

Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



Klassen, Peter J. Mennonites in Early Modern Poland & Prussia

Marlene Epp

Volume 35, Number 1, Winter 2012

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1105902ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v35i1.19091>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Epp, M. (2012). Review of [Klassen, Peter J. Mennonites in Early Modern Poland & Prussia]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 35(1), 209–212. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v35i1.19091>

© Canadian Society for Renaissance Studies / Société canadienne d'études de la Renaissance; Pacific Northwest Renaissance Society; Toronto Renaissance and Reformation Colloquium; Victoria University Centre for Renaissance and Reformation Studies, 2012

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

criticism which continues to perceive Shakespeare as a static symbol of colonial subjugation. The concluding essay by Rustom Bharucha provides an extremely well-articulated and a highly persuasive critique of current critical readings of Shakespearean productions in Asia, particularly postcolonial critiques, which ironically become “recolonizing exercises” (254). In contrast to Yong Li Lan, Bharucha demonstrates that Ong’s *Desdemona* misuses the model of an “intercultural” adaptation, since instead of problematizing the “East-West” binary, it reconstructs “Asia” as the “Other” of Europe. Similarly, the postcolonial glorification of the Kathakali *Othello* is highly simplistic because the traditional dance form is not suitable for expressing the complexities of Shakespeare’s text. Bharucha’s astute and rigorous critique of postcolonial theory, even while agreeing with the political thrust of Ania Loomba’s reading of the play, comes across as a bit harsh on Loomba whose work should not be portrayed as the epitome of postcolonial theory. In his conclusion, Bharucha undermines John Russell Brown’s ahistorical and homogenizing readings of Shakespearean adaptations, and argues for a subtle model of translations to question the “Foreign Asia/Foreign Shakespeare” deadlock in theatrical productions (277). Bharucha’s essay, which eloquently critiques several models of adaptations, is an example of the richness of *Shakespeare in Asia*, a collection that does not approach the subject from a preconceived point of view, but provides the reader with a wide variety of information and analyses to generate a healthy debate regarding multiple and alternate models of readings of the contemporary Asian adaptations of Shakespeare.

RAHUL SAPRA, *Ryerson University*

Klassen, Peter J.

Mennonites in Early Modern Poland & Prussia.

Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009. Pp. xviii, 260. ISBN 978-0-8018-9113-7 (hardcover) \$50.

The story of Mennonites in Poland and Prussia often receives short shrift in a historiography that has tended to emphasize their Anabaptist beginnings over their sojourns in Russia and America. In this welcome study, noted Reformation

historian Peter J. Klassen provides a detailed and fascinating illumination of a significant era in Mennonite history: their presence in Poland and Prussia during the early modern period from the mid-sixteenth century to near the end of the eighteenth century. As a historian of Mennonites mainly in twentieth-century Canada, I found that my simple generalizations of Mennonites in this time and place were challenged and nuanced by Klassen's study. In particular, I learned that the predominant "us versus them" paradigms of separatist Mennonite engagement with their environment did not always hold true for Mennonites of the early modern era.

The history that Klassen presents focuses very much on the relations that Mennonites had with the ruling authorities of a given era and territory, and in that sense is less an analysis of the internal functioning of Mennonite communities than a study of their accommodation to the authorities of the day or the attitudes towards Mennonites in the midst of a Europe riven by religious intolerance. The story begins with the flight of Mennonites from northern Netherlands as early as the 1530s to the "Island of Toleration" that existed in the Vistula Delta — that part of northern Poland known as Royal Prussia. From the city of Danzig, throughout the *Werder* (delta) and along the Vistula River towards Warsaw, Mennonites were welcomed for their "Dutch" agricultural practices of building dikes and canals and reclaiming marshland for productive farming. Mennonites also settled in Ducal Prussia in the east, though in small numbers.

As Klassen shows through the book, Mennonites were not the only believers to benefit from the Convention of Warsaw, a remarkable 1573 agreement that resolved to deal with religious difference through diplomacy rather than warfare. Furthermore, a fascinating idea which can be extrapolated from Klassen is that the toleration meted out to Mennonites may have encouraged their own open-mindedness towards groups such as Catholics and even the pope himself.

Every chapter emphasizes either economic or religious circumstances that shaped the Mennonite experience in Poland and Prussia; these themes are not completely delineated between chapters, and thus there is some overlap throughout the book. An especially interesting example of Klassen's research illuminates the activity and skill of Mennonites in lace- and cloth-making, so that they were viewed as economic assets by the Danzig city council and the Polish kings even while the craft guilds that feared competition in the industry lobbied for their exclusion. Toleration without equality, and localized attitudes,

also shaped their religious lives when it came to the rights of Mennonites to build churches or run their own schools.

The accommodation that both Mennonites and the state exhibited was tested most strongly over the Mennonite peace position. Even though Mennonites contributed substantial monies to state and city coffers as a substitute for soldiering, the linkages between citizenship, landownership, and military service made their otherwise thriving presence tenuous over two centuries. A significant shift in the environment of tolerance occurred for Mennonites following the partitions of Poland in the late eighteenth century that saw Mennonites come under the rule of Prussian kings who were less sympathetic to their desire for both land and military exemption. In the last chapter and Epilogue, Klassen traces the gradual erosion of Mennonite commitment to military exemption to its more or less complete abandonment in the Second World War.

Klassen's study adds to our understanding of Mennonite history in a number of ways. The existence of ongoing relations and even physical travel between the community left behind and the new homeland is remarkable, as we learn about Mennonites in Poland repeatedly seeking advice from church elders in Amsterdam and even sending individuals to the Netherlands to receive baptism — a pattern that today might be described as transnationality. The changeability in attitudes towards Mennonites as a reflection of the "party in power" or, even more so, the state of the economy is obvious in this history, so that edicts of eviction issued by one ruler might be quickly overturned by the next. The situation was not always black or white. Mennonites were a small piece of the puzzle that saw Catholics, Lutherans, Reformed, and Calvinists all juggling and being juggled for power; they were not the only ones in the Vistula who faced religious restrictions. We learn about the Mennonites as artisans, craftspeople, business owners, and not just farmers.

Given the emphasis on religious and economic developments, there is little in this book on the social life of Mennonites, and thus one is left with questions that arise from frequent allusions to intermarriage and to large families. At what rate did Mennonites intermarry? Were their families larger than the norm, and why? Given the important role of land acquisition, what were the inheritance patterns and did they include daughters equally with sons? As is often the case with these kinds of questions, answers may be elusive, even in the extensive body of primary and secondary sources utilized by the author.

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.

MARLENE EPP, *Conrad Grebel University College, University of Waterloo*

Land, Stephen K.

The King My Father's Wrack: The Moral Nexus of Shakespearean 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 Shakespearean 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-