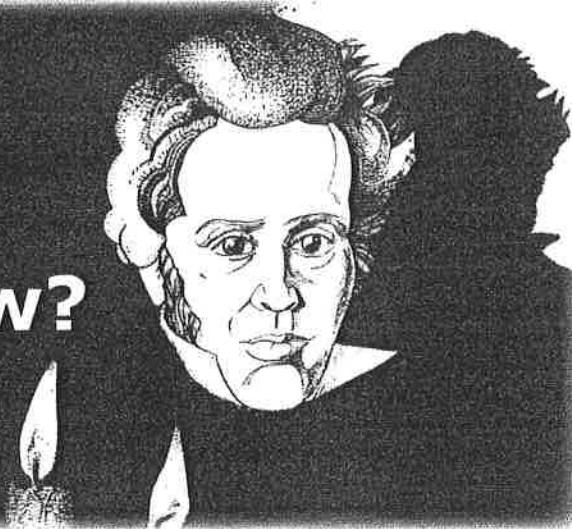


## Who's Søren now?

M G Piety on the disputed life  
of Kierkegaard

Andrew Fournier



**A** battle is raging between two Danish scholars over the status of a prize-winning biography of Søren Kierkegaard that appeared in English translation in February of this year. Princeton University Press has called *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography* “the definitive account of Kierkegaard’s life”. *Publishers Weekly* calls it “monumental and magisterial”, and an American Kierkegaard scholar writing in *The Wall Street Journal* called it “superb”. Another scholar, writing in the *Times Literary Supplement*, said that while it was hard to imagine what a new biography of Kierkegaard might consist of, this most recent work had solved that problem “masterfully”. Danish reviewers have been similarly extravagant in their praise. A reviewer for the Danish newspaper *Politiken* asserted that no other biography “would ever even approach it, much less surpass it”.

The biography received the prestigious Georg Brandes Prize and the Danish newspaper *Weekendavisen*’s literary prize. It is in its fifth Danish edition. Since its publication in Denmark in 2000, it has been translated into German, Swedish, Norwegian, Hungarian, and now English. The George Brandes prize selection committee said they chose the work because of its “academic thoroughness” and because of the “rigour of the standards of verification to which it adhered”.

Unfortunately, it appears now that it was

perhaps not so thoroughly researched. Another Danish scholar, Peter Tudvad, himself the author of a critically acclaimed book, *Kierkegaards København (Kierkegaard’s Copenhagen)*, has charged that the biography is seriously marred by the “uncritical appropriation” of erroneous information concerning the details of Kierkegaard’s life, “scholarly bungling” and outright “plagiarism”.

The author of the biography, Joachim Garff, has argued that the criticisms of his book and the dispute over its status – whether it is a scholarly work – are not matters that would interest the general public. He appears, however, to have been wrong about that. Danish newspapers have run more than fifty articles now on what *Weekendavisen* is calling “the fight between the white-wine academic and the archive rat”.

So what are the errors in *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography*? There is not space here to list them all, so the following are just a few examples of the more important errors that perpetuate misunderstandings of Kierkegaard’s life and works. The first concerns Kierkegaard’s run-in with the satirical newspaper *Corsaren (The Corsair)*. Kierkegaard was repeatedly attacked and caricatured in the paper in 1846. He continued to complain of persecution by *Corsaren*, however, long after the attacks had – according to biographers, including Garff – ceased. These complaints, in the absence of any cause, have been taken as evidence that Kierkegaard suffered from some kind of neurotic personality disorder; a disorder that scholars, including Garff, have argued

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than to a piece of scholarship. If Tudvad is correct, however, the book does not even fare well as an historical novel because Garff, he charges, repeatedly evinces “insufficient knowledge of the conditions of the period”. This would appear, for example, to be the case with Garff’s “translation” of the “old-fashioned” word “virgin” (*jomfru*) from Kierkegaard’s brother’s journal, to what he argued was the more contemporary “young girl” (*ung pige*). The problem is that the “young girl” in question was actually 37 years old. Garff appears to have been unaware that the “*jomfru*” was actually a term of respect, a title applied generally to all unmarried women and particularly to a housekeeper, or “*husjomfru*” as was the case with the reference in question.

Garff has attempted to dismiss Tudvad’s criticisms as motivated by personal animosity. Tudvad argues, however, 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, the numerous factual errors, the plagiarism and the overly speculative nature of the book, yet none did. Instead, they awarded it prizes for its scholarly rigour. It was actually this turn of events that Tudvad asserts most disturbed him and which was the actual target of his public criticism of the book.

Garff has acknowledged the errors, but has failed to correct them. Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, the director of the Søren Kierkegaard Research Centre at the University of Copenhagen, where both Tudvad and Garff are employed, called the discoveries on which Tudvad bases many of his criticisms of Garff’s biography “epoch-making” and asserts that “they cast a whole new light on Kierkegaard”. Still, Cappelørn declined, at first, to comment on the criticisms themselves. When he did finally take a position, it was in the form of an official reprimand of Tudvad for airing the centre’s dirty laundry in public. This is the

kind of dispute, Cappelørn explained, echoing Garff’s own words, that should have been settled privately.

Some would argue, however, that this is precisely the problem with Danish scholarship. “Such collegial loyalty,” observed the author of an editorial in *Weekendavisen*, “is highly valued in Denmark, often more highly than is good either for scholarship or for the general public”. The value placed on “collegial loyalty” in Denmark is in fact so high that Tudvad’s criticisms of Garff’s biography have been likened to a Kamikaze attack of the order of Kierkegaard’s own attack on the Danish Lutheran church.

The target of that attack was not, on Kierkegaard’s own account, the dead bishop at whom it appeared to be directed, but the church that eulogised him as a “witness for the truth.” In a similar manner, Tudvad asserts that the primary target of his own attack is not Garff, but the scholarly tradition that both produced him and that now lauds his work.

Kierkegaard’s attack on the church damaged his reputation among Danish intellectuals to such an extent that, had his work not become popular outside Denmark, it is unlikely he would ever have become part of the Danish university curriculum. It remains to be seen whether Tudvad’s behaviour will amount to professional self-immolation.

One thing is clear, however: Garff’s defence of his book, together with the fact that he has failed to correct its errors – errors that now permeate the new English translation – show that Tudvad was right to make his criticisms public rather than keep them hidden within the walls of academe.

The number of Danish scholars and intellectuals who have rallied to Garff’s defence suggests that there may be a little rot within those walls and that more public exposure of their interior could be a very healthy thing. **T**

*Kierkegaard: A Biography is reviewed on p89*



shaped many of his works. Tudvad discovered, however, while doing research for his own book, that the attack on Kierkegaard, which began in *Corsaren* in 1846, did not stop in that year, but continued for nine years until Kierkegaard's death in 1855. This is not a small detail for a biographer to get wrong.

Other serious errors in the book include the fact that Kierkegaard is described as having two male servants, which Garff uses, as others have before him, as evidence of excessive personal extravagance, at odds with Kierkegaard's emphasis, in his works, on charity. Tudvad reveals, however, that one of these purported "servants" was actually a mentally ill and financially destitute carpenter's apprentice whom Kierkegaard took into his household, along with the man's wife and two children, and partially supported for four years.

Garff also repeats the story that Kierkegaard was accompanied, on a trip he made to Jutland in 1850, by his servant Anders Westergaard. It would indeed be extravagant to travel with a servant. Kierkegaard appears, however, to have made the trip alone because Anders Westergaard, Tudvad points out, was actually in the army in 1850. He did not enter Kierkegaard's employ until four years later.

Garff repeats the myth that Kierkegaard gave very little to charity. Tudvad reveals, however, that the figure first cited in 1935 as the sum total of Kierkegaard's annual charitable contributions, thirty *rigsdaler*, actually refers to the annual charitable contributions of Kierkegaard's servant, Westergaard. There are no precise records of how much Kierkegaard himself contributed to charitable organizations. A receipt has turned up, however, for a ten *rigsdaler* contribution Kierkegaard made to help flood victims in Jutland. There appears to be no special reason for this contribution and this suggests that Kierkegaard very likely made other such contributions. He does not appear, in any case, to have evinced the insensitivity to other people's economic situations that Garff attributes to him. Kierkegaard's

amanuensis, Israel Levin, thought Kierkegaard an overly generous tipper. According to an account Tudvad unearthed by one of Kierkegaard's contemporaries, Kierkegaard gave a *rigsdaler* every week to a street musician in his neighbourhood; thus his annual contribution to this musician alone is greater than the amount cited by Garff as the total of his annual charitable contributions.

Tudvad charges that much of Garff's *Soren Kierkegaard* is actually plagiarised from earlier and, unfortunately, flawed biographies of Kierkegaard; the nature of the errors in the new biography seem to support this charge. Garff actually admits he based his work on earlier biographies, but argues in his defence that he did not have time to go back and check most of the original sources. Garff argues that anyone who has ever written a biography knows that the biographer bases his work on pre-existing biographies. Several Danish biographers have actually agreed with Garff on this point. Few biographers outside Denmark, however, are likely to agree with such a view of their work.

There is no question that the errors in Garff's biography are substantial. It may be a good read, as the members of the Georg Brandes prize now – in their best Danish double-speak – assert was the real reason for its selection, but that does not make it a good biography.

Garff argues, on the other hand, that critics of the work simply do not understand the nature of biography. "If every time I'd written a sentence, pure scholarly nervousness had driven me to check its accuracy, I'd have never gotten past page seven," he wrote in *Politiken*. Biography, he contends, is more a literary than a scholarly genre, so he chose to devote his energies to things such as the narrative structure of the work rather than to verifying the truth of the many factual claims it contains.

The numerous errors in the book do indeed leave the reader with something much closer to literary work in the sense of historical fiction

**Collegial loyalty is often more highly valued than is good either for scholarship or for the general public**

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## Angst og hykleri

Af Marilyn G. Piety

En amerikansk forsker angriber Joakim Garffs verdensberømmede biografi SAK om filosofen Søren Aabye Kierkegaard for at være pseudovidenskab, plagiering og letkøbt sensationstrang. Marilyn G. Piety mener også, at hele sagen handler om uvidenhed og arrogance og en gennemført fejhed i det globale akademiske miljø.

Anmeldere af den engelske oversættelse af Joakim Garffs SAK (en biografi om filosofen Søren Aabye Kierkegaard) beskriver værket som »monumentalt og autoritativt« (Publishers Weekly 20. december 2004), »superbt« (The Wall Street Journal 3. februar 2005), »mesterligt« (Times Literary Supplement 28. januar 2005) og »fortræffeligt« (The Washington Post 29. maj 2005). Den virkelige historie bag SAK er imidlertid, som Peter Tudvad afslørede sidste sommer, noget anderledes end den, der præsenteres i disse anmeldelser. Det er en fortælling om pseudovidenskab, plagiering og letkøbt sensationstrang, om uvidenhed og arrogance og en gennemført fejhed i det globale akademiske miljø.

Faktuelle fejl er ikke det eneste problem med bogen. Det helt store spørgsmål er snarere, hvordan fejlene er kommet ind i værket. Det lader til, at det er foregået via andre biografier, som Garff har gennemgået for faktuelle informationer i stedet for at gå til primærkilderne.

Et stående eksempel finder man allerede på første side, hvor Garff beskriver den husekræmmerforretning, som Kierkegaards far, Michael Pedersen Kierkegaard, ejede. »Af de bevarede regnskabsbøger«, skriver Garff, »kan man se, at (den ældre) Kierkegaards sortiment bestod af trådstrømper, vævede huer, randershandsker og forskellige islandske varer«.

Referencen til Kierkegaards fars regnskabsbøger får det sandelig til at se ud som om, Garff har lavet sit hjemmearbejde. Der er kun ét problem: der findes ikke nogen bevarede regnskabsbøger (jf. »SAK - en uvidenskabelig biografi om Søren Kierkegaard« i: Fakten, [www.fakten.dk/debat/20040701.html](http://www.fakten.dk/debat/20040701.html)). Oplysningen i passagen ser ud til at stamme fra en tidligere Kierke-

gaard-biografi, »Søren Kierkegaards Barndom og Ungdom« af Sejer Kühle, Aschehoug 1950).

Garff modargumenterer, at enhver, der har skrevet en biografi, ved, at biografer baserer deres arbejde på eksisterende biografier, og i dette har adskillige danske forskere erklæret sig enige (se f.eks. Information, 30. juli og 4. august 2004).

Få akademikere uden for Danmark vil imidlertid erklære sig enige med ham. Stephen Ambrose og Doris Kearns Goodwin er blevet hængt ud i de amerikanske medier for at have lånt fra andres arbejder uden korrekt tilladelse. Sådanne »lån« er ofte nok til at få studerende smidt ud af universitetet og udgør en akademisk embedsforbrydelse, når det praktiseres af professionelle. Goodwin blev tvunget til at indgå et forlig af en ukendt størrelsesorden i en copyright-sag, at trække sig ud af den prestigefulde Pulitzer-komité og bede sin forfatter om at makulere restoplaget af bogen og udgive en korrigeret udgave.

Intet blot i nærheden af dette er sket med SAK. Garff har erkendt fejlene i bogen, men i stedet for at rette dem, har han afvist Tudvads kritik som værende motiveret af personligt fjendskab. Tudvad hævder på sin side, at hans kritik ikke udelukkende er rettet mod Garff, men snarere mod den

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akademiske tradition som Garffs værk er en del af. Anmeldere, hævder han, burde have blottet bogens problemer. I stedet er den blevet belønnet med priser for akademisk præcision.

Ifølge Tudvad er Garffs transskriptioner fra andre værker om Kierkegaard indimellem så forfæstede, at morsomme fejl sniger sig ind, som f.eks. da Garff bytter rundt på nogle bogstaver i et ord fra Søren Bukdahls »Søren Kierkegaard og den menige mand« (Munksgaard, 1961), med det resultat, at Garffs tekst lyder: »Der var rygter om, at den sociale agitator J.C. Lindberg skulle fængsles og henrettes på Christiansø« (s.33), hvor ordlyden skulle være, at Lindberg skulle »...fængsles og hensættes på Christiansø«, hvilket rent faktisk også står at læse i den engelske oversættelse af Bukdahls bog. Denne passage er vigtig, fordi oversætteren burde have fanget fejlen. Bruce Kimmse, der har oversat SAK, har også i 2001 oversat den tekst, som Garff kopierede. Kimmse er historiker med speciale i dansk 1800-talshistorie. Det er svært at forstå, hvordan han kan have glemt detaljerne i forbindelse med Lindberg-sagen.

De utallige fejl i SAK lader læseren tilbage med et værk, der i højere grad må betegnes som en historisk roman end et stykke akademisk arbejde. Men ikke engang som historisk roman ville bogen stå distancen, fordi Garff - som Tudvad påpeger - gentagne gange råber »en utilstrækkelig viden om forhold i perioden« (Berlingske Tidende 28. juli 2004).

Det er f.eks. tilfældet med Garffs modernisering af det gammeldags udtryk »jomfru« fra Kierkegaards brors dagbog, til hvad han argumenterer for, er et mere nutidigt klingende »ung pige« (Politiken 28. juli 2004). Problemet er, at den »unge pige« sagen handler om, faktisk er 37 år. »Jomfru« var simpelthen en respektfuld betegnelse, en titulering, der blev anvendt om alle ugifte kvinder. Man undrer sig igen: hvorfor træder historikeren Kimmse ikke ind og korrigerer Garff her?

Trods Garffs erkendelse af bogens problemer, var det Tudvad og ikke Garff, der modtog en officiel reprimande fra leder af Søren Kierkegaard Forskningscenteret, Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, hvor både Garff og Tudvad arbejder. Det er sådanne slags stridigheder, forklarede Cappelørn med et ekko af Garffs egne ord, der skulle have været klaret privat (Jyllands-Posten, Internetavisen, 28.-29. juli 2004). At Garff ikke har rettet fejlene i bogen, tyder imidlertid på, at Tudvad handlede korrekt, da han gik til offentligheden.

Selv før Tudvad afslørede fejl og plagierede passager i SAK, var der mindst én dansk anmelder, Johan de Mylius, der havde formatet til at henlede opmærksomheden på visse formelle eller teoretiske svagheder ved bogen samt modet til at sige det højt. Bogen, erklærede han, negligerede næsten fuldstændigt forfatteren Kierkegaard på bekostning af en overfladisk og sensationspræget præsentation af andre detaljer i dennes personlige liv (Nordica, vol. 19, 2002). Det er en svaghed, enhver anmelder burde se. Så hvorfor nævnes det ikke af nogle af anmelderne af den engelske oversættelse? Man ledes uundgåeligt til den konklusion, at visse anmeldere og andre i det akademiske miljø har set værkets svagheder, men har valgt at forblive tavse.

Idealforestillingen om boganmelderen som intellektuel vagthund leder til formodningen om, at hun eller han tager sit ansvar alvorligt. Anmelderen må sætte sit værdifulde job højere end tanken om at lifdynde sig hos forfatteren. Det er imidlertid ikke altid tilfældet. Nogle gange lader selv dygtige anmeldere bekymringer om kollegiale forhold triumfere over deres ansvar over for læseren.

Det kan være sådan en dynamik, der er tale om her. Garff er ansat på Søren Kierkegaard Forskningscenteret, en særdeles velbemidlet institution, der står som en af Danmarks stolteste kulturelle præstationer. Forskningscenteret er kendt i vide kredse og yder en særdeles eftertragtet økonomisk støtte til Kierkegaard-forskere i både ind- og udland. En støtte de kunne frygte at miste, hvis de uforvarende generede en prominent ansat.

Hvad vil der ske med SAK? Vil Garff udgive en revideret og rettet udgave? Hvad sker der med de utallige oversættelser? Vil Garff fortsat være et respekteret medlem af det danske akademiske miljø? Har Tudvad påført sig selv ubodelig skade ved offentligt at forsvare akademiske standarder? Hvad vil det sige om situationen i de danske akademiske cirkler, hvis Tudvads adfærd ender med at blive et tilfælde af professionel selvofring? Og hvad siger det om resten af os, der gerne vil betragtes som akademikere, hvis vi ikke støtter ham?

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