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Review of David Livingstone, *In Our Own Image: Fictional Representations of William Shakespeare*

Dear Professor Peprník,

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to evaluate David Livingstone's book, *In Our Own Image: Fictional Representations of William Shakespeare*. Given that Shakespeare and popular culture has been a main research focus of mine for 35 years, I was delighted for the chance to really dig into this remarkable book, that is both encyclopedic in coverage and astutely analytical with regard to the impact of Shakespeare as a cultural product, icon, and ideological vehicle within both mainstream and competing discourses, which is to say, counter-discourses in the Foucauldian sense. Once upon a time, my mentors were Shakespeare scholars Stephen Greenblatt and Marjorie Garber whose work, respectively, were preoccupied with how Shakespeare functions as an historical medium through which culture speaks (the new historicist model) and how Shakespeare functions as a conduit or mechanism by which suppressed desires, mostly individual but also cultural insofar as the individual is a product of culture, are articulated or conspicuously absent, whether consciously or not (the psychoanalytic model). In my own work, I focused more on the former, which often disadvantaged the arguments I attempted to make, such as in *Shakespeare Without Class: Misappropriations of Cultural Capital*.

Alternatively, in *In Our Own Image*, Livingstone manages to brilliantly accomplish both: to look at representations of Shakespeare and popular culture as both exemplary of cultural anxieties and ideological influence and as a field infused by the psychology of individuals that together reflect social or societal concerns ranging from niche subcultural or ethnically specific to the ubiquitous, even epidemic. This is a masterful scholarly accomplishment on the part of Livingstone, who no doubt was influenced by Greenblatt and the predominance of psychoanalytic approaches to literary studies at that time as well. Remarkably, his mind can achieve the balance requisite to the conscientiousness and complexity the study of Shakespeare and popular culture demands. It is rare to encounter a book that manages to juggle such extremes in theory and methodology with eloquence.

Livingstone begins with what might appear to be a rather simple question, which I am going to attempt to account for here. Basically, he asks, why Shakespeare – why would writers, filmmakers, and artists want to create fictional versions of Shakespeare's work, what is the intellectual, aesthetic, or even spiritual, religious structure behind these enterprises? Where does the affinity come from, and

to what end does it gesture? He grounds this discussion in the biblical concept of humans having been designed in God's image, implicitly grounding this deep appreciation or appropriation of Shakespeare in an effort to coincide with divinity, perhaps even to occupy its sacred space, a space sequestered from humans until the gateway that is Shakespeare is revealed and accessed. Shakespeare, then, becomes a portal or threshold through which one can pass to salvation, under, or rather only possible if under, legitimate, that is legitimated, Shakespearean credentials.

Hence, throughout the book, Livingstone stresses that readings of Shakespeare – whether critical or representational through another medium – no doubt tell us more about the author or artist than about Shakespeare. It is as though the mysteries around Shakespeare's life and genius, his beliefs, religion, sexuality, education, and so on, like those about Jesus, predispose Shakespearean discourse to exuberant engagement if not exploitation, co-option, and misinformation. We all know that knowledge is power, but what constitutes knowledge is debatable. If no writer in history is thought to understand humanity more than Shakespeare, then access to Shakespeare, if only by association (like the hierarchy of priests within the Catholic Church), gets one closer to that knowledge and therefore to resolving the mysteries that both make life daunting and exciting.

This reminds me of the famous 1988 interview with cult leader and murderer Charles Manson conducted by the television journalist Geraldo Rivera in which Manson exclaimed, and I am paraphrasing here, "I am whoever people want me to be. I am your mirror. I am you. You would not exist without me." In many ways, it seems, that Manson unwittingly provided the thesis that Livingstone, most likely with no knowledge of this interview, proves in *In Our Own Image: Fictional Representations of William Shakespeare*. After all, is this not Hamlet's argument as well when he says the purpose of acting, and therefore of theater and perhaps all art, is to hold a "mirror up to nature," whether affirming, critical, or disillusioning – there is always distortion in the reflection in as much as nothing is ever identical to itself.

There has been many, even countless, biographies of Shakespeare, some of which Livingstone discusses in depth, like Samuel Schoenbaum's *Shakespeare's Lives*, and then there are others that account for representations of Shakespeare, like Maurice J. O'Sullivan Jr.'s anthology *Shakespeare's Other Lives* and more recently Paul Franssen's *Shakespeare's Literary Lives: The Author as Character in Fiction and Film* (2016). The list is really endless. Off the top of my head, I am sure I could recall some 50 books that are biographical or provide accounts of Shakespeare in popular culture and about the importance of Shakespeare to humanity, from Samuel Johnson to James Shapiro, from Jan Kott to Richard Burt or Michael Bristol, and so on and on. So, what is different about Livingstone's book? Precisely, everything that I mentioned above – about Livingstone's mixed or rather combined theory and methodology, from new historicism and cultural materialism to psychoanalysis and basic humanistic thinking, to the scope of his engagement – truly encyclopedic, a compendium of Shakespearean adaptation and appropriation he synthesizes through decisive focus on the very spiritual question of in whose image are these representations made. In *Shakespeare and the Invention of the Human*, Harold Bloom convinced many people that Shakespeare makes us human, in other words, the more Shakespeare one consumes, the more human one becomes – we are what we eat. Alternatively, *In Our Own Image*, with occasional sarcasm and irony, Livingstone posits the idea that Shakespeare makes us divine, or rather Shakespeare is divine because he looks like us, and we, according to the Bible, look like God.

To be more specific, Livingstone's contributions to Shakespeare and cultural studies are at least twofold. First, he provides a comprehensive, accessible overview of twentieth- and twenty-first-century fictional Shakespeare, covering not only novels and plays but also films, television series,

sitcoms, and even comics. Second, Livingstone offers a unifying interpretive framework: the idea that fictional Shakespeare is always, to some degree, veiled autobiography. He traces this insight to Robert Nye's *The Late Mr. Shakespeare* and to critics like Sonya Freeman Loftis, who observed that both Shaw and Stoppard conflate their own biography with that of Shakespeare. Livingstone extends this observation across the entire corpus, finding psychological and psychoanalytical connections between each author and the Shakespeare they create. Shaw's rivalry with his "literary father," à la Bloom or Burgess's identification with Shakespeare's class anxieties, Bond's political critique of Shakespeare's bourgeois values, and so on, all reveal more about the author than they do about Shakespeare.

Livingstone makes a persuasive case that the most successful fictional treatments are those that approach Shakespeare with humor. He contrasts the dreary, self-important efforts of Frank Harris with the witty, self-aware works of Shaw, Twain, and Baring. Such playful treatments, Livingstone suggests, are more honest about their own fictionality, and therefore more revealing about the author's imaginative engagement with Shakespeare.

Livingstone's chapter on Burgess is my favorite, mostly because of its thoughtfulness, what I gather from between the lines, places where Livingstone reveals, in like fashion, more about himself than the author he discusses. He argues that Burgess is uniquely suited to interpret Shakespeare because of the parallels between their lives. Both were class-conscious outsiders, both had problematic marriages, both were extraordinarily productive and consequently undervalued by the establishment. Burgess's Shakespeare is pragmatic, money-conscious, sexually conflicted and is therefore, Livingstone suggests, Burgess himself in Elizabethan dress.

I really appreciate, also, that Livingstone gives substantial attention to feminist treatments, from Virginia Woolf's famous speculation about Shakespeare's sister to contemporary novels like Sally O'Reilly's *Dark Aemilia*. These works, he argues, do more than simply correct the historical record. He argues that they challenge the very structure of Shakespeare biography, which has traditionally marginalized the women in his life. The pro-Anne Hathaway treatments, in particular, represent a significant shift from the anti-Anne Hathaway narratives that dominated earlier fiction. Anne Hathaway, by the way, was Shakespeare's wife.

Livingstone identifies a clear trajectory from early twentieth-century representations, which depict Shakespeare as a devoted artist isolated from the real world to contemporary works that cast him as a detective, spy, or action hero. This shift, he suggests, reflects broader cultural movements, ones that coincide with different literary-critical theories and methodologies (feminist, Marxist, queer, etc.), the sexual revolution, and the rise of genre fiction. The argument is a useful framework for understanding why Shakespeare has become, in recent decades, a figure of such protean versatility.

If I were to identify some shortcomings in the work, I might say that the logic behind Livingstone's organization is not necessarily adequately accounted for. Nevertheless, I prefer that the book be more thematically organized, as it is, with less emphasis on historical trajectory, and therefore seeing things as more multidimensional, perhaps more in line with the spiritual discourse he discusses. Along these lines, he could have engaged with more discourse and narrative theory, but this is not necessary to make his argument; it just might be fun to do and fun for the reader. The early chapters on Shaw, Harris, and Kipling are followed by a chapter on *No Bed for Bacon*, then a long chapter on Burgess, then a "serious interlude" on Bond, then Nye, then a sprawling chapter on "Flights of Fancy" that covers everything from time travel to feminist novels to anti-Stratfordian works. The result is sometimes diffuse, which I like. This structure is more consistent with what I believe is the impact of

Shakespeare on discourse, or the discursive construction of Shakespeare often sourced from other discourses, highlighting the intertextuality – or inter-representational nature of the discourse – that has come to characterize Shakespeare both diachronically and synchronically, historically and in the present.

Finally, I would like to emphasize that Livingstone writes with clarity and enthusiasm for his subject. His prose is accessible without being simplistic, and his affection for the material is contagious. The book is peppered with witty asides and provocative insights, and Livingstone's willingness to express strong preferences, such as for Burgess, Harris, and Nye. Livingstone builds his case cumulatively, piling example upon example until the reader is convinced that fictional Shakespeare really does tell us more about the authors who represent him than about the subject. I am particularly taken with Livingstone's willingness to embrace the playful over the serious. His preference for works that actually seem to be enjoying the subject is refreshing in an academic context, where gravitas is often mistaken for profundity.

In Our Own Image is a valuable and enjoyable contribution to Shakespeare studies. It provides a comprehensive overview of twentieth- and twenty-first-century fictional treatments, offers a compelling interpretive framework, and makes a persuasive case that these works tell us more about their authors than about their subject. If it is not clear already from what I have said, I am hugely impressed by this book. Thank you for inviting me to read it.

Sincerely,

Bryan Reynolds
Distinguished Professor,
Chancellor's Professor,
& Claire Trevor Professor of Drama