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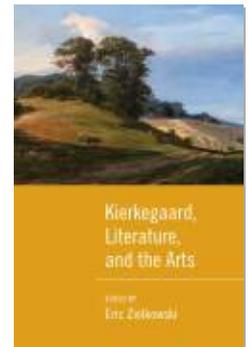
Published by Northwestern University Press

Ziolkowski, Eric & Garff, Joakim & Jøthen, Peder & Rovira, James.

Kierkegaard, Literature, and the Arts.

Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2018.

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Kierkegaard's Existential Play

Storytelling and the Development of the Religious Imagination in the Authorship

Marcia C. Robinson

Søren Kierkegaard's polyphonous authorship is replete with imagery. From the early polemical writings to the late attack on the established Church, analogies, figures, and stories of all sorts pervade his reflections on God and human existence. Indeed, the prominence and prevalence of stories as biblical, mythical, fictional, or historical accounts of human situations suggest a deliberate desire to make religious philosophy poetry. Kierkegaard does not use all of this imagery, however, just to create philosophical or theological art. Rather, as George Pattison rightly notes, Kierkegaard uses imagery for rhetorical and ethical purposes.¹ That is, in good Ciceronian fashion, he offers his modern cultured readers an imaginative philosophy in a narrative and conversational style in order to persuade them to become persons of faith or "selves before God" (*SKS* 11:129–32, 143, 225–27 / *SUD* 13–16, 26–27, 113–14)—an attitudinal ethic that Pattison convincingly presents as a "regulative ideal."² This suggests that for Kierkegaard, faith not only has intrinsic value—as a way of seeing and being in the world that defines human being as human being, which is precisely what makes it the ethical purpose driving his rhetorical aesthetic—but as such, faith also has the capacity to incite deep feeling and desire, and so to serve as its own incentive for action.³ In other words, faith addresses itself to the whole person—head, heart, and soul, not just head; therefore, the presentation or communication of faith must do likewise. For Kierkegaard, this means that faith requires artistry, not just prose.

Kierkegaard's logician-humorist pseudonym Johannes Climacus confirms this in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, where he discusses "the subjective thinker" or person of faith "as an artist" and faith as an "existence-communication" (*SKS* 7:317–20, 346–47 / *CUP* 1:348–51, 379–80). There, after presenting faith as "an objective uncertainty" on which to stake one's whole life, Climacus says that the person of faith or subjective thinker realizes that "imagination and feeling," not just "dialectical thinking," are needed to exist in, and to communicate, faith because such an existence involves

“passion . . . difficulty and contradiction” (*SKS* 7:186–87, 317–20, 346–47 / *CUP* 1:204, 348–51, 379–80). In other words, reason and prose are not sufficient for addressing or relating passion and life’s challenges and paradoxes as they are experienced; poetry *is* sufficient—that is, a dialectical poetry that speaks to head, heart, and soul. Climacus concludes, then, that “to exist is an art” and to communicate the art of living is also an art because the whole person must be involved and addressed in both.

Storytelling and Human Nature

All of this suggests that Kierkegaard’s rhetorical strategy depends upon some kind of holistic conception of human nature, a conception that goes hand in glove with the ethical-religious ideal he promotes. This understanding of human nature, though, should not be viewed primarily as a formal or fully developed anthropology or ontology, concerned with objective certainty. Rather, it should be viewed, as Pattison observes, as a practical or “experimental” anthropology, concerned primarily with faith and life.⁴ As such, we might see Kierkegaard sketching this “experimental” anthropology in order to identify aspects of human nature that he thinks are central to becoming and being a faithful self and that he thinks must be engaged in order to persuade his readers to pursue such selfhood. That is, with both his own experience and the long Western tradition of conceiving human nature in mind, including the Idealist and Romantic anthropologies of his day, we might see Kierkegaard setting out a working conception of human nature for his “art of living” that considers humans to be sentient, rational, and free beings (“feeling, knowing, and willing”), defined by time, place, and circumstance (“finitude”), yet able to transcend and transform these limitations in problematic situations, at least to some degree, by means of imagination’s “infinite reflection” (*SKS* 11:145–47, 154–57 / *SUD* 29–31, 38–41). If we take this perspective, we might then see Kierkegaard to be assuming that if his readers possess sufficient imagination, as his premier Christian pseudonym, Anti-Climacus, puts it, he might be able to awaken and develop this capacity in them by presenting narratives of moral and religious conflict that would allow them to envision life’s potentiality or ideality in direct relation to its problematic or difficult actuality (*SKS* 12:186 / *PC* 186; *SKS* 11:146–47 / *SUD* 30–31). The tension created by these opposites might in turn “intensify” or sharpen his readers’ abilities to “feel” and to “know” the issues at stake and, if they are receptive to the paradigm shift introduced, “to long for” and “to seek” the moral and religious ideal presented (*SKS* 11:147 / *SUD* 30–31). This in effect would make their imaginations’ capacities “*instar omnium*” since their whole persons would be “transformed” by its vision (*SKS* 11:147 / *SUD* 30–31).⁵

With regard to faith, this would mean that Kierkegaard tells stories because he assumes they can awaken his readers’ imaginations and heighten

their abilities to “feel” and to “know” the ideality and actuality of faith itself. If they are receptive, they will fall in love with faith’s goodness and beauty, in spite of its challenges and risks, and be moved to “seek” its possibility and plenitude in the midst of life’s difficulties, just as Anti-Climacus’s earnest youth does in *Practice in Christianity* (SKS 11:146–47 / SUD 30–31; SKS 12:186–94 / PC 186–96). The capacity of the imagination to do this, however, suggests that for Kierkegaard, it cannot be awakened just once. As the capacity for a high level of ethical and religious reflection that influences how one views and responds to existential challenges, the imagination must be cultivated throughout a person’s life, indeed always in relation to a person’s experiences (SKS 12:186–88 / PC 187–88). We might conclude, then, that Kierkegaard tells stories about faith and life throughout the authorship, from multiple perspectives, and particularly with actual experiences in mind in the religious discourses, because he wants to help his readers to develop mature religious imaginations, controlled powers for envisioning divine possibility that can keep them “awakened” to, in love with, and thankful for life as divine gift, grace, and task (SKS 11:146–47 / SUD 30–31; SKS 12:186–88 / PC 187–88; SKS 10:73–75, 138–40, 142–43, 209–10 / CD 64–66, 127–129, 131–33, 200; SKS 1:312–16 / CI 276–80).

Kierkegaard’s tempering of imagination with actual experience in this careful union of storytelling and faith suggests that his rhetorical strategy assumes more than a broad, working conception of human nature. His faith-oriented storytelling also assumes that he possesses a good understanding of his audience’s actual circumstances, values, fears, concerns, and conceptions of and attitudes toward faith, since these kinds of particularities are the “premises,” as he puts it in *The Concept of Irony*, of any type of effective communication (SKS 1:313 / CI 277).

Audience and Storytelling Method

As is well known, in *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*, Kierkegaard indicates that his primary audience is modern Danish Christians, who, he believes, live in illusions about faith and life (SKS 13:15–17; 16:23–38 / PV 9–11, 41–56). According to him, ecclesiastical and cultural leaders such as Hans Lassen Martensen and Johan Ludvig Heiberg are largely to blame. As advocates of a right-wing or conservative Hegelianism, a popular intellectual and cultural movement of the day, Martensen and Heiberg encourage their bourgeois followers to believe that the difficulties of faith and the anxieties of modern life are easily resolved in institutional expressions of a divinized reason and in triumphs of artistic genius. In other words, as Kierkegaard sees it, Martensen and Heiberg wrongfully encourage their followers to bury their anxiety and despair in the false security of the Church, the state, the university, and the arts community—a democratized absolutism, or “leveling,” as

Kierkegaard puts it—rather than face life in earnest as genuine “selves before God” who learn to be faithful “out over 70,000 fathoms” (SKS 20:187–88, NB2:119, n.d. 1847 / KJN 4:186–87; SKS 8:74–89 / TA 77–93; SKS 11:117–18 / SUD 5–6; SKS 7:131, 187, 212, 263 / CUP 1:140, 204, 232, 288). For Kierkegaard, Martensen’s participation in this activity is particularly disturbing because he is a minister of the Gospel (SKS 20:205, NB2:160, n.d. 1847 / KJN 4:204; SKS 23:179–80, NB17:23, n.d. 1850 / KJN 7:182–83; SKS 25:28–29, NB26:21, n.d. 1852 / JP 6:6807). As such, says Kierkegaard, he should be helping modern Danes to deal with their troubles and to find more honest and authentic ways to live in a disorienting, frightening, uncertain, and fragmented world, not to sneak out of it or to deceive themselves into thinking that all is well (SKS 7:402–403 / CUP 1:443).⁶

Kierkegaard sees it as his task, then, to call Martensen, Heiberg, and their followers back to a serious engagement of faith and life. He does not do this with loud protestations or direct and vociferous attacks—at least not at first (SKS 16:24–29 / PV 42–47; *Pap.* X⁶ B 171, n.d. 1851 / JP 6:6748; compare SKS 14:123–217; 13:127–68 / MLW 3–126). Rather, realizing the power of Martensen’s and Heiberg’s eloquence, he pursues an indirect or aesthetically sophisticated course that he believes is appropriate for, and immediately attractive to, his art-loving, theatergoing audience—an approach that he maintains is driven by Socratic purpose and Christian love (SKS 16:25–28, 35–36 / PV 43–46, 53–55; compare SKS 27:334, *Papir* 323:1, n.d. 1845 / JP 1:631; SKS 25:83, NB26:80, n.d. 1853 / JP 1:824; and SKS 23:322, NB18:99, n.d. 1850 / KJN 7:328–29). Kierkegaard testifies to this in a journal entry on his now famous tangle with the editor of the *Corsair*, where he refers in Hamlet-fashion to a vision of his dead father: “It seemed to me that my dead father put this demand to me: You must present Christianity in its utmost *rigorosity*, but you must keep it *poetic*, you may attack no one, and on no account may you make yourself out to be better than the most insignificant person” (*Pap.* X⁶ B 171, pp. 264–65, n.d. 1851 / JP 6:6748, p. 397, my emphasis).

Thus, styling himself “a peculiar kind of poet” (a dialectical poet, we might say), Kierkegaard takes on the role of a Socratic troubadour or court jester, a master storyteller leading a troupe of “actors,” or pseudonyms, representing a wide array of lifestyles and perspectives. This allows him to meet his avowedly Christian audience where they take their cultured, and not so cultured, ease in illusions: at Our Lady Church, at the Royal Danish Theater, in the halls of the university, in the galleries of Charlottenborg and the Thorvaldsen Museum, and at Copenhagen’s mass attractions and distractions, namely, Tivoli, the Deer Park, and the pages of popular newspapers and scandal sheets (SKS 12:281 / WA 165; with SKS 7:569–73 / CUP 1: 625–30; SKS 22:250, NB12:178, n.d. 1849 / JP 6:6498; SKS 25:44, NB26:38, n.d. 1852 / JP 6:6809; *Pap.* XI³ B 53, n.d. 1854 / JP 6:6943). In doing so, he not only accommodates them by creating his own eloquence, as Erasmus (Aristotle)

says a good orator should (*SKS* 18:236, JJ:305, n.d. 1845 / *KJN* 2:217).⁷ But he also sets the stage for “deceiving” them in a “godly” way, as M. Holmes Hartshorne notes, a way that allows his readers to recognize privately what faith truly is and who they truly are, so that they might acknowledge, or perhaps even become receptive to, faith as a risky, but healthy way of living (*SKS* 16:25–29, 35–36 / *PV* 43–47, 53–55).⁸

Pattison's characterization of Kierkegaard's authorship as a “magic theatre,” an image he borrows from Kierkegaard's pseudonym Constantin Constantius, is quite apropos (*SKS* 4:30 / *R* 154).⁹ For by qualifying his characterization with Martin Thust's older interpretation of the authorship as a “marionette theatre,” Pattison not only indicates how Kierkegaard deploys the poetic by appropriating nineteenth-century dramaturgical theory in constructing the pseudonyms and other figures—that is, by making them personifications of ideas, attitudes, or perspectives rather than three-dimensional characters, something familiar to his cultured Christian audience.¹⁰ But he also illuminates the nature of Kierkegaard's role as a Socratic poet. With Thust's assistance, he helps us to see Kierkegaard as a master manipulator of existential dialogue, a “puppeteer” who gives his figural “assistants” or “marionettes” the right words, sensibilities, and timing so that they might engage the reader in just enough Socratic conversation to make themselves and their ethical and religious issues personally compelling.

However, in order to understand more about the rhetorical impact that Kierkegaard makes on his reader, it might also help us to view the authorship as a veritable funhouse of existential activity, teeming at every turn, like a Fellini film, with opportunities for self-exploration, self-examination, and self-assessment.¹¹ Such a funhouse is not a simple matter of fun and games but more like a fairy tale that uses the comic, the charming, the seductive, or the magical in order to draw the reader into the anxiety, the suffering, the terror, and the death that dog human existence. By viewing Kierkegaard's artistry in this way, our analytical focus shifts away from what he does behind the scenes to the impact of his manipulations on the psyche of the reader experiencing them. This allows us to be attentive to the often strange but attractive nature of his personified ideas, attitudes, and perspectives, something that makes them akin to clowns who know how to unite levity and earnestness. Viewing the authorship as a funhouse also allows us to be attentive to the way he uses imaginative existential situations to induce a free and personally invested response from his readers.¹² Hence, as we follow Kierkegaard's receptive, nineteenth-century Danish readers, running like children through the creative corridors of his literary, yet interactive, Christo-Socratic theater, we too are put in a position to respond to the uncanny voices, strange sounds, and unexpected happenings emerging and reverberating around every corner. All of this puts us in a better position to see the significance of the psychological and experiential for illuminating, enlivening, and instantiating Kierkegaard's ethical or regulative ideal “before God.” For such an imaginative situation

tells us that the moral and religious ideal cannot be separated from the feeling it induces or the aesthetic form through which it is communicated, since this very feeling and this very form are what allow the reader to be alive to the compelling power of this ideal.¹³ The German Romantic poet and playwright Johann Ludwig Tieck helped Kierkegaard to see this early on in the 1830s and early 1840s, while he was developing ideas about good writing and a life view.¹⁴

As with other Romantics, Kierkegaard was both openly critical and quietly appreciative of Tieck. In his dissertation of 1841, he openly criticizes Tieck for failing to deploy his insights about poetry for moral and religious purposes (SKS 1:330–31, 337–39 / CI 296–97, 304–6).¹⁵ In his journals and papers from the mid- to late 1830s, though, he appreciates and appropriates Tieck's insights about allegories and fairy tales because they help him to see that storytelling is a kind of Socratic play in which a master storyteller weaves existential themes and issues into the magic and immediacy of a narrative's details, so that an audience might have an entertaining, engaging, yet nonthreatening way to deal with their fears and questions about life and to develop morally and religiously.¹⁶ Tieck's remarks in several works to which Kierkegaard refers, cites, and/or responds make this apparent.

For example, in *The Old Book and the Voyage into the Blue* (*Das alte Buch und die Reise ins Blaue hinein*, 1835), a novella to which Kierkegaard refers in tongue-in-cheek fashion (SKS 1:133 / CI 74; SKS 3:246 / EO 2:258), Tieck writes, "The true fairy-tale . . . opens up with its child-like tone and its play with the wondrous, an area of our spirit into which other kinds of art and poetry cannot find their way."¹⁷ In doing so, Tieck continues, it allows us to experience—that is, to see, to sense, to feel, to know—matters that pertain to "our first, and most sacred, relations with nature and the invisible world, the basis of our faith, the elements of our perception, birth, and grave . . . and . . . the origin of good and evil," all things that "cannot be resolved into what we call rational or consequent."¹⁸ This, though, is not the only thing that fairy tales do for us, says Tieck in a fascinating passage from the *Phantásus* (1812–16), a self-selected collection and interpretation of his works that Kierkegaard quotes at length in an 1836 journal entry. As an "allegory" attending to the "double phenomenon" of "good and evil," a fairy tale (*Märchen*) "moves us anew . . . appeals to us in the most diverse forms in every enigma, and . . .—through a struggle—wants to disclose itself to the understanding" (SKS 17:76, BB:6 / KJN 1:69, as translated at 1:388). Kierkegaard underscores these remarks himself in another journal entry from 1836, where he says, "Does not 1 Corinthians 13:12 . . . imply a recognition of the necessity of *allegory* for our present condition . . . since the whole idea [of life] cannot be contained in the . . . expression.—metaphor—[?]" (SKS 27:108, Papir 77 / JP 3:3807).¹⁹

Kierkegaard absorbs all of this in an 1837 journal entry, where he basically credits Tieck for pointing out the significance of storytelling. "Not

telling children tales and legends capable of occupying their imaginations," he declares, "leaves room precisely for an anxiety that, not moderated by such narratives, returns with all the greater strength. (Cf. 'Die Verlobung,' short story by Tieck, Dresden 1823, pp. 63 below, 64 and 65. . . .)" (SKS 17:131n10, BB:37, n.d. 1837 / KJN 1:124n10, continued from previous page). In other words, as products of the imagination (the storyteller's in concert with the readers'), fairy tales deal with life's problems, absurdities, and paradoxes, and seek to unite sense, head, and heart in a magical exploration of these experiences that is at first both wondrous and unnerving, as they re-present them; then cathartic, as they facilitate working through them; and ultimately educative, as they encourage respect for the mystery, fragility, and beauty of life.²⁰

It comes as no surprise, then, that in the same journal entry, Kierkegaard immediately puts this insight to work sketching a procedure for telling children stories. Indeed, we can already see in this appropriation of Tieck a way for him to address an adult audience that is equally reticent about growing up spiritually. The procedure of storytelling, writes Kierkegaard, "should be *Socratic*. One must awaken an appetite in [children] to *ask questions*. . . . What matters is to bring *the poetic to bear on their lives in every way*, to exert a magical influence; when least expected, suddenly to let in a glimpse and then to have it vanish again . . . so that the child's soul is electrified by it" (SKS 17:124–25, BB:37 / KJN 1:118, 119). In other words, as Tieck indicates, "the poetic," as the tale "capable of occupying [children's] imaginations," should naturally and powerfully evoke the "Socratic," as existential questions. Yet "the poetic," as Kierkegaard indicates in this same passage, should also be the exploratory space around the tale that the storyteller creates in order to set the right tone and to keep the audience in the right frame of mind to identify with the story's issues. Tieck helps Kierkegaard to see, then, that "the poetic" and "the Socratic" are of a piece in good storytelling, for the creation of an ethical-religious situation within an inviting, exploratory space gives an audience the opportunity, confidence, and distance it needs to deal with life's difficulties (SKS 1:338–40 / CI 306–7).²¹

Johannes Climacus, Dialectical Poet: Kierkegaard's Model Storyteller

Kierkegaard immediately puts these insights to work, along with his ideas of good writing and a life view, in the construction of a polyvocal authorship, in which he creates narrative situations that make both his pseudonymous and his signed writings function individually and cooperatively as poetic confessionals, so to speak—that is, as a series of imaginative spaces able to metamorphose into private places for assessing self and life (SKS 16:26, 35–36 / PV 43–44, 53–55; *Pap.* X⁶ B 171, n.d. 1851 / JP 6:6748).²² Johannes Climacus's king and maiden story in the *Philosophical Fragments* (or

Philosophical Crumbs) is particularly exemplary of this unique appropriation of Tieck's storytelling theory.²³ This is not only because Climacus is easily recognizable as the most Socratic of all of Kierkegaard's voices. It is also and primarily because Climacus's king and maiden story functions as the very dialogical poetry or expository-interactive drama of divine love that is needed to awaken the moral and religious imaginations of his Hegelian-Christian audience and to guide them effortlessly into the self-examination and confession needed to develop those imaginations for authentic living.

Climacus takes on the role of Kierkegaard's Socratic-Tieckian storyteller in the preface and first two chapters of the *Fragments*. There "the poetic" becomes both the farce of philosophy and theology that he puts on to relax and to entertain his urbane audience, and the fairy tale that he deploys at the center of this farce in order to get that same audience to question the meaning of God and faith existentially or "Socratically." Climacus stages his farce by offering only "crumbs" of philosophy and "scraps" of theology in comparison to the intellectual "feast" that his Hegelian colleagues Heiberg and Martensen provide. This bit of fun is his way of entering their intellectual and cultural space and establishing himself as someone in need of their expertise so that they will not feel threatened by the questions about God and faith he will ultimately raise. That is, Climacus knows that he cannot disabuse Heiberg, Martensen, and their followers of their "superior" knowledge about God and faith all at once, so he takes the indirect road that Kierkegaard sketches in *The Point of View*, a path that requires a little deception, as indicated earlier (*SKS* 16:24–26, 32, 35–36 / *PV* 42–44, 50, 53–54). Knowing that neither Heiberg nor Martensen considers farce to be a particularly refined form of comedy, he starts appropriately with its unrestrained joking and laughter so that he can appear to be lower than they and they can appear to be higher than he—that is, where aesthetics, not to mention philosophy and theology, are concerned.²⁴ Farce is also particularly appropriate for Climacus's purposes because, as his pseudonymous colleague Constantin Constantius explains, it requires an audience to participate; precludes it from responding conventionally, particularly in a refined manner; and leaves open-ended the audience's resulting mood (*SKS* 4:34–35 / *R* 159–61; *SKS* 4:218–42 / *PF* 9–36; *SKS* 7:263–64 / *CUP* 1:289). Climacus's strategy is to make the members of his audience comfortable in their intellectual and cultural superiority, in spite of his little taunts, so that they will not suspect there is a personal tragedy hidden in the comedic form of the medieval fairy tale at the heart of his play.²⁵

Climacus starts his farce and sets the tone and the context for his storytelling in chapter 2 by characterizing the *Fragments* in the preface as a ridiculous "pamphlet" with no "claim to being a part of the scientific-scholarly endeavor in which one acquires legitimacy . . . as a co-worker, . . . volunteer attendant, . . . a hero or . . . an absolute trumpeter" (*SKS* 4:215 / *PF* 5). This bit of fun and games, with an edge, continues into chapter 1, where he presents the doctrine of the incarnation as the central moral problem of his "thought-project"

(SKS 4:218 / PF 9). There he appropriates the language of Hamlet's soliloquy in a punning manner, reminiscent of Shakespeare's comedies, in order to offer his audience "crumbs" from Plato's dialogues and "scraps" from doctrinal Christianity, before plagiarizing outright the God-man of the Gospels (SKS 4:218–30 / PF 9–22). Anticipating his audience's irritation at his flippant treatment of Socrates's reflection on how one knows the truth, and at his even more flippant treatment of Christianity's doctrines of the incarnation and of salvation, Climacus immediately releases the tension by admitting in a self-deprecating manner that he is "the most ludicrous of all project-cranks" for trying to pass off the figure of Jesus Christ and the standard conversion narrative as his own inventions (SKS 4:229–30 / PF 21–22). This allows him in all of his ineptitude to start again, in chapter 2, with a "poetical venture" (SKS 4:230–31 / PF 23)—a step down perhaps from trying to be a philosopher of religion to trying to be a simple poet of the religious.

Taking on the role of poet, however, does not preclude Climacus from continuing to be a comic or a logician, for he opens chapter 2 of the *Fragments* with the same jocularly and questioning as in the preface and chapter 1, by teasing his Hegelian audience about their assumption that everyone has surpassed or "goes further" than Socrates (SKS 4:231 / PF 24) with their God's-eye view of existence and "world historical knowledge" (see SKS 7:124–28, 146, 176 / CUP 1:133–37, 157–58, 192; compare SKS 4:219–20, 227–28 / PF 10, 19). This time, however, his teasing sets the stage for delving more deeply into Christ's unique plight as teacher-savior. That is, Climacus figures that if he can get his readers to see the difficulties involved in Socrates's role as teacher, particularly in regard to Socrates's attempt to create a situation of equality with his students, he might also get his audience to see the challenges involved in the God-man's attempt to achieve equality with human beings.

Climacus begins by giving a kind of pseudo-historical account of Socrates as an ordinary man who has nothing on his followers where the truth or the divine is concerned (SKS 4:230–31 / PF 23). In fact, he says, it is the duty of Socrates as teacher to help his pupils see that they must help each other to long for and seek the truth (SKS 4:231–32 / PF 24). The situation becomes comical, though, when Plato and Alcibiades attempt to "idolize" Socrates, who, although a lover of his overzealous followers, must display "cold irony [*kolde Ironi*]" (SKS 4:231–32 / PF 24). With a smile still on his face, Climacus shifts the focus to the God-man by rehearsing—or, as he will later suggest, "plagiarizing" (see SKS 4:241 / PF 35)—another story familiar to his nineteenth-century audience: the ballad of King Cophetua and the beggar maid (SKS 4:233–37 / PF 26–30). The point in recounting this story is to provide a Christian parallel to the Socratic one that challenges his audience's identification of God with power—that is, as absolute Spirit or Mind.

The ballad of King Cophetua and the beggar maid is a medieval English tale of an unconventional, idealized, romantic love between an African prince

and an impoverished girl variously called Penelophon or Zenelophon.²⁶ In appropriating it from Shakespeare, who himself appropriated it from earlier troubadours, Climacus knows that he is fooling no one. Indeed, he expects his Hegelian audience to roll their eyes at this, since he is obviously being just as much a *poet crank* as a *thought-project crank*.²⁷ Climacus, nevertheless, asks them to indulge him because he knows that the best way to challenge their conceptions of God as incarnate power and knowledge is to take the psychological and moral road of “dialectical” poetry, which does not “foreshorten” the difficulties of faith by providing a “reassuring conclusion” (SKS 4:229–30, 233–34, 241 / PF 20–21, 26, 35; SKS 7:263–64, 317–21, 399–403 / CUP 1:289, 347–51, 439–43).

Climacus begins innocently enough by encouraging his sophisticated audience to act like children. “Suppose,” he says, “there was a king who loved a humble maiden” (SKS 4:233 / PF 26).²⁸ That is, imagine that God is a lofty and awe-inspiring king like Cophetua in the ballad, who loves human beings passionately and wants to be their equal in love. Then, in order to give them a sense of human inferiority before God, that is, human sin, which, for Climacus, is more a moral matter than an ontological one, Climacus says: Imagine that human beings are like a poor, dirty, but beautiful, young, peasant woman like Penelophon who has, amazingly, garnered the king’s favor. Is this not something to wonder at? Does this not create a huge dilemma for both parties? Is it not impossible for unequals to be happy in love (SKS 4:233–34 / PF 26–27)? By setting up such a situation and asking questions that highlight the opposition, Climacus immediately creates tension and brings his audience’s now awakened imaginations into concert with his own. He then outlines the problem for his readers’ consideration, as though it were their job to solve it. By doing so, Climacus gives his audience both intimacy with and distance from the king’s and the maiden’s dilemma. That is, in accord with the storytelling procedure that Kierkegaard discusses in the aforementioned journal entry from 1837, Climacus gets his audience on board by demonstrating that he has confidence in their intellectual abilities to help him to solve this intriguing but vexing problem since he is “only a poet” (SKS 4:233 / PF 26; see also SKS 17:124–25, BB:37 / KJN 1:118–19). However, as it is a “poetical” problem, he initially treats it as though it were a particularly interesting parlor game or salon discussion—something with which Heiberg and Martensen were thoroughly familiar (SKS 4:233–42 / PF 26–36; compare SKS 10:135–36 / CD 124–26).

Climacus continues by maintaining that the barrier between the divine king and his beloved maiden-creation rests in the probability that she will not understand him (SKS 4:234–37 / PF 28–29). In other words, as in the medieval ballad, Climacus’s concern is to foreground the psychological anguish and anxiety of both parties. And like the medieval storyteller, Climacus starts with God the King’s initial problem of getting the human-maiden to come to him in love, which in itself is no mean feat, since regal power is awe-inspiring,

and so off-putting. Once the human-maiden is under the sway of the divine power, though, the real problem emerges for the king, namely, what kind of relationship will facilitate genuine intimacy between them. Climacus immediately divides this second problem into two problems because he realizes that there are only two things that God the King can do to help the human-maiden to understand him and be truly intimate with him. Either God the King must raise her to his regal status or he must lower himself to her humble status.

Assuming that his audience is predisposed to value power, Climacus starts with the former option, but he realizes immediately that it poses a serious problem. He does not get ponderous about it, however; instead, he keeps everything light by gently exposing the contradiction with a bit of levity. That is, picking up the relationship of the God-man to his disciples as set out in chapter 1 of the *Fragments*, Climacus maintains that the disciple-maiden can become “most terribly deceived” only if God the King raises her to his level, because she cannot help but be “spellbound by a change of costume” (*SKS* 4:236 / *PF* 29). That is, like Penelophon and, for that matter, Plato and Alcibiades, she cannot help but to overidentify with God’s absolute power to the point of rejecting herself as created, since the costume basically reveals that she is “nothing” for divine power without it (*SKS* 10:138–40 / *CD* 127–29). She does not realize this immediately, though, because at the moment, she is caught up in a dream. Her “prince has come; swept her off her feet; and carried her off in style.”²⁹ According to Climacus, the learner-maiden’s forgetfulness of herself does not satisfy God the King because he wants her glorification, not his own, and delights in her as “something” for his love, not his power, as Kierkegaard says elsewhere (*SKS* 10:138–40 / *CD* 127–29; compare *SKS* 7:224 / *CUP* 1:246). Therefore, he must tell her that the benefits of monarchical power are not real benefits—something that can only seem like foolishness as long as power is the definition of divinity—and the perceived means for well-being. Herein, however, is the crux of the matter, for it is difficult for human beings even to recognize God as tenderness and vulnerability when the very concept of divinity is synonymous with domination and power (*SKS* 4:236–37 / *PF* 29–30).

Climacus concludes that this option will not lead to genuine intimacy; therefore, the path of humility must be considered. On this second path, Climacus divests divinity of the very power that ordinarily defines and makes it attractive by showcasing the suffering of the God-man and by bringing his audience closer to the God-man’s “wise and unwavering eyes,” as Kierkegaard puts it in his discussion of Tieck’s fairy-tale figures in *The Concept of Irony* (*SKS* 1:339 / *CI* 306). That is, in this instance, God the King becomes a lowly and despised human being so that he might be the equal of all human beings. Yet, by doing so, he subjects himself to even graver misunderstanding than before, for this time misunderstanding brings with it rejection, abuse, and death (*SKS* 238–40 / *PF* 31–34). God the King suffers all of the risks of

trying to be the equal of his beloved but fragile human creation, while also working desperately not to crush or offend them (*SKS* 4:238–39 / *PF* 32). This makes God an “unhappy,” even tortured “consciousness,” to use Hegel’s terms,³⁰ particularly when one gazes at him, in all of the vulnerability of his love, as he is brutally beaten and executed by the very ones from whom he seeks love (*SKS* 4:232–33, 238–39 / *PF* 25–26, 32–33). It is futile, however, says Climacus, to try to dissuade this king to give up this position of despised and condemned servant, even out of sincere concern for him, for doing so will only make one his adversary, so that he will say, “To think that you could become so unfaithful to me and grieve love in this way; so you love only the omnipotent one . . . not him who humbled himself in equality with you” (*SKS* 4:239 / *PF* 33).

With this subtle shift to the personal pronoun “you,” Climacus brings the tension in the story to its climax, for his “imaginary [re]construction” of the gospel story has not “slacken[ed] the tension of the conflict in a reassuring conclusion, but by means of its teasing form [has made his readers] even more contemporary [with it]” (*SKS* 7:263–64 / *CUP* 1:289), so that they are now confronted with a decisive or “transformative” moment.³¹ They must now admit to themselves how they truly feel about the Christian God. Will they view Climacus’s conception of the divine as a thoroughgoing nightmare and denounce Climacus for disrupting their dream? Or will they allow his little existential play to be the beginning of a new life of faith, fueled by a grace-imbued imagination? As Kierkegaard the dialectical poet sees it, these are some of the weighty questions that a little storytelling can facilitate.

Notes

1. George Pattison, *Kierkegaard’s Upbuilding Discourses: Philosophy, Theology, Literature* (London: Routledge, 2002), 93–106, 113–18, 125–32, 141–42, 145, 147–67. Compare *SKS* 16:72 / *PV* 93. See also Grethe Kjær, “The Role of Folk and Fairy Tales in Kierkegaard’s Authorship,” in *Kierkegaard on Art and Communication*, ed. George Pattison (Basingstoke, U.K.: Macmillan, 1992), 78–87.

2. Pattison, *Kierkegaard’s Upbuilding Discourses*, 93–117, esp. 95–106, 112–16.

3. Compare Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Lewis White Beck (New York: Macmillan, 1985), 30–33, 74–92, 128–36.

4. Pattison, *Kierkegaard’s Upbuilding Discourses*, 68–78, esp. 75–76, 78.

5. See M. Jamie Ferreira, *Transforming Vision: Imagination and Will in Kierkegaardian Faith* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 62–84, 87–97, 116–25; John Lippitt, *Humour and Irony in Kierkegaard’s Thought* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000), 104–20.

6. Kierkegaard also blames a family friend and one-time family pastor, Bishop Jakob Peter Mynster, for deceiving Danish cultured Christians into thinking that Christianity is soft, secure, and comfortable.

7. See Marjorie O'Rourke Boyle, "Evangelism and Erasmus," in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, ed. Glyn Norton, vol. 3: *The Renaissance* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 49nn30–32, for a brief discussion of the idea of accommodation in Erasmus with reference to his *Ratio verae theologiae* and *Paraclesis*; compare 1 Cor. 9:19–22; Desiderius Erasmus, *Paraclesis*, in *Readings in Christian Humanism*, ed. Joseph M. Shaw et al. (1982; Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2009), 293–94.

8. M. Holmes Hartshorne, *Kierkegaard, Godly Deceiver: The Nature and Meaning of His Pseudonymous Writings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 6–7.

9. George Pattison, *Kierkegaard: The Aesthetic and the Religious, from the Magic Theatre to the Crucifixion of the Image*, 2nd edition (London: SCM Press, 1999), 95–124.

10. *Ibid.*, esp. 95–96, 120–21; Pattison, *Kierkegaard's Upbuilding Discourses*, 162.

11. I have in mind here Fellini's film *La Strada* (1954). See also Pattison's Bakhtinian reading of the carnivalesque nature of Kierkegaard's works in *Kierkegaard and the Quest for Unambiguous Life, between Romanticism and Modernism: Selected Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 30–57. (In addition, see Pattison's essay in this volume.—Ed.)

12. Compare Edward F. Mooney, *On Søren Kierkegaard: Dialogue, Polemics, Lost Intimacy, and Time* (Aldershot, U.K.: Ashgate, 2007), 10–11, 178–79, 186–87, 205–10, 225; Edward F. Mooney, "Pseudonyms and 'Style,'" in *The Oxford Handbook of Kierkegaard*, ed. John Lippitt and George Pattison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 207, 208–9; Joseph Westfall, *The Kierkegaard Author: Authorship and Performance in Kierkegaard's Literary and Dramatic Criticism* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2007).

13. This does not mean there is only one aesthetic form through which faith might be presented and experienced. It just means that whatever aesthetic form the religious ideal takes, and whatever feeling it induces, must match or be appropriate to the ideal itself.

14. Marcia C. Robinson, "Tieck: Kierkegaard's 'Guadalquivir' of Open Critique and Hidden Appreciation," in *Kierkegaard and His German Contemporaries: Literature and Aesthetics*, Tome 3: *Literature and Aesthetics*, ed. Jon Stewart, Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources, vol. 6 (Aldershot, U.K.: Ashgate, 2008), 295–310.

15. See also *ibid.*, 278–82.

16. See also *ibid.*, 282–95.

17. Ludwig Tieck, *Das alte Buch und die Reise ins Blaue hinein*, in *Das alte Buch und die Reise ins Blaue hinein: Der Alte vom Berge. Eigensinn und Laune. Die Gesellschaft auf dem Lande* (Berlin: G. Reimer, 1853), as translated in Roger Paulin, *Ludwig Tieck: A Literary Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 310.

18. *Ibid.*

19. 1 Cor. 13:12, NRSV: "For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known."

20. Robinson, "Tieck," 288–93.

21. *Ibid.*, 284–85.

22. *Ibid.*, 295–310.

23. *Ibid.*, 295, 309. Note also that Kierkegaard's *Philosophical Fragments*, or *A Fragment of Philosophy* is now, with the lead of Alastair Hannay, Edward F. Mooney, and Marilyn Piety, being alternatively translated as *Philosophical Crumbs*, or *A Crumb of Philosophy*. See, for example, Søren Kierkegaard, *Repetition and Philosophical Crumbs*, trans. M. G. Piety, Oxford World Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). (For further discussion of this retranslation of Kierkegaard's title, see Mooney's essay in this volume.—Ed.)

24. Robert Leslie Horn, "Positivity and Dialectic: A Study of the Theological Method of Hans Lassen Martensen," Th.D. diss., Union Theological Seminary of New York, 1969, 121–23, 150–61.

25. The reference here is to comedy in the classical sense, as a situation or story in which a conflict resolves favorably or happily. However, I have mainly used references to the comic to mean anything that is funny, which is how Kierkegaard used the category of "the comic," as noted by Lippitt, *Humour and Irony in Kierkegaard's Thought*, 63.

26. See n. 4 on v. 70 of "King Cophetua and the Beggar-Maid," in Thomas Percy, *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry: Consisting of Old Heroic Ballads, Songs, and Other Pieces of Our Earlier Poets; Together with Some Few of Later Date*, 2 vols., ed. J. V. Prichard (London: George Bell, 1876), 1:138 [bk. 2, ballad 6].

27. See, e.g., Pattison, *Kierkegaard: The Aesthetic and the Religious*, 16–26, 122.

28. In this instance, I use David F. Swenson's more succinct translation, as found in Robert Bretall, ed., *A Kierkegaard Anthology* (1946; Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1973), 165. The Hongs render "en ringe Pige" as "a maiden of lowly station in life."

29. These lines are from Disney's animated feature-length films *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and *Robin Hood*, which were released in 1937 and 1973, respectively.

30. G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 126–31, 456–57.

31. See Ferreira, *Transforming Vision*, 114–25.