

Loughborough University
Institutional Repository

*Review of E. A. J.
Honigmann, 'Shakespeare:
seven tragedies revisited: the
dramatist's manipulation of
response' (Basingstoke:
Palgrave, 2002)*

This item was submitted to Loughborough University's Institutional Repository by the/an author.

Citation: EGAN, G., 2002. Review of E. A. J. Honigmann, 'Shakespeare: seven tragedies revisited: the dramatist's manipulation of response' (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002). *Around the Globe*, 22. p. 49

Additional Information:

- This is a book review.

Metadata Record: <https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/2134/3952>

Publisher: Shakespeare's Globe

Please cite the published version.

This item was submitted to Loughborough's Institutional Repository (<https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/>) by the author and is made available under the following Creative Commons Licence conditions.



CC creative commons
COMMONS DEED

Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5

You are free:

- to copy, distribute, display, and perform the work

Under the following conditions:

BY: **Attribution.** You must attribute the work in the manner specified by the author or licensor.

Noncommercial. You may not use this work for commercial purposes.

No Derivative Works. You may not alter, transform, or build upon this work.

- For any reuse or distribution, you must make clear to others the license terms of this work.
- Any of these conditions can be waived if you get permission from the copyright holder.

Your fair use and other rights are in no way affected by the above.

This is a human-readable summary of the [Legal Code \(the full license\)](#).

[Disclaimer](#) 

For the full text of this licence, please go to:
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.5/>

Review of E. A. J. Honigmann *Seven tragedies revisited: The dramatist's manipulation of response* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002) ISBN 0333995821 pp. ix+275

Some works on Shakespeare deserve reprinting not only because their important insights on the plays should be studied by each new generation, but also because they capture a particular moment in the development of the subject. Honigmann's book, in this category, is a reprinted 1976 classic valuable not only for its insights into *Julius Caesar*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Coriolanus* (plus, newly written for this edition, chapters on *Henry 5* and *As You Like It*) but also for a prefatory argument defending a particular kind of character analysis. The mid-1970s were the time of Reader-Response (or Reception Theory) criticism in English Literature which, rather than treating it as a hermeneutic singularity, attended to what actually happens *while* a book is being read, especially by someone who has not read it before. The experience of *Paradise Lost* as one starts Book 3 (up to which Satan's perspective has dominated) is entirely different from that got as one finishes Book 10, and both are as much conditioned by the reader's mind as anything immanent in the work. Honigmann took this insight to the study of drama to stress the importance of the performance as an event experienced through time: "Each spectator participates creatively: consciously or unconsciously he sifts all impressions, compares them with earlier ones, flashes back and forth to the present, revises his expectations".

Honigmann tracks the changing audience sympathy for central characters in the plays, and although this is a single rising/falling variable--he even imagines "plugging ourselves into a private galvanometer" for a reading--its determinants are many, varied, and subtle. Character criticism is open to the charge of mistaking fictional beings for real ones, an error wittily mocked in the ironic title of L. C Knight's famous essay of 1933, "How many children had Lady Macbeth?". Defending his approach, Honigmann argued that dramatic characters are somewhat like our next-door neighbours, about whose behaviour we may reach tentative evaluations based on the partial evidence we gain when they are present supplemented with what others speak of them in their absence. As Howard Felperin later put it in *The Uses of the Canon* borrowing the same metaphor, we do not assume that our neighbours cease to exist just because they go indoors. In transforming the Brutus he got from North's translation of Plutarch's *Lives*, Shakespeare made him loftier but more self-regarding, and thus "an intellectual hideously corrupted by high-mindedness". Honigmann's style is learned but witty and uses to great effect the disarming device of asking rhetorical questions with startling premises, such as why did Shakespeare "re-write the tragedy of Brutus and call it *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*?" Shakespeare, Honigmann argues, manipulates our judgement of Hamlet's powers of judgement, and by making him likeable gets us to accept his disturbing actions and his trusting of a ghost. Reader-Response criticism might now seem naive in reducing art to an account of its effects--how could it explain the literariness of Hobbes's *Leviathan* or Darwin's *Origin of Species*?--but in his measuring of audience response Honigmann's analysis is strikingly modern in its attention to performativity.

This new edition was created by reprinting the first 191 pages of the 1976 edition and adding two new chapters and a revised conclusion. Honigmann's work on Shakespearian revision, especially his groundbreaking study of 1965, *The Stability of Shakespeare Texts* (which proved their instability in ways that are now becoming central to textual theory), makes it impossible to resist the temptation of a close study of his reworded conclusion. Some changes are made to accommodate the new essays and others show Honigmann's alertness to the decreasing formality of critical discourse. Otherwise Honigmann cut just one phrase, about our contemplating tragic heroes "in woe and wonder, as one might marvel at a splendid storm spending itself", which allusion to Horatio's characterization of a bloodbath perhaps now seemed overstated. Although measuring a single variable, audience sympathy, might seem simplistic, Honigmann's insights into the determinantnts

That the rest of this work may stand unaltered is a sign that, in criticism as in textual studies, Honigmann has long been ahead of the field.