historical truth can unearth whether Mary did or did not kill her husband, no amount of literary scholarship can ever hope to unearth whether Hamlet did or did not know – definitively, correctly, verifiably – that Claudius was guilty. No amount of research or thinking, that is, can ultimately unearth *the truth*. So what are we left with? An intuition and nothing more, with little definitive indication of whether Hamlet *should* act. We cannot say in hindsight that he *should* have—or, if we do, we must do so without benefit of the confession. But then, how tenuous would our normative demand on Hamlet be? But can we say, conversely, that he *shouldn't* have, that he was right to delay? Both options remain open.

At the beginning of the play, Hamlet intuits that something is rotten, if not in Denmark at large, then certainly at court. With no real reason to doubt Hamlet's authority, we accept it; hence we have an intuition too. But who else? Let us not forget the voices of those on the watch:

MARCELLUS. Good now, sit down, and tell me, he that knows,

Why this same strict and most observant watch

So nightly toils the subject of the land,

And why such daily cast of brazen cannon,

And foreign mart for implements of war,

Why such impress of shipwrights, whose sore task

Does not divide the Sunday from the week:
 What might be toward that this sweaty haste
 Doth make the night joint-labourer with the day,
 Who is't that can inform me? (1.1.69-78)

Those on the watch are witness to the militarization of the state. But Marcellus here expresses, however timidly, if not outright opposition to such militarization, then at least, anxieties about it. What does the Ghost signify, if anything, to him? For an answer, we can turn to Cavell and his reading of *Hamlet*, and another piece in which he discusses the ramifications of political consent. The first piece, on *Hamlet*, focuses on Hamlet's plea that he "lack[s] advancement" (*DK* 14), taken by Cavell to mean not that he desires the throne, but that he lacks a type of advancement through the womb—an opportunity, which he craves, to be reborn. Cavell writes: "That human existence has two stages – call these birth and the acceptance of birth – is expressed in religion as baptism, in politics as consent" (187). The first stage of birth occurs passively, in passing, or in silence. The baby, that is, has no say in its unfolding; the subsequent marking of a birth through baptism is meant to signify not the passive existence of a human through the womb and into the world, but the active recognition of a member of a community. A baby, initially silent, is acknowledged through baptism, not born exactly, but born again. Analogously, political consent marks the entry of a fuller human being into the world. That is, once a human being has achieved insight and temerity enough to recognize that political consent is something that he or she can (or ought to) *give*, rather than merely take for granted, such a human being is, in a way, reborn. Nothing may change ostensibly after the act of giving such consent; but, like

baptism, the act attests to, or seeks to initiate or mark, some form of inner transformation made outer. Cavell goes on to present a reading of Hamlet that deals with a psychological desire to be reborn into a “primal scene” (180) of kinship now made more controversial by his father’s death and his mother’s remarriage. But his discussion of political consent, taken up more explicitly elsewhere, has bearing in how we are to read the Ghost. What the Ghost emblemizes is Hamlet’s longing for a type of political consent that is, for whatever reason at the outset of the play, lacking.

In his *Cities of Words*, in particular his third chapter on John Locke, Cavell highlights Locke’s curious discussion of “tacit” and “express” consent, noting that while Locke defines tacit consent, what might constitute *express* consent remains to be seen. Moreover, Cavell notes that when Locke defines tacit consent, he does so not in relation to a member of the Commonwealth, but in relation to a foreign traveller passing through the Commonwealth (who would thus seem exempt from expressing any sort of consent to a political entity of which he is not formally a member). In Locke’s example, it is the traveller who gives his tacit consent simply in abiding by the state’s laws (“obedience to the laws of that government” (Locke 153)). So simply “being” in a country, say happily, enjoying its appurtenances, implies one’s tacit consent; nor is such consent “non vocal, or un-express” (*CW* 64). Rather, the ability and desire to speak at all marks one’s tacit consent.

An accurate interpretation of Locke is not the issue here. Rather, Cavell’s reading of Locke, and subsequently his thoughts on what (express) consent is, says something useful about the Ghost in *Hamlet*, particularly in light of Cavell’s comment that to be reborn is to be able to make oneself heard, to achieve a type of outer

expression that Hamlet, and perhaps others (in a more political register), are searching for. How can we know, for example, if Hamlet's railings are *justified*, if something *is* indeed rotten in the state of Denmark at all?—which is to ask not if the Ghost is a hallucination, but if it is a *useful* hallucination—say, a useful intuition. How do the central courtly goings on affect, or interact, with the periphery? If the periphery is aware, or feels, or even knows (in a way), that something is rotten, how should (or could?) the centre react? Can the centre possibly know what those on the periphery are railing about if even they cannot voice their concerns?—and not because the political mechanisms allowing them to do so are lacking, but because they themselves have not the will or energy or desire to voice their discontent in the first place. Cavell, quoting Locke, highlights some of the problematics of any centre/periphery social configuration:

But my question persists: How is it known that the “ill designs ... of the Rulers” have become “visible” or “sensible” to “the greater part [of the Commonwealth]?” What has become visible—the rulers’ designs and attempts, or the greater part of the people’s becoming sensible of their lives’ destruction? It is only the people’s sense that causes resistance and the desire for change. But this requires a reciprocal perception by the people of themselves. Something in their lives shows a change in the status of their consent. You might say something shows a change of status in their silence, their not making a “stir.” Since being tacit, saying nothing, never expressed their consent to establish and maintain society, there must be a change in their expression that shows their sense of

consent to be withdrawing. This may take the form of public demonstrations, or private meetings, but may it also take the form of what Emerson calls “silent melancholy” and what Thoreau more famously called “quiet desperation,” which he claims characterizes the mass of men? (66)

Cavell’s idea is that express consent is something only known in absence – the lack of it suffered, *not* voiced.⁵ It is not that the words do not exist that would allow the dispossessed to speak; rather, no amount of willingness exists on their part to take them up, which means that the state as it exists does not speak for them simply because they, for whatever reason, remain silent. The state cannot speak for the dispossessed by virtue of speaking *to* them, but by virtue of its citizens’ willingness to speak at all—about their lives, their conditions, their happiness, or lack thereof. In such a case, by the time they (i.e. the mass of men) *do* speak up, dissolution is already well underway, something Cavell underscores in his reading of *Hamlet* when he says that Hamlet can only murder Claudius *after* announcing his own death, thereby “demonstrating that to take the Ghost’s revenge is to become the Ghost” (*DK* 190)—to become his own intuition realized. Hamlet cannot prevent the dissolution of state; he can merely bear witness to its dissolution, which may be to suggest that a state which has the express consent of its citizens would not be haunted by Ghosts in the first place. Hamlet realizes that an express consent, including his own, is no longer forthcoming, can no longer be given. He finally reneges on doing so not because he knows definitively that Claudius killed his father, but because Claudius has killed him and his mother. Dissolution is indeed well underway. The absence of the true cause of his original

discontent at court (when all is said and done), a discontent mirrored by those on the watch, means that for those on the periphery (who may, at play's opening, be voicing their "quiet desperation," if only to themselves), Hamlet is their only channel or repository for political protest. Hamlet is hardly aware that he is or could be such a repository—nor does it matter all that much whether he does or doesn't take up their cause. What the Ghost "incarnates" is precisely this silence, this lack of express consent, both real and unreal, and the inability of the rulers to speak for, or to, its citizens. The problem of the delay is only a problem at the centre. For those on the periphery, like Hamlet and like us without Claudius's confession, other things more pertinent are truly rotten in the state of Denmark, rough-hew them how we will. Sometimes, in the fight against injustice, a Ghost may be all we have.

How has counterfactual speculation helped us to "read in the present" and how has this, subsequently, raised our understanding or perception of the tragic effect in *Hamlet*? We maintain that to engage in counterfactual speculation is to do so as a means not of helping us see the truth of some other world or play, but to aid us in seeing something true about this play. Moreover, where the subjunctive mood registered in the tragic effect entails a desire to imagine a different outcome, what we propose here is instead imagining a different perception of events as they unfold lacking a certain piece of knowledge to which we have grown accustomed. The counterfactual pursued here is an imagining of alternate perception of the same events in the hypothetical case that Shakespeare had left out Claudius's confession.

Such an exercise enables us to see how we abstract and intellectualize a narrative anomaly which, in the present, goes by largely unnoticed. In order to see how skewed our post-facto obsession with the “delay-as-problem” is, we must divorce it from its immediate occurrence after Claudius’s confession, which is to pretend we do not hear Claudius’s confession at all. Now we are subject to the rush of the present, as Hamlet is, where *either* to delay or act is perfectly reasonable and whichever choice is made (Hamlet, in a way, chooses both) cannot be construed as a matter of necessity, but of contingency. In a world of contingency, that is, there is no *reason* for Hamlet to do either, no reason that can be verified through acts of criticism.

Moreover, we also realize that ignoring the confession *does not* compromise the play’s intelligibility; or, if it does, what we are left with is the incomprehensibility of a world that every player in the play finds him or herself in anyhow. What this insight reveals is the tragedy not of a world where Hamlet is doomed to play out the tragic inner necessity of his own flaw, but rather, one which operates under the auspices of radical outer contingencies. Our inability to track *these* down definitively, hence to make these contingencies necessities, even in, or after, death, speaks to our own limitations of knowledge. The compromise here in not knowing, or un-achieving, the knowledge of ourselves which we somehow *know* to be true is tragic. The tragedy is that a certain type of knowledge can remain both A and not A simultaneously, both chimerical and ostensible simultaneously.

3. Reversing Good and Evil: Counterfactual Thinking and *King Lear*

From a position of post-facto hindsight, Cordelia has to die in order for the tragic effect to take hold. To ask “what if Cordelia had lived?” would be to erase *King Lear*’s tragedy. Yet we must emphasize that Cordelia’s death is not necessary *within* the world of the play. Indeed, Edmund’s conversion in Act 5, his desire to take back the writ on her life, exposes the possibility of her living. So the question of Cordelia’s death, the possibility of her living, is explicitly called to attention by Shakespeare: *she could have lived*. The question which follows is not necessarily why does she then die, or what sort of play would we have had Cordelia lived, but why would Shakespeare tempt us with the possibility of her living in the first place?—to heighten the sense of devastation at the end? How are we to read not only Cordelia’s death, but also, Edmund’s conversion?

As acts of radical contingency, seemingly arbitrary, they seem to be placed in the play as functional placeholders designed to elicit hope only to then stifle it for the sake of greater tragic effect. These acts are “explained” by appealing to something outside of the play itself—once again, to convention, or the conventions of tragedy. But such appeals counteract the power of these acts as contingent by anchoring them to something we can (only later) interpret as necessary. By appealing to convention, we deny these acts the power of possible intelligibility within the world of the play; Edmund’s conversion becomes implausible at the very least, impossible at most. But Lear, having no access or appeal to convention, does not mourn the loss of his daughter any less. He must face the possible unintelligibility of her death, the gratuitous randomness of it.

To say Cordelia’s death is necessary is to say it is necessary only in hindsight.

Moreover, we don't know, or cannot entirely conceive of, Cordelia's goodness until the play is over. Hence this play is not like *Hamlet*, where we can intuit some semblance of good and evil from the start and merely await verification. Just as quickly as we come to understand *what* we want verified by the narrative – i.e. Lear and Cordelia's standing redeemed, or verified as morally correct, at court, in some way – the possibility for this type of redress is just as quickly lost. If we want to say that Cordelia's goodness and her sisters' wickedness are evident after the love test alone, we must remember that the initial antagonism Shakespeare sets up in the play is not between Cordelia and her sisters, but between Cordelia and her father. Who, at this point indeed, are we to side with? At the level of subplot, we are given more adequate bearings. Shakespeare gives us plenty of motive for Edmund's treachery: his humiliation by his father for being a bastard is the play's opening scene. Initially, Edmund has no designs on the throne; he merely wants to disinherit Edgar of his lands.

None of the preceding statements are particularly insightful. But by zeroing in our discussion of *Lear* around the contingency, rather than the necessity, of Edmund's conversion, we are seeking to read Edmund as the preeminent moral agent in the play not because he, like Cordelia, is eminently "good," but because he is the only character in the play who acknowledges the universe as contingent, a powerful metaphysical insight which only he achieves. This inner transformation is made outer in his attempt to save Cordelia's life. Whatever one thinks of Cordelia, it remains ambiguous by play's end whether she, through her initial transgression, manages to uphold the good or initiate the unfolding of evil. If the latter, it would hardly be fair to hold Cordelia *responsible* for the play's tragedy. But in order for the tragedy of *King Lear* to register,

we must, at the very least, consider *the possibility of her evil*—the sort of possibility we become deaf to once we know how the play turns out.

First, we must deal more carefully with these terms “necessity” and “contingency.” The distinction between “radical necessity” and “radical contingency” is raised by Cavell. We have highlighted earlier his emphasis on “continuous presentness.” Yet a consideration of these terms is more prominent in Kent Cartwright’s use of Cavell. In particular, Cartwright appropriates and transfigures these terms to suit his discussion of tragedy:

Stanley Cavell’s essay “The Avoidance of Love” explores the countervailing pulls of “radical contingency,” and “radical necessity,” qualities fundamental to Shakespearean tragedy. The “radical contingency” of tragedy is its sense that each death is “inflicted” and therefore need not have happened. Yet no one knows how to have prevented it; so a “radical necessity” haunts tragedy, as well. That “enveloping of contingency and necessity by one another ... is why the death that ends a tragedy strikes one as *inexplicable*, necessary, but we do not know why; avoidable, but we do not know how; wrapped in meaning, but the meaning has come out, and so wrapped in mystery.” For Shakespearean tragedy, I associate “engagement” with the audience’s experience of “radical necessity” and “detachment” with its experience of “radical contingency.” (9)

Cartwright’s definition of “engagement” is “the spectator’s surrender of self-awareness” (11), as though to be “engaged” with a play, i.e. when watching a play *in the*

present, is to forgo such awareness. “Detachment,” on the other hand, “involves ‘conception’: insights and ideas” (15), and occurs, for the most part, post-performance. Though Cartwright notes that “[e]ngagement and detachment dance together” (16) thus “stimulat[ing] an expansive sense of choice” (17), he firmly has engagement validated by “distance [i.e. detachment], the very ground of truth” (42). Yet this refiguration and appropriation of Cavell’s terms does disservice to Cavell’s reading of the play. Because Cartwright defines “engagement” as an audience’s “surrender of self-awareness,” what he is taking “engagement” to mean is what Cavell means when he says “presentness.” And if tragedy, for Cavell, is rooted in a “continuous presentness,” then what Cavell means is that we are aware of necessity in the moment, as Cartwright alludes to; but we are also, simultaneously, coevally, aware of contingency. To say that Cavell’s idea of “radical contingency” is only pertinent when considering a play after the fact is to say that in watching a play, we are (simply) waiting for necessity to play out. But what constitutes the necessary can only be known or reflected upon after the fact. It would be far more profitable to reverse this distinction, to say that “engagement” is associated with a “radical contingency” and that post-facto “distance,” or “spectatorial criticism” (41), is rooted in a push to establish necessity. Cartwright touches on this when he says that “particularly for the modern spectator, necessity may only emerge as necessity after the fact” (31). Here, Cartwright *is* equating necessity with detachment—though earlier, he has equated the perception of necessity via audience response as something closer to engagement. This inconsistency is not a mere trifle; the ramifications of where and when and how an understanding of contingency happens are far reaching. Cartwright, for example, never offers a well wrought opinion on

whether or not tragedy can exist on the page. In seeking to establish the primacy of his “spectatorial” criticism, he takes for granted that the tragic effect is wholly, or perhaps fully, felt in performance; its articulation, however, comes only in hindsight via criticism, with the aid, no doubt, of the written text. Cartwright’s “dance” between performance and criticism is indeed a form of oscillation, but one occurring between past performance and present reading of the text. The sort of oscillation we are championing is between competing versions of the present, the actual and the possible, accessible not to reading per se, but to what we have been calling reading for the first time.

We noted in the previous chapter how Bradley manages to achieve something like this in his discussion of *Hamlet*. In terms of charting out responses, he notes that in performance, we judge a play’s “intelligibility” in a different way. Arguably, Bradley – in reminding us that in performance, Hamlet’s delay may be the only action warranted at the time – means that what we are tuned in to when we see him delay is the necessity of the delay. In such a case, the “radical contingency” of the act is only perceived after the play is over. So perhaps Cartwright is correct after all. In the present moment, are we more in tune with necessity or contingency? Cavell shows how in the moment we are aware of both. What we tried to highlight in our reading of *Hamlet* was that both necessity and contingency, say, competing interpretations (Hamlet’s delay as necessary, as contingent) are open. Post-facto criticism, however, attempts to tip the scales of interpretation definitively in favour of necessity. But if a character’s intelligibility is not necessarily compromised by the seemingly contingent, what good is it to make it,

somehow, necessary? Do we need a *cause* for the contingent? But if we get that, then we are removed from the realm of contingency, and the mystery of tragedy is lost.

In articulating the differences between “contingency” and “necessity” on the one hand, and “performance” versus “criticism” on the other, we seem to be marrying an appreciation of the contingent to performance, and that of necessity to criticism. But in order to make the case, then, that an appreciation of the contingent is perfectly accessible to criticism (and not just performance in the present), we must now consider the ontological properties of the word, both on the page and on the stage. In order to do that, we must first consider some of the ontological properties of theatre as opposed to life. Cavell provides some early guidance:

[W]hat is the difference between tragedy in a theater and tragedy in actuality? In both, people in pain are in our presence. But in actuality acknowledgement *is* incomplete; in actuality there is no acknowledgment, unless we put ourselves in their presence, reveal ourselves to them. We may find that the point of tragedy in a theater is exactly relief from this necessity, a respite within which to prepare for this necessity, to clean out the pity and terror which stand in the way of acknowledgment outside. (DK 103-4)

The very conventions of theatre allow us to do nothing when we see Othello strangling Desdemona. We may say something like, “we know he (the actor playing Othello) is not *really* strangling (the actress playing) Desdemona”; but the ethical imperative to do something as some horror is being played out before us is what the particular conventions of theatre take away. Because such an act is occurring immediately in our

presence, it *makes sense* to imagine someone screaming out for Othello not to do the deed. But the aesthetic value of watching some horror happen right before our eyes and *not* being called upon to act, indeed being denied the opportunity to act, is part of both tragedy's horror and pleasure.

Elsewhere, commenting on the conventional properties of cinema, Cavell notes that the screen allows us to be "mechanically absent" (WV 26) to proceedings. A world on film is a world in the past, a world dead to us, already in the can. It makes *no sense*, that is, for someone viewing a screen adaptation of *Othello* to shout out in a movie theatre. Even if such a thing has occurred (doubtless it has), what has happened is that a particular individual has managed to watch cinema *like* theatre. But this is not a mass, collective, phenomenon, whereas the lone spectator shouting out at the playhouse is committing a transgression everyone in the theatre can sympathize with. In a theatre, we are not voyeurs; though we do not participate in the events happening on stage, we allow the events on stage to participate in our presence. When watching a screen actor, on the other hand, we know that we are not in his or her presence, but neither is he or she in ours. We watch a world dead to us and lacking this key participatory element, we have reason to believe that cinema, indeed, cannot elicit or draw out the tragic effect. But what about the page? Does it make sense to cry out, in the privacy of a reading room, for Othello not to do the deed?

Cartwright's title, *Shakespearean Tragedy and Its Double*, is a call out to Antonin Artaud and his key text on the ontology of theatre, *The Theatre and its Double* (1938). In his preface, Cartwright says he hopes his title "might suggest both a Bradleyan attention to the details of the tragic world and an Artaudian concern for the effect of

performance upon an audience" (ix). From this Cartwright establishes his peculiar "double," that is, a "double" viewing of the plays, at once "engaged" and also "detached" from which we are to gauge "the rhythms of audience response," hence charting out as accurately as we can the tragic effect a "spectatorial criticism" will allow. In short, Bradley offers engagement, attention to detail, while Artaud offers a concept of distance. But this is a strange refiguration of Artaud as well, particularly when Cartwright says that Artaud "wished to use the theater's resources to obliterate the distinction between life and drama" (11). Yet, immediately following this sentence, Cartwright entrenches his claim that "[d]istance determines spectatorial experience—and ultimately tragic meaning" (11). Artaud, who does not comment specifically on the functioning of tragedy in his book, never promotes distance as any sort of ideal to be achieved in the theatre. In wanting to obliterate the distinction between life and drama, he seeks greater intimacy and incorporation of theatre into our daily lives. Moreover, he goes so far as to equate theatre with "contagious delirium" (26) and "alchemy" (48), stressing not the importance of speech, but the importance of those gestures and objects which come before speech as a means to exploit theatre's true ontic potential. On the strengths of the Balinese (Oriental) theatre as opposed to our Western (Occidental) theatre, Artaud says

[t]he Balinese theater has revealed to us a physical and non-verbal idea of the theater, in which the theater is contained within the limits of everything that can happen on a stage, independently of the written text, whereas the theater as we conceive it in the Occident has declared its alliance with the text and finds itself limited by it. For the Occidental

theater the Word is everything, and there is no possibility of expression without it; the theater is a branch of literature, a kind of sonorous species of language, and even if we admit a difference between the text spoken on the stage and the text read by the eyes, if we restrict theater to what happens between cues, we have still not managed to separate it from the idea of a *performed text*. (His emphasis, 68)

The likening of theatre to “contagion” is a metaphoric ploy by Artaud to describe the coming into being on stage of something we might otherwise take to be magical: the daemonic quest to bring forth possibilities through the stage, not a re-presentation of something that already exists, but the presentation (on stage) of that which has yet to come into being. Accessing this realm of “shadows,” theatre’s ostensible double, can only occur where language breaks off, so that the theatre, in order to inflict its brand of contagion upon its spectators, must unlock, unearth, and present to the senses the sum total of energies lying latent behind our normal, day to day conception of the world. The “double” is not the “real” any more than theatre is fake; the theatre, like the plague, “releases conflicts, disengages powers, liberates possibilities, and if these possibilities and these powers are dark, it is the fault not of the plague nor of the theater, but of life” (31).

Hence Artaud’s insistence on the veritable danger and cruelty of the theatre. In likening theatre to alchemy, Artaud further notes the ferocity which accompanies alchemy, the examination of everyday objects to the point where the meaning ascribed to them – whether spiritual, moral, practical – leaves us, ultimately, not with gold, but a type of “spiritualized gold” (52) through which darker forces are made manifest.

Theatre, like poetry, is anarchical “to the degree that it brings into play all the relationships of object to object and form to signification ... [and] to the degree that its occurrence is the consequence of a disorder that draws us closer to chaos” (43). Clearly Artaud is taking us to the realm of Dionysus, and, furthermore, he says that our ability to inhabit such a realm could only be *curtailed* by language.

All true feeling is in reality untranslatable. To express it is to betray it. But to translate it is to *dissimulate it*. True expression hides what it makes manifest. It sets the mind in opposition to the real void of nature by creating in reaction a kind of fullness in thought. Or, in other terms, in reaction to the manifestation-illusion of nature it creates a void in thought. All powerful feeling produces in us the idea of the void. And the lucid language which obstructs the appearance of this void also obstructs the appearance of poetry in thought. That is why an image, an allegory, a figure that masks what it would reveal have more significance for the spirit than the lucidities of speech and its analytics. (His emphasis, 71)

Language lulls us into the belief that once something is expressed lucidly, all there *is* (to be expressed) has been expressed. Whatever the void is, it is, ultimately, nothing, so how could language capture the void? It could only mask it, however lucidly spoken.

How, then, could even the lucid presentation or articulation of possibilities lost hope to do any better? Artaud, in making his case for non-verbal theatre, in calling for Occidental theatre as we know it to be “destroyed with diligence and malice on every level” (47), is not making any particular plea for tragedy. Nietzsche, moreover, who reminds us that tragedy is born once we are able to recognize and even sanctify the

destructive forces of Dionysus in our dramaturgy, does not say that tragedy lives solely in Dionysian festival, but in the oscillation between Apollo and Dionysus, in the recognition that each needs the other. He goes on to say that tragedy is born out of the spirit of music because music is nonverbal. Artaud likewise nominates the importance of music, along with “dance, plastic art, pantomime, mimicry, gesticulation, intonation, architecture, lighting, and scenery” (39). So if the form and harmony of music is Apollonian *enough*, where does this leave us with regards to Shakespeare?— particularly because we know that however it is that he manages to elicit the tragic, the “shadows,” it is *because* of his words. Do his words supplement the pantomime, mimicry and gesticulation of Elizabethan theatre or do these things supplement Shakespeare? Should we be singing Shakespearean verse?

First we must note that Shakespearean verse carries musical properties and the musical property of verse draws us in, increases intimacy with the particular narrative unfolding. But if intimacy has something to do with absence, how does the *presence* of Shakespeare’s words increase affective intimacy? To return to the question of whether or not when reading Shakespeare in private we feel compelled to shout out at Othello doing the deed, what we will suggest here is that the imagining of counterfactual alternatives as we read is the way *we do* shout out in private. Other counterfactual possibilities are largely silenced not by the Shakespeare’s words per se, but first, by the narrative as it unfolds, and second, by the words or acts of criticism that, in their very zeal to explain the void or sense of reader helplessness, do more to mask the void in unprofitable ways. Fleshing out counterfactual alternatives, then, is to bypass critical analysis and attach the spirit of music to Shakespearean verse. For Artaud, who

maintains that the true ontic potential of theatre is to be found in its non-verbal properties, what we are saying is that attending to possibilities lost goes some way in addressing or acknowledging what is rendered non-verbal on stage. Counterfactual criticism is sympathetic to what Artaud believes theatre ought to be in the business of promoting—i.e. a non-verbal manifestation of feeling.

If posing counterfactual alternatives places us on the edge of discovery, what we want to do is to maintain our position there for as long as possible. Jeffrey Kahan, for example, engages in this bit of counterfactual speculation over Cordelia's death:

Yes, Cordelia has to die, but, even within the bounds of his other tragedies, Shakespeare had a variety of more palatable options. Shakespeare might have staged it akin to Romeo and Juliet's demise. Lear comes on carrying his daughter, dies of a broken heart, Cordelia then revives, sees her father and dies. Or, he might have done it along the lines of *Othello*: Lear carries her in, she revives, forgives her father for starting all this mess, then dies, prompting the king to kill himself. The difference between these plays and *Lear* is one of expectation. Since in *Romeo and Juliet* the plot-turn depends upon playing dead *and* we know it's a tragedy *and* we're in the fifth act *and* she's lying there *and* Romeo has poison, we expect it to all go wrong. Having plotted Desdemona's death, Othello's and our own surprise is merely that she awakens long enough to forgive him. With respect to the fact of her death, it is both expected and, occurring as it does in the fifth act, necessary to a neat close. But the death of Cordelia is not the sacrifice of an innocent victim, nor is it

presented with poetic justification. Indeed, given that in Act 4, scene 6 Lear awoke thinking he was dead, might we not here also expect in Act 5, scene 3 for Cordelia to do the same? (356)

Kahan is asking not so much if Cordelia's death is necessary, but whether the manner of her death is necessary. Yet in each case, the critical imperative is to establish necessity, i.e. the necessary conditions around which we can judge a play, or an ending, to be adequate or palatable. The curious reach for criteria to account for necessity beyond the play itself (to *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Othello*) mirrors the sorts of New Historical reaches for evidence, of some sort, to ground our understanding. Yet in order to chart out responses, we must try to read *Lear* for the first time, as Frye manages to do here:

When you start to read or listen to *King Lear*, try to pretend that you've never heard the story before, and forget that you know how bad Goneril and Regan and Edmund are going to be. That way, you'll see more clearly how Shakespeare is building up our sympathies in the opposite direction. ("Lear"14)

We noted how Shakespeare toys with his own audiences' assumptions (of the *Leir* tale) and how, according to Greenblatt, his novel presentation of the opening scenes makes Lear's motives "more strange and arbitrary." Frye's comments here complement Greenblatt's nicely because both remind us that our present-day reception of the text is likely to be skewed by the assumptions we bring to the text. But where Greenblatt wants to establish a reason or justification for us to begin, with the benefit of historical hindsight, to question or doubt Lear's motives, Frye's reminder does more to

counteract this initial certainty. Greenblatt wants to tie our doubt to a sort of *historicist's necessity*, while Frye, in championing a type of certainty or “coolness” to the play’s first scenes, leaves open the possibility for more counterfactual discussion because he reminds us how vulnerable we are to coming contingencies.

In the first two acts, all Lear’s collisions with his daughters steadily diminish his dignity and leave them with the dramatic honours. They never lose their cool: they are certainly harsh and unattractive women, but they have a kind of brusque common sense that bears him down every time. (15)

It is difficult to tell if Frye is criticizing in hindsight when he says that Regan and Goneril are “harsh and unattractive” because there is no immediate correlation between “brusque common sense” and unattractiveness. What is entirely clear, however, is that Frye shows us how perfectly reasonable it is to ally ourselves with Regan and Goneril, that their responses to Lear’s outbursts are, in a way, the only ones warranted. We may not be ready to condemn Cordelia, but her responses leave us suspicious, more so than those of her sisters.

The banality of the coming love test (that it *could* be read as a rather banal staging of events) is registered in Kent’s opening exchange with Gloucester:

KENT. I thought the king had more affected the Duke of Albany than Cornwall.

GLOUCESTER. It did always seem so to us; but now, in the division of the kingdom, it appears not which of the dukes he values most: for equalities

are so weighted, that the curiosity in neither can make choice of either's moiety. (1.1.1-6)

The coming standoff, perhaps once thought to be a true contest, has been accepted by those at court as a playing out of mere formality. Between Albany and Cornwall is no essential difference, and so, the coming division of the kingdom should proceed rather uneventfully. Furthermore, Act 1, scene 2 of the play actually ends happily. Cordelia is taken by France, dowerless, saving us a fair amount of moral anguish. Even if we are, at this point, suspicious of either Lear or his other two daughters (or both), we also take comfort knowing that good has been banished hence and evil is left to contend with evil—a situation more comic than tragic. However dramatic we may believe the opening scenes to be, our recollection of them *as* dramatic occurs largely in hindsight. Frye even notes that a mood of semi-charged drama may very well govern the first two acts entirely.

So does Frye's reading, which downplays the opening drama, contradict Greenblatt's, which explicitly elevates it? That Greenblatt is describing a likely Elizabethan response, and Frye, perhaps, a more contemporary response, does not necessarily restrict each sort of response to a particular historical timeframe. Perhaps Elizabethan audiences were afforded as much opportunity for doubt as for calm, just as we are today. But it is easy enough to take a position of strength in regards to our knowledge of the play, once the play is over, thereby to assume we had reason all along to doubt Lear's motives. However, what counterfactual speculation forwards is not the validity of such critical postures of strength but the *possibility* of reader weakness, that is, reader unknowingness—the sort of possibility no amount of post-facto theorizing

can ever hope to abolish completely. Do we know that Cordelia is good and her sisters evil at the end of Act 1? How about at the end of Act 2? When, indeed, do we know? Even at the end, after all the waste and loss of human life, we are left feeling that were it to occur again, Cordelia should simply take her third of the kingdom. In hindsight, perhaps Hamlet ought to have done the deed. But in hindsight, perhaps Cordelia ought *not* to have done her deed. But neither one of these normative claims could be made in the present. And what we want, but what tragedy reminds us we cannot have, is the knowledge necessary to make these sorts of normative statements in the present. That we are barred from such knowledge is tragic. Is tragedy a problem of knowledge?

Criticism which touches on our ability or need to forgo knowledge comes closer to capturing the essence of tragedy, and not because such criticism reminds us that *simply* by forgoing knowledge can we avert disaster, but that if tragedy is a problem of knowledge, it is a problem of knowledge arriving too late, not to our benefit, and that there is nothing we can do in the present to summon it. To reclaim this sort of understanding, it is necessary to disinherit ourselves of the knowledge gained with the benefit of hindsight. Kahan's later embrace contingency is far more apposite to a discussion of tragedy. Commenting specifically on Edmund, he notes:

Edmund worships Nature, which changes season-by-season and day-by-day. To be at one with Nature, Edmund has to be equally polymorphic: bold, admirable and resolute as well as furtive, worthless and perfidious. Not surprisingly, Edmund's triumphs are as fleeting as his personae. Moreover, given that Edmund wins the war and loses his life, we may ponder whether his gains are any less illusory than Lear's. In this regard,

the play is neither joyous nor gloomy. One character may express encouraging thoughts at one moment, discouraging thoughts in another, one may say something that seems lucid or mad, but each statement is no more authoritative or less transient than another. In *King Lear*, people take pleasure where they can and hope that their gains are real and lasting, but hope is not the same as certainty. (355)

Is commentary like this, then, the *last word* on *King Lear*, a surrender of our critical faculties and an embrace of contingency? Is this the *lesson* of tragedy? But what would such a “lesson” entail? The idea that Edmund worships nature is taken from his injunction to nature (“Thou, nature, art my goddess. To thy law/ My services are bound” (1.2.1-2) and Kahan’s reading implies that Edmund, like nature, operates under, or embraces, a certain amount of unpredictability in the cosmos, as though set patterns of human relationships (in distinguishing between legitimate and bastard children) are themselves the sources of injustice; indeed, he invokes a certain rough justice when he asks for “gods, [to] stand up for bastards!” (1.2.22).

The unpredictability of the unfolding of seasons or days is perhaps cause for anxiety; but it is also true that the seasons and days, what Kahan here associates with nature, can be thought of as entirely *predictable*, that their periodicity mirrors (indeed, is directly tied to) that of the movement of the planets and stars in their orbits. This brings us to Gloucester’s panicked interpretation after witnessing the initial division of Lear’s household and reading of Edgar’s forged letter:

These late eclipses in the sun and moon portend no good to us. Though the wisdom of nature can reason it thus and thus, yet nature finds itself

scourged by the sequent effects. Love cools, friendship falls off, brothers divide; in cities, mutinies; in countries, discord; in palaces, treason; and the bond cracked 'twixt son and father ... We have seen the best of our time. Machinations, hollowness, treachery, and all ruinous disorders follow us disquietly to our graves. (1.2.95-105)

If there is indeed wisdom in the movement of the sun and the moon, and if this wisdom portends future strife, what Gloucester is doing here is asserting both the authority of nature (“the wisdom of nature can reason it thus and thus”) while at once denying its very wisdom (“yet nature finds itself scourged by the sequent effects”). In the end, he is saying that the coming unpredictability is entirely predictable, as a means, no doubt, of reassuring himself against the fact that he knows not *what* will come—but can only assume the worst. It is this sort of exclusive reasoning that Edmund chides his father for. Edmund himself knows not what will come; he desires a certain amount of “discord,” appeals directly to nature for it, is himself actively committing treason. But to assert that his father’s worst fears, or even his own success, are a matter of necessity is not a step he is willing to take:

This is the excellent foppery of the world: that when we are sick in fortune—often the surfeit of our own behavior—we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon, and stars, as if we were villains on necessity (1.2.108-111)

Kahan says Edmund is “bold.” Indeed, his boldness is not in his ability to overcome the contingent, but to embrace it—that is, to accept his own weakness rather than hastily asserting his strength.

CURAN. Have you heard of no likely wars toward twixt the Dukes
of Cornwall and Albany?

EDMOND. Not a word.

CURAN. You may do then in time. Fare you well, sir.

EDMOND. The Duke be here tonight! The better, best.

This weaves itself perforce into my business. (2.1.6-15)

Edmund's implausible string of luck has been brought to critical attention before. Coleridge notes that Edmund operates within a "concurrence of circumstance and accident," though he notes also that even without the benefit of accident and circumstance, "pride will necessarily be the sin that most easily besets him" (332). Yet in the final act, Edmund offers a complete reversal of his previous actions when he says "Some good I mean to do,/ Despite of my own nature" (5.3.217-18). Nothing he said previously necessitates his coming change of heart. Furthermore, at this point, he seems to be castigating everything he has done previously *as evil*. But it is also true that despite doing so, Edmund had meant to do *some* good. He appeals to nature and the gods (Iago appeals to "hell" itself (2.3.324)) to stand up for bastards; the only way his previous acts become evil in the most meaningful sense is when he *himself* condemns them as such and for no apparent or easily explicable reason. Edmund transforms in the manner of a convert. And no matter how we may try to trace the steps to conversion, the act of conversion itself is a radically contingent act—a rupture from necessity beyond the realm of explanation. There is no *reason* true conversion should happen at all. We may tell ourselves it is more *likely* at the tail end of intense moral and spiritual suffering, making it believable, necessary. But what *King Lear*

documents is not successful conversion, but ultimately, arguably, *failed* conversion—whether Lear’s or Gloucester’s or Edgar’s. Edmund’s is the only one successful. We may say it is fatuous, that he has not undergone the requisite spiritual austerity to make such conversion believable, hence his conversion occurs as a matter of (conventional) necessity. But this is to say that we are not given the materials with which to trace out his conversion. Edmund’s sudden desire to do good, like Cordelia’s death, is a wholly and radically contingent act—nothing can prepare us for either. In fact, Edmund seems motivated by nothing else than a desire to thwart necessity, to act “despite of [his] own nature.” Part of the exercise of considering possibilities after the fact is to come to terms not with why a seemingly gratuitous act of contingency is unbelievable, but with why it is believable—hence to ask ourselves why and how we do believe it. If we want to say that our experience of tragedy is rooted in the swift, sudden, and violent curtailment of possibilities, we need not be reminded of aesthetic possibilities occurring elsewhere (say in other plays, or at other times), but of those possibilities lost here, in the world of this play—in this case, the very real possibility of Cordelia living.

The type of “spectatorial criticism” Cartwright espouses is the sort that takes us away from the play, loading up experience with the type of speculation that distances us from it. Abstract theories about how tragedy functions do little to explain why we felt the play tragic upon viewing it on stage or reading it (for the first time) on the page. Even Brecht, who says that Shakespeare’s plays are full of “alienation effects” (Stam 4) believes we must *remain* alienated from the play in order to brood over its (social) implications post-performance. Alienation does not occur at a distance in time, but in the present. As Artaud argues, theatre – outside of spoken dialogue, even – immerses

our consciousness in the becoming of the present. In wanting to acknowledge such becoming through a consideration of speech, we need only consider the possibilities latent and lost in speech, understanding that speech does, indeed, “mask,” rather than (re)present.

One can read *King Lear* as an exploration of necessity gone wrong, and not because the necessary is a priori evil. Indeed, the comedies, in ending happily, teach us that the necessary and the good are often intimately linked. In tragedy, it is not the hubris of those on the bottom who seek to disrupt the moral order. Rather, and more pressingly, tragedy documents the ability of those who benefit from the moral order to misrepresent, or not see clearly, how contingent the good of the universe truly is—taking the good for granted.

King Lear thematizes not the burden of the past, of our misjudgments of the past, but that to exist in the present means being open to the possibility of either good or evil at every turn. This is not to say that either the good or evil is *necessary* at every turn. Merely that in being open to possibilities, to conversion, we mean to do some good, to “see better.” Gloucester and Lear did not mean to do good; they reneged on the possibility of good believing the love of their children *was* a matter of necessity. When that necessity was lost, or compromised, they had not the means or ability to cope with the possibility that the love even of their “loyal” children *was also* a matter of contingency. They suffered from what Bradley calls “want of imagination” (286), i.e. a deficiency in the liminal space required to consider moral possibilities. Edmund, by play’s end, is (still) armed with the *possibility* to do good; he takes up his chance, and though unsuccessful, he, at least, can still *mean* to do some good. Nor should Lear and

Gloucester, and even Edgar, simply extend their imaginative faculties to accommodate more possibilities—for, in effect, this is what Cordelia does. If we are to judge these characters by their lack of expansiveness, there is no easy way to know, in the present, what we *ought* to take as necessary and what contingent, when to expand our minds and thereby expose ourselves to others, or when to retract, or make ourselves smaller to the world, to accept its conventions without controversy.

We can also say the love test was staged not for Cordelia, but for Lear. Lear, and not Cordelia, failed the test because she was trying to create the space for him to consider the possible, to have him believe that her love was not a matter of mere necessity alone. Because we can only know in hindsight that Lear fails the test, it makes no sense for us as critics to then affirm that we knew, all along, that Cordelia's intentions were good. Such thinking removes us from the presentness of the play, is itself a plea for necessity which leaves us blind to the *possibility* of Cordelia's evil, or, less dramatically, to her wrongdoing (a possibility we are more in tune with when reading *Lear* for the first time)—what Coleridge calls her “sullenness” (335), what Frye implies is a lack of common sense. If Cordelia seeks to remove Lear's dependence on the past, wishes him to see in the present, then so too does Shakespeare's ambiguous presentation of events invite consideration in his readers of the possible, of both Edmund's good and Cordelia's sullenness.

In the case of *Lear*, it is difficult to know *what* we are screaming out for anyone to do. Yet even when the play ends and some semblance of moral order takes shape, we are left unsure as to what anyone could have done to avoid the outcome we are given. It may be easy enough in hindsight to say that Hamlet should or should not have done

the deed, hence, in a way, to avoid or deny corruption at court. But even when *Lear* ends, how can we possibly say that Cordelia ought *not* to have done the deed? To move forward on a commitment to do good, despite whatever surrounding conventions demand, can be perilous indeed; but then, what is left when necessity, or utility, provide us a world in which moral choice is negated? Do we protect the shallow views of our loved ones, or try to create the space for conversion to happen, even at considerable risk? Is Cordelia heroic, or foolish? From without, her death is heroic, wholly necessary; from within, her death is wholly foolish, entirely contingent. That one *can* be heroic, but only in hindsight (i.e. only from a critic's point of view), that our lives only make a moral sense after they have been lived, is tragic. To those who knew Cordelia, who avoid the rush to sanctify her and instead embrace the rush of the present, her life is a tragic waste indeed.

4. The Banks of Finitude: Counterfactual Thinking and *Macbeth*

In *Hamlet*, we are afforded a certain knowledge of past events. In *Lear*, knowledge must be deduced on the fly, against the rapid unfolding of the present. Now we must turn to *Macbeth*, a play in which we are granted knowledge over something we have no access to in real life: the future. Before getting to a careful reading of a counterfactual possibility in *Macbeth*, we must isolate how our relationship to knowledge affects our perception of tragedy. In all three plays, a certain type of knowledge is not forthcoming, which suggests that tragedy has some direct relationship to our lack of, desire for, or perhaps even over-abundance of (a certain kind of), knowledge. In proposing the multiplication of possibilities up for discussion about a play, moving away from the “actual” of the play, we immediately run up to a discussion or consideration of limits—where, how, and if, for example, we ought to construct limits on our criticism. This has particular resonance in a Cavellian discussion of tragedy, in lieu of Cavell’s remarkable thesis “that tragedy is the working out of a response to [what philosophy knows as] skepticism,” or “that tragedy is an interpretation of what skepticism is itself an interpretation of” (*DK* 5-6). Cavell’s thesis is a clear attempt at bridging the divide between philosophy and literature. Yet of particular salience here is his distinction between an “other minds” skepticism and an “external world” skepticism, a distinction which often leads critics to impose the sorts of prescriptive lessons that become problematic when reading tragedy. What we will attempt here is to problematize the distinction, or level off the given “asymmetry,” between the two skepticisms. Whereas the “other minds” version of skepticism is usually taken to be more indicative of what literature knows as tragedy, an “other worlds” sort (naturally,

in our case, the consideration of many possible other worlds) has as much bearing on any discussion of tragedy. If tragedy is indeed to remain congruent with what philosophy knows as skepticism, the external world must factor in far more than is currently the case by Cavellian scholars.

An external world skepticism – where we cannot know, for example, if we see all sides of a table – seems to exist in asymmetrical relationship to an other mind's skepticism, as though the latter is far graver. That is, we go on living, to no great intellectual scandal, knowing that our knowledge of the table, and the external world more generally, is limited by sense perception. But to go on living not knowing an other's mind is a possibility that haunts our day to day existence with that other, and has the potential, at any given moment, to elicit crisis. One could say that in dealing with the external world, there is no scandal *between* human beings; each is restricted in largely the same ways. However, in the case of other minds, our restricted access to one another calls into question what knowing (an other) is, or consists of, even minimally.⁶

The philosophical project to establish the minimal criteria of knowledge concerning not the world *per se*, but the world of sense perception (say, Kant's phenomenal world) places an other world's skepticism within the boundaries of human limits and finitude. In dealing with other minds, we are also, in a very real sense, limited; but part of the scandal is that there are no *perceivable* limits—say, limits we can establish with conviction or criterion; part of the scandal then is the possibility not of limits, but *limitlessness*. Yet to then suggest that imposing limits (a suitable option perhaps when dealing with the external world) is a correlative option when dealing

with other minds is to provide a prescriptive antidote against tragedy which does not exist.⁷

For example, Simon Critchley, discussing in particular our relations with others, points to this bit of “Cavellian” wisdom:

This brings me to what I see as the central insight of Cavell’s work, what one might call its tragic wisdom, which, like a musical leitmotif, is rarely explicitly formulated but which constantly returns in different variations throughout his work: the need for an acceptance of human finitude as that which cannot be overcome—that is to say, an acceptance of the finiteness of the finite, of the limitedness of the human condition. (49)

The idea here is that Othello, for one, overshoots in his desire to know Desdemona (know her fully, intimately) because he fails to acknowledge his finite relation to her, demanding instead a type of infinite access to her, or, perhaps, to the infinite via her. Had he learned to accept his finitude, tragedy may not have been avoided necessarily, but Othello, at the very least, could have absorbed something of Cavell’s tragic wisdom.

To summarize, Cavell’s startling reading of *Othello* has Othello unable to forgive Desdemona not for being faithless to him, but for being separate from him.

Consequently, he *wants* to believe Iago’s lies about Desdemona; the idea of her “as an adulterous whore is more convenient to him than the idea of her as chaste. But what could be more terrible than Desdemona’s faithlessness? Evidently her faithfulness. But how?” (133). Cavell’s reading, which raises the issue of Desdemona’s chastity, presents Othello’s understanding of it in a way that leaves him impotent—both spiritually and literally. Cavell’s reading of Othello’s logic concerning Desdemona’s chastity does not

take for granted either possibility—of Othello discovering that Desdemona is chaste on the one hand, or discovering that she is, indeed, unchaste on the other. Rather, Othello's logic is as follows: "Either I shed her blood and scarred her or I did not. If I did not then she was not a virgin and this is a stain upon me. If I did then she is no longer a virgin and this is a stain upon me" (135).

Desdemona's blood, or lack of blood, becomes in Othello's eyes a scar which "is the mark of finitude, of separateness" (137). Othello is surprised not that she has no sexual desire for him, but that she does. Having staked his existence on her perfection (and the union of himself with her as indicative, perhaps, of his own perfection), he suddenly discovers her imperfection, that she is flesh and blood. This perception of her imperfection is not merely the realization that she is lacking in some physical trait (that she ages, say), but that her mind, even her desires, while focused on him, remain separate from him, unable to be commanded by him.

OTHELLO. ... Oh, curse of marriage,
 That we can call these delicate creatures ours
 And not their appetites! I had rather be a toad
 And live upon the vapour of a dungeon
 Than keep a corner in the thing I love
 For others' uses. Yet, 'tis the plague of great ones;
 Prerogated are they less than the base.
 'Tis destiny unshunnable, like death. (3.3.272-79)

Othello is not merely scandalized by Desdemona's "otherness," but also, the limits her otherness places on him, her otherness prone to undermine *his* standing—more so,

anyway, “than the base.” So when Cavell says “that the failure to acknowledge a best case of the other is a denial of that other” (138), we can see how he is referring to Othello specifically. Othello falls in love with not with a flesh and blood version of Desdemona, but a vision of her as infinitely perfect which he believes he can, ultimately, command.

But sometimes, the problem with other minds is not an *inability* to accept limits in knowing an other (or oneself in relation to an other), but the all too hasty imposition of limits on the other (Cavell words this as turning the problem of skepticism into “an intellectual lack” (DK 138), a problem to be solved). For example, one can read Lear’s staging of the love test as a desire *for* finiteness. The scandal then is not an inability to acknowledge one’s own finitude, but an inability to acknowledge another’s *infinitude*, or, perhaps, the infinite demands an other makes on us. Moreover, why should this scandal of infinitude be restricted solely to other minds? If we are dealing with one actual world, we can see how the asymmetry holds; we are all equally restricted in terms of sense perception from *this* world. But if we are imagining other possible worlds, insisting on an asymmetry is unwarranted.

Cavellian critics are quick to associate tragedy with an other minds skepticism, rather than the external world sort because Cavell, in his Preface to *The Claim of Reason* says “that skepticism concerning other minds is not skepticism but is tragedy” (xxiii), which seems to definitively tip the scales of asymmetry in favour of other minds. Oddly, Cavell seems to be saying that other minds skepticism “is not skepticism” *at all*, as though refuting his oft cited claim that what literature calls tragedy philosophy knows as skepticism. Yet his statement is consistent with later claims if he means

something like: “skepticism concerning other minds is not [external world] skepticism *at all*, but is tragedy.” Hence further reason to believe that an asymmetry exists between competing skepticisms.

Yet in the body of his text, Cavell also notes

[i]t would not hurt my intuitions, to anticipate further than this book actually goes, were someone able to show that my discoveries in the regions of the skeptical problem of the other are, rightly understood, further characterizations of (material object) skepticism, of skepticism as such. (451)

Cavell’s discussions of tragedy – anchored in his readings of *Othello* and *Lear*, in which the tragic failure is one of a failure to acknowledge an other – suggest that his reading of Shakespearean tragedy is the exploration in literature of what certain strands of philosophy knows more specifically as “other minds” skepticism. But in his reading of *Macbeth*, Cavell does not highlight a distance between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, but a type of marital intimacy (a destructive sort he equates with vampirism and magical thinking) that Othello, in a way, might envy. Macbeth is not scandalized by his divorce from an other but by his divorce from the external world, or the incongruence between his need for atemporal rest and his existence in historical time. So in this case, still in Cavellian register, *the skepticism of our relation to the external world and not with other minds is the most salient and damning kind*. Tragedy is not the exclusive exploration or realization or response to the scandal of the other, but, primarily (or, at least, equally) the sort that problematizes our relation to the outside world—and not because we cannot solve certain intellectual puzzles, but because when considering possibilities, or

other possible outcomes, the external world is suddenly *as* distant from us, to the point of scandal—which means that to crave intimacy with an other is *coeval* with craving intimacy with the world. As far as a discussion of tragedy is concerned, the potential for devastation in each or by each is indistinguishable.⁸ Where we are tempted to equate tragedy with an “other minds” skepticism – i.e. tragedy as the sort of skepticism dealing with our inability to accept finitude in face of an other – we can say, equally, that the existence of other worlds (say, many competing possible other worlds) reverses or problematizes what Critchley takes skeptical wisdom to be. Where he has tragic wisdom tied narrowly to an ability (or inability) to acknowledge our own finitude in face of an other, an ability (or inability) to acknowledge *infinite* is also at play. This is to know that even if one *were* to acknowledge one’s limits, the danger would then be in wanting to impose these limits on the world too stridently. One way to remind ourselves not to be satisfied with the sort of half-wisdom Critchley puts forward would be to consider possibilities, which places us within range of the limitlessness of our desires.⁹

The key to understanding the relationship between tragedy and knowledge is not in deciding what to do with half-knowledge per se, but what to do with knowledge of the infinite (rather than infinite knowledge). When Cavell says that “[w]hat [Othello] lacked was not certainty,” but that he “could not yield to what he knew, be commanded by it” (*DK* 141), he is presenting a vision of Othello as haunted by possibilities. What does Othello know? That Desdemona *is* separate. Ultimately, Othello is not burdened by the possibility that she is unfaithful, but by the possibilities –and thus the restrictions on him – that her separateness entails. That there is, in a sense, no end to

her separateness is what Othello cannot face—according to Cavell not that he was lacking in knowledge, but that “he found out too much” (141).

Moreover, to achieve something like an acknowledgement of finitude is not, as Michael Fischer reminds us, “a magic wand forever releasing us from revenge, fear, and so on but [itself] an arduous task” (91). Furthermore, in the present, what constitutes acknowledgement, as opposed to avoidance, of finitude is virtually unknowable because so often what we take to be our “acknowledgment” is merely cover for our “avoidance” anyhow. Macbeth is an example of someone who, unlike Cavell’s Othello, seeks to impose a version of his own finitude on the world. Despite his seeming acquisition of “tragic wisdom,” his example is no less tragic.

To consider counterfactual possibilities is to consider, and want to rescue, a character’s freedom and reflects a critical desire to break from limitations, say, limitations of convention, which, in *Macbeth*, presents us with a prophecy that seems to dictate the way the play *should* end. It seems using counterfactual alternatives would be much more suitable to a play like *Hamlet*. What if Hamlet had killed Claudius at prayer? Would his (Claudius’s) crimes have been exposed? A compelling question to be sure, which bears on the play we do have because if Hamlet could, at the very least, *imagine* a world, i.e. a possible world in which Claudius’s crimes are *not* exposed, all the more reason for him to delay. Indeed, considering such an “alternate” ending – where Hamlet has done the deed but cannot lay claim, convincingly, to have acted justly – helps enhance our understanding of the play. The next step would be to look for clues or evidence that suggest Hamlet did indeed, even in passing, consider such a possibility.

We have not discussed *Hamlet* in this vein because it seems that the prior knowledge we are given (via the Ghost's testimony) does not restrict Hamlet's freedom in the same way Macbeth's is restricted by the sisters' prophecy. It makes sense, for both Hamlet and for us as readers, to question the veracity of the Ghost's story. We can conceive of the possibility that the Ghost is a "Goblin damned" (1.4.21), however much we may want its testimony to be true. In *Macbeth*, on the other hand, to ask something like "What if the prophecies aren't true?" would be to ask, "If not, why would Shakespeare give them to us?" And there is no answer other than to reiterate that because he does, it is by matter of conventional necessity that they come true. Hence no serious critical effort can question the veracity of the sisters' prophecy the way Greg called "Hamlet's Hallucination" into question. The Ghost's appearance in *Hamlet* does not dictate as explicitly in what manner *Hamlet ought* to unfold. The sisters' prophecy, on the other hand, does have immediate bearing on how *Macbeth*, and not Macbeth, *should* end—that is, with Macbeth as, or having served as, King. This suggests that Macbeth is far more beholden to outer (rather than inner) contingencies, which further shrinks his sphere of individuality and hence, his freedom. So how indeed to (re)capture Macbeth's freedom? If it is imperative for us, as readers, to remember that Macbeth *is* free, we must ask ourselves what sort of critical price we are willing to pay for his freedom.

One way would be to delay, as long as possible, a definitive reading of the precise makeup of Macbeth's ambition.¹⁰ Where Hamlet is burdened by the (im)possibility of correct action, Macbeth is burdened by the (im)possibility of correct thought. Hamlet desires thought as an end to all thinking, as though once armed with

correct thought, correct action can only follow. Macbeth operates at an opposite metaphysical register: he desires correct action as an end to all action, as though once the correct action is carried out, he will no longer be burdened by his desires.

If chance will have me king, why, chance may crown me

Without my stir. (1.3.142-43)

The appeal to chance here suggests that Macbeth doesn't want to act at all. Indeed, one reads in these lines the possibility of a Macbeth who chooses not to murder Duncan, who sits on his laurels and waits for the sisters' prophecy to unfold.

Clearly Macbeth is stirred by the sisters' prophecy in a way Banquo is not:

MACBETH (to the WITCHES). Speak, if you can. What are you?

FIRST WITCH. All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of Glamis.

SECOND WITCH. All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of Cawdor.

THIRD WITCH. All hail, Macbeth, that shalt be King hereafter!

BANQUO. Good sir, why do you start and seem to fear

Things that do sound so fair?

The obvious reading here is that Macbeth has been outed by the sisters, that they have given voice to a desire Macbeth holds secretly in his heart. The reason he is somewhat flummoxed is that he fears he will be (has been) found out; hence we are to conclude that he has had designs on murdering Duncan all along. That Macbeth feels ashamed at desiring the Crown is a plausible interpretation; yet it is equally plausible that Macbeth feels ashamed in *desiring*. What he is startled by is not that his ambitions have become known to others but that suddenly, they are known to him, i.e. *made known*, given voice and a preliminary expression. And what is it primarily that Macbeth

desires? Something akin to metaphysical rest, conceived in *Hamlet* as an end to all thinking, in *Macbeth* as an end to all action, so no longer needing to heed, or subordinate oneself to, the perpetual call to act. *Macbeth* feels ashamed not in desiring the Crown, but in being restless, in being unsatisfied with his lot. But the immediate temptation is not (necessarily) to murder Duncan; it only becomes tempting when this particular path is *suggested to him* by circumstances and contingencies outside of his control. The question is whether it is wrong or immoral or tragic to (merely) want or demand this sort of metaphysical rest in the first place, as an end in itself, as digestion of “tragic wisdom.” To desire such rest a priori is to make oneself vulnerable or susceptible to outside influence, to suggestion, particularly because no one can ever know, from the outset, *what* exactly it will take to curb one’s desires. *Macbeth*, like *Edmund*, is open to conversion; but unlike *Edmund*, he has not moral imagination enough to understand what his own nature is—partly why *Macbeth* makes himself beholden to the stars, something *Edmund* refuses to do. Does *Macbeth* have a choice in the matter? What a prophecy entails – in a play, for instance – is that he does not. Where Shakespeare allies us with *Edmund*’s knowledge that to take another’s word as necessary is indeed to make a foppery of the world in *King Lear*, he situates us within an otherworldly or supernatural necessity through the witches’ prophecies in *Macbeth*. Does this mean we are *supposed*, somehow, in this case, to make a foppery of the world? But we cannot seek out verification of the prophecies the way we do in *Hamlet*; we demand verification in *Macbeth* in a different way so that *not* to receive it would make the play unintelligible.

MACBETH. This supernatural soliciting
 Cannot be ill, cannot be good. If ill,
 Why hath it given me earnest of success
 Commencing in a truth? I am Thane of Cawdor.
 If good, why do I yield to that suggestion
 Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair
 And make my seated heart knock at my ribs
 Against the use of nature? Present fears
 Are less than horrible imaginings.
 My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical,
 Shakes so my single state of man that function
 Is smothered in surmise, and nothing is
 But what is not. (1.3.129-141)

The “horrible imaginings” suggests that whatever Macbeth fears, whatever possibilities are brewing in his mind, they are mediated by less than noble desires, again suggesting that Macbeth’s thoughts here are black, in no way innocent. But even here, after Ross and Angus have named him Thane of Cawdor, Macbeth is still unsure as to how to receive the sisters’ prophecy, as something either “good” or “ill.” The prophecy is more or less taken in stride by Banquo. But for Macbeth, it is not the case that the sisters have “outed” him because Macbeth is still uncertain as to what has been outed. The anxiety he feels is of not knowing, of being forced to consider now not the single state of his existence in this world, but the number of possibilities that the sisters’ prophecy might entail. This is where Macbeth’s freedom resides, a freedom he

detests. His existence is suddenly “smothered in surmise” and what “is” has been made subordinate to what might be, what at present “is not.”

Editors Wells, Taylor et al paraphrase Line 138 of Act 1, Scene 3 (“My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical”) in the *Norton Shakespeare* as follows: “In which murder is so far only a fantasy.” The question then is, the murder of whom, or what? We may be quick to reply, “Duncan,” but the less forced interpretation is that Macbeth is explicitly discussing, hence desiring, the murder of (his) thought, only “fantastical” at present because his thought cannot grasp or get a hold over the infinitude of his desire, the limitless number of possibilities the sisters’ prophecy entail. Macbeth wants to murder thought so “function” can (once again) follow, so the division of his self amongst a plethora of possibilities not yet given voice is made whole again—and then, preferably, by a *single* voice, recommending, of course, a single course of action. One could interpret here that Macbeth does indeed desire thought in order to murder *action*. But really, what he desires is the correct action, or function, that will murder thought and hence, subsequent calls to action. Macbeth, unlike Hamlet, intuits that thought will not save him—only action will, and only if successful in murdering thought. Furthermore, the note that appears in the middle of Line 139 (“Shakes so my single state of man^[1]”) reads: “My undivided self. Macbeth feels that his wholeness is coming apart under the pressure of his criminal thought.” Macbeth is coming apart under the pressure of thought, though whether it is truly criminal at this point cannot be known definitively.

Where his thoughts do turn criminal, definitively, is near the end of Act 1 Scene 4, when he voices his desire to murder not Duncan but his newly named heir, Malcolm, now the Prince of Cumberland:

MACBETH (aside). The Prince of Cumberland—that is a step
 On which I must fall down or else o'erleap,
 For in my way it lies. Stars, hide your fires,
 Let not light see my black and deep desires;
 The eye wink at the hand; yet let that be
 Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see. (1.4.48-53)

Obviously what Macbeth wants to hide is his desire, now taking more concrete shape through his contemplation of action; and these desires seem to emanate outwards from within, so that outward show must hide “black and deep desires.” But to read these lines as bringing something inner out reverses the gradient of projection, for what has taken place is the opposite: outer contingency has given shape to inner desire.

If we grant that Macbeth is unsure of how to act, because still unsure of how to think, we must try to find the sorts of outer contingencies that bring about something we might call conviction (at this point) in him. The line immediately preceding his earlier aside is uttered by Duncan; he addresses Macbeth as “My worthy Cawdor” (1.4.47)—that is, by title rather than name. It is also true that titles, at least in this play, less depict or signify territorial or geographical obligations than roles and duties within a hierarchical structure with King Duncan at the top. That Malcolm is made Prince of Cumberland has little to do with Cumberland and everything to do with the convention that sees the Prince of Cumberland next in line to inherit the Scottish estate. Macbeth

directs his hostility not against Malcolm, but against his title. But this because Macbeth has just been addressed, formally, by *his* title, a naming which grounds him, and less makes him aware of his position in a regency than of the possibility, even the actuality, of his own advancement.

We are not implying that Macbeth is *actually* doomed once he has been addressed as Thane of Cawdor. This is merely to defer the moment his fate is sealed rather than to reclaim his freedom. Where counterfactual thinking is useful to us is in considering if a world *could* exist where other options are available to Macbeth, where he is tempted to commit other deeds (rather than murder) to achieve the ends the sisters have prophesized for him. For example, we have already touched on the possibility of Macbeth essentially doing nothing, waiting for chance to take hold. It is not too difficult to imagine how such a possibility could play out. Macbeth, for instance, could simply bide his time. A whole host of external events could happen to bring Macbeth to the Crown: Duncan could simply fall ill and die, and then, somehow, both of his sons. One could argue here that it is simply not in Macbeth's nature to bide his time, that he is all too willing to act, so that to suppose him capable of biding his time is to misread his character and the very nature of the play he dominates.

But this commits us to saying that Macbeth is playing out a "self-fulfilling prophecy," so that because he has been granted knowledge of his future does he take pains to realize it. This sort of reading once again dooms Macbeth and *necessitates* that he does, indeed, act just as he does. But if it is in the realm of *possibility* that he does nothing, and if such a possibility, in fact, indeed, *crosses his mind*, the question becomes why does he choose, instead, to act? We could appeal to all sorts of coming outer

contingencies, so even if the resolve he gains in being addressed as Cawdor dissolves, other contingencies present themselves to reaffirm that resolve. Most saliently, we begin thinking about Lady Macbeth and her destructive influence on her husband. But this is to once again delay the moment when we believe Macbeth is doomed, as though it is our critical lot to establish the precise moment his freedom is relinquished.

The most immediate reason that Macbeth acts is because if he did not, *we would not have a very interesting play*.¹¹ This seems obvious, trite. But when Bradley, extending Hegel's discussion of dramatic poetry more forcefully to Shakespeare, says that

the notion of tragedy as a conflict emphasizes the fact that action is the centre of the story, while the concentration of interest ... on the inward struggle emphasizes the fact that this action is essentially the expression of character (11)

he goes on to link the function of tragedy fundamentally to character action, as though character is best expressed by action. What does this say, then, about the possibility of tragedy coalescing around a character who refuses to act?—something to the effect that whoever refuses to act has removed himself from the realm of tragedy. Again, this seems obvious enough. But another possible implication – in restricting the function of tragedy to dramatic poetry, or narrative, or action – is that the stance of not wanting to act, if indeed such a stance can be thought of as tragic, even dramatic, *must somehow be linked to action*. What results is a fundamental incongruence between what the character does and his motivations—in a sense delinking, or at least loosening, the function of tragedy to character action. Macbeth may indeed be tragic because he acts;

but to then induce from his actions that he wanted to act all along, that he *chose* to act and so is responsible for his fate, is far too limiting a proposition to sustain because, in a way, Macbeth had no choice in the matter. So how does this reading *reclaim* Macbeth's freedom? By separating him from his actions in this way, are we not victimizing him instead? Macbeth cannot possibly be aware that he acts for our dramatic pleasure.

Macbeth is responding to external contingency rather than playing out internal necessity. These contingencies include supernatural voices (the witches), mortal voices (his wife), and signs (the daggers). Macbeth may be acting, but he is acting *passively*. If he feels that desire is something to be avoided, he also feels that whatever action he must undertake must be rooted outside himself. Macbeth does not know if the sisters' prophecy will lead to salvation or damnation. What he does know is that ambition, naked and brutal ambition, is abhorrent and that the best way to avoid it is to avoid his own inner inclinations and instead be led by outer forces. Here is how Macbeth has clear moral scruples. How does one avoid tragedy? One might think: to curb infinite desire in *me*—which is what Macbeth does, or rather, *thinks*. In hindsight, we can say that Macbeth was a victim, that he could not see that he was, all along, being controlled by forces of desire and ambition ultimately housed *in* him, could not face or deal with his ostensible “flaws.” But one could also read Macbeth as ultimately acting out a desire to confront, *head-on*, hence to put away, his desire and ambition once and for all—the Crown a symbol not of ambition rewarded, but ambition put to rest. Hamlet wants to take charge against a sea of troubles by thinking, then acting. Macbeth wants to avoid any subsequent sea of troubles by acting, so to avoid thinking, or desiring, altogether. Both manifest a particular relationship to a type of knowledge from without: a

verifiable sort in Hamlet's case leading, hopefully, to correct action; an absolute sort in Macbeth's leading, hopefully, to *no action*. This means that tragedy has more to do with our orientation to knowledge and how *it* affects character action – say, the sorts of possibilities it draws out – than with assuming that action manifests some internal and stable character flaw. In the former scenario, character freedom is assured through the subsequent play of contingency; in the latter, necessity is established after the fact and the players – more violently, viciously – are victimized. Macbeth has not internalized the desire for self-aggrandizement and power we normally associate with tragic heroes or monsters. His “fate” is not testament to his desire for power; rather, his actions betray his desire to *avoid* his own ambition. Simply “acknowledging” his own limitless desires, i.e. his finitude, taken in hindsight to be a wisdom he no doubt indubitably “lacked,” does not mean tragedy would have been avoided. Arguably, this is what he does and is, of course, no better off.

Macbeth is not shameless, one interpretation of him being “rapt withal” (1.3.55). Macbeth is “rapt” with, i.e. startled by, the preliminary expression of a desire the origins of which he has reason to be suspicious of. Hence he has a desire (a moral desire) to forgo revenge, realized dramatically through his gratuitous taking of revenge. But revenge against whom, or what? Macbeth has little interest in inflating himself or his worth. (“I dare do all that may become a man;/ Who dares do more is none” (1.7.46-47). If indeed his ambition is dangerous or monstrous, it is not because he is an egomaniac like Caligula or Tamburlaine. What Macbeth wants is to deflate himself, his worth, and the most expedient way to do this, he is made to believe, is to murder Duncan. Others can only interpret this as naked ambition. In a very real and significant

way Macbeth's ambition is naked. He knows not how or with what to dress it. ("Why do you dress me/ In borrowed robes? (1.3.106-7)) But his ambition does not exist as an end in itself, insatiable to the point of continual expansion. Rather his ambition is insatiable to the point of unachievable contraction; he has a clear end in mind, and when this end proves unattainable, he no longer fears death but welcomes it. Which is worse? An articulated ambition (i.e. *known* ambition) that revels in itself as an end (revealed most cynically in the speech of the true Shakespearean Machiavels, Iago and Edmund); or unarticulated desire which does not revel in itself, desires an end, but cannot formulate in speech (i.e. in thought) the means of its achievement, as though knowing we are incapable of thinking our way past our desires anyhow?

Imagining a version of Macbeth who does not want to act is restricted by the fact that Macbeth himself operates within a play which itself operates under certain conventions—in this case, one that requires prophecies about the future to come true. Furthermore, the fact that any drama or play requires *action* seems to ensure that Macbeth suffer a fate. But imagining the possibility of a Macbeth who does not act, or, at the very least, does not want to act – a possible subjective interpretation made possible by lines 142 and 143 in Act 1, scene 3 ("If chance will have me king, why, chance may crown me/ Without my stir") – is the only way to remove Macbeth from a Hegelian tragic fate *necessarily* realized through action. Yet the appeal to outer contingency may seem to equally fate, or doom, Macbeth to tragedy; or, it may show that tragedy has more to do, or at least as much to do, with outer forces of contingency as with inner necessity alone. Macbeth's tragedy is not rooted in an inability to

acknowledge one's finitude in face of an other. In Macbeth's case, an other's finitude or infinitude is hardly at stake. What is at stake is the infinitude of his own desires which he seeks to curb. Macbeth craves a finite world, one in which rest is possible, and is willing to go to tragic lengths to achieve his vision.

5. Reversing Time: Counterfactual Thinking and *The Winter's Tale*

Thus far, in making a case for counterfactual reading, we are making a particular plea not for a knowledge of what is, but for what could be, or could have been. In claiming that our best access to what could have been requires occupying a position of “presentness” to a play – rather than emphasizing our distance, historical, critical or otherwise, i.e. the play’s pastness – we are emphasizing a certain temporal relation to knowledge. And we are saying, moreover, that tragedy functions not when we assume that time is irreversible, but when we take steps to reverse it, to reclaim possibilities lost.

Understanding the relationship of time, or the passage of time, to tragedy, is one way to distinguish tragedies of the ancient world from early modern tragedy, i.e. Shakespearean tragedy. Where Attic tragedy existed against a backdrop of what François Laroque calls “sacred time” (84), marked by the repeatability of tragedy in rituals and festivals, (early) modern tragedy exists in “profane time” (75), which seeks ultimately to undermine the hold of the sacred on popular imagination:

Because one of the functions of festivals is to mark out time, they assume an almost immutable character, as if they were detached from time itself and protected from all erosion. Recurring as they did at regular intervals, they helped to dispel the feeling of “mutability” which generally seems to have characterized the Elizabethan view of the passage of time in the sublunary world. (75)

We will say, however, that the tragic effect takes hold *more* stridently in profane time because of time's irreversibility: hence the modern individual is made to suffer his tragic fate absolutely, irreversibly.

In his *Tragic Conditions in Shakespeare*, Paul A. Kottman focuses less on time than on space, linking the function of tragedy to the "shared significance of our words and actions" (13), the sort of significance that can be – indubitably is, in tragedy – betrayed. The function of tragedy is tied not only to past meanings and significations, but also to their future transmissibility. First, commenting on ancient tragedy, Kottman notes:

[T]ragic representation becomes central to civic discourse in moments at which the city seeks to question its own value or sustainability, as in fifth-century BCE Athens. Tragedies like *Oedipus* and *Antigone* ask us to consider how we can best ... transmit the conditions of living with one another ... Indeed, it may be that we come to measure the significance or value of our bodily lives together in terms of its worldly inheritability—the relative transmissibility of rights, entitlements, possessions, institutions, and prerogatives that we might wish to bestow on those we love. (21)

However, or in whatever way, ancient tragedy brought the contingencies of social obligations and rights to the forefront, the tragic impetus to re-establish the prevailing social order after the occurrence of some rupture or social "diremption" (22) reaffirmed existing social bonds and the existence of the community at large. Those who feel hemmed in by the social order, though able to show that the order as is is

indeed unable to accommodate all possibilities, less expose the contingency of that order than its necessity. If today we are more aware of the contingency, or the non-transmissibility of social customs, then it seems we have found a way to embrace contingency. But the embrace of contingency is not an antidote removing us from tragedy. In a world where everything is possible, Kottman suggests that a lack of meaning and of an “inheritable form of cultural life” leads to more depraved individual acts of diremption:

Shakespeare will compel us to consider our forms of worldly inheritance, on which we have depended in order to live together meaningfully at all, as insufficient, fragmented, weakened, or damaged. The activities that upheld and affirmed prior modes of social organization—burying the dead, military service, or courtly speech—will give way, as we proceed, to activities that break and destroy bonds on which we, in our lives together as individuals, rely, culminating with acts of torture... . (22)

So the moral and ethical imperative behind tragedy is to lead us to establishing some manner of communal bonds that can be transmitted to future generations without which would be to transmit meaninglessness. But we have been making the case, in reading counterfactually, for downplaying the establishment of necessity in favour of considerations of the contingent. Will this not lead to acts of critical depravity? What the consideration of alternatives proposes is the idea that tragedy *can be* revisited when other outcomes are shown to be possible. However hemmed in we may feel by its occurrence, to read tragedy’s horrors as necessary (that is, as irreversible) is what is unbearable. What we want is the opportunity to go over tragedy

again, which is not to say that tragedy can be avoided “if only” such and such had occurred, but that we are willing to, or ought to be able to, suffer it to make the world meaningful. That tragedy occurs, is destined to occur in human affairs, does not make it *necessary* in any useful understanding of the term “necessary”—for the conditions of such necessity can never be known beforehand. Rather, if human beings are fated to suffer tragedy, what is required is an understanding that such suffering is entirely contingent. To brace oneself for such contingencies, to remind ourselves that contingency is indeed at play and to avoid subsequent acts of critical diremption or depravity, through the hasty imposition of critical necessity, is the purpose of counterfactual reading.

If reading counterfactually is a way to “renew” our understanding of tragedy, where does this leave us in terms of transmissibility? Can an understanding of contingency be anything at all to transmit to future generations? Though Kottman does not focus on time, in emphasizing the idea of inheritance, or transmissibility, he is, nonetheless, invoking a conception of time, of keeping time static. When he says that modern tragedy brings to bear the contingency of anything at all we might consider transmissible, he is talking about how time, or our existence in historical time, paves the way for an infinite number of diremptions. Whatever has meaning now is destined to perish at some point in the future; hence nothing is definitively transmissible any longer.

The idea of going over tragedy – i.e. linking tragedy’s functioning not to the ultimate destruction of communal bonds, but to their renewal – seems to be a plea to make something of Aristotle’s purgation of “fear and pity” resonant to tragedy today.

We don't want the purgation of fear and pity to occur *once and for all*, concomitant with the irreversibility of one's tragic fate; rather, we want to establish ways – say, critical ways – to relive or rehash such purgation, to achieve such purgation *again*. This is then to say that a consideration of counterfactual possibilities is an attempt to re-establish something like living and lasting social bonds—to know that we can read tragedy and revisit it by presupposing its horrors to be not necessary, but vitally contingent. This is the only way to reclaim the “buoyancy” (93) of tragedy noted by Frye, the realization that not all is “vanity” (15) noted by Bradley; otherwise, the irreversibility of tragedy is not only too devastating, but so devastating as to make reading it pointless. If the horror of tragedy is ultimately irreversible, the only critical action warranted is to make it, somehow, necessary, thereby transfiguring it not so it matters, but precisely so it doesn't.

Questions indubitably mount: if tragedy is destined to occur in human affairs, in what sense is it fatalistic, i.e. tied to a fate? If a tragic character is to be read as a type of everyman, then what is a tragic play supposed to teach us about *our* fate? That we have one, or that we do not? If there is something we can call a tragic fate, how are we to suffer it? We will take up these questions here in a reading of *The Winter's Tale*.

Though the play is often classified as a “later romance,” Shakespeare, in presenting to us a “mini-tragedy” in the first three acts, goes on to depict a life beyond tragedy, i.e. shows us that tragedy is survivable. But survivable how? Not survivable in the way of ancient tragedy where we know that the world after tragedy, despite even the occurrence of tragedy, will carry on largely unchanged, social bonds less shattered than renewed. In Attic tragedy, the realization is that if everything is contingent, we have no

way of relating to one another. What is *then* reiterated is the necessity, or the reality, of whatever social bonds we do have—mediated, no doubt, by some sacral order. But lacking a sacral order now, how can we know that what we take to be necessary *is* necessary? Does a consideration of counterfactual possibilities bear on what we do have *as real*, or reveal that what we take to be real is no more real than anything else, hence *entirely* contingent? And if existing day to day is impossible in a world of contingency, where does this leave us? It leaves us with the burden of constructing legitimate social bonds in an age of mass contingency. But contingencies will not be conquered, once and for all, at some point *in the future*. We must find a way of dealing with contingencies *now*. What we have in the final act of *The Winter's Tale*, even if not a community begun anew, *ex nihilo*, is one that, in borrowing appurtenances from the pre-existing (or still existing) social order, re-establishes previous social bonds which originally led to disaster. Community, that is, is re-established in profane time, after a lapse of sixteen years.

Let us first highlight possibilities. We have earlier touched upon the idea of rapid tragic unfolding as the unfolding of contingency as opposed to necessity. So what are the possibilities taken up – and conversely, the possibilities lost – in the first three acts of *The Winter's Tale*? Possibilities, at least for Leontes and Paulina, are both realized, lost, and reclaimed. Leontes, suddenly, rails like a madman, and then, just as suddenly, is subdued. Paulina, also, initially firm and straight to the point in her dealings with Leontes, relents, not in the content of her message, but in the manner of its delivery. Hermione is constant. First, Leontes: he is convinced, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that Hermione is unfaithful, that the child she bears is not his. At the end of

Act 2, scene 1, he not only sends for the oracle, but is convinced that it will corroborate what he perceives to be truth:

Though I am satisfied, and need no more
 Than what I know, yet shall the oracle
 Give rest to th'minds of others, such as he
 Whose ignorant credulity will not
 Come up to th' truth. (2.1.191-95)

This is a stunning demonstration not of Leontes's magnanimity, but his assuredness. Hermione, let us note, is unsure *what* the oracle will say, and does not take it as given that the oracle will sort out this business to her liking. After the officer reads out her arraignment (prior to revealing the oracle's verdict), Hermione says

Since what I am to say must be but that
 Which contradicts my accusation, and
 The testimony on my part no other
 But what comes from myself, it shall scarce boot me
 To say "not guilty." Mine integrity,
 Being counted falsehood, shall, as I express it,
 Be so received. But thus: if powers divine
 Behold our human actions, as they do,
 I doubt not then but innocence shall make
 False accusation blush and tyranny
 Tremble at patience. (3.2.20-30)

But if she doubts not, why not simply wait for the oracle's verdict and be silent? She does not say, briefly, as Leontes does, "I am satisfied." Rather, she is bracing herself at court for the possibility that the oracle will rule against her. So what we have here, what hindsight bears out, is that he who knows, who has every faith in the oracle, is proven false, while she who doubts, who has lesser faith in the oracle, is proven true. How can this be? Resoluteness is not rewarded; waffling is. It is not so much *that* Hermione doubts; but if she is innocent, if she *knows* she is innocent, why *should* she doubt, especially if she believes that "powers divine/ Behold our human actions" anyhow? Nor is it so much that Leontes *is* resolute; but if he is ultimately wrong, shouldn't *he* waffle?

Of course, without the oracle, we as readers would have no way of sorting any of this out. But with it, we marvel *more* at Leontes's prior conviction and Hermione's lack of conviction. Moreover, we can only further marvel at Leontes's express and casual dismissal of the oracle. He says, bluntly, with hardly any protestation: "There is no truth at all i'the'oracle./ The sessions shall proceed. This is mere falsehood" (3.2.138-39). So the question worth posing is, particularly in our godless, post-sacral order, how do *we* know the oracle is correct? The oracle is not exactly a paternity test. What if Leontes is right? What if the oracle is false? Again, we come to know that the oracle is correct not because we have grounds to believe it, but because, like Hamlet, Leontes *eventually* mediates how we are to read the oracle (that is, *as* true). But Leontes does not immediately believe the oracle. He only believes it once Mamillius dies. Arguably, Leontes believes the oracle to be true because, when Mamillius dies, at least one part of the oracle is proven true (that Leontes shall have no heir). Hence Leontes reasons it

would now be wise to believe that the oracle is correct. But believing the oracle fully does not reverse his fate. Had he continued to insist, despite Mamillius's death, that the oracle was false, nothing, ostensibly speaking, would have changed. His queen and his son would still be dead, his child still lost. The conditions for his conversion would still exist and the play would be about Leontes's *gradual* conversion to the oracle's truth—over the next sixteen years and subsequent return of Perdita. What we want to emphasize is that Mamillius's death does not guarantee or necessitate Leontes's conversion. That his conversion occurs immediately, in fact, saves us the painful task of asking how *we* know the oracle is true. Put another way: without Mamillius's death, and despite our position outside of the text as readers, we would lack any way of convincing Leontes that he is wrong; we would be back in the realm of contingency, armed with no clear and discernible way of combating his tyranny, and not for the sake of those at court, but for the sake of our own moral sensibility. Surely we know Leontes is wrong, have a type of faith, anyhow, that he is. But faith is what Leontes had all along, what Hermione lacked.

We are left asking how Leontes achieved his conversion so suddenly, as though our moral sensibilities depended on finding an answer. But we shall see that however deep our criticism goes in posing such a question, none can ever derive the necessity of Leontes's conversion. Upon what, then, do we base our knowledge of the oracle's veracity? The question bears on Leontes's intelligibility. We have two radically different versions of Leontes: one where he is stubbornly obdurate, another where he is profoundly repentant. Also we have two radically different versions of Paulina: one where she is acerbic and direct ("I'll use that tongue I have. If wit flow from't/ As

boldness from my bosom, let't not be doubted/ I shall do good" (2.2.55-57) and another where she is similarly remorseful. After a lord chastises her "boldness of ... speech" (3.3.216), she relents: "I am sorry for't./ All faults I make, when I shall come to know them,/ I do repent" (3.3.216-218). Finally, we have two radically different versions of Hermione: one where she is flesh, another where she is stone, Hermione in death and in life; and if one version of Hermione necessarily cancels out the other, the question is whether we have a right to expect some version of intelligibility, i.e. consistency, from the characters before us. That is, how believable is it that Leontes and Paulina hold radically different subjectivities within what we take to be their same bodies? How or in what way does housing such stark possibilities within the same subjectivity speak to, or against, a notion of tragic fate? Let us return to Hegel here and his discussion of what constitutes a fate. Though here he is not speaking about tragedy, his notion of fate no doubt bears on his particular conception of tragedy. He first notes that "a fate appears to arise through another's deed" (54). Through interaction with another, one of perhaps any number of possibilities inherent in a character is brought into actuality. So the possibility that *is* realized is, indeed, in some sense, the "true" one, hence the beginning of a fate.

What really produces [a fate] is the manner of receiving and reacting against the other's deed. If someone suffers an unjust attack, he can arm and defend himself and his right, or he may do the reverse. It is with his reaction, be it battle or submissive grief, that his guilt, his fate, begins.

("Spirit" 54)

Yet what we have in the case of Leontes is an expression, or a coming to be, of *two* distinct possibilities. That is, Leontes both defends himself and his right *and* does the reverse in committing to submissive grief. So has he at once initiated a fate and negated it? Hegel continues:

In neither case does he suffer punishment; but he suffers no wrong either. In battle he clings to his right and defends it. Even in submission he does not sacrifice his right; his grief is the contradiction between recognizing his right and lacking the force actually to hold onto it; he does not struggle for it ... Courage, however, is greater than grieving submission, for even though it succumbs, it has first recognized this possibility [of failure] and so has consciously made itself responsible for it; grieving passively, on the contrary, clings to its loss and fails to oppose it with strength. Yet the suffering of courage is also a just fate, because the man of courage engages with the sphere of might and right. Hence the struggle for right, like passive suffering, is an unnatural situation in which there lies the contradiction between the concept of right and its actuality. (54)

In Hegel's account, what is "right" never changes—simply one's reaction in face of it. The conversion Hegel is talking about is not the refiguration of right, but the refiguration of reaction (and even deferral) of the right. What constitutes the right constitutes a fate. This outward antagonism "between the concept of right and its actuality," is key to Hegel's account of dialectical unfolding, in particular, to his insistence on the sort of inner consistency of (tragic) character which then marks a

tragic fate. But Leontes's conception of what is right fundamentally changes. First Hermione is absolutely guilty, then absolutely innocent. In altering his conception of right, then, is Leontes taking steps to alter his fate? Can one *alter* one's fate? Indeed, Leontes achieves something like a transcendence of his own fate through suffering.

Unhappiness may become so great that his fate, the self-destruction, drives him so far toward the reunification of life that he must withdraw into the void altogether. But, by himself setting an absolutely total fate against himself, the man has *eo ipso* lifted himself above fate entirely.

(56)

So how does the above square with Hegel's insistence on an inner (i.e. consistent) tragic fate? First, we will note that above, Hegel is not talking about tragedy, but about a move beyond it, the sort a tragic character *does not* achieve; a tragic character achieves his (tragic) fate and does not transcend it. According to Hegel, Leontes (at least a *later* Leontes, the one who alters his conception of the right) is not a tragic character. By mourning not in the world of action, Leontes's "fate," in a way, is not really a "fate," or, let us say, not a *tragic* fate. Tragedy can be – in Leontes's case, has been – transcended.

What Leontes has achieved, that is, is a Hegelian "second-order negation," or a "negation of the negation," which, as Jennifer Bates tells us, "means that the alienation initiated by the first negation is overcome in a positive resolution" (30). The first negation is simply the elementary recognition that appearances in the world are not what they seem – for example, Edmund's recognition that the stars do not really control human fates ("This is excellent foppery") – hence an expression of a certain type of agency rooted in the self. Leontes similarly negates the oracle's verdict (first order)

but then reneges on his original negation (second order). So, in a sense, Leontes seeks to avoid his tragic fate. The first initiates a tragedy, the second a type of suffering which marks its transcendence.

According to Hegel (and subsequently, Bradley), only a character who pursues a life of *action* suffers tragedy. A character who realizes or is willing to make a second order negation to then pursue a life of inaction is not suffering tragedy. But what about a character, who achieves a second order negation but must, for whatever reason, *still commit to action*? How true would it then be that the tragedy which unfolds is a matter of *inner necessity*? Now, what has happened instead is that the character, fully understanding and willing to make a second-order negation, will go on to suffer not because of inner necessity, but because of outer contingency. We have made the case that Macbeth suffers in this way. Even if he achieves a second order negation, what results is not a positive resolution but a negative one. Hence, in a Hegelian conception, Macbeth does not suffer a fate, but succumbs to tragedy. Leontes, on the other hand, transcends tragedy, but suffers a fate.

Hegel acknowledges the possibility of contradiction within a subjectivity (both A and $\sim A$), but notes that in action, one possibility *must* emerge to the *negation* of the other. But what we want in our criticism is not to isolate the dialectical necessity of how either A or $\sim A$ came to be, but to develop an understanding that both A and $\sim A$ are possible *now*, i.e. in the present. Macbeth does not express some inner necessity of his *as true*; the truth of his tragedy is that he could have done either A or $\sim A$. Leontes, in fact, does achieve both A and $\sim A$. And the best schematic conception of this truth comes not from Hegel, but from Northrop Frye in his discussion of the metaphor.

Isolating the move of literature (both poetry *and* criticism) from an “archetypal phase” (118) to an “anagogic phase” (119), Frye notes that

[i]n the anagogic aspect of meaning, the radical form of metaphor, “A is B,” comes into its own. Here we are dealing with poetry in its totality, in which the formula “A is B” may be hypothetically applied to anything, for there is no metaphor, not even “black is white,” which a reader has any right to quarrel with in advance. The literary universe, therefore, is a universe in which everything is potentially identical with everything else. This does not mean that any two things in it are separate and very similar, like peas in a pod, or in the slangy and erroneous sense of the word in which we speak of identical twins. If twins were really identical they would be the same person. On the other hand, a grown man feels identical with himself at the age of seven, although the two manifestations of this identity, the man and the boy, have very little in common as regards similarity or likeness. In form, matter, personality, time, and space, man and boy are quite unlike. This is the only type of image I can think of that illustrates the process of identifying two independent forms. (124-25)

Metaphor, that is, in saying something like “black is white,” has the opportunity to say that a thing is equal to its opposite, not “A is B” per se, but $A = \sim A$, particularly in a universe where “everything is potentially identical with everything else.” So we are suggesting that criticism about Shakespearean tragedy take an anagogic turn by considering possibilities. In Hegel’s conception, everything is (or can be) both A and

$\sim A$ over time. In the moment, *either* A or $\sim A$ (necessarily) suffices. Yet what Frye's conception of the anagogic literary universe does is give primacy to both A and $\sim A$ in the present.

Moreover, in the vast dialectical unfolding that Hegel champions, the antagonism between A and $\sim A$ ultimately leads us to something *else*, say its eventual synthesis in B. Neither A nor $\sim A$ has any meaning now, but only, ultimately, in relation to something else that has yet to be. So in thinking about renewing social bonds, by allowing something to clash with itself or its opposite, we come to view the necessity of one over the other. In Hegel's view, if $A = \sim A$, it is only in relation to B. Furthermore, it is not only that because B follows A that A caused B (a logical fallacy), but also, that B, speaking strictly from a consideration of value, *is better than A*, often re-iterated as the historical discovery of *more* freedom, or greater degrees of it. Both A and $\sim A$ are meaningless in and of themselves. Either only gains meaning in relation to B, so in the end, all we have left to renew social bonds is a conception of B that has yet to come into being, which means that in the present, the passage of time is all we have to renew social bonds that stand dissolved. In other words, the renewal of communal bonds is eternally *deferred*. And if one is hesitant to assert or subordinate meaning to the passage of time, one is forced to (re)visit Frye's conception of things because what his anatomy achieves is the *detemporalization of the dialectic*. Frye's conflation of man and boy speaks to this: however or whatever we discover (or rather uncover) to be A and its opposite, all possibilities exist *now* and do not depend on the dialectical unfolding of events in time. The desire not to subordinate meaning to the passage of time is the key reason Leontes continues to mourn the loss of Hermione, not in the hope that one day

his community will be reconstituted around her (and them together), for *how* could he possibly hope for such a thing? But in holding out against the passage of time, he is saying that what is meaningful to him now is not worth sacrificing to the passage of time. By hoping beyond all hope, he creates the conditions (thematically speaking) necessary for Hermione's resurrection, which requires committing to the belief that her life (hence her death) *means* something not just now, but for all time—for him, and hence for the state over which he presides.

CLEOMENES. Sir, you have done enough, and have performed

A saintlike sorrow. No fault could you make
Which you have not redeemed – indeed, paid down
More penitence than done trespass. At the last,
Do as the heavens have done: forget your evil.
With them, forgive yourself.

LEONTES. Whilst I remember

Her and her virtues, I cannot forget
My blemishes in them, and so still think of
The wrong I did myself, which was so much
That heirless it hath made my kingdom and
Destroyed the sweet'st companion that e'er man
Bred his hopes out of. (5.1.1-12)

A critique of Hegel's idea of *Aufhebung* (translated in Bates as "sublation" (xv)) can be found in the disguised Polixenes's exchange with Perdita. Polixenes, interrogating Perdita on why she refuses to plant and grow gillyvors (a crossbreed, to Perdita

“bastards” (4.4.82)) in her garden, thus reasons dialectically:

POLIXENES. ... You see, sweet maid, we marry
 A gentler scion to the wildest stock,
 And make conceive a bark of baser kind
 By bud of nobler race. This is an art
 Which does mend nature – change it, rather – but
 The art itself is nature.

PERDITA. So it is.

POLIXENES. Then make your garden rich in gillyvors,
 And do not call them bastards.

PERDITA. ... I'll not put
 The dibble in earth to set one slip of them ... (4.4.92-100)

Rather than accept that something base is to be ennobled through (biological) synthesis, Perdita insists on maintaining the difference. This insistence on difference, on drawing a line between legitimate and bastard plants, is the sort inherited from her father perhaps, someone who also rejects bastards. But Leontes's rejection is a rejection of her. Yet Perdita, divorced from her own history, hence from the possibility of herself as a bastard, is free (or more free here) to entrench the difference. Is this to imply that the particular renewal to be achieved in this play ought to come on the renewal, rather than the disavowal, of a societal distinction of bastards as other? This seems to be implied later at Leontes's court when his gentleman describes Perdita as someone who could potentially renew communal bonds:

... This is a creature,
 Would she begin a sect, might quench the zeal
 Of all professors else, make proselytes
 Of who she but bid follow. (5.1.106-9)

But just before this assertion, Paulina chides the gentleman (“’Tis shrewdly ebb’d/ To say you have seen a better” 5.1.102-3)) because, in his praise of Perdita, he seemingly cancels out his earlier praise of Hermione, for which the gentleman can only ask “pardon” (5.1.103). The scandal the gentleman touches on is not the possibility of a state founded on Hermione’s living memory, but of the memory of Hermione succeeding to Perdita’s presence, in which, or in whom, there is no memory, as far as the state is concerned. So in whom, or in what, does the salvation of the state lie—in Hermione’s living memory, or Perdita’s dead present (as far as Sicilia is concerned), or some synthesis of the two?

What, in short, does Hermione’s resurrection *mean*? The ending of *The Winter’s Tale* is often taken to be the thematic triumph of love or forgiveness, but it remains to be seen where the forgiveness is. Hermione neither asks for it nor offers it. Leontes takes her hand and in the end reaffirms something like the mythical founding (of their love) that will allow his state to carry on. The sum *total* of his lines to Hermione is the following:

What? Look upon my brother. Both your pardons,
 That e’er I put between your holy looks
 My ill suspicion. This’ your son-in-law

And son unto the King, whom, heavens directing,
Is troth-plight to your daughter. (5.3.148-52)

So Leontes indeed asks for pardon, but we do not know if he receives it, if the act of forgiveness is *completed*. It is *not* completed in the play, which brings us back to the oracle. Whatever occurs in the final scene between Leontes and Hermione, the oracle is fulfilled. The oracle was fulfilled the moment Perdita was found. Nothing in the oracle suggests or portends Hermione's resurrection, and if we are to accept its "mythical" or "sacred" qualities as an event, why the conspicuous divorce between its miraculous occurrence and any foreshadow from the oracle? Is the oracle correct? We have all sorts of reasons for supposing it is correct, but no way of knowing.

But why is it *necessary* that the oracle be true? One could argue that, conventionally speaking, that is what an oracle is for, so that, in the manner of the prophecies given us in *Macbeth*, Shakespeare would not have put an oracle into the play to have us doubt its veracity. But the prophecies in *Macbeth* portend the future, which, we noted earlier, makes its unfolding *necessary*. (In *Hamlet*, we are given testimony about the past, requiring verification). But the oracle here rules on the *present*. Its "prophetic" portion, occurring in the conditional tense, must come true by matter of necessity. But what about its ruling on the present? Is it valid? Does such a ruling require posterior verification or is it a priori necessary? What manner of knowledge is conveyed by the oracle?

We must say that the oracle conveys *sacred* knowledge; even if a reader believes that no such knowledge exists now, it does, or did, during the time of the play. As a type of knowledge, then, it transcends categories of being *either* necessary or contingent. It

merely *is*, has a revelatory power and allows us to make meaning of this play. The oracle must be true because without it, meaning would be lost and the play would become unintelligible. But the nature of its ruling, i.e. about the present, means that its power transcends both past and future. It is true for all time, *is*, in a sense, a debunking of the passage of time. If meaning in this play is tied to the oracle, it is because meaning is tied to something that can neither be verified nor made necessary but simply *is*. This knowledge exists outside of or beyond historical time. What *The Winter's Tale* shows is that despite all our hyperbolic critical doubts, certain pieces of knowledge still hold sacred force in the imagination.

So if *we* know better than to doubt the oracle, what in the world allows Leontes to do so so brazenly? Is he asserting his freedom from the sacred, forgoing sacred time for historical time? To do so, it would seem, would constitute a type of *progress*. But Leontes initially does not seek to *verify* that the oracle *is* false. He simply *knows* it to be false. He takes his first intuition to be more sacred than the oracle's verdict and so is still, even in his original transgression, firmly attached to a sacred order, merely reconceived with himself at the centre rather than the gods. His transgression is less sacrilegious than hubristic.

But it is not necessary (not ever) for Leontes to *accept* the oracle. He could go on, even in the world of the play, to accept the passage of historical time, subjecting the oracle's ruling to verification, say. We might even take such an occurrence to be in line with a type of maturity in jurisprudence. If, in the world of the play, sometime over the course of the next sixteen years, such verification proves impossible, or unlikely, he

could then make amends for his own rashness by deciding that while the oracle cannot be proven false, *neither can it be proven true*.

But this type of knowledge, i.e. knowledge of the contingent to be verified in time, is itself unbearable. What we mean to emphasize here is that Hegel's dialectical antagonism is never *resolved* in this play. Leontes's intuition rubs up against the oracle. Each cancels the other out. Why should the oracle prevail? Indeed, in some grand dialectical scheme where the power of the sacred is *eventually* reduced, Leontes's acceptance of the oracle's ruling is regressive. Furthermore, we all know that Leontes's original doubt in the first Act is hyperbolic. But his *acceptance* of Hermione's resurrection is equally hyperbolic. If ever there was a time to doubt, it is now, when Paulina calls upon him to believe in something wholly superstitious (the type of doubt many critics of this play are all too happy to inhabit). What has happened to Leontes to cause him to renege on his original doubt of the oracle's ruling, on his scepticism, so absolutely? Is it *admirable* that he does? By doing so, he no doubt provides us with some semblance of a happy ending. But in many ways, the ending we get is not indicative of a life restored, but of a life, of their lives (Leontes and Hermione's) lost or spent. Leontes is not filled with redemptive energies upon seeing Hermione restored in stone, but is ashamed that he no longer has the metaphysical strength to conjure up something that might constitute proper acknowledgment:

LEONTES. I am ashamed. Does not the stone rebuke me

For being more stone than it? O royal piece!

There's magic in thy majesty, which has

My evils conjured to remembrance and

From thy admiring daughter took the spirits,
 Standing like stone with thee. (5.3.37-42)

Hermione, upon coming back to life, briefly addresses Perdita, but hardly *rejoices*. Both have suffered, have been ravaged by, the passage of time. But rather than transmit the truth of historical time to their children, they instead attempt to confer meaning upon their children through suffering. Their willing regression guarantees that this play has *meaning*, that their lives, the lives of those at his court, the life of his state, are meaningful; in their regression and resignation lies the redemption of the state. What they transmit to the next generation is less the “truth” of their love for each other than the *myth* of their love for each other, removing the burden of establishing new meaning in their absence by, or because of, their (at least ostensible, if not veritable) devotion to one another. They transmit meaning to be inherited and renewed—not a state to be founded, but one founded *already*. Perdita and Florizel are free to love one another, the resurrection and health of the state less dependent on any myth of *their* union than that of Leontes and Hermione. The myth saves meaning by renewing sacred time. Perdita and Florizel exist within a community of established social bonds, but this does not mean that they have no opportunity to make meaning of their own; rather, they are free to exist within a cradle of meaning. Whatever contingencies ensue, Leontes and Hermione have taken steps to ensure that time is not irreversible.

Shakespeare is challenging his readers to accept Hermione’s resurrection as fact. Taking such an event to be true is hardly to commit to the belief that the resurrection of dead flesh is biologically possible. But the will required to reverse time for the sake of

upholding the social order is as difficult to muster as that, perhaps, required to raise the dead. However we may shudder at Leontes's initial dismissal of the oracle, the more miraculous achievement is, in fact, his obdurate acceptance of its verdict made manifest through his willingness to suffer the consequences of his original transgression for, it seems, the remainder of his life. And the only way to comprehend this is not to assume, with the benefit of hindsight, that the oracle is necessarily correct, but to ask ourselves how or why *we* are convinced that the oracle is correct at all. To suppose it anachronistic to deny the oracle's veracity, that doing so would make the play unintelligible and meaningless, is a worthy objection. But it is well within Leontes's purview, at the very least, to make peace with his prior transgression without upholding the veracity of the oracle—to disengage from its sacred hold and move forward for the health not only of himself, but of his state. But such an action would entail the disengagement of his state from the social order thus subjecting it to the ravages of historical time—a move that could be considered progressive and statesmanlike, in fact; but Leontes refuses. Why? Why, that is, ought he to commit to such masochistic undoing and needless spiritual suffering? Leontes's suffering is not the dialectical result of having been severely rebuked, but corresponds rather to a willingness to commit to a Hegelian “second-order negation.” But if such a negation is to result in a “positive resolution,” how are we to read an ending in which Leontes stands shamed before Hermione anyhow, seems more spent and less redeemed? To commit to Hermione's resurrection is to commit to a type of metaphysics of presence from which meaning can be mined and around which the social bonds of the community are renewed absolutely rather than eternally deferred.

6. “Why Indeed Did I Marry?” Counterfactual Thinking and *Othello*

The Winter's Tale shows us a court exposed to historical time that rejects it in favour of sacred time; as such, it is an *antidialectical* play. The truth of tragedy is that in order for life to have meaning, one must be willing to suffer a fate (if not a Hegelian tragic fate rooted in action). Perhaps there is no quibble here; no one reads tragedy and assumes that by play's end, any of Shakespeare's tragic heroes are left unspent, particularly when the genre of tragedy entails irreversible physical extinction. Death is absolute, removing a consideration of the possible because characters in these plays do not live to achieve anything like what Hegel might call a transcendence of tragedy. Leontes is unique in that his tragedy does not result in his mortal extinction; he is given opportunity to survive tragedy; so too is Hermione. But we see we are left with a Leontes and Hermione whose lives *are* spent; though they are not deprived of life, they are deprived of those psychic energies we associate with any type of life worth living. Is this any sort of lesson?—that if we manage somehow to hang on to our lives after tragedy strikes, we must continue to repent for our past crimes for the remainder of our lives?

The only way to move forward with a life so spent would be to reason our way out of our dilemma dialectically. But this is not to proceed by appealing to Hegel's transcendence of fate. Hegel's transcendence is less a dialectical resolution than a resolution of will to suffer one's fate and *in so doing* transcend it—to transcend the very dialectic of unfolding that, for Hegel, necessitates the tragic in the first place. Once again, to quote Hegel:

Unhappiness may become so great that his fate, the self-destruction, drives him so far toward the reunification of life that he must withdraw into the void altogether. But, by himself setting an absolutely total fate against himself, the man has *eo ipso* lifted himself above fate entirely.

(56)

So the only way to transcend the suffering of a tragic fate is through more suffering. What kind of solution is this? We noted in the previous chapter how a sacred order is necessary not for the individual but for the community to survive tragedy. Existing social bonds, necessarily finite, necessarily triumph when pushed up against the infinitude of human desire. Moreover, this does not mean that such bonds have been exposed *as necessary*. On the contrary, what has been exposed is their contingency. The choice to renew social bonds is one to establish the parameters of necessity so as to curb the contingent in human affairs—for the sake, ultimately, of the survival of the community and of human life. Aristotle’s purgation is less of “fear and pity” than of the human resentments necessarily bred in *any* social order or hierarchical setup.

So what are the Edmunds and Iagos, let alone the Hamlets and the Lears, of the world to do finding themselves marginalized in such a setup? If the social order as is is unbearable, must they commit to suffering in hopes of transcending perceived injustices? Edmund and Iago are hardly thought of as tragic characters. It is hardly tragic that Edmund is a bastard, or that Iago is looked over for promotion. Yet neither is willing simply to yield to the unfolding of sacred time. Rather, each rejects the status quo in which they are marginalized choosing instead to exploit his existence in profane time in hopes of manipulating or transforming the social order to achieve not a

transcendence of fate, but a conquest of it. This is the meaning behind Edmund's aside. The "excellent foppery" of the world is one that takes the social order *to be* necessary, as though human desires are ultimately incapable of transforming it. Iago's advice to Roderigo to "make money" (1.3.348-49) is a plea to take hold of time. What Edmund and Iago bank on, that is, is not that the dialectic of historical time will reveal the necessity of their suffering, but rather, their possible liberation. We castigate them as villains for thinking this way, but they are no different than Macbeth when he says that "time and hour/ runs through the roughest day" (1.4.146), which is an elaborate way of saying that time heals all wounds. What we are made to suffer can be changed. In a dialectical conception of unfolding, the marginalization and even possible devastation at the hands of an existing finite social order is not something to be yielded to in the present, but to be overcome resulting not in the renewal of social bonds but their future transmutation. The will to achieve such transmutation, then, is equivalent to curbing tragedy's power in human affairs and mirrors, for example, critical attempts to establish the necessity of tragedy, because the implicit assumption of such criticism is that if we establish suitable reasons *why* such and such a tragic event occurred, all of us can live to fight another day. No one need, by matter of necessity, be spent if we just establish the reasons such a seeming necessity took place. A human (individual) life is not fated to suffer, to continually renew *that* suffering, but can be transformed. Existence in historical time, that is, while offering a way of surviving tragedy, at the same time trivializes both tragedy and existence.

Let us listen to Iago's dialectical reasoning. Roderigo, full of angst that the love of his life, Desdemona, has married the Moor, is on the verge of ending his supposedly "tragic" existence. Iago consoles him thus:

Come, be a man. Drown thyself? Drown cats and blind puppies ... I say, put money in thy purse. It cannot be long that Desdemona should continue her love to the Moor—put money in thy purse—nor he his to her. It was a violent commencement in her, and thou shalt see an answerable sequestration – fill thy purse with money. The food that to him now is as luscious as locusts shall be to him shortly as bitter as coloquintida. She must change for youth; when she is sated with his body, she will find the error of her choice. She must have change, she must. Therefore put money in thy purse. (1.3.330-44)

Nor is it too much to imagine that "honest" Iago follows his own advice, that he reasons similarly when the fates turn against him. His plot to "abuse Othello's ears" (2.1.377) is related to his being overlooked for promotion. But what he also despises about Othello is his *presence*—a certainty and assuredness in himself impervious to dialectical logic:

IAGO. In personal suit to make me his lieutenant,
 Off-capped to him; and by the faith of man,
 I know my price, I am worth no worse a place.
 But he, as living his own pride and purposes,
 Evades them with a bombast circumstance
 Horribly stuffed with epithets of war,
 And, in conclusion,

Nonsuits my mediators. For, 'Certes,' says he,
 'I have already chose my officer.' (1.1.9-16)

Since Othello has managed to achieve a type of standing at court not through the manipulation of words, but through their more resounding delivery, all the more reason for Iago to hate him. Iago, in comparison, is unable to command words to achieve the sort of standing he believes he deserves (he "knows his price"). When he hears the officers on their way to confront Othello for eloping with Desdemona, Iago is not inclined to stand and make his case. His first impulse is to retreat; he advises Othello to do the same:

IAGO. Those are the raised father and his friends.
 You were best go in. (1.2.29-30)

But Othello extends his majestic presence:

OTHELLO. Not I. I must be found.
 My parts, my title, and my perfect soul
 Shall manifest me rightly. (1.2.30-32)

Othello goes on to defuse the scandal at court not by weighing costs and benefits in dialectical or utilitarian fashion, but by being direct. He is charged to "say it" (1.3.126), i.e. to tell how he and Desdemona came to wed; despite being accused of witchcraft and trickery, he does so with astonishing poise and candour:

OTHELLO. She loved me for the dangers I had passed,
 And I loved her that she did pity them.
 This only is the witchcraft I have used. (1.3.166-68)

After which there is little left to say. Othello has achieved standing as Desdemona's husband not by skirting or circumventing perceived social infelicities, but by confronting them directly. Indeed, his bold words immediately discredit the Duke's. Earlier, he had promised Brabantio, upon hearing that his daughter had married without her father's consent, to throw the entire "bloody book of law" (1.3.62) at the perpetrator, even were he "our proper son" (1.3.69). Now, his authority diminished somewhat by Othello's presence, the Duke must proceed more carefully in his counsel:

Let me speak like yourself, and lay a sentence
Which, as grece or step, may help these lovers
Into your favor.
When remedies are past, the griefs are ended
By seeing the worst, which late on hopes depended.
To mourn a mischief that is past and gone
Is the next way to draw new mischief on.
What cannot be preserved when fortune takes,
Patience her injury a mock'ry makes.
The robbed that smiles steals something from the thief;
He robs himself that spends a bootless grief. (1.3.198-208)

Brabantio has suffered a fate: betrayal by his daughter. And however well meaning the Duke's consolation, Brabantio understands and refuses to trivialize his loss. He sees through the emptiness of such reasoning:

But the free comfort which from thence he hears,
But he bears both the sentence and the sorrow

That, to pay grief, must of poor patience borrow.

These sentences, to sugar or to gall,

Being strong on both sides, are equivocal. (1.3.212-16)

The sentence is to suffer “patience,” which hardly lessens Brabantio’s sorrow. In the end, such “advice” is neither helpful nor harmful but “equivocal.” What has been exposed is the contingency of a custom which demands that fathers have some say in their daughter’s marriage. Moreover, the charge to suffer patiently exposes the fact that there is no *solution* to the problem at hand. The problem, that is, is now Brabantio’s alone. So the Duke’s advice to simply make peace with an unfortunate set of circumstances isolates Brabantio in his sorrow. He could perhaps take the Duke’s advice in order to survive the blow but instead chooses to suffer. Though Brabantio’s fate at this point seems irreversible, by withdrawing as he does, he asserts the truth of a custom in which he has staked his existence as a man. *He* may suffer irreversibly, but he holds out, or makes a demand that, such a custom be not exposed to, or withered away merely due to unforeseen contingencies brought about by, the passage of time. For Brabantio, if it is true that time heals all wounds, so too does time create potential, at every turn, to open all wounds. This type of uncertainty, concomitant with our existence in historical time, may remove the burden of tragedy *in the moment*, but in the long run, stands to dissolve all that is serious, to make all that is fair foul. Claiming one’s freedom – or refusing to suffer passively *because* one can live to fight another day – has consequences. The sort of tragic vision inherent in a world that exists in historical time is that time heals all wounds because the weight of the initial tragic blow is not lessened but trivialized. Brabantio, in refusing to trivialize what he takes to be

real (i.e. a real “hurt”) asserts that however social custom may have failed at this moment, to throw it out or invalidate it absolutely would be to throw out a world, a world in which his existence is staked. By choosing to suffer, Brabantio holds out for the possibility that such a diremption *can* be reversed.

Dialectical unfolding makes all things possible over time, opens up a world of contingencies that have yet to come into being. This could be liberating on the one hand or devastating on the other, introducing into human affairs the possibility of a type of dialectical sickness in thought. This sort of sickness is what Othello, in being made to doubt Desdemona’s faithfulness, succumbs to. We could easily point to Iago and suggest that he, who reasons dialectically, infuses Othello with the types of doubts and uncertainties Iago not only thrives in, but gleefully exploits. But the counterfactual question worth posing here is *would Othello have succumb to such sickness lacking Iago?* Or rather, *what if Iago was no longer a character in the play?* Now we cannot seriously entertain such a possibility without making the play wholly unintelligible. But Iago himself suggests that the Moor’s unmooring is, in a way, *destined* to happen. Again, consoling Roderigo, Iago says

[h]er [Desdemona’s] eye must be fed; and what delight shall she have to look on the devil? When the blood is made dull with the act of sport, there should be, again to inflame it and to give satiety a fresh appetite, loveliness in favour, sympathy in years, manners, and beauties—all of which the Moor is defective in. Now, for want of these required conveniences, her delicate tenderness will find itself abused, begin to

heave the gorge, disrelish and abhor the Moor. Very nature will instruct her in it and compel her to some second choice. (2.1.220-29)

Iago makes no mention of himself! “Very nature” will instruct Desdemona to eventual revulsion for the Moor, reasons including but not limited to their difference in age (“sympathy in years”) and “loveliness in favour ... manners, and beauties.” Othello himself knows he is direct in speech, hence lacks what others perceive to be social graces. Indeed, when the sickness begins to take hold of him, these two *exact* reasons are those which Othello ponders over despite the fact that Iago has uttered not a word of them *to him*.

... If I do prove her haggard,
 Though that her jesses were my dear heartstrings,
 I'd whistle her off and let her down the wind
 To prey at fortune. Haply, for I am black
 And have not those soft parts of conversation
 That chamberers have, or for I am declined
 Into the vale of years—yet that's not much –
 She's gone. I am abused, and my relief
 Must be to loathe her. Oh, curse of marriage,
 That we can call these delicate creatures ours
 And not their appetites! (3.3.264-72)

Othello has some power to reason exactly as Iago does. He knows he is “black” (i.e. not “fair” in conversation) and that he is “declined/ Into the vale of years.” Moreover, Cavell’s reading of Othello – that Desdemona’s possible infidelity is a

convenient lie to cover something he *knows* (in this case that he is “black,” that he is her senior, and that these are limitations on him) resonates in these lines as well. Indeed, Othello cannot command Desdemona’s appetites; in the unfolding of time, what he takes to be his possession of her is subject to the contingencies of her desire.

But are we now convinced 1) that Desdemona *will* eventually tire of the Moor and 2) that it *is* indeed unwise for the Moor to place his life upon her faith? To commit to 1 is to commit to a world ruled not by the resoluteness of our desires, but to their fickleness. It is to ally ourselves, in a way, with Iago’s reasoning. And though we might try, as Othello does, to put a stop to ill suspicions, the dialectical trajectory of *our* thought is nonetheless underway. Othello concludes his lines above by trying to will away his suspicions:

If she be false, oh, then heaven mocks itself!

I’ll not believe’t. (3.3.282-83)

But as we know with the benefit of hindsight, in a world of historical time where all things are *possible*, the dialectical sickness has already taken hold.

But are we not dooming Othello to suffer a fate at the hands of Desdemona’s certain infidelity? What about Desdemona? We are dooming her, if not to cheat on Othello, then to tire of him. But nothing Desdemona does in the world of this play *ever* compromises the nature of her devotion to Othello. In fact, Cavell alludes to her perfect obedience to Othello despite even his heinous accusations:

Though Desdemona no more understands Othello’s accusation of her than, in his darkness to himself, he does, she obediently shares his sense that this is their final night This shows in her premonitions of death

(the Willow Song, and the request that one of the wedding sheets be her shroud) and in her mysterious request to Emilia, “ ... tonight/ Lay on my bed our wedding sheets” (IV, ii, 106-7), as if knowing, and faithful to, Othello’s private dream of her, herself preparing the scene of her death as Othello ... imagines it must happen ... as if knowing that only with these sheets on their bed can his dream of her be contested. (DK 134)

Desdemona, in perfect devotion to her husband, understands that in order to contest his deranged dream of her, she must hope beyond hope that he will see in her her *total* faithfulness, even at risk of her very life. She cannot renege on her love for Othello because through her love has she staked *her* existence—so to renege on that would be to renege on everything she holds dear of the world she inhabits. She, like her father, is willing to suffer her beliefs.

If such is the case, how unwise is it after all for Othello not to doubt her faith, but to stake his existence upon her love of him in the first place? If we want to say the Moor was correct in doing so, we also want to say he was incorrect for ever doubting her. But if we follow Cavell’s reading – that Othello is, after all, infinitely separate from Desdemona – what are we then asking Othello to do? Cavell’s reading, that is, dooms Othello in a different way—i.e. dooms Othello, and human beings more generally, to an existence separate from others. Despite even Cavell’s recognition that Othello has no good reason to doubt Desdemona’s faithfulness, what he *must* do, nonetheless, is make peace with her separateness from him. But how can Othello be tempted with union with an other, an other who *is* totally devoted to him and at the same time willfully deny even the *possibility* of that union? Again, Desdemona does nothing to invite an

understanding that she is separate from him—rather, she tempts him with the possibility of their perfect union, a union upon which she has staked her life just as Othello has. Othello may soon be better off coming to terms with the notion that the world is beyond his grasp; but should Desdemona do the same? If the realization that human beings are separate comprises some bit of human knowledge, it seems inhuman of *her* to tempt Othello otherwise. What is a “man” to do under such temptation?—sagaciously deny the possibility of union between human beings or take pains all the more stridently to accept one’s vulnerability and love, wholly, fully, an other—thereby asserting, or at least believing, that the union of two souls is eminently *possible*?

The question is whether love between two souls is a suitable mythology, metaphysic, presence, or starting point from which to extract meaning and purpose in *this* world. What is at stake is a cultural orientation to a world not in which everything there is is on display to be discovered, but one in which something like the perfect love between two souls *is* achievable, even if shrouded in mystery. We saw in the previous chapter how such considerations factor into the reconciliation of Leontes and Hermione. Leontes’s faith and steadfastness in loss brings Hermione back to life. Even if theirs is an “unhappy” reconciliation, there is mystery enough in the particular makeup of their final union, the sort of mystery in which the myth of a possible perfect union can be derived. Moreover, such a myth is entirely useful in helping to cheer, or make meaningful, the lives of those who live in the state. Is it wrong or fallacious to transmit meaning to others rooted in something that is, if not empirically unverifiable, then certainly not empirically verifiable?

Othello voices two options. Like Brabantio, he could suffer his tragic fate by “whistl[ing] her off and let[ting] her down the wind/ To prey at fortune,” or, alternatively, pout over his loss: “[Y]et that’s not much –/ She’s gone. I am abused, and my relief/ Must be to loathe her.” In either case, Othello registers the veritable pain of his possible betrayal by calling up his passions—i.e. either passionately lamenting Desdemona’s departure, or angrily loathing her. Either reaction requires significant spiritual stamina. To what end? A third option would be to take steps to circumvent any possible betrayal in future. But how? No single act could remove completely the possibility of Desdemona’s betrayal, except, of course, murder. This is the option Othello ultimately chooses, and act which, however deranged, preserves the myth of their love as real:

... When I have plucked thy rose,
 I cannot give it vital growth again;
 It needs must wither ...
 Be thus when thou art dead, and I will kill thee,
 And love thee after ... (5.2.13-19)

Time has stopped. Desdemona can no longer wither. And Othello’s mind has been freed of dialectical suspicions.

But clearly the third option is the most morally grotesque. So that leaves us with the first two. Yet the first two take it as matter of necessity that Desdemona *will* betray Othello. Again, are we convinced that she would? If the lesson of this tragedy is for Othello (and human beings more generally) to accept finitude in face of Desdemona’s (or another’s) infinite desires, we seem to be committed to a reading that caricatures

Desdemona's faithfulness. We could appeal to all sorts of "conventions" here—i.e. a dramatic convention that necessarily hollows out Desdemona's character, as though she must be rather one-dimensional in her speech and devotion—a sort of faithfulness that could only be presented hyperbolically by Shakespeare to increase the dramatic or tragic resonance at play's end. The veritable union between separate human beings is not a possibility worth considering, never *actually* achievable for either Othello or Desdemona. Yet what does this say about the ideal, if less the veritable truth, of holy matrimony—one in which two souls *do* become one flesh? What sorts of meanings are lost if this ideal, this possibility, is reneged on?

Is it fair to ask Othello to will away his doubts and commit to loving Desdemona, not to accept his finitude in face of her but to strive ever onward to achieve a type of metaphysical union which Desdemona, for all we know, is herself committed to? Othello tries to do this, to put a stop to his suspicions, but the passage of time cannot be willed away. Contingencies abound. And if Othello cannot confront them, where does that leave the rest of us? The tradeoff is between suffering the world for the sake of meaning, or trivializing it for the sake of survival. And if, as Susan Sontag says, tragedy is indeed an "ennobling vision of nihilism," the seemingly pointless suffering of the individual to no easily quantifiable or calculable end is necessary in order to ennoble not nihilism per se, but human existence.

The best case, then, would have been for Othello to commit fully to loving Desdemona, which means having loved her despite whatever she may or may not have done to him. The first option, to allow Desdemona to "prey at fortune" (if, in fact, she does prove unfaithful), as Brabantio does, is given cursory consideration then just as

quickly abandoned: “yet that’s not much—/ She’s gone. I am abused”. What Othello cannot face is the possibility of mourning, that is, of suffering, her loss. Now it will be said that Othello suffers anyhow, not her loss, but anger, jealousy, madness, in the thought of her *possible* loss—hence that Othello has invested too much in Desdemona’s faithfulness to him. Were he simply to curb his passions somewhat, he could carry on loving Desdemona and be less susceptible to the “green-eyed monster.” Friar Laurence’s advice to Romeo seems apt here:

These violent delights have violent ends,

And in their triumph die like fire and powder[.] (2.5.9-10)

It is easy enough, of course, when things end so poorly for Romeo and Juliet, to then say that their passions *all along* were misguided. Perhaps violent delights indeed have violent ends. Both Romeo and Juliet suffer a fate, i.e. both are willing to suffer the consequences of their passions (at the very least, both indubitably *do* suffer the consequences). But Othello is unwilling to suffer the consequences of love yet all *too* willing to suffer the consequences of jealousy. Why? To say he doesn’t have a choice in the matter is to ignore his own repression of choice (“yet that’s not much”). Othello *chooses* not to suffer, as does Iago; but unlike Iago, Othello demands that the world still have meaning. The dialectical sickness is particularly pernicious for Othello because of these competing psychical demands. Othello cannot face what Iago is made to face every day: 1) the possibility of loss of standing at court, and 2) the possibility that words are meaningless, and hence so too the world. But Iago is hardly a tragic character; he survives his fate by living to fight another day. When Cassio frets over his

loss of standing, Iago's tone is virtually indistinguishable from the one used earlier to console Roderigo:

IAGO. Come, you are too severe a moraler. As the time, the place, and the condition of this country stands, I could heartily wish this had not befallen; but since it is as it is, mend it for your own good. (2.3.278-81)

Roderigo, Cassio, or even Desdemona (2.1.144-45), Iago counsels each effectively not via flattery, but by chronicling "small beer" (2.1.162)—i.e. via trivialization.

We seem, strangely, to have returned to an old-fashioned critical championing of "suffering," the sort of aesthetic lesson from which a type of historicist or materialist criticism is thought to have redeemed us. Marx's adage, for example, that the point of philosophy is not merely to interpret the world, but to change it, reorients not only the function of philosophy, but of criticism. In a cultural materialist register, for example, Jonathan Dollimore has this to say about the humanist tendency to reify suffering:

[T]he humanist view of Jacobean tragedies like *Lear* has been dominant, having more or less displaced the explicitly Christian alternative.

Perhaps the most important distinction between the two is this: the Christian view locates man centrally in a providential universe; the humanist view likewise centralizes man but now he is in a condition of tragic dislocation: instead of integrating (ultimately) with a teleological design created and sustained by God, man grows to consciousness in a universe which thwarts his deepest needs If that suffering is to be justified at all it is because of what it reveals about man's intrinsic nature

– his courage and integrity. By heroically enduring a fate he is powerless to alter ... man grows in stature even as he is being destroyed. (189)

Despite the distinction between a Christian “providential” view of suffering, and a secular humanist view of endurance, both are merely “two sides” of the same “essentialist humanism” (191). Hence to suppose that the secular humanist view is any sort of break from critical prescriptions of a time gone by is entirely fallacious. For Dollimore, “existential humanism is merely a mutation of Christianity and not at all a radical alternative” (195). To which he proposes a “materialist reading” in order to separate ourselves from the disempowering vision of tragic suffering and to assert instead an invigorating notion “radical” tragedy that both calls attention to suffering and details, of course, the materialist conditions for that suffering.

The notion of a tragic victim somehow alive and complete in death is precisely the kind of essentialist mystification which [*King Lear*] refuses. It offers instead a decentring of the tragic subject which in turn becomes the focus of a more general exploration of human consciousness in relation to social being – one which discloses human values to be not antecedent to, but rather in-formed by, material conditions. (202)

According to Dollimore, the specific material conditions to consider when reading *Lear* are those surrounding the nature of “power, property and inheritance” (197). Shakespearean tragedy is not great because it depicts tragedy, but because it depicts, however implicitly, *why* tragedy. Yet whether New Historicist (in which the stage and the plays are read as suffering from ideological contamination), or cultural materialist (where Shakespeare is subordinated to a much larger historical process

ultimately rooted in the discovery of class relations and the realization of class consciousness), both forms of inquiry are merely opposing sides of the same dialectical coin. It seems to us, then, in reaching for reasons why, Dollimore has succumbed to the same sickness Othello does at line 247 of Act 3, scene 3 (“Why did I marry?”). In both cases, that is, tragedy is construed as a problem to be solved, or, more pertinently, a problem to be solved in the future. Neither Othello nor Dollimore is willing to champion the power of suffering in the present, i.e. the power of suffering a world for the sake of meaning, which does not mean passively accepting the world, or injustice, as is. Rather, suffering, so conceived, entails creating, or attempting to create, the conditions for a type of justice to materialize not in some future world, but in some better manifestation of *this* world, in which one has already staked one’s existence. An individual may find him or herself powerless to alter *his or her* fate. But to then leave the world up to contingencies – say, irreversibly – is implicitly to create a world unworthy of transmitting to future generations because to do so would be to transmit to them the (eventual) realization of *their own* powerlessness, or triviality. Only by rejecting the world does Brabantio deny nihilism, ennobling it in a way. To concede that the world is ultimately meaningless, that his values and beliefs ultimately *are* trivial – whether to his daughter or to himself – would be to grant contingency far too much power in human affairs. And while we have been making a case *for* a consideration of contingencies, we are doing so as a means of coming to terms with the fact that asserting something like necessity in the face of contingency is not the only recourse to provide some sort of healthy stability to our criticism. What we have to ask, rather, is if we have the critical strength to resist not the dialectical unfolding of thought

per se, but the continual deferral of meaning. And the only way to make meaning is not by appealing to some grand theoretical methodology or paradigm, but rather, by letting a thousand possibilities and readings flourish, to avoid critical attempts to unify them. Only in so doing can the creative, subversive, even “radical” element of tragedy materialize. Dollimore wishes to no longer reify suffering—but in so doing, he has refused to reify tragedy also and has, like others before him, deferred its meaning to some point in the future. Tragedy becomes not “radical,” but all too trivial.

7. Conclusion

Our present-day perception of tragedy is linked to an irreversible, necessarily historical, conception of time. Moreover, this felt irreversibility – of time, of fates suffered – results in either 1) making the tragic effect so resoundingly, irreversibly, disastrous as to make reading it pointless, or trivial; or 2) disentangling tragedy from fate, but via the reverse discovery of cause and effect. Hence tragedy's appearance in human affairs becomes something avoidable given proper post-facto explanation. Any cursory glance at *Hamlet* shows both Hamlet's promise and his sickness. That he should succumb to the latter is not indicative of anything *in* him, or his character. Contingencies present us with one possibility over another. Moreover, Hamlet cannot be freed from the deadly play of contingency through any definitive act of criticism because ultimately, no act of criticism can ever hope to be definitive. Rather, we must embrace the possibility of competing interpretations *for all time*, which is to deny the necessary and embrace the contingent for the sake of the tragic effect.

We want to free the characters from fatalism as well. But so often, just because an event, largely *external* to the character under discussion, goes awry, we feel justified in condemning something internal to that character as flawed. We may say something like: "Of course Shakespeare is saying something negative about Hamlet in having him die the way he does, in *choosing* the particular unfolding, the particular 'accidents' he does. If ultimately Shakespeare were seeking to comment favourably on Hamlet, he would have given us a happy ending instead." This easy polarization into good and evil allies itself with an elementary logical fallacy. The post hoc fallacy says that A before B does not entail that A caused B. In the case of criticism, this fallacy is reversed; often,

that is, when B occurs, we are then compelled, in hindsight, to somehow make the case that *B caused A*. So the death of Hamlet, for example, affects our judgments of prior events. Instead of emphasizing the possible moral worth of Hamlet's delay, we emphasize instead its now evident pernicious qualities.

We seem to be proposing a type of unravelling of the play. The play is to be conceived as an assortment of separate parts, held together by contingency rather than necessity. The task of the critic is not to maintain any kind of uniform interpretation, but to comment specifically on certain fragmented and discreet dramatic units. But what we arrive at is the necessity, even, oddly, the "uniformity" of contingency that is surreptitiously denied by all manner of dialectical criticism. By "dialectical criticism" we mean the sort that stakes itself as an elaborate truth claim, in the manner of a proposed hypothesis, seeking verification or disqualification (properties of truth or falsity) over time, or over an author's oeuvre, i.e. over multiple plays that have no immediate reason being juxtaposed against one another. Reducing criticism to this sort of propositional structure makes criticism of tragedy meaningless. The quest for certainty, or a type of certainty, entails fighting off contingency, so nowhere in our criticism is there acknowledgment enough of the power of the contingent in human affairs, the sort of acknowledgment which criticism true to the tragic effect requires. The only way to bring this intuition to bear is to 1) keep contradictory interpretations open simultaneously and from there 2) imagine alternatives. Whatever alternatives we pursue, we cannot hide from the fact that Shakespeare has still given us a play. Whatever absences we have ultimately leads to presence and vice versa. Counterfactual speculation does not make uniform statements about a play impossible;

rather, such speculation will add to such statements a new level of integrity and accuracy, one that recognizes a fundamental difference between humanistic knowledge on the one hand and scientific, or propositional, knowledge (which seeks out verification in time) on the other.

How, then, do we “verify,” or come to accept, one counterfactual reading over another? A successful counterfactual reading is less a feat of logic than a feat of language. Its success is marked by its rhetorical quality, even its sophistry. Since we know we are dealing with the imaginative *already*, the successful delineation of counterfactual alternatives must serve merely to re-animate or re-excite the tragic feelings we have lost because with the passage of time comes also our increased inability to comprehend the contingent in our reading of tragedy. This sort of reading strategy is designed to elicit feelings of reader helplessness; how to construct a world after that is up to each to decide.

Meaning must be constructed *between* absence and presence. It makes no sense to argue continually for the presence of the text (which no doubt alludes to that which is also not there) on the one hand, or its complete absence on the other (because surely, something *is* there). Derrida, often construed as an apologist for the absence of the text, understands that a moral imperative for a type of presence is nonetheless required.

Differance began by *broaching* alienation and it ends by leaving reappropriation *breached*. Until death. Death is the movement of differance to the extent that that movement is necessarily finite. This means that differance makes the opposition of presence and absence possible. Without the possibility of differance, the desire of presence as

such would not find its breathing space. That means by the same token that this desire carries in itself the destiny of its non-satisfaction.

Differance produces what it forbids, makes possible the very thing that makes it impossible. (His emphasis, *OG* 143)

Yet elsewhere, Derrida also introduces his concept of “trace” (47), a neologism that calls attention to the presence of absence (or absence of presence). Briefly, such a concept is meant to convey that in the present moment, we have no access to Being without simultaneously calling attention to nothingness. Derrida, by using a sign like “trace,” highlights that meaning is not made, or indicative, of something else *out there*—rather, meaning is made in the difference, in opposition, to what is not. The “trace,” moreover, is ahistorical, and points to the fact that any immediate meaning is betrayed by unmeaning. It never points “to the root”; rather a trace creates meaning in the manner of a root system:

We know that the metaphor that would describe the genealogy of a text correctly is still forbidden. In its syntax and its lexicon, in its spacing, by its punctuation, its lacunae, its margins, the historical appurtenance of a text is never a straight line. It is neither causality by contagion, nor the simple accumulation of layers. Nor even the pure juxtaposition of borrowed pieces. And if a text always gives itself a certain representation of its own roots, those roots live only by that representation, by never touching the soil, so to speak. ...To say that one always interweaves roots endlessly, bending them to send down roots among the roots, to pass through the same points again, to redouble old adherences, to circulate

among their differences, to coil around themselves or to be enveloped one in the other, to say that a text is never anything but a *system of roots*, is undoubtedly to contradict at once the concept of system and the pattern of the root. (His emphasis, *OG* 102)

This organic view of meaning as taking “root,” mirrors Frye’s conception of how meaning is to be created in a self-sustaining “anagogic” literary universe which houses both A and its opposite simultaneously. But unlike Frye, Derrida champions a dialectical resolution to this “illogicality”:

In order not to be pure appearance, this contradiction takes on the meaning of a contradiction, and receives its “illogicality,” only through being thought within a finite configuration—the history of metaphysics—and caught within a root system which does not end there and which as yet has no name. (102)

Derrida conceives of difference ending “by leaving reappropriation *breached*.”

Difference occurs over time and ultimately ends with death; never in our finite lives do we find the presence we crave. Moreover, the separation of a system of roots from reality is overturned not by resolving any immediate illogicality, but by mapping out the seeming illogic across a finite configuration of metaphysics—which means, in a sense, to *historicize* the existence of our given root system, one avenue to pursue to establish meaning. But since history has not ended yet, since closure is not imminent, we are in no position now to name whatever dialectic we find ourselves or our particular root system in.

But why should the configuration of metaphysics be finite? A certain conception of history, or time unfolding historically, presupposes that history is indeed finite in the sense that everything with a beginning has an end. But another version or conception of the passage of time, as we have been trying to make the case for here, renders time *infinite* in the present.¹²

As such, we must say that criticism cannot seek out knowledge impervious to time, interpretation true once and for all, irreversible. By focusing on absences in the text, we acknowledge both the text's metaphysical absence *and* presence simultaneously and agree to make meaning, or make the text meaningful, by virtue of our response to its "ethical" or "rhetorical" quality alone. This does not mean we need do away with "historical" or "archetypal" criticism altogether. Though Frye favours the latter, he does want his anatomy to promote the "breaking down of barriers within criticism" (342). We favour, obviously, the ethical sort, the sort by which, according to Frye, literature passes into the anagogic phase in which a Derridean freeplay can thrive.¹³ But what exactly do we mean by anagogy?

In the anagogic phase, literature imitates the total dream of man, and so imitates the thought of a human mind which is at the circumference and not the center of its reality. We see here the completion of the imaginative revolution begun when we passed from the descriptive to the formal phase of symbolism. There, the imitation of nature shifted from a reflection of external nature to a formal organization of which nature was the content. But in the formal phase the poem is still contained by nature, and in the archetypal phase the whole of poetry is still contained within

the limits of the natural, or plausible. When we pass into anagogy, nature becomes not the container, but the thing contained, and the archetypal universal symbols, the city, the garden, the quest, the marriage, are no longer the desirable forms that man constructs inside nature, but are themselves the forms of nature. Nature is now inside the Milky Way. This is not reality, but its conceivable or imaginative limit of desire, which is infinite, eternal, and hence apocalyptic. By an apocalypse I mean primarily the imaginative conception of the whole of nature as the content of an infinite and eternal living body which, if not human, is closer to being human than to being inanimate. (119)

By anagogy we take the literary world to be *saturated* rather than lacking. The anagogic universe, that is, houses both A and \sim A, both presence and absence, both the theatre and its double, both signs and masks, and no dialectical methodology exists to resolve these antinomies once and for all, to verify either A or \sim A. Significance no longer occurs along a chain of signifiers leading to the future and some, as of yet, undiscovered meaning. Signification, meaning, difference, are to be found by looking at absences suggested (always) already. Moreover, we are not removing or reducing “supplements” (Derrida, *WD* 365) by looking at absences, but adding to them, *further* saturating the anagogic universe. Only by such saturation, that is, do we come up to and acknowledge the limitlessness of our desires, albeit within a stable anagogic universe in which the text is centred. Our criticism seeks not to displace or decentre the text by placing it within an external historical narrative (the standard methodology of deconstruction). Rather, we seek to discover the text’s centredness through the

application of centripetal force—i.e. via *internal* displacement within an anagogical universe. Such a method is indeed the only way to find tragic meaning in an otherwise profane (i.e. irreversible) conception of time.

Frye likely did not have counterfactual criticism in mind when he composed his *Anatomy of Criticism* or when he formulated his conception of anagogy. Though he is careful not to offer prescriptions of any kind, he does suggest that meaning can be made via a historicist method:

Rousseau says that the original society of nature and reason has been overlaid by the corruptions of civilization, and that a sufficiently courageous revolutionary act could reestablish it. It is nothing either for or against this argument to say that it is informed by the myth of sleeping beauty. But we cannot agree or disagree with Rousseau until we fully understand what he does say, and while of course we can understand him well enough without extracting the myth, there is much to be gained by extracting the myth if the myth is in fact, as we are suggesting here, the source of the coherence of his argument. (353-54)

Tracing out *causes*, or reading ordinary myths as causes attesting to coherence is one way to carry on in the anagogic universe. But if we can understand Rousseau well enough without the myth, it remains to be seen of what value it would be to discover the myth, which does not mediate meaning in the moment. The discovery of the sleeping beauty myth merely suggests that whatever play on absence or presence Rousseau manages to exploit has been achieved before. Does Rousseau's conception *derive* its meaning from the tale of sleeping beauty? Even if there is some conceivable

chain connecting the two, it is not necessary to assert the chain as the *only* thing that is, by default, *real* or necessary, ostensibly “present.” If we insist that Rousseau matters now, or should be (re)read now, then his words must matter not *because* of some chain existing a priori, but in opposition to whatever absences his work is able to call attention to immediately. Rousseau’s worth must be evaluated outside of a dialectical process of unfolding that ultimately sees the acquisition of presence or more degrees of freedom as the teleological goal of culture—the sort of criticism that demands verification.

Along with Frye, Cavell has been of immense value to this project. His thesis, that the working out of what philosophy calls an “other minds” (*CR* xxiii) skepticism is realized in literature as tragedy unapologetically *assumes* presence, the existence of the self that requires negotiation in the present, rather than some hopeful deferral of our infinite responsibilities to an other (to another time). The “direction” of knowledge is pertinent. The trajectory we seek to map out is of first assuming limits and then discovering limitlessness. The usual trajectory of traditional metaphysical speculation, including even Derrida’s critique of it, has been to begin with a consideration of limitlessness. From there, one goes on to establish suitable limits, usually constrained by sense perception and hence, knowable (i.e. prescriptive) methodology. We can only discuss what we know, and if we cannot know the infinite, then it is beyond criticism to pursue it. We want to reverse this, establishing the finitude of presence, of the written text, before going on to establish the infinitude of desire through the consideration of infinite absences or possibilities. Fischer’s critique of deconstruction, which makes use of Cavell, touches on the ethical implications of these respective trajectories of thought:

Cavell's account of other-minds skepticism encourages us to look beneath the disappointment [of absence] ... and to see the deconstructionist as not so much discovering his distance from others as trying—unsuccessfully—to distance himself from them. Instead of being ineluctably hemmed in by language, for Cavell our relationships with others are exposed—to our confusion, our hesitation, our courage, our fear, to everything that makes us our history.... From this point of view, our condemnation to meaning tempts the deconstructionist to look for a reprieve that he finally cannot get, or can only get by trying to empty the text, even kill it. Instead of justifying the deconstructionist's actions, the quest for certain knowledge of the text excuses them. What looks like doubt brought on by the insistence on well-grounded insight into the text ends up resembling avoidance of what the text and language disclose. The deconstructionist's violence against the text is not the unintended consequence of his longing for a surer connection with it, as the deconstructionist himself would have it. The presence of the text is for some reason the deconstructionist's problem, not its absence. He wants the hollowed-out, indecipherable text that he gets. (77-78)

Discovering the "end" of metaphysics in time and leaving it there is less a critical move of intellectual responsibility than one of avoidance, which mirrors, in Cavell and Fischer's view, not an intellectual lack leading to tragedy, but plenitude—the sort of infinity of significance a human being is burdened by and would rather not deal with or acknowledge. Insisting on absence means that the future can never yield presence; but

such an assertion acts as cover for an abundance of meaning and significance existing *now*.

J.V. Cunningham, who makes a convincing plea for the artifice of “wonder” in our experience of tragedy, notes that Elizabethan audiences were apt to feel wonder at the marvellous turn of events offered up by a tragic plot, whether through “unusual diction” or “unusual event[s]” (71). But how is such a thing possible when the stories used by Shakespeare were well circulated beforehand? What Shakespeare presented to his audiences was the deep exploration of character subjectivities through poetic verse in which audiences were reminded, despite knowing they were watching a tragedy, that these now complex characters had will and foresight and fortitude enough to possibly avoid tragedy. However an ending may reiterate the “primacy” of a tragic fate, such reiteration occurs largely in hindsight. The occurrence of such a fate could only resonate at a deeper level when juxtaposed against the absence, or *non-necessity* of such a fate. Shakespeare’s tragic characters are interesting because we are tempted with the possibility that they may indeed be worthy enough to avoid tragedy. We may not immediately know or understand how; but by considering possibilities, we are reminded of how vulnerable human beings are to contingency. One last quotation from Cunningham:

[W]hat is perhaps the greatest single difference between our habits of thought and those of the Middle Ages and Renaissance is located in the problem of continuity. We believe in the continuous. We believe that contraries shade off into each other. We believe a character is real when he is neither good nor bad but a middling gray. We disbelieve in, though

we have not yet disproved, the law of excluded middle. But the Renaissance believed firmly in Aristotelian logic: for them, B was either A or Not-A. (120)

That we exist and operate within a matrix of choices and responsibilities is one reason, Cunningham tells us, that we turn to “the novel” (119). A novel has greater opportunity to diffuse individual choice amongst a plethora of extenuating circumstances and contingencies. An insistence on gray is not the denial of meaning, but the deferral of meaning per se—not that B is in fact, or could be, A, but that B exists in the future. But if we want to explore the possibility that B is A in the anagogic universe in the present, what sort of difference are we insisting on?

Frye says that the “discovery or *anagnorisis* which comes at the end of the tragic plot is not simply the knowledge by the hero of what has happened to him ... but the recognition of the determined shape of the life he has created for himself, with an implicit comparison with the uncreated potential life he has forsaken” (212). The discovery we have come to champion is not a discovery of something in or over time, but the discovery of how it is or what it is we know, i.e. how we create meaning, in the present—conceived not as a discovery but a *rediscovery* of a knowledge which – though latent, perhaps even absent – is ostensibly *there*. Counterfactual critics do not disagree with Aristotelian logic; indeed, like Elizabethan audiences, what we want is to *insist* on the difference.

We can now isolate a minimal methodology. First, we must accept the play as present, not absent. Second, we must understand the particular type of knowledge we are afforded within the world of the play. In *Hamlet*, for example, we are given

knowledge about the past; in *Lear*, we begin with no prior knowledge; in *Macbeth*, we are given a prophecy about the future; in *The Winter's Tale*, we are given a ruling on the present in the present not subject to any sort of verification; and, in *Othello*, we understand Othello's jealousy as a supposition about the future which need not come true (not ever) by matter of either convention or necessity. Third, we must figure out the tendencies and desires such knowledge creates in our imagination (as mediated, more often than not, by the central protagonist). That is, we have a desire for verification about the past in *Hamlet*, for clear moral footing in *Lear*, for action (for the sake of convention) in *Macbeth*, for present verification in *The Winter's Tale*, and for an end to dialectical sickness (i.e. a desire to *know*, one way or the other) in *Othello*. Lastly, we must take wilful steps to deny or problematize these expectations. (It may help, even, to conceive of, or implement, this methodology in reverse order.) The results may be surprising.

To the question, where would it (i.e. counterfactual speculation) end?—the answer is that it need not, not ever. Counterfactual criticism is an intervention, the sort necessary to tie our experience of Shakespeare's plays more immediately to subjective responses, hence an attempt to make Shakespeare matter now by taking a second look at the deep subjectivities he has given us, to "novelize" his plays. But where novels exist in a matrix of social and historical contingencies *already*, Shakespeare, in presenting us only with suggestive character speech, invites greater consideration of character possibilities in the present. Moreover, novels are designed to bring to bear a plethora of competing contingencies, historical or otherwise, hence deferring meaning absolutely to some time in the future. What we want in our understanding of

Shakespeare's tragic plays is to make a consideration of competing contingencies capable of transmitting tragic meaning in the present, rather than simply deferring its significance, thereby trivializing it. The "radical" approach of this methodology comes in granting each individual the opportunity to create meaning *now*, to unleash the subversive potential of tragedy's devastation not by seeking to overcome it, but by allowing tragedy to put into clearer focus just what it is we take to be of vital significance, of what exactly we hold dear. A reader of the plays is invited to create a world of interpretation based on the articulation of possible contingencies that could convincingly be said to bear on the character at hand. Such interpretation is rooted not only in character subjectivity, but reader subjectivity as well. In this way is counterfactual criticism an extension (perhaps renewal is a better term) of Bradleyan character criticism. Unleashing the "subversive" potential of tragedy in this way is less a call to action and more to contemplation. Why exactly should students bother with such contemplation? So as to regain, or reanimate, a feeling of intensity when reading the plays.

Finally, counterfactual criticism is meant to de-historicize our position in relation to the plays in order to make the tragic effect resonant in our imagination. Skirting a discussion of tragedy through the application of finite critical precepts (largely originating from beyond the text) is what Cavell would call an "avoidance" of tragedy—circumventing the presence and plenitude of a text before us by appealing all too hastily to its absence. It is not tragic that we cannot make meaning, but that we continue to defer it.

8. Endnotes

¹ Wilbur Sanders has made hay of these very lines before and argues, as my fourth chapter does, that whatever the nature of Macbeth's ambition, it does not "*demand ... murder*" (emphasis mine)—hence suggesting that other options, including bypassing murder altogether, are certainly within Macbeth's purview. See Sanders and Jacobson 70.

² The charge that one must "historicize new historicism," as Catherine Belsey puts it, are prevalent, though a) somewhat muted and b) somewhat unconvincing. For example, James Cunningham tells us how "Stanley Fish sees new historicism as bound to operate within the positivist assumptions that it explicitly opposes" and how "Fish maintains that without this bracketing off of textuality, historical as opposed to historiographical analysis could not take place." Moreover, where both Greenblatt and Howard have expressly called for the necessity of acknowledging the present in criticism (or, in Howard's case, calling attention to the "myth of objectivity" of the past), neither is willing to do so beyond asserting the odd perfunctory bromide. Greenblatt, for example, has said that one's "voice is important" and that the only way to revitalize much of literary criticism is "to actually put yourself on the line as somebody." It is less that the past is a refashioning and more that to make the present is to refashion the past. So the question becomes a moral one: how to do this responsibly, ethically, humanely? This sort of question has not been addressed squarely by New Historicists, indeed cannot be, because, in the last instance, if all we have to shape the present is some *version* of the past, we must still reach for some *authoritative* version of the past—still, no doubt, rooted in the promise of the objectivity of *things* rather than texts. See Grady, *Presentist* 27; Cunningham, *Shakespeare* 79-80; Greenblatt *Wicked*.

³ Most editions of *Hamlet* conflate parts of the Folio (F) and Quarto 2 (Q2). *The Norton Shakespeare*, whose notations we are following, sets off Q2 lines from those of F by using decimals.

⁴ Greg recognizes that Hamlet only utters four lines in the time between Luciano's pouring of the poison in the player-King's ears and the King's rising—hardly enough time for Hamlet to do all of the things Greg has him do, including “shouting, gesticulating” and not quite springing at Claudius's throat. Yet Greg, in a note of his own, maintains that such is the only “legitimate” reading, reminding us that in the following scene and “elsewhere, it is assumed that it was Hamlet's behavior, not the King's, that broke up the court.” See Greg 406.

⁵ Here is Cavell: “How can you tell that consent to be governed together has been given? What I took as Locke's answer to Hume's raillery in asking where our consent is recorded only says that we can tell where consent has *not* been given, where pockets or strata of a state of nature inevitably exist. But is there no positive criterion? There may be reasons why the negative here, as elsewhere, is more visible than the positive—as, according to J.L. Austin, there are many ways in which an action may not be free, but no single criterion that shows positively that it is free, no single quality of freedom; as there are many ways in which a statement may be false (an exaggeration, a lie, an understandable mistake, and so on) but no one way in which it is true. But I mean that there may be a reason for the greater visibility of the absence over the presence of consent that is concerned with the political function of consent itself.” Cavell, *CW* 60.

⁶ A paraphrase of Cavell's "there is zero relevant difference between me and others in contemplating material objects. But if I am meditating others, then I face an instance of the very topic of my meditation, one whose relevant difference from me is all the difference in the world." See Cavell, *CR* 454.

⁷ This tack is taken by James Conant in his rebuttal of Gerald Bruns's characterization of Cavellian skepticism in *Critical Inquiry* (Spring 1991). The "prescriptive" antidote to skepticism, through the simple acknowledgment of "the limits of knowledge," is not a misconception unique to departments of literature. Indeed, in his long note, Conant says "[w]ith respect to this assumption (namely that the role of acknowledgment is to affirm the limits of knowledge), [philosopher Paul] Guyer's reading [of Cavell] is virtually indistinguishable from Bruns's." So too, we might add, is Critchley's. See Conant 631.

⁸ Whether or not external world skepticism is enough to warrant the type of seriousness/sense of scandal Cavell would have us believe it does (or should) is taken up quite effectively by Richard Rorty when he says that the pair of the competing skepticisms Cavell highlights and conflates "have all sorts of historical connections, but they are dialectically independent." Restricting ourselves to one side of Cavell's asymmetry between competing skepticisms (that of other minds), restricts us from a broader depiction or understanding of tragedy that should encompass *something* of the external world—which, to be sure, includes other minds anyhow. Philosophers are not conceiving of the external world this way (i.e. in considering other *possible* worlds), so to say a consideration of counterfactual worlds is indicative of *that* type of external world skepticism is hasty. But to make external world skepticism part of the consideration of tragedy is something Cavell

(arguably) encourages. But to zero-in on other minds alone is to narrow our definition of tragedy, philosophically or otherwise. *The world is out there, and, possibly, it is not; this is tragic.* See Rorty 13.

⁹ Cavell does talk about the “acceptance of the sufficiency of human finitude.” But here his words are meant to prop up the indeterminacy of finitude, hence to commit to a world that places infinite demands on us armed only with finitude, a fate that leaves us remarkably open to the contingent. Accepting our own finitude does not mean retreating from the world because we can’t make sense of it, but going along in the world and only being able to make partial, or piecemeal sense of it, to drown, so to speak, in infinity and attempt to stay afloat. We must have the courage, that is, to face limitlessness, *infinitude*. See Cavell, *MWM* 61.

¹⁰ This marks the trajectory of Bradley’s reading of the play, which seeks to establish, definitively, when Macbeth has it in his head to murder Duncan. Though rather than delay the possibility, Bradley takes pains to quicken it, concluding that Macbeth had designs on the Crown prior to the witches’ prophecy, sealing Macbeth’s fate before the play even begins. See Bradley 386.

¹¹ Sianne Ngai, in seeking to establish the dramatic worth of characters who are not prone to action, but to “ugly feelings” (i.e. a range of “negative emotions” that lead not to grand dramatic outward action but inner passivity and confusion) claims that these feelings “under[write] canonically major forms and genres like Homeric epic and Shakespearean tragedy.” But this does not mean that a discussion of negative emotion vis-a-vis the characters of, say, high tragedy is beyond the pale. Though formal constraints in canonical

works may demand an ultimate “purgation” of “pity and fear,” the feelings themselves are no different, nor any “grander” in the case of tragedy. See Ngai 1, 9-10.

¹² Derrida distinguishes between the temporality of differance and the atemporality of the “trace.” Discussing the structuralism of Levi-Strauss, he says: “by reducing history, Levi-Strauss has treated as it deserves a concept which has always been in complicity with a teleological and eschatological metaphysics, in other words, paradoxically, in complicity with that philosophy of presence to which it was believed history could be opposed. The thematic of historicity, although it seems to be a somewhat late arrival in philosophy, has always been required by the determination of being as presence ... it could be shown that the concept of *episteme* has always called forth that of *historia*, if history is always the unity of a becoming, as tradition of truth or development of science or knowledge oriented toward the appropriation of truth in presence and self-presence....” (WD 367-68).

Derrida says that the metaphysical quest for presence *invites* “*historia*,” a story or dialectic of becoming that presupposes history as the story of its (not-yet-attained) presence. Yet elsewhere in the same essay, Derrida also notes that a conception of metaphysics as history is the only way to begin to extricate ourselves from a misguided obsession with metaphysics.

¹³ Indeed, whether Frye and Derrida are destined to be rivals is taken up by Michael Happy. Opposing Derrida’s “absence,” even “*aporia*” to a Fryvian “*kerygma*,” Happy tells us that “[k]erygma ... suggest[s] a wholly conscious awareness of our sustained participation in an ongoing act of recreation in which the infinite is always here and the eternal always now; in which the dead, the living, and the unborn are revealed to be members of one

community of shared concern.” Happy also notes that the Derridean deconstruction operates under the parameters of a “discursive” philosophical tradition, where what Frye highlights is the *non-discursive* mechanics of the myth and metaphor as sites of meaning. But Happy does say that “Derrida’s freeplay of meaning ... while it may not refer to, nevertheless does not seem to preclude, kerygma’s literal-metaliteral dialectic.” See Happy 83, 84, 91, 93.

9. Bibliography

- Adams, Barry B. *Coming-To-Know: Recognition and the Complex Plot in Shakespeare*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2000. Print.
- Adelman, Janet. *Suffering Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays*. New York: Routledge, 1992. Print.
- Aristotle. *The Poetics*. Ed. T.A. Moxon. New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1934. Print.
- Armstrong, Paul B. "The Conflict of Interpretations and the Limits of Pluralism." *PMLA* 98.3 (1983): 341-52. Print.
- Artaud, Antonin. *The Theatre and its Double*. Trans. Mary Caroline Richards. New York: Grove Press, 1958. Print.
- Auerbach, Erich. *Mimesis: the Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. 1953. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton UP, 1968. Print.
- Bamber, Linda. *Comic Women, Tragic Men: A Study of Gender and Genre in Shakespeare*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1982. Print.
- Bates, Jennifer Ann. *Hegel and Shakespeare on Moral Imagination*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2010. Print.
- Bayley, John. *Shakespeare and Tragedy*. London: Routledge, 1981. Print.
- Bazin, André. *What is Cinema?* Trans. Timothy Barnard. Montreal: Caboose, 2009. Print.
- Belsey, Catherine. *The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama*. New York: Meuthen, 1985. Print.
- . *Why Shakespeare?* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. Print.

- Bloom, Harold. *The Western Canon*. 1994. New York: Riverhead, 1995. Print.
- Booth, Stephen. *King Lear, Macbeth, Indefinition, and Tragedy*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1983. Print.
- Bradley, A.C. *Shakespearean Tragedy*. Ed. Robert Shaughnessy. 1904. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. Print.
- Bristol, Michael. *Big-time Shakespeare*. London: Routledge, 1996. Print.
- Bristol, Michael. "How Many Children Did She Have?" *Philosophical Shakespeares*. Ed. John J. Joughin. London: Routledge, 2000. 18-33. Print.
- . *Shakespeare and Moral Agency*. Ed. Michael Bristol. London: Continuum, 2010. Print.
- Brooke, Nicholas. *Shakespeare's Early Tragedies*. 1968. London: Meuthen, 1973. Print.
- Bushnell, Rebecca. *Tragedy: a Short Introduction*. Malden: Blackwell, 2008. Print.
- Callaghan, Dymphna. *Woman and Gender in Renaissance Tragedy*. Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989. Print.
- Carroll, Noël. *The Philosophy of Motion Pictures*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2008. Print.
- Cartwright, Kent. *Shakespearean Tragedy and its Double: the Rhythms of Audience Response*. University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1991. Print.
- Cave, Terence. *Recognitions: A Study in Poetics*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988. Print.
- Cavell, Stanley. *Cities of Words*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Belknap Press, 2004. Print.
- . *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare*. 1987. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2003. Print.
- . *Must We Mean What We Say?* Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1976. Print.
- . *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Belknap Press, 2005. Print.

- . *The Claim of Reason*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1979. Print.
- . *The World Viewed*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1971. Print.
- Charney, Maurice, ed. *"Bad" Shakespeare: Revaluations of the Shakespearean Canon*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988. Print.
- Conant, James. "On Bruns, on Cavell." *Critical Inquiry* 17.3 (1991): 616-34. Print.
- Cooke, Katharine. *A.C. Bradley and His Influence in Twentieth-Century Shakespearean Criticism*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972. Print.
- Critchley, Simon. "Cavell's 'Romanticism' and Cavell's Romanticism." *Contending with Stanley Cavell*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005. 37-54. Print.
- Cunningham, J.V. *Woe or Wonder: The Emotional Effect of Shakespearean Tragedy*. 1951. Chicago: The Swallow Press Inc., 1964. Print.
- Cunningham, James. *Shakespeare's Tragedies and Modern Critical Theory*. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1997. Print.
- Danson, Lawrence. *Tragic Alphabet: Shakespeare's Drama of Language*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1974. Print.
- Dart, Ron. "Charles Taylor And The Hegelian Eden Tree: Canadian Philosophy And Compradorism." Web. 1 May 2007. *Vive le Canada*. 2 August 2011.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Margins of Philosophy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982. Print.
- . *Of Grammatology*. Trans. Gayatri Spivak. Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1976. Print.
- . *Writing and Difference*. Trans. Alan Bass. 1978. London: Routledge, 2001. Print.
- Dollimore, Jonathan. *Radical Tragedy*. 1984. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. Print.

- Donaldson, Jeffrey and Alan Mendelson, eds. *Frye and the Word*. Toronto: U of T Press, 2004. Print.
- Donovan, Barna William. *Blood, Guns, and Testosterone: Action Films, Audiences, and a Thirst for Violence*. Plymouth: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2010. Print.
- Drakakis, John, ed. *Alternative Shakespeares*. London: Meuthen, 1985. Print.
- . *Shakespearean Tragedy*. Ed. John Drakakis. New York: Longman, 1992. Print.
- Dusinberre, Juliet. *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women*. London: Macmillan, 1975. Print.
- Eagleton, Terry. *After Theory*. New York: Basic Books, 2003. Print.
- . *Sweet Violence: the Idea of the Tragic*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2003. Print.
- . *William Shakespeare*. New York: Blackwell, 1986. Print.
- Eliot, T.S. "Hamlet and his Problems." *The Sacred Wood*. London: Meuthen, 1948. Print. XX.
Print.
- Else, Gerald F. *Aristotle's Poetics: The Argument*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1957. Print.
- Eshelman, Raoul. *Performatism, or, the End of Postmodernism*. Aurora, CO: Davies Group, 2008. Print.
- Evans, Bertrand. *Shakespeare's Tragic Practice*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979. Print.
- Evans, Malcolm. *Signifying Nothing: Truth's True Contents in Shakespeare's Text*. 1986.
Brighton: Harvester, 1989. Print.
- Felperin, Howard. *Shakespearean Representation: Mimesis and Modernity in Elizabethan Tragedy*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1977. Print.
- Ferguson, Niall. *Virtual History*. New York: Basic Books, 1999. Print.

- Fischer, Michael. *Stanley Cavell and Literary Skepticism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989. Print.
- French, Marilyn. *Shakespeare's Division of Experience*. New York: Summit, 1981. Print.
- Frye, Northrop. *Fools of Time: Studies in Shakespearean Tragedy*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967. Print.
- Frye, Northrop. "King Lear." *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: King Lear*. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Bloom's Literary Criticism, 2010. 13-30. Print.
- Frye, Northrop. *Anatomy of Criticism*. 1957. New York: Atheneum, 1969. Print.
- Gans, Eric. *Originary Thinking*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1995. Print.
- Garber, Marjorie. *Shakespeare After All*. New York: Pantheon, 2004. Print.
- . "Shakespeare in Slow Motion." *Profession* (2010): 151-64. Print.
- Girard, René. *A Theatre of Envy: William Shakespeare*. Herefordshire: Gracewing, 2000. Print.
- . "Hamlet's Dull Revenge." *A Theatre of Envy*. 1991. South Bend, Indiana: St. Augustine's Press, 2004. 271-89. Print.
- . *The Girard Reader*. Ed. James G. William. New York: The Crossroad Publishing Co., 2002. Print.
- Grady, Hugh and Terence Hawkes, eds. *Presentist Shakespeares*. New York: Routledge, 2007. Print.
- Grady, Hugh. *Shakespeare, Machiavelli, and Montaigne: Power and Subjectivity from Richard II to Hamlet*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002. Print.

- . *Shakespeare's Universal Wolf: Studies in Early Modern Reification*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996. Print.
- Greenblatt, Stephen et al., eds. *The Norton Shakespeare*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997. Print.
- Greenblatt, Stephen. *Shakespearean Negotiations*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988. Print.
- Greenblatt, Stephen. "Stephen Greenblatt: The Wicked Son." *Bookwire*. 2001. Web. Accessed December 2012.
- Greer, Germaine. *The Female Eunuch*. London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1970. Print.
- Greg, W.W. "Hamlet's Hallucination." *The Modern Language Review* 12.4 (1917): 393-421. Print.
- Happy, Michael. "The Reality of the Created: From Deconstruction to Recreation." *Frye and the Word: Religious Contexts in the Writings of Northrop Frye*. Eds. Jeffrey Donaldson and Alan Mendelson. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004. 81-96. Print.
- Hartley, Andrew James. "Page and Stage Again: Rethinking Renaissance Character Phenomenologically." *New Directions in Renaissance Drama and Performance Studies*. Ed. Sarah Werner. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. 77-93. Print.
- Hawkes, Terence, ed. *Alternative Shakespeares, vol. 2*. London: Routledge, 1996. Print.
- . *Shakespeare in the Present*. New York: Routledge, 2002. Print.
- Hawthorn, Geoffrey. *Plausible Worlds*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991. Print.

Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. *Hegel on Tragedy*. Eds. Anne and Henry Paolucci. Smyrna: The Bagehot Council, 2001. Print.

Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. "The Spirit of Christianity and its Fate." *Philosophers on Shakespeare*. Ed. Paul A. Kottman. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2009. 44-56. Print.

Heilman, Robert Bechtold. *Tragedy and Melodrama: Versions of Experience*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1968. Print.

Heller, Agnes. "Historical Truth and Poetic Truth." *Philosophers on Shakespeare*. Ed. Paul A. Kottman. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2009. 184-92. Print.

Honigmann, E.A.J. *Shakespeare: Seven Tragedies; The Dramatist's Manipulation of Response*. London: MacMillan, 1976. Print.

Howard, Jean E. "The New Historicism in Renaissance Studies." *Shakespeare: an Anthology of Criticism, 1945-2000*. Ed. Russ McDonald. Malden: Blackwell, 2004. 458-80. Print.

Jardine, Lisa. *Still Harping on Daughters: Women and Drama in the Age of Shakespeare*. Brighton: Harvester, 1983. Print.

Jenkins, Harold, ed. *Hamlet*. New York: Arden Shakespeare, 1982. Print.

Johnson, Samuel. "King Lear". *Preface to Shakespeare, by Samuel Johnson*. 28 August 2010. Web. University of Adelaide Library. 22 January 2011.

Johnson, Samuel. "The Preface to Shakespeare". *Preface to Shakespeare, by Samuel Johnson*. 28 August 2010. Web. University of Adelaide Library. 22 January 2011.

Jones, Emrys. *Scenic Form in Shakespeare*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971. Print.

Jones, Ernest. *Hamlet and Oedipus*. 1949. London: W.W. Norton & Co., 1976. Print.

- Kahan, Jeffrey. "If Only: Alternatives and the Self of King Lear." *King Lear: New Critical Essays*. Ed. Jeffrey Kahan. New York: Routledge, 2008. 351-60. Print.
- Kahn, Coppélia. *Man's Estate: Masculine Identity in Shakespeare*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981. Print.
- Kahneman, Daniel. *Thinking Fast and Slow*. Web. Random House Digital, 2011.
- Kastan, David Scott. "'A rarity most beloved': Shakespeare and the Idea of Tragedy." A *Companion to Shakespeare's Works*. Eds. Richard Dutton and Jean E. Howard. Vol. 1. Malden: Blackwell, 2003. 4 vols. 6-22. Print.
- Kaufmann, Walter. *Tragedy and Philosophy*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1968. Print.
- Klapwijk, Jacob. *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Critical Theory and the Messianic Light*. Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2010. Print.
- Knight, George Wilson. *The Wheel of Fire*. London: Oxford UP, 1930. Print.
- Kottman, Paul A. *Tragic Conditions in Shakespeare*. Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 2009. Print.
- Laroque, François. *Shakespeare's Festive World: Elizabethan Seasonal Entertainment and the Professional Stage*. Trans. Janet Lloyd. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991. Print.
- Levy, Eric P. *Hamlet and the Rethinking of Man*. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2008. Print.
- Locke, John. *Two Treatises of Government and A Letter Concerning Toleration*. Ed. Ian Shapiro. New Haven: Yale UP, 2003. Print.
- Lynch, Jack, ed. *King Lear: Adapted by Nahum Tate*. N.d. Web. Rutgers University, Newark. Accessed 1 January 2011.

- MacGregor, David. "Canada's Hegel." February 1994. Web. *Literary Review of Canada*.
 Accessed 28 July 2011.
- McKenzie, William and Theodora Papadopoulou, eds. *Shakespeare and I*. London:
 Continuum, 2012. Print.
- McLuhan, Marshall. *The Gutenberg Galaxy: the Making of Typographic Man*. Toronto:
 University of Toronto Press, 1962. Print.
- Minsky, Rosalind, ed. *Psychoanalysis and Gender: an Introductory Reader*. London:
 Routledge, 1996. Print.
- Montrose, Louis. "Professing the Renaissance: The Poetics and Politics of Culture." *The New
 Historicism*. Ed. H. Aram Veesser. London: Routledge, 1989. 15-36. Print.
- Muir, Kenneth. *Shakespeare's Tragic Sequence*. Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 1979. Print.
- Nevo, Ruth. *Tragic Form in Shakespeare*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1972. Print.
- Ngai, Sianne. *Ugly Feelings*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2005. Print.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*. Trans. Peter
 Preuss. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1980. Print.
- . *The Birth of Tragedy and the Case of Wagner*. Trans. Walter Kaufmann. Toronto:
 Random House, 1967. Print.
- Nuttall, A.D. *Why Does Tragedy Give Pleasure?* Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996. Print.
- Oort, Richard Van. "Hamlet's Theatre of Envy." *The Originary Hypothesis*. Ed. Adam Katz.
 Aurora: The Davies Group, 2007. 151-69. Print.
- Pocock, J.G.A. *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic
 Republican Tradition*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton UP, 1975. Print.

Popper, Karl. *The Poverty of Historicism*. 1957. London: Routledge Classics, 2002. Print.

Poulet, Georges. *Studies in Human Time*. Trans. Elliott Coleman. Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1956. Print.

Price, Hereward. *Construction in Shakespeare*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1951. Print.

Rabkin, Norman. *Shakespeare and the Common Understanding*. 1967. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984. Print.

Ricoeur, Paul. *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*. Trans. Denis Savage. New Haven: Yale UP, 1970. Print.

Rorty, Richard. "Cavell on Skepticism." *Contending with Stanley Cavell*. Ed. Russell B. Goodman. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005. 10-21. Print.

Sanders, Wilbur and Howard Jacobson, eds. *Shakespeare's Magnanimity: Four Tragic Heroes, Their Friends and Family*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1978. Print.

Sanders, Wilbur. *The Dramatist and the Received Idea*. London: Cambridge UP, 1968. Print.

Schmitt, Carl. *Hamlet or Hecuba: the Irruption of Time into the Play*. Trans. Simona Draghici. Alexandria: Plutarch Press, 2006. Print.

Shakespeare, William. *Othello*. Ed. Kim F. Hall. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2007. Print.

—. *The Winter's Tale*. Ed. Mario DiGangi. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2008. Print.

Simkin, Stevie. *Early Modern Tragedy and the Cinema of Violence*. Houndmills: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006. Print.

Snyder, Susan. *The Comic Matrix of Shakespeare's Tragedies*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1979. Print.

Sontag, Susan. *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*. 1966. New York: Picador, 1996. Print.

Stam, Robert. *Reflexivity in Film and Literature: From Don Quixote to Jean-Luc Godard*. 1985. New York: Columbia UP, 1992. Print.

Steiner, George. *The Death of Tragedy*. New York: Knopf, 1961. Print.

Steinkraus, Warren E., ed. *New Studies in Hegel*. Holt: Rinehart & Winston, 1971. Print.

Stoll, E.E. *Art and Artifice in Shakespeare*. New York: Barnes & Noble, 1962. Print.

Taleb, Nassim Nicholas. *Black Swan*. New York: Random House, 2007. Print.

Vickers, Brian. *Appropriating Shakespeare: Contemporary Critical Quarrels*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1993. Print.

Williams, Raymond. *Modern Tragedy*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1966. Print.

Wilson, Dover. *What Happens in Hamlet*. 1935. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1959. Print.

Yachnin, Paul. *Stage-Wrights: Shakespeare, Jonson, Middleton, and the Making of Theatrical Value*. Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1997. Print.