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### Jackson, Ken. Shakespeare and Abraham

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how anti-English Dutch polemics, satires, prophecies, and other publications on the First Anglo-Dutch War served as a major stimulus for Dutch royalism. The final chapter focuses on politics, providence, and theatricality in the alternative dramatic productions of the major English poet of the age, John Milton, and the most famous Dutch poet of the time, Joost van den Vondel—a Catholic convert and royalist. Their mutual engagement with transnational royalist discourses is accurately shown to yield radically different results.

Helmerts's analyses of poems, plays, translations, paintings, histories, and pamphlets—including bilingual ones, written by writers like John Lilburne—are as astute as his readings of the relevant scholarly literature (in the vernacular) by contemporary British and Dutch critics and historians. He weighs evidence cautiously and carefully, and will call out those scholars who force alignments and influences between English and Dutch literature that can't be substantiated (169). In the end, the primary contribution of *The Royalist Republic* is not that it renders incomplete those studies of the literary and political culture of the War of the Three Kingdoms that fail to consider the Anglo-Dutch public spheres (which it does successfully), but rather that it promotes an international historicism, which, unlike a comparative historicist approach, discovers and explores shared spaces and discourses that interrogate national paradigms and traverse linguistic boundaries.

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**Jackson, Ken.**

*Shakespeare and Abraham.*

Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015. Pp. xii, 172. ISBN 978-0-268-03271-5 (paperback) \$27.

William Hazlitt once wrote, “the love of liberty is the love of others,” a statement very much in the spirit of the Abrahamic as described in Ken Jackson's *Shakespeare and Abraham*. Shakespeare, in Jackson's formulation, repeatedly tries to show us that devotion to almost any transcendent principle of the good is fundamentally a devotion to others, as in other people or a common humanity. In Genesis 22, Abraham offers his son Isaac as a sacrifice at God's

command, and the resulting complications illustrate the complex ways a transcendent Other and the others that make up our collective humanity are functionally equivalent. This Abraham is a construct of a philosophical tradition and contemporary liberal theology, and ultimately one that may not be congruent with Abraham as conceived of by Shakespeare scholarship in general, particularly historicist scholarship. Jackson asserts that Shakespeare uses Genesis 22 “to think,” and the end result is that Shakespeare thinks quite a lot like John Caputo, Søren Kierkegaard, Emmanuel Levinas, and Jacques Derrida, or, in the same vein, Geza Vermes, Bruce Chilton, Jon Levenson, and others, mainly philosophers and scholars of religion. This intellectual apparatus is crucial to Jackson’s argument throughout, such that its reception depends a great deal on the acceptance of what some may view as a stilted—even arbitrary—premise.

Jackson begins with prototypes of Shakespeare’s Abrahamic thinking in various medieval cycle plays dramatizing the Abraham and Isaac story, before connecting Shakespeare’s plays with various meditations on Abraham in religious and philosophical thought. The philosophical content of Genesis 22 concerns the possibilities latent in Abraham and Isaac’s silences in the event on Mount Moriah; dramatizations of Genesis 22 must cope with this silence by filling it in, and this filling inevitably comments on the biblical narrative’s core themes. Most interesting, Jackson suggests, are dramatizations that leave the silence in place, such as the Towneley *Abraham and Isaac*, a text emphasized in the first chapter. From here, Shakespeare’s Abrahamic situations and their links to modern philosophical thought take centre stage. Jackson’s discussions of *3 Henry VI* and *King John*, for instance, relate to the ethical thought of Immanuel Kant and Caputo’s concept of “weak sovereignty.” For Kant, the ethical demand to not kill Isaac should supersede God’s demand for a sacrifice, and Jackson’s reading of *3 Henry VI* positions King Henry as a “patriarch whose commitment to a divine ‘Other’ compromised his responsibilities to this world” (45). Henry “sacrifices” his son Edward by disinheriting him for what appears to be a common good, while Clifford’s butchering of the young Rutland satisfies purely worldly concerns. Henry’s is a properly Abrahamic sacrifice in Derridian terms, a sacrifice to a divine Other that is at bottom a community of human others. In *King John*, Hubert’s dramatic pause before killing Arthur recalls Genesis 22 and the cycle plays, but functions ultimately as a silence, presenting us with a weak sovereign who cannot decide between the rival legitimacies of family, ethical

reason, and human and divine sovereignty. *Richard II* plays out Kierkegaard's understanding of the Abrahamic event as a "fear and trembling," a response to a divine command that is never really known as a command, and never really known as an adequate response. Jackson lingers on Kierkegaard while situating *Titus Andronicus* within early modern Christian anxieties over Islam: Titus sacrifices his sons to the state in a properly Abrahamic fashion—the state being a stand-in for a divine Other—while Aaron the Moor refuses the divine call, and this difference dramatizes a religious difference that privileges both Titus and Christianity. In all of this, Shakespeare's sense of religion, Jackson argues, is both ancient and modern: it looks back to the patriarchs of the ancient Israelites just as it looks forward to modern and postmodern thought.

The book's last two chapters deal more directly with Shakespeare's apparent link to the postmodern, particularly on the question of alterity and whether it is ever possible to fully engage with the (human) other without some sort of violence or disequilibrium. In his reading of *The Merchant of Venice*, Jackson is once again interested in the dramatic pause and its Abrahamic overtones of Kierkegaardian fear and trembling, but also in showing how the play presents the impossibility of a gift that is not tainted by some sort of commerce. *Timon of Athens* illustrates another impossibility, namely, the gift—however imperfect—as an obligation that precedes religion and is somehow embedded in a human drive to experience the other, one that can never be satisfied because, as Derrida makes clear, we can never truly give.

*Shakespeare and Abraham* is an easy read, and sparks curiosity about how some foundational biblical touchstones may have shaped the values reflected in Shakespeare's plays. But the general style of argumentation and theoretical apparatus does appear quite jury-rigged. It would have been helpful for Jackson to situate Shakespeare's appropriations of Abraham more precisely within the intellectual currents of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England. Knowing what Derrida, Kant, and Levinas thought about Abraham is interesting, but knowing what Edwin Sandys, William Cecil, or John Donne (to cite just a few contemporaries) thought about Abraham—if anything at all—would be interesting as well, and persuasive.