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Land, Stephen K. The King My Father's Wrack: The Moral Nexus of Shakespearian Drama

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Many of the conclusions Klassen reaches about early modern Mennonites in Poland and Prussia could and should be tested on Mennonites in other geographical and chronological settings. This is an accessible and interesting read with many fascinating images and a useful timeline to guide the reader through the complicated changes in borders and rulers that occur in this region over 300 years.

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Land, Stephen K.
The King My Father's Wrack: The Moral Nexus of Shakespearian Drama.
New York: AMS Press, 2011. Pp. xvi, 177. ISBN 978-0-404-62348-7 (hardback) $110.

Stephen K. Land's *The King My Father's Wrack: The Moral Nexus of Shakespearian Drama* is ambitious in its scope, treating weighty matters of moral failure and human mortality as structural imperatives in Shakespearean drama. In this sense, the study represents a rare artifact on the contemporary critical landscape: it invokes a traditional sort of criticism that unabashedly tackles broad questions of theme, character, and plot, and argues for Shakespeare's unified artistic vision. In its aims, Land's book might be compared to the work of Northrop Frye, to whom Land acknowledges a critical debt. In its execution, however, the book falls short of the Frygian sensibilities to which it aspires; while Land makes some compelling claims, his method of imposing sweeping patterns onto the framework of all of Shakespearean drama means that crucial detail and nuance are lost, and the complexity inherent in the plays is disregarded. Ultimately, rather than revealing unexpected and exhilarating connections and insights, Land's study tends to delimit interpretation. The result is a curiously inert reading of the plays.

In his introduction, Land suggests that Shakespeare's enduring currency stems from "the coherence of his imagery," a category which encompasses artistic choices such as the "selection of words" and the "selection of archetypes" (p. xiv). Accordingly, Land works from an extensive corpus of Shakespeare's plays to argue that recurring patterns in imagery "give moral coherence and in-

tensity" to Shakespeare's material (vii). Land divides his study into four groupings of plays based on similar plots and character types. The book's first chapter deals with what are designated "lateral" stories — love plots that highlight either the union or the separation of the hero and heroine. In a strategy repeated in all subsequent chapters, Land catalogues a number of elements that are integral to each lateral plot. One is a pivotal moment of "crossing" in which the hero enters "an unfamiliar situation in which he is required to make moral choices" (4). The recurring pattern in the lateral stories is that the hero, once in this new environment, is all too ready to assume the position of moral censor, because he inevitably fails "to come to terms with the weakness of mortal nature" (38).

Chapter 2 treats plays that combine lateral trajectories with what Land calls the "vertical" stories of Shakespeare's canon — plots that focus on ambitious figures who struggle for power in the public domain. In these plays, Land asserts, the hero tends to lose sight of his own human frailty, and his demise is premised on an untenable moral outrage. Indeed, Land summarizes the dramas of this category as stories "of excessive zeal in the repudiation of moral weakness" (68). Chapter 3 considers "the dying king" motif, in which Shakespeare invokes a weakened king (or king-like representative) to provide "a focal image of the human condition, of inherent moral weakness" (83). In Land's view, such figures illustrate a paradox of human existence: moral perfection is unattainable, and no one, no matter how regal, may rise above "the limitations of humanity" (106). The fourth and final chapter discusses the late "romance" plays, noting that each play features a figure reminiscent of the dying king, whose eventual "moral recovery" represents "the essential issue of the drama" (124). Based on the patterns of consistent imagery evident in all categories, Land concludes that the central concern of Shakespearean drama is the hero's confrontation with human weakness and the fact of mortality.

The book's strengths dovetail with its weaknesses, and both its method of analysis and its style pose challenges for readers. While the book's rigid methodology can distort the complexity of the plays, in some cases it illuminates neglected perspectives. The discussion of *Coriolanus*, for example, features a stimulating reading of the easily-overlooked character of Virgilia, whom Land re-casts as a pivotal figure worthy of sustained attention and emotional sympathy. Similarly, in his treatment of *The Tempest*, Land argues for the importance of Alonso, arguing that Alonso's guilt is as crucial to the plot as the matter of Prospero's revenge. Further, the book is highly readable, featuring lucid prose

unencumbered by jargon. Yet discussion tends to be descriptive rather than analytical, and pat conclusions are drawn without sufficient proof. We are told, for example, that *The Winter's Tale* concludes with Leontes's "return to happiness and moral health" (137), an assessment that is both unremarkable and inattentive to the traces of loss that inform the end of the play. Similar banal assertions, such as the claim that "man's confrontation with mortality is the central business of middle-period Shakesperian drama" (72), appear with troubling frequency. Not only is such an argument too general to be effective — we might contend that most of Shakespeare, and indeed most of literature, grapples with this very theme — it is reflective of Land's failure to engage genuinely with his thematic touchstones. References to nebulous notions of "inherent moral weakness" and "the fallen world" permeate the book, but without sufficient critical interrogation of what these concepts represent, or of how Shakespeare's treatment of them is distinctive.

These problems are amplified by the fact that Land disregards decades of critical work (the book features fewer than 25 endnotes, many of which cite sources that pre-date the 1980s). In some cases, this gap in scholarship is merely distracting; when Land resorts to phrases such as "It is often observed," one is left to wonder about the source of these observations. In other cases, though, the lack of critical engagement poses more substantial concerns. For example, Land proposes that *The Tempest*'s Caliban be treated as a minor figure, a mere prop for Prospero's narrative. This is a bold and suggestive claim, but because Land does not incorporate the abundant evidence and scholarship supporting Caliban's relative significance, it is difficult to grant it much credence. Land's affinity for his subject matter is evident, but his study ultimately falls short of providing truly invigorating perspectives on Shakespearean drama.

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