INTRODUCTION
Abraham and the Shakespearean Stage

This study seeks to illuminate Shakespeare’s dramatic fascination with Abraham’s near sacrifice of his son Isaac in Genesis 22. Scenes of child killing or near child killing fill Shakespeare’s early plays, but, remarkably, no one has yet considered this in full. Genesis 22, I will show, informed Clifford’s attack on young Rutland in 3 Henry VI and Henry’s political sacrifice of his son Edward, which opens the play; Hubert’s providentially thwarted murder of Arthur in King John; Aaron the Moor’s surprising decision to spare his son amid the filial slaughters of Titus Andronicus; and old York’s darkly comic insistence that King Henry execute York’s (adult) son, Aumerle, in Richard II.¹

The playwright’s full engagement with the biblical narrative, however, does not manifest itself exclusively in scenes involving the sacrifice of children or in verbal borrowings from the famously sparse narrative. This is not a traditional study of literary borrowing or influence that primarily seeks to link Genesis 22 and Shakespeare via philological evidence—although I certainly don’t ignore the connections that are there. I want to stress at the outset that the real influence of Genesis 22 and its interpretive tradition is seen in the critical, conceptual framework Shakespeare develops to think through, dramatically
speaking, the relationships between religion, sovereignty, law, and justice. In short, Shakespeare uses Genesis 22 to understand the world—and to pray. Consequently, his Abrahamic explorations become strikingly apparent in unexpected places such as the trial of Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* and the bifurcated structure of *Timon of Athens*.

Because of its centrality to the three great monotheisms—Judaism (Abram), Christianity (Abraham), and Islam (Ibrahim)—the outline of Genesis 22 is familiar to most people in Western and Near Eastern cultures. God unexpectedly calls Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac (although in Islam, Ishmael is generally understood to be the sacrificial son). Abraham responds immediately to the call saying “Here I am” and takes Isaac to Mount Moriah. Before he can use his drawn knife to slay Isaac, an angel stops him. A ram suddenly appears in a thicket, and Abraham sacrifices the animal instead.

Genesis 22 completes the extraordinary narrative of Abraham’s long life. In Genesis 12, God calls Abram to leave home without any sense of where he will go or if he will return. Famine forces him to Egypt, where, in an attempt to protect his beautiful wife Sarah, he tells Pharaoh that she is his sister. The ruse backfires, and Pharaoh seizes Sarah, only to release her because he realizes he has angered God by taking a married woman. Later, Abram rescues his kidnapped nephew Lot in a daring military adventure. Barren, Sarah convinces Abram to have a child with Hagar, her servant. Eventually, however, Sarah comes to resent Hagar’s son, Ishmael, and insists Abram banish him. In Genesis 17, God makes a new covenant with Abram, but one that requires he circumcise himself at age 90 and take a new name: Abrah. In Genesis 18, Abraham finds himself bargaining unsuccessfully with God to halt the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, a cataclysmic event that unravels the family of Lot. God fulfills his promise to Sarah in Genesis 21 wherein Isaac (whose name refers to Sarah’s “laughing” at the suggestion someone her age could have a child) is born.

One can understand Abraham’s failed negotiations with God in Genesis 18 to spare Sodom and Gomorrah if the patriarch could find but ten honest men as a precursor to his complete willingness to submit to God’s call in Genesis 22. As John Caputo points outs, Abraham has learned not to
enter into negotiations with God, as he had haggled over the price of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 18. Instead of giving God trouble over what looks like an unreasonable demand, he just says *me voici*. God gives a return only in the instant when it is clear that Abraham gives a pure gift, when he has raised the dagger and has no intention of stopping, when he is without hope or expectation of a return, when he has already made the decision and now it is just a question of “executing” it in an un-calculating aneconomy.1

The call from God in Genesis 22 comes, then, when Abraham is very old, as is Sarah. Genesis 22 thus has come to be understood as Abraham’s last trial—last not only in terms of chronology but also in terms of comprehensiveness.4 As early as Genesis 12 God had told Abraham that he would father a great nation, which he confirmed in Genesis 19 by identifying Isaac as the seed of this nation. Isaac embodies everything that has been endured—and promised.

Abraham’s total willingness to submit to God under these circumstances makes Genesis 22—or the akedah, or “binding”—critical to the Jewish tradition. His willingness to sacrifice has come to stand in the post-Rabbinic world as a model of faith and obedience for all generations (*Genesis Rabbah* 55:1). Christianity typologically connects Abraham’s willingness to give himself over to Christ’s complete sacrifice or self-oblation (Hebrews 11:7). The absolute willingness to *submit* to God makes Ibrahim/Abraham the first *hanif*, or monotheist (Sura 3:67), in Islam.

And it is this willingness of Abraham to completely give himself up and over to God in extraordinary circumstances that ultimately fascinates Shakespeare. Not unlike the long interpretive tradition that precedes him—the early Jewish commentators, Philo, St. Paul, the Christian Church Fathers (Origen, Tertullian, Justin Martyr, Ambrose, etc.), the Koran, Medieval exegesis from all three Abrahamic faiths, Calvin, and Luther—Shakespeare comes to wrestle with the aneconomic paradox of Genesis 22: God tells Abraham to give everything, and he demands this impossibly difficult to imagine gift while insisting Abraham expect nothing in return—salvation, for example.

Somewhat surprisingly, though, Shakespeare’s dramatic engagement with Genesis 22 is made legible not by tracing the direct
influence of this interpretive tradition, but by the so-called continental philosophers—Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Levinas, and, most recently, Derrida—who inform so much of our own literary critical activity, activity which still certainly leans toward the purely secular. For these thinkers Genesis 22 became a critical narrative and their Abrahamic explorations allow us to reconsider some of the most vexing cruxes in Shakespeare in a new light.

To a certain extent, then, this book reaches beyond Shakespeare studies in that I provide an introductory sketch of how the terrifying mystery of God’s command in Genesis 22 has been interpreted in history. In some sense the book is an attempt to situate Shakespeare in a complex genealogy that extends from ancient religion to postmodern philosophy. We are at a moment in time when the relationship between the religious and the secular is being reconfigured yet again. This book is, in part, an attempt to bring Shakespeare into the larger current conversation about religion in the modern world by exploring his engagement with one of religion’s oldest and most influential narratives.

For most readers, it is the philosophical work of Søren Kierkegaard in Fear and Trembling that most profoundly illuminates the paradox at the center of the interpretive tradition. For Kierkegaard, Abraham cannot even reward himself with the fleeting sense of hope for salvation following God’s command. In fact, what a modern individual would consider a normal sense of self must evaporate in Abraham’s willingness to give himself over. Abraham’s submission must be almost unimaginably complete, total, and instantaneous, the latter temporal factor linguistically marked by the Hebrew term hineni, or “Here I am.” A better translation for that term, Hilary Putnam suggests, might be the militaristic “Ready!” which implies an almost purely affective response to the call, a response without thought. Simply put, hineni performs the speech-act of making oneself completely available to “Other” to the extent that the responsiveness to or for the other could be said to constitute the “self.” Abraham says “Here I am” three times in Genesis 22: in his first response to God, then in his response to Isaac, who is about to ask where the sacrificial lamb is, and when he responds to the angel calling to stay his hand. The phrase makes up much of the dialogue in the brief narrative.
Of the many elements that make up the story, the *hineni* element demands special attention. “Here I am” echoes at critical Abrahamic moments in *Richard II*, *Titus Andronicus*, and *Timon of Athens*. But, again, it is the conceptual complexity of the term that matters most here. The utter absence of thought implied in *hineni* suggests a perfect religious emptying of selfhood (*kenosis* might be the best term to get at this) that makes possible a perfect, although paradoxical, relationship with the divine. The divide between the transcendent divine and the immanent being collapses entirely in Abraham’s “Here I am.” In the instant when he draws the dagger, Abraham must act *religiously* but without a divine presence or even any sense of divine presence. This creates a positively odd correspondence between the religious and what we would call the “secular,” a correspondence that emerges strikingly in Shakespeare’s own rigorous, albeit complexly mediated, explorations of Genesis 22.

In short, the strange religion of Shakespearean drama (if not of the playwright himself)—the religion Harold Bloom has identified as “secular transcendence”—is constituted primarily by an Abrahamic desire to give oneself to the other that cannot be known, a desire that, Jacques Derrida argues, may determine institutionalized monotheisms but is not equivalent to them. According to Derrida, in “the impossible” instant when Abraham “gives” death (or almost gives death) without expecting anything in return (following Kierkegaard), one can glimpse the desire for something absolutely other that founds all religion. The Abrahamic gift identifies that which is not an exchange, that which stands outside even a sacrificial economy—that which can’t be thought.

One might frame the argument this way: In a Christian culture that restricted religious representations on the stage (in contrast to the Medieval mystery plays that could and did dramatize directly the Abraham and Isaac episode), Shakespeare sought dramatically, but still religiously, what Derrida identified philosophically, the impossible other, the Abrahamic gift. Correspondingly, the continued inability of literary-historical scholarship to locate Shakespearean drama precisely on the Christian spectrum stems not from a secular tendency in the playwright, but from a religious one, one that pushes back to the ancient mystery of Genesis 22. Shakespeare’s seemingly prescient
distance from religion is actually a thorough or hyperbolic immersion that takes readers and audiences back to the ancient narrative of Abraham and Isaac.

It is, to specify my earlier claim about continental philosophy, primarily Derrida’s reading of the impossible gift that makes visible the continuity between our current “secular” world, Shakespeare’s post-Reformation world, and the ancient religious world of Genesis 22. Shakespeare’s world lacked the theoretical language we have to discuss otherness, of course. But the Reformation prompted an intensified need to define its religious truth against others, and we discover there a multitude of what Gil Anidjar calls “Abrahamic elaborations” to separate Christian from Jew and Muslim, leading to a rather intricate explanatory system of the otherness of the Abrahamic gift. These elaborations, ranging across the East/West divide, are visible as early as Titus Andronicus. Martin Luther simultaneously explains and participates in the phenomenon:

The Saracens have invented horrible lies on the basis of this text [Genesis 22]. They tell the fictitious story that Ishmael was immolated in the place of Isaac, who, they say, ran away and did not obey his father. Hence they boast that they are the sons of Sarah; for, as they say, Isaac was not sacrificed, but Ishmael was sacrificed in his brother’s place. It is the perpetual custom of all heretics to transfer to themselves the glory of the church and the people of God, for everybody wants to be nearest to God. And this temptation has existed among men from the beginning of the world. Thus today the heretics and the pope want to be the people of God. The Turk wants to be the people of God.

Within the strict confines of the Christian world, too, Protestantism’s effort to distinguish itself from Catholicism led to an intensified critique of the exchange principles that seemed to inform the Augustinian concept of caritas (charity/perfect love). The Protestant was told repeatedly to seek to give perfectly—that is, without any expectation of Catholic reward for merit. As historian Natalie Zemon Davis writes, “In a profound sense, the religious reformation of the sixteenth century were a quarrel about gifts, that is, about whether humans can re-
ciprocate to God, about whether humans can put God under obligation, and about what this means for what people should give to each other. Shakespeare’s world was busy exploring the impossibility of the Abrahamic gift every bit as much as Derrida.

No image (or set of images) illustrates this deep engagement with Abraham more strikingly than Henry VIII’s ten stunning tapestries depicting the major events of the patriarch’s life that hung at Hampton Court Palace from roughly 1540 to the early seventeenth century. As Thomas P. Campbell writes, “visitors to Hampton Court regularly noted [their] beauty and magnificence above all others. In 1599, the Swiss diarist, Thomas Platter, commented that it was thought to be the finest and most artistic in England.” The set was enormously expensive, and it was often transported to London for state events, possibly Queen Elizabeth I’s coronation. Crossing into Hampton Court, a visitor would have been surrounded by over 81 meters of Abraham tapestries, some 5 meters high, mostly made of silk and gilt thread. The seventh scene tries to capture almost all of Genesis 22 from the moment Abraham and Isaac leave the servants at the bottom of Mount Moriah to the (Christian typological moment) when the two kneel together on a mountain ledge, presumably thanking God for his strange mercy.

As Campbell writes, “the richness and the scale of the tapestries leave little doubt that [they were] intended to celebrate and promote the parallels between Abraham and Henry [who was also, of course, the patriarch of a new church], and the continuation of the virtues that they embodied through Prince Edward.” Campbell is correct, I think, to assume the massive investment in the tapestries at or around 1540 had much to do with the birth of Edward in 1537, the long-awaited male heir that came to Henry, like Abraham, late in life.

Given the power of this iconography, then, it is perhaps no surprise that Shakespeare’s first consideration of Genesis 22 addresses another Henry and Edward in English royal history. Shakespeare opens 3 Henry VI with that notoriously “weak” and pious Henry politically sacrificing his son Edward’s right to rule. The political sacrifice of Edward that opens the play is, in turn, though, artfully juxtaposed to the physical sacrifice, or murder, of young Rutland by Clifford, perhaps the most grisly of all the child killings in Shakespeare (and drawn
from a textual source, the chronicler Edward Hall). The actual Rutland slaying—standing in stark and bloody contrast to King Henry’s opening gesture—ameliorates and complicates Henry’s sacrifice of his son, reminding an audience of the Genesis patriarch whose commitment to a divine “Other” compromised his responsibilities to this world. Through Genesis 22, Shakespeare, not unlike Henry VIII gazing at tapestries, contemplates sovereignty itself: its relationship to the divine, the paradoxical power of a “weak” sovereign who does not rely on pure violence but instead relates to God via sacrifice, and the always pressing political problem of achieving sovereign legitimacy and passing that legitimacy down to one’s son.

Shakespeare’s King John, I argue, very much illuminates the Abrahamic at work in 3 Henry VI. There the playwright turns immediately and more directly to the problem of sovereign legitimacy; in the play’s opening lines the French ambassador tells the English King his “majesty” is “borrowed” (1.1.5). This play relentlessly explores the possibility that sovereignty involves only pure force and has no divine inspiration. Young Arthur’s claim to the throne is as legitimate, if not more legitimate, than John’s, and the playwright never backs away from that reality. When John sends Hubert to take Arthur’s life Shakespeare comes as close as he ever does to suggesting sovereignty derives simply from the greatest violence. But Shakespeare artfully and tellingly hesitates on this critical issue of political philosophy and religion. Hubert fails to complete his rather straightforward task. Arthur dies, yes, but only in a manner—an accidental fall off a high cliff—that complicates rather than secures John’s claim to the throne. Moreover, without any apparent reason, and in striking contrast to his literary source (the anonymous play The Troublesome Raigne of John, King of England), Shakespeare depicts the scene involving Hubert and Arthur as oddly sacrificial, involving a father figure and a son, and borrowing language straight from the Abraham and Isaac cycle plays. Simply put, Shakespeare uses Genesis 22 to think.

In Richard II Shakespeare uses Genesis 22 to think through problems of divinely sanctioned absolutism. Briefly, Richard’s historical deposition threatened the legitimacy of rule by divine right. As Shakespeare’s Richard points out, a king on the throne by God’s will should have nothing to fear. But fear he must. This begs the troubling question
for Tudor reign, a reign dependent on the usurper in historiography: if a king on the throne can be deposed by sheer force, does one have to abandon the notion of rule by divine right? Shakespeare negotiates this historical tension by turning to Genesis 22. He dramatically frames the situation so that the problem is not that the king does not have divine access to the throne but that this particular king overestimates that access. Shakespeare suggests that Richard confuses his proximity to the divine with the divine itself. A true sovereign should respond like Abraham to the call from the divine, without assuming any deal or exchange for what is asked—in this case, royal invulnerability. Shakespeare thus reimagines rule by divine right in Abrahamic terms, first, in the figure of John of Gaunt, who seems willing to sacrifice his son Bolingbroke in the opening moments of the play in obedience to a divinely sanctioned monarch, and then in Gaunt’s aging and trembling brother, York, who, similarly, would sacrifice his son, Aumerle. Both Abrahamic figures facilitate the transfer of the crown from Richard to Henry. In the play’s seemingly comic 5.2, a scene borrowed almost straight from the Northhampton (formerly Dublin) Abraham and Isaac, Shakespeare suggests Abraham and Isaac is the one cycle play every sovereign should watch.

The second half of the book turns to three plays—Titus Andronicus, The Merchant of Venice, and Timon of Athens—that involve stranger and more passionately religious explorations of how one simultaneously responds to both God (Other) and one’s own (other). These plays have repeatedly made literary criticism twist and turn in what are, I will argue, Abrahamic paradoxes. Rather surprisingly, one discovers that the interpretive tradition of Genesis 22 has been influencing Shakespearean literary criticism for some time, although in unexpected and mostly unrecognized ways.

For example, critics long have been stymied by the wild sacrificial energy of Titus Andronicus, a play in which the title character gives death to so many of his own children. Twenty-one die in combat under his direction, two are executed because of their father’s political conflicts, and two more die at the hands of Titus himself. Amid this violence the play also features an unexpected scene wherein the play’s chief villain, Aaron the Moor, seemingly shows a spark of compassion by refusing to sacrifice his own son—even though that son’s existence