

Shakespeare and Abraham. Ken Jackson.

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Ken Jackson's *Shakespeare and Abraham* is premised on two claims. First, Shakespeare does not just make a single allusion or even a series of disconnected allusions to Genesis 22 (the "binding of Isaac" story) in the way that, for example, he regularly alludes to Matthew's Sermon on the Mount. Rather, he returns to Genesis 22 again and again because he found in it a "critical conceptual framework . . . to think through" various relationships between religion, philosophy, ethics, and politics (1). Second, that framework was not one that Shakespeare could have adduced from any exegetical, liturgical, or artistic tradition with which he would have been familiar. In carving out his own path as a (re)reader of Genesis 22, Shakespeare, Jackson claims, has more in common with the interpretive efforts offered through the modern Continental philosophical tradition in the work of Kierkegaard, Levinas, and especially Derrida. What Jackson finds in that dialogue is a shared commitment to the struggle to make sense of the moral horror of God's demand for the murder of a child and Abraham's unquestioning acceptance of that demand. In philosophical terms, the issue is what "Abraham's total willingness to submit to God" means, or what it might be made to mean, through the work of interpretation, commentary, and even artistic application. As Jackson summarizes his own argument, "in a Christian culture that restricted religious representations on the stage," by reworking Genesis 22 "Shakespeare sought dramatically, but still religiously, what Derrida identified philosophically, the impossible other, the Abrahamic gift," that is, a "desire to give oneself" — freely and without expectation of reciprocity — "to the other than cannot be known" (5).

One might imagine initially that the second premise would be the more difficult one to document. Of course, Shakespeare often shows himself to be a creative reader of

biblical texts, assigning to them within particular dramatic settings meanings that could go well beyond, even challenge, the intentions of the original authors or the later interpretive history. Jackson's claim, then, might have been effectively grounded in his showing through rhetorical analyses that Shakespeare's multiple revisitations of Genesis 22 actually pointed to his critical reconstruction. But the argument is not persuasive for two interrelated reasons. First, the meanings Jackson finds in Shakespeare's revisionary labors are so various, convoluted, and inconsistent that it is impossible to believe that a single writer could have attached all of them to a single text. Second, the meanings Jackson imposes on Shakespearean texts — and they do very much feel like impositions — extend into discursive areas not even considered by the modern philosophers with whom Jackson seeks to place Shakespeare in conversation. He thus fails to convince us that a modern philosophical understanding of Genesis 22 can shed any light on Shakespeare's attempts at dramatized exegesis.

But even if the lens of Continental philosophy failed to provide productive interpretive focus, one would think it would be a simple enough matter to document that Shakespeare did return almost obsessively, apparently, to a well-known biblical source text. Minimally, we might have expected to have been surprised at what Jackson refers to as "Shakespeare's dramatic fascination" (1) with Genesis 22 and then to have felt enlightened by being shown what Shakespeare actually does in his many "Abrahamic explorations" (2) or "Abrahamic elaborations" (11). But here too we are disappointed. If anything, Jackson's efforts to explore the six plays he chooses — *3 Henry VI*, *King John*, *Richard II*, *Titus Andronicus*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *Timon of Athens* — more strongly suggest how little proof there is that Shakespeare had anything more than a passing interest in Genesis 22. (It is instructive that the final chapter on *Timon of Athens* essentially dispenses with the pretense that Shakespeare had any explicit awareness of Genesis 22 as a source text.) Perhaps Jackson is feeling this very burden and so reaches for even the vaguest of hints from the plays in question. But what mainly comes across is a rather shockingly cavalier attitude toward the very idea of evidence. As with any book-length study there are moments of real insight scattered throughout. But even the best of these journey so far afield from the book's thesis that reconceptualization of the entire interpretive framework would have been in order.

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