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ESSAYS AND ARTICLES

Some Reflections on Academic Ethics

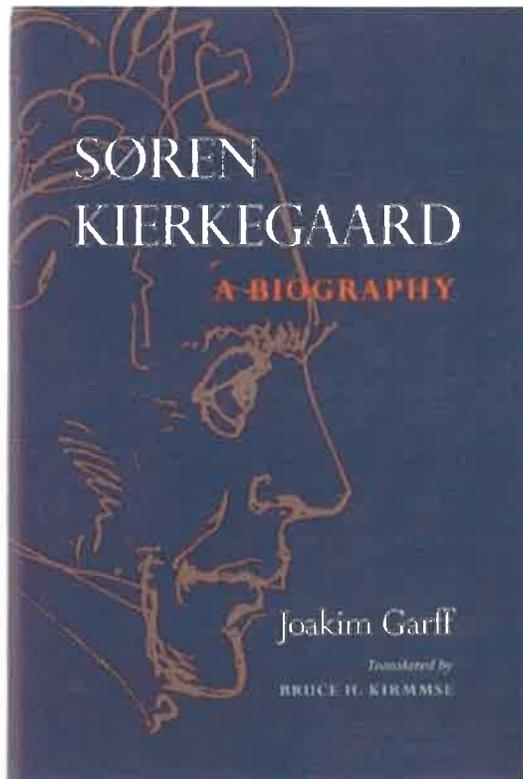
by M.G. Piety

When I was a little girl I was, like so many little girls, horse crazy. I didn't have a horse, so outside of the two weeks I spent at camp every summer, I had almost no practical experience with horses. I read every book on horses and horseback riding I could get from our small local library though. I read them not once, but over and over again. I read them until I had virtually memorized them. I came in this way to feel like such an expert on the subject that I eventually began to write my own book on horses, borrowing liberally from those I had read. I even drew some pictures to illustrate it. When I proudly showed my mother what I had done, she gently informed me that I could not write a book simply by cobbling together information I had learned from other books. I'd have to go out and get some new information. I'd have to learn about my subject first hand.

This was a big pill to swallow for a naïve girl eager to write a book about a subject I loved, but swallow it I did. I am glad I learned this lesson when I was a child rather than after I had become a scholar, and I expect the Danish scholar Joakim Garff wishes he'd learned this before he published his biography, *SAK*, of the philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. The book was a best seller when it came out in Denmark in 2000. It was awarded the prestigious Georg Brandes Prize and the Danish newspaper *Weekendavisen's* Literary Prize. Reviewers of the English translation, *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography* (Princeton, 2005), describe it as "monumental and magisterial" (*Publishers Weekly*, 20 Dec. 2004), "superb" (*The Wall Street Journal*, 3 Feb. 2005), "masterful" (*Times Literary Supplement*, 28 January 2005) and "brilliant" (*The Washington Post*, May 29, 2005).

Another Danish scholar, Peter Tudvad, himself the author of the critically acclaimed book, *Kierkegaards København* (Kierkegaard's Copenhagen, 2004), revealed, however, in the summer of 2004, that Garff's biography was full of factual errors and that it had made substantial use of earlier biographies of Kierkegaard (cf., "SAK-en uvidenskabelig biografi om Søren Kierkegaard" [SAK-an unscholarly biography on Søren Kierkegaard], *Fakten*). Tudvad was "rewarded" for this service to the academic community, and the Danish reading public more generally, with an official reprimand from his boss, the director of the Søren Kierkegaard Research Center at the University of Copenhagen.

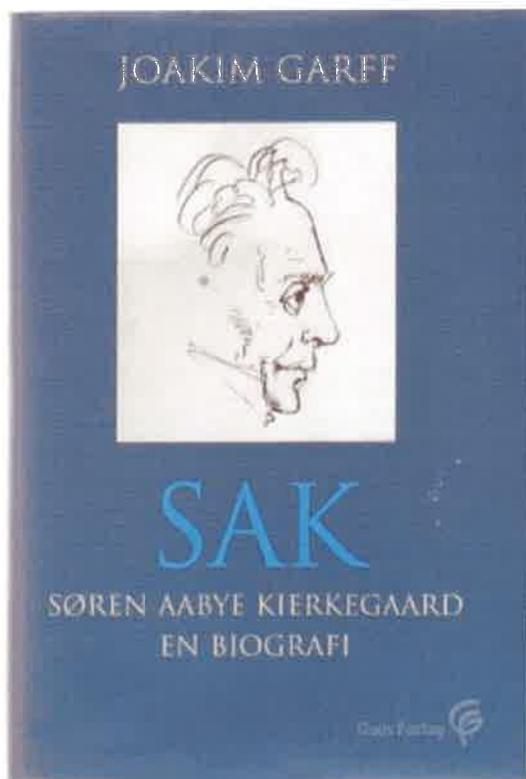
These events raise a number of troubling questions: How could a prominent scholar produce such a work? How could it be lauded as exemplary? Why has the only disciplinary action taken so far been brought against the scholar who exposed the work's flaws rather than against the author? And why have American and British Kierkegaard scholars who are aware of the controversy



over the book in Denmark chosen to remain silent even now, after the English translation has appeared?

Tudvad's careful study of the first hundred pages of this eight hundred and thirteen page work revealed more than forty factual errors and numerous instances of plagiarism. Many of the errors are relatively insignificant, such as incorrect addresses and titles of public officials. Other errors are more serious in that they perpetuate myths about Kierkegaard. I won't list the errors here because I examined some of the more important ones in my article, "Who's Søren Now" in the most recent issue of *The Philosophers' Magazine* (<http://www.philosophersnet.com>). The issues I want to examine here are, first, how the errors got into the work and, second, what happened to the man who exposed them.

The first error comes on page three, where Garff describes the dry-goods business of Kierkegaard's father Michael Pedersen Kierkegaard. "The surviving account books," writes Garff, "indicate that [the elder] Kierkegaard's selection of wares included lisle stockings, woven caps, leather gloves from the Jutland town of Randers and various goods from Iceland."



Reference to Kierkegaard's father's account books makes Garff appear to be doing his homework. There is just one problem: the account books are not listed among Garff's primary sources and Tudvad's diligent search failed to turn up any account books. Tudvad thus concluded that the information in the passage must have come from an earlier biography of Kierkegaard entitled *Søren Kierkegaards Barndom og Ungdom* (Søren Kierkegaard: Childhood and Youth) by the Danish scholar Sejer Kühle (Aschehoug, 1950). Kühle, in turn, appears to have gotten the information not from account books but from the elder Kierkegaard's licenses to do business at various Danish markets. Hence the "account books" Garff refers to would appear to be pure invention.

According to Tudvad, Garff's transcriptions from other works on Kierkegaard are sometimes so hasty that amusing mistakes creep in, as is the case when Garff mistakenly substitutes an "r" for an "s" in a word in a passage from Jørgen Bukdahl's, *Søren Kierkegaard og den menige mand*

(Munksgaard, 1961), with the result that Garff's text reads: "there were rumors that [the social agitator J.C. Lindberg] was to be incarcerated and executed [henrættes] on Christiansø, a notorious prison island" (p 33), whereas it should read, as the English translation of Bukdahl does in fact read, that Lindberg "was to be imprisoned and sent into exile [hensættes] to...Christiansø" (*Søren Kierkegaard and the Common Man* [Erdmans, 2001], 41).

What makes this passage particularly significant is not simply that it points to yet another uncredited secondary source for the book's factual information, but that in this case, the translator should have caught the mistake. Bruce Kirmmse, who translated *SAK*, also translated the text from which Garff made his overly hasty transcription. Kirmmse is an historian who specializes in nineteenth-century Danish history. Had Kirmmse simply forgotten the passage from Bukdahl? That's not inconceivable. What is harder to understand is that, as an historian, he would have forgotten the facts surrounding the Lindberg case. There is, after all, a big difference between being exiled and being executed.

In most instances where Garff borrows from other authors, he lifts relatively innocuous chunks of text that contain information he wants to use. It is not just facts he borrows; in at least one instance he avails himself of a theory as well. One of the most interesting parts of Garff's book is his examination of a story inserted in the "Guilty?"/"Not Guilty?" section of Kierkegaard's *The Stages on Life's Way*. In this story, entitled "A Possibility" (276-288), a young man who had visited a brothel is described as becoming obsessed with the fear that

he might have fathered an illegitimate child.

"The fear about the consequences of the visit," writes Garff, was not, as it was presented in *The Stages*, "a fear about possible offspring—that is a poetic diversionary tactic. It was rather a fear about having contracted a contagious disease" (344). This theory, Garff asserts, is supported by an earlier story entitled "A Leper's Self-Contemplation" (233-234), that was also inserted in one of the passages of *The Stages*, where a leper is described as securing a salve that would conceal the outward signs of his illness.

"A demonic and alarming allegory," asserts Garff,

takes form deep within this dark tale, a reconstruction of a crippling relationship to one's father: The father is a leper, and leprosy is a metaphor for syphilis. And the salve he uses to combat the infection is not a poetic invention but existed in the real world as mercury salve, known as 'the gray ointment,' which physicians believed to be effective in treating syphilis. The curative effects of the mercury salve treatment were only visible after fifteen or twenty years, however... . (346.)

Kierkegaard's father, Garff observes, citing a little-known entry in one of Kierkegaard's journals, actually told his son "that in his youth he had been like a wild animal and had contracted an infectious disease, a syphilitic punishment" (347.)

The "syphilis theory" is fascinating and ingenious, combining in an enormously fruitful way impressive knowledge of nineteenth-century medicine with an almost unprecedented familiarity with the more obscure passages from Kierkegaard's journals and papers. "Almost" is the operative word here because, according to Tudvad, the "syphilis theory," in all its details, is not actually Garff's, but comes from Carl Saggau's *Skyldig-ikke skyldig? Et par kapitler af Michael og Søren Kierkegaards Ungdomsliv* (Guilty-Not Guilty? A Couple Chapters from Michael and Søren Kierkegaard's Youth) (Copenhagen, 1958).

Garff argues that anyone who has ever written a biography knows that biographers base their work on preexisting biographies and several Danish scholars have agreed with Garff on this point (cf., e.g., *Information*, 30 July and 4 August 2004). Few scholars outside Denmark are likely to agree. Stephen Ambrose and Doris Kearns Goodwin were both pilloried in the American media for borrowing from the works of others without proper attribution. Such "borrowing" is the paradigmatic example of plagiarism. It is enough, often, to get students expelled from college and it constitutes academic misconduct when practiced by professionals. Goodwin was so shamed by the exposure that she had borrowed from other scholars that she was forced to settle a copyright infringement claim made against her for an undisclosed amount of money. The controversy surrounding her case became so heated that she asked her publisher to destroy the remaining copies of her book and publish a new, corrected edition.

Garff has acknowledged the errors, but instead of correcting them or destroying the remaining copies of the book, he has attempted to dismiss Tudvad's criticism as motivated by personal animosity. Tudvad argues, on the other hand, that his criticisms are not directed primarily at Garff, but at the scholarly tradition of which Garff's work is a part. Reviewers, he asserts, should have exposed the problems with the biography. Instead, they awarded it prizes for scholarly rigor.

Despite Garff's admission of the problems with the book, it was Tudvad, and not Garff, who received an official reprimand from Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, the director of the Søren Kierkegaard Research Center, where both Tudvad and Garff work. This is the kind of dispute, Cappelørn explained, echoing Garff's own words (*Jyllands-Posten, Morgenavisen*, 28 July 2004), that should have been settled privately (*Jyllands-Posten, Internetavisen*, 28-29 July 2004). Since the book was already in print though, it is hard to imagine how Tudvad could have settled the matter privately.

It is clear to me that Tudvad was right to make his criticisms public. It was his professional responsibility as a scholar. Scholars often circulate manuscripts of their work among colleagues to get feedback that they can use to make revisions before the work appears in print. If Garff had circulated a manuscript of *SAK* among his colleagues at the center, it would have been wrong for Tudvad to seize upon the work's errors and run with this information to the press. That was not what happened though. *SAK* was not only in print, when Tudvad made his discoveries, it had won two prestigious awards and the effusive praise of Denmark's intellectual elite. Tudvad had a responsibility to the reading public, as well as to other scholars, to expose the work's flaws.

Most of the public discussion of *SAK* has focused on the work's factual errors. Getting facts wrong is not unethical; it is just bad scholarship. The real problem is not the facts; it is not even that these "facts" were lifted from the works of other biographers rather than from primary sources. The real problem is that the authors Garff mined for both factual information and for theories, such as the "syphilis theory" that is given as the real explanation for a passage from *The Stages on Life's Way*, are not given proper credit. The authors are listed among the "sources" at the end of the work, but there is often little, if any, indication of what parts of the book originated from Garff's pen and what parts originated from the pens of others. That is not bad scholarship. *That* is plagiarism.

The really disturbing aspect of the whole affair is that the one man with the courage to fulfill his professional responsibility and reveal the plagiarism as such was publicly censured by a prominent member of the academy. Tudvad is what is known in the US as a "whistle blower." Retribution against whistle blowers is not unknown. It is so common, in fact, that US law actually incorporates specific legal protections for them. They are perceived to provide a vital public service and thus to deserve the protection of the law. Retribution against whistle blowers is usually enacted in secret. Yet Cappelørn *publicly* punished Tudvad for blowing the whistle on *SAK*. Such a move will discourage other scholars from speaking up when they see similar violations of academic ethics. This might save some people a lot of embarrassment, but at what cost to the quality of scholarship and to the culture more generally?

It is uncertain what will happen with *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography*. Will Garff provide a revised, corrected edition or are the problems with the work so pervasive that a corrected version is effectively impossible? Will Princeton continue to call the work "definitive"? Will Garff and Cappelørn continue to be respected members of the academic community? Has Tudvad done himself irreparable professional damage by publicly supporting standards of academic ethics that the rest of us who call ourselves scholars claim we also support? It will be a sad day for all of us if that turns out to be the case.

M.G. Piety is a professor of Philosophy at Drexel University.