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On the Shoulders of Giants: A Shandean Postscript

Robert K. Merton

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Robert K. Merton : On the Shoulders of Giants: A Shandean Postscript before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised On the Shoulders of Giants: A Shandean Postscript:

11 of 12 people found the following review helpful. highly recommended, but not for everyoneBy XolotlanenseThe subtitle is the key: this is very shandean. If you enjoyed Tristram Shandy, you'll probably enjoy OTSOG too. Merton tirelessly (but not tiresomely) tracks down the origin of a famous aphorism through the labyrinthine ways of countless erudite digressions. If you have the kind of crooked mind that appreciates this kind of thing, you'll find the book entertaining as well as instructive. If you gave up on Tristram Shandy after the first few pages, thinking "What th' ?!" OTSOG is almost certainly not for you. It's rather like cilantro, which people either love or hate.47 of 50 people found the following review helpful. Academia TransfixedBy Marc Ruby™'On the Shoulders of Giants' (which shall hereafter be referred to as OTSOG) is the quintessential study of the nature of academicism. It is thinly disguised as a dissertation into the origin (and originality) of Newton's famous aphorism 'If I have seen farther, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.' However, once the reader finds himself confronted by what might or might not be an attack on Richard Burton (the one that wrote 'The Anatomy of Melancholy'), suspicions grow, and in short order one begins to understand that a leg or two is being pulled.Of course, it does not end there. Displaying the kind of dazzling scholarship that most academics can only aspire to, Merton zigzags across the intellectual horizon on a quest for the lighter side of truth. In doing so, he exposes many of the pretensions of scholarly work, plagiarism and specious logic. Leaving no stone unturned, we are as likely to find ourselves in pursuit of Tristram Shandy as we are to be wandering

through the transept of Chartres Cathedral. All in a mad search to uncover who really used OTSOG first. It needs to be said that Merton is, on his own, an extremely respected sociologist, one who often has used the scientific and academic world as the focus of his remarkable eye. OTSOG sets out to make points by mimicking its subjects rather than lecturing about them. Whimsical and witty, it still touches on serious issues while exposing a great deal of fascinating minutia. Certainly it is a one of a kind work that enjoys a large cult following among those who are reluctant to take themselves seriously. Look out for Umberto Eco's foreword and Merton's riposte-face as well. 3 of 4 people found the following review helpful. *Dwarfs on Giants' Shoulders* By H. Baltussen An original study with an unexpected outcome. Merton manages to do the historical digging in order to extract the story on how intellectuals build up their theories by declaring themselves "dwarfs standing on shoulders of giants". He retraces the original version not to Newton --as was always assumed-- but to the medieval scholar Bernard of Chartres. But there is much else to be learned, since Merton rummages through the archives of intellectual history and unearths the different versions and variants of the aphorism. The lively style under the form of a long letter (Tristram Shandy style) and the introduction by Umberto Eco are a nice bonus.

With playfulness and a large dose of wit, Robert Merton traces the origin of Newton's aphorism, "If I have seen farther, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants." Using as a model the discursive and digressive style of Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, Merton presents a whimsical yet scholarly work which deals with the questions of creativity, tradition, plagiarism, the transmission of knowledge, and the concept of progress. "This book is the delightful apotheosis of donmanship: Merton parodies scholarliness while being faultlessly scholarly; he scourges pedantry while brandishing his own abstruse learning on every page. The most recondite and obscure scholarly squabbles are transmuted into the material of comedy as the ostensible subject is shouldered to one side by yet another hobby horse from Merton's densely populated stable. He has created a *jeu d'esprit* which is profoundly suggestive both in detail and as a whole."—Sean French, *Times Literary Supplement*

From the Back Cover A great and universal book...one of my all-time favorites....The fascinating details build out to profound statements, with light touches about the deepest issues that concern us all: creativity, originality, the social context of discovery, to name just a few.'-Stephen Jay Gould About the Author Robert K. Merton is University Professor Emeritus at Columbia University, Foundation Scholar of the Russell Sage Foundation, and a MacArthur Prize Fellow. A member of the National Academy of Sciences, he has received numerous honors and prizes for his work in both science and the humanities. His many books include the classic *Social Theory and Social Structure*, the *Sociology of Science*, *Sociological Ambivalence*, and *Science, Technology, and Society in Seventeenth-Century England*.