

More on specialization and literature: the Scottish heritage and Christmas books

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Abstract. Adam Smith's vision of fields of narrow specialists seems incompatible with the singly authored pastiche book: one which imitates a variety of styles. Furthermore, at least one pastiche book takes inspiration from another notable Scottish figure, raising a question of the consistency of the Scottish heritage. I draw attention to the suggested solution.

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Every style of book that you've caught sight

This underspecialized creature can write

Adam Smith envisions a world of narrow specialists. Regarding the making of a pin, "One man draws out the wire; another straightens it; a third cuts it; a fourth points it; a fifth grinds it at the top for receiving the head..." (Ch. 1, Bk. 1) By dividing up the labour in this way, the end of making a pin is achieved more efficiently. And it is not just pins. It is other fields which are best pursued like this, according to Smith, such as philosophy. But what about those pastiche books: the ones in which a single author has a chapter imitating the style of this prominent author, and another chapter imitating the style of that prominent author? Were there no pastiche books in his day, or did he frown upon them? "This should be done by several specialists: one man imitates Montaigne, another man imitates Rousseau..." That is not such an exciting feat to observe.

Problems deepen for the Scottish heritage, when we examine one particular pastiche book, namely Max Beerbohm's *A Christmas Garland*, or Max Beerbohm's *A Christmas Garland woven by Max Beerbohm*, if that is its proper title:

Stevenson, in one of his essays, tells us how he "played the sedulous ape" to Hazlitt, Sir Thomas Browne, Montaigne, and other writers of the past. And the compositors of all our higher-toned newspapers keep the foregoing sentence set up in type always, so constantly does it come tripping off the pens of all higher-toned reviewers. Nor ever do I read it without a fresh thrill of respect for the young Stevenson. (1912: vi)

Stevenson? Robert Louis Stevenson? There is a question of the consistency of the Scottish heritage, with this situation obtaining:

- (a) The recommendations of Adam Smith lead towards narrow specialization.
- (b) Robert Louis Stevenson inspired the singly authored pastiche book of many styles.

But there is a solution suggested: (b) is something one should only do when young, that is to say, before narrow specialization sets in.

References

- Beerbohm, M. 1912. *A Christmas Garland*. London: William Heinemann.
- Smith, A. 1904 (originally 1776). *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. London: Methuen. Available at: <http://www.econlib.org/library/Smith/smWN.html>