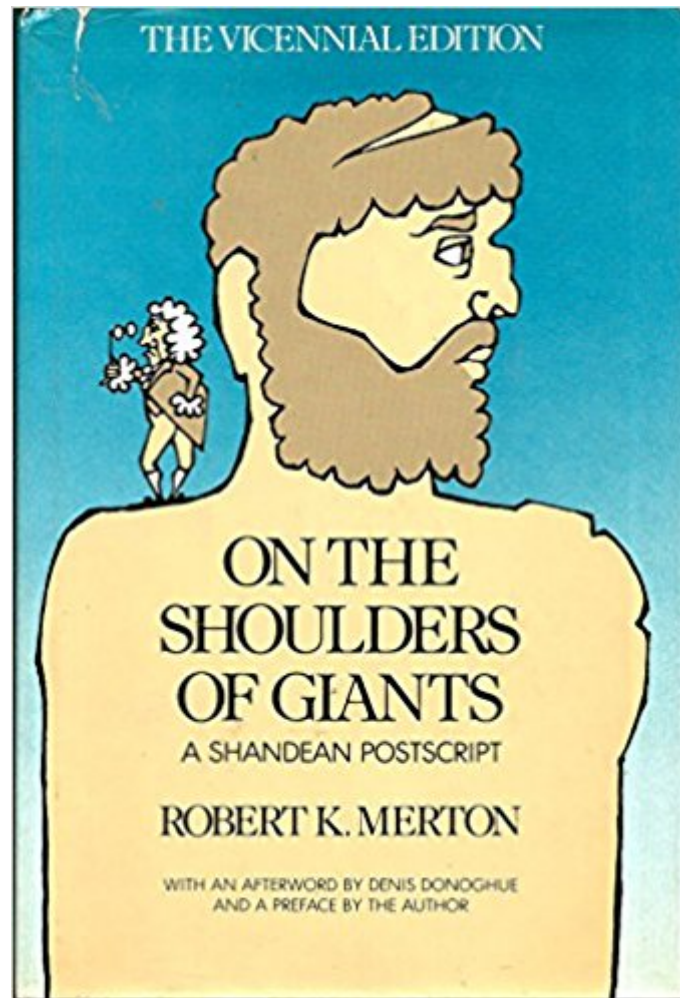




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# **On The Shoulders Of Giants: A Shandean Postscript**



## Synopsis

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*

--This text refers to the Paperback edition.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

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 --This text refers to the Paperback edition.

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*. --This text refers to the Paperback edition.

The 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.

'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.

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 Sterne. He comes off third best. First, of course, is the master himself. Second, comes Umberto Eco for his witty, catholic and erudite Forward. Nonetheless, Merton treads where no others have dared in his re-creation of the "Shandean" style. For this, alone, he deserves credit (and reading.) Because Merton chose real characters it was inevitable he failed to reach the pinnacle achieved in Sterne's fictional master-creation: Uncle Toby--one of the great characters in all literature. Do read Merton, and Tristram Shandy.

The original edition of this supremely pointless timewaster of a volume, parasitical on what might be an entirely legitimate interest in the celebrated sparring between Newton and Hooke, the 'delicious' Brief Lives or the (scarcely less delicious) Anatomy of Melancholy. The mock-scholarly, antique-even-for-1965 tone is conveyed by cumbrous phaseology like 'this is not a matter easily settled', 'I've grown fatigued' and 'I'm not even sure that it's pertinent'. (Ho jolly ho!) Self-indulgent to a degree, its subsequent manifestations have garnered implausibly effusive afterwords from Denis Donoghue (one of three books he wished he'd written, yet!) and finally a foreword by Umberto Eco\*, both of which contrive effortlessly to outclass Merton without feeling obliged to be so peskily, fussily facetious - but then, Merton did have a whole book to fill; we are here spared, at least, the excruciatingly, ineffably fey embroidery that adorns the verso of the dedication in later editions.\* Eco's description of Merton's original, in William Weaver's translation, as 'incontinent' I find extraordinarily apt (admiration and censure both) and wonder if this was Eco's own choice of term. He's also remarkably generous to a sociologist effectively 'larking about' outside his comfort zone.

NORA LUKAN: An amazing insight into academicism that sheds light on the scholarships, for example. The book also takes surprising twists that make this a must read. It's an intellectual rollercoaster ride that might change your life in a couple of ways.

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