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A Review of the Habilitation Thesis *In Our Own Image: Fictional Representations of William Shakespeare* by David Livingstone

The habilitation thesis *In Our Own Image* by David Livingstone provides a representative selection of approaches to the fiction of "William Shakespeare" (further on, "WS") as a fictional character appearing in several works of art, such as contemporary literature (novels, short stories, and plays), graphic novels, and films. The thesis includes a theoretical introduction of the phenomenon of fictional biography and an overall evaluation of the various representations of "WS" as a fictional character. It grasps an important and intriguing feature of the contemporary culture: how the 20th and 21st centuries treat the classics and how they develop their own artistic sensibilities in reflection of the lingering presence of the canonical playwright and poet.

Among the positives of the thesis, there is the fact that it has a wide scope of what it includes into its focus, which results in a rich and varied collection of examples. For example, Chapter 1 presents several examples of what Shaw called Bardolatry (and the "fight" against it) from the early 20th century, bringing in several obscure works (but not, for example, the short story "The Birthplace" by Henry James, which is among the classics of the Bardolatry discussions). This chapter contains several truly fascinating examples, such as the play *Shakes versus Shav*, a little known puppet show by Bernard Shaw. In general, Chapter 1 is a solid introduction into the complicated and intricate world of including "WS" into contemporary works.

Then, several case studies follow, covering *No Bed For Bacon* or *Shakespeare Sows an Oat* by C. Brahms and S. J. Simon, a completely unknown work (and thus, an excellent start of the case studies section of the book), where parallels with the film *Shakespeare in Love* by M. Norman and T. Stoppard are brought to the fore; then the thesis delves into reading the works of Anthony Burgess; a

short study of E. Bond's *Bingo* follows; and then the thesis introduces R. Nye as the Shakespearean historiographer of a special sort.

The thesis changes with Chapter 6, which brings in more comprehensive and overview-driven approach to covering this vast topic. Chapter 6, "Flights of Fancy" lists and briefly comments on a number of presences of "WS" in various works. The individual works do not get a deep treatment, but the scope of the works included in this chapter is impressive.

The following chapter 7, "The Lunatic, the Lover and the Poet" focuses on "WS" in film, TV, and comics. This is an excellent chapter, which could also stand alone as a publication in its own right, if properly expanded beyond its current scope of over 70 pages.

There are several shortcomings, too. The thesis could profit from a clearer methodological approach to what is understood as a literary (graphic novel, film) character in the first place. For example, Lubomír Doležel's theory in *Heterocosmica* offers a viable approach to the intriguing fact that the same character appears in otherwise unconnected works – and what makes it "one character" even if each rendition is radically different (such as, the "Napoleon" of *Red and Black*, who is very historically accurate, and the "Napoleon" of *Animal Farm*, who is a farm pig). Similarly, nearly all chapters begin with Livingstone's personal positioning toward the content of the chapter, which is great for me as a reader who is familiar with several of Livingstone's conference presentations (and as such, I could appreciate the transformation into the publishable form) – but the development from one chapter to the next is not that obvious from the text itself. Interestingly, Livingstone admits that there are several books dealing with this topic, most recently *Shakespeare's Literary Lives* by P. Franssen, but Livingstone says he has not consulted it. While this is personally understandable, it is problematic from a scholarly point of view. But with a topic as vast as this, it is not humanly possible to cover all the available sources.

There are two questions that I would like to discuss. The first is the issue of the various contradictions that the character of "WS" contains throughout the massive scope of works where he (and he is not always a "he") appears. Especially given the historical fact that we have virtually zero actual evidence of the character of William Shakespeare as a historical figure beyond anecdotal evidence and deductions from some of his historically evident actions (and, the plays), including his looks, has Livingstone identified a bedrock of all these representations? Is there any other common denominator for "WS" beyond the name, and what is it? (M. O'Farrell's *Hamnet* comes to mind, which does not include Shakespeare's name at all, yet the action revolves around him).

My second question relates to what is suggested by the concluding sentence, which comments on the expectation that more works with "WS" as a character will appear: "Much will be dross" (325). Many (and perhaps, nearly all) of these works do not reach the heights of Shakespeare's works and it can be said that this kind of production is to a degree a parasitic endeavour, feeding of the fame and status of the canonical author. Are there any examples of the opposite? Which of the works

that Livingstone studied for this thesis could be listed as an excellent example of innovativeness and originality, perhaps equalling or even surpassing the original? And if so, how was this achieved?

To conclude, the habilitation thesis offers a clear focus on the current renditions of “William Shakespeare” as a character in literary, film, and graphic novel narratives. It represents research that spans over many years and serves as an illustration of Livingstone’s abilities as a researcher, writer, and educator with a long-term research focus (a part of the thesis has been presented at conferences as papers). It is a well written, well organized, and clearly presented work.

For all these reasons, I recommend to the committee to accept *In Our Own Image: Fictional Representations of William Shakespeare* by David Livingstone as a habilitation thesis.

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