

Rot in the Ivory Tower

By M.G. PIETY

Things are heating up in Denmark. Peter Tudvad, the scholar who exposed the problems with Joakim Garff's once famous, now infamous book, *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography* (Princeton, 2005) has been forced out of his job. I wrote about the [controversy over the biography](#) and now I have been scurrilously attacked by the book's translator, Bruce Kirmmse. Kirmmse reached back eight years to draw into the debate an entirely unrelated article and misrepresented the content of that article in order to assassinate my character ("M.G. Piety's skam" [M.G. Piety's shame], *Weekendavisen* 23-29 Sept. 2005). Kirmmse argues that an article I published in *The Times Higher Education Supplement* in 1997 was nothing more than an attempt to smear the rector of the University of Copenhagen, Kjeld Møllgård, through the mention that he had been involved in a scientific misconduct case when he was a post doc at the University of California at Berkeley.

A Danish committee later exonerated Møllgård, so why resurrect that controversy now? Møllgård can't be pleased about it. Could it be Kirmmse is trying to destroy the credibility of the one person who might expose that he was complicit in Garff's crimes. I already pointed out that as an historian, Kirmmse should have recognized many of the errors in the book and that as a translator, he should have recognized when Garff had copied material from a book that he, Kirmmse, had earlier translated. Could it be Kirmmse now fears I might be able to produce evidence that would raise suspicions that he made a systematic attempt, when he translated Garff's book to obscure the extent to which Garff had appropriated text from other authors?

There's a lot at stake here. We're not talking about some obscure book. The biography was praised by reviewers on both sides of the Atlantic. It was awarded the prestigious Georg Brandes Prize and the Danish newspaper *Weekendavisen's* Literary Prize. John Updike described the 813 page English translation as "monumental" ("Incommensurability: A New Biography of Kierkegaard," *New Yorker*, 28 March 2005), and other reviewers described it as "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).

Garff may indeed be brilliant. He weaves together the facts he presents in an enormously entertaining and original way. Unfortunately, Garff's originality isn't restricted to his theses, but extends to some of his "facts." What's worse, his originality does *not* extend to all of his text. Tudvad revealed back in 2001 that *SAK* was riddled with factual errors and that some of the text had been plagiarized from earlier biographies of Kierkegaard ("*SAK-en uvidenskabel biografi om Søren Kierkegaard* [[SAK-an unscholarly biography of Søren Kierkegaard](#)]), yet the errors and plagiarisms he exposed were never corrected.

One of the works from which Garff frequently copies material is Jørgen Bukdahl's, *Søren Kierkegaard og den menige mand* (Munksgaard, 1961). Kirmmse translated this work into English only a few years ago (*Soren Kierkegaard and the Common Man*, Eerdmans, 2001), yet if one compares Kirmmse's translations of the passages Garff has copied from Bukdahl with his earlier translations of these same passages, peculiar dissimilarities emerge. Kirmmse routinely elects to change his choice of terms from his earlier translation, as in the cases, for example, of "fængsles" which he translated first as "imprisoned" in Bukdahl and later as "incarcerated" in Garff where Garff copied from Bukdahl (p. 33 in Garff and p. 41 in Bukdahl), "Brødrementshed," which he translated as "Society of Brothers" in Bukdahl and then as "Congregation of Brethren" in Garff, where Garff copied from Bukdahl (p. 11 in Garff and pp. 31-33 in Bukdahl) and "gudelig vækkelse" which he translated as "religious awakenings" in Bukdahl and as "godly awakenings" in Garff where Garff copied from Bukdahl (p. 32 in Garff and p. 20 in Bukdahl).

Kirmmse felt compelled, apparently, to add the adjective "internal" to his translation of Bukdahl's "sammenholdet" so that the translation reads "internal solidarity" (p. 20), but no longer felt such a compulsion when he translated the same expression simply as "solidarity" in Garff 's appropriation of the passage from Bukdahl (p. 32). Kirmmse omitted a phrase, "the so called 'Gehülfen,'" from his translation of Bukdahl (p. 20), but apparently repented of this omission when he translated Garff's appropriation of the same passage four years later (p. 32). The effect, of this change of heart is, once again, to obscure to readers of the two translations that Garff has copied directly from Bukdahl.

Translation is, of course, not an exact science. It would be unreasonable to expect a translator to adhere rigidly to what he had at one time preferred to a possible alternative translation. Translators usually endeavor to be consistent, however, in their translation of the names of groups and religious movements. To depart so routinely as Kirmmse does from what only four years ago he thought were the most defensible translations of the

phrases and terms in question gives one pause. The concatenation of these examples might even incline the reader to the view that Kirmmse made a deliberately erroneous translation of Garff's "aften" as "afternoon," rather than the correct "evening," on page 154 in order to obscure the fact that Garff had again copied the passage in question from an earlier work on Kierkegaard, this time from Flemming Chr. Nielsen's *Søren Kierkegaard og Aarhus* (Søren Kierkegaard and Aarhus) (1968) which also has "aften." After all, Kirmmse's knowledge of Danish is excellent, so it is difficult to find any other explanation for why he would make such an elementary mistake.

There's another error that is difficult to explain. Garff appears to have copied so quickly that he mistakenly substituted an "re" for an "sæ" in a passage from Bukdahl. The result is that Garff's text reads: "there were rumors that [the social agitator J.C. Lindberg] was to be incarcerated [*fængsles*] and executed [*henrettes*] on Christiansø, a notorious prison island" (p 33), whereas it should read, as Kirmmse's translation of Bukdahl does in fact read, that Lindberg "was to be imprisoned [*fængsles*] and sent into exile [*hensættes*] to Christiansø" (p. 41).

Kirmmse, a history professor at Connecticut College, should have caught the mistake. He is a purported expert in 19th Danish history. Not only that, he had already translated Bukdahl's correct characterization of the rumors that circulated about Lindberg. It's possible, of course, that he had simply forgotten what Bukdahl had written. What is harder to understand is that, as an historian, he would have forgotten the facts surrounding the Lindberg case. There is, as I pointed out in my earlier article, a big difference between being exiled and being executed. Could it be that Kirmmse *did* recognize the mistake, but failed to correct it out of a fear that the corrected text would be more easily identifiable as having been lifted from Bukdahl?

This question is impossible to answer definitively. I asked some experienced translators, who are members of the American Translators Association, for their opinion on the significance of the irregularities in Kirmmse's translations of Garff and Bukdahl. Most said that there were too few examples (I gave them only the three terms: "incarcerated," "Congregation of Brethren" and "godly awakenings") to *prove* Kirmmse had deliberately tried to conceal Garff's plagiarisms. Translators often change how they translate particular terms, they explained, if the new choice can be defended as an improvement on the earlier translation. One translator, Stephen Slater observed, however, that this would not explain the change from "imprisoned" to "incarcerated," because in this case, "there is minimal to no semantic difference." Several remarked that "godly awakenings"

was clearly inferior to the earlier "religious awakenings" as it was less idiomatic and relied, as one pointed out, on a "false cognate." Most also agreed with Slater's observation that

[a]s to the change from "Society of Brothers" to "Congregation of Brethren," it is odd that a translator would alter his previously published translation of a group's name. Even if it is a clear improvement (in which case it is something of an embarrassment for the translator), it is an irritation for those who read the literature, since there are now two English translations of the group's name rather than one.

Whether Kirmmse deliberately tried to conceal Garff's plagiarisms or not, he had *an interest* in doing so. Kirmmse was recently appointed by the Søren Kierkegaard Research Center at the University of Copenhagen, where Garff is employed, to direct the project of translating Kierkegaard's journals and papers into English. That appointment was still pending when he agreed to translate Garff's book. This fact was enough for several of the translators whose opinions I canvassed to agree with Lawrence Schofer, Ph.D., that there was sufficient evidence to raise suspicions that Kirmmse might have tried to conceal Garff's plagiarisms.

The strongest statements, however, came from two translators who approached the issue from a slightly different angle. They focused not on the irregularities across the two translations, but on Kirmmse's failure, as Ted Crump put it, "to raise a red flag about the plagiarism I can recognize translations I did twenty years ago," Crump continued, "Kirmmse must certainly been aware of this [i.e., the plagiarisms] and did not act ethically, in my opinion, especially in light of his vested interest in the appointment." Ingrid G. Lansford agreed. She observed that,

[s]ince Bruce Kirmmse did the Bukdahl and Garff translations within four years of one another the plagiarized passages in the more recent source must have seemed familiar to him. As a scholar, he would also have known that Garff had violated scholarly procedure in omitting proper attribution. He then had several choices and did not do what I hope most scholars would have done.

Whether it was intentional or not, Kirmmse's translation obscures the extent to which Garff plagiarized from other authors. This is perhaps why Peter J. Dougherty, the head of Princeton University Press, said the press had looked into the issue of the problems with the work and found nothing to them. This could also be why the article on the

controversy in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* where Dougherty is quoted was essentially a whitewash: Garff's failure to indicate when he is quoting directly was characterized there simply as "'an unusual referencing system" ("Kierkegaard Biography Draws Praise and Criticism," [*Chronicle*, Sept. 16, 2005]).

Readers of the English translation may not care that much of Garff's text actually originated from the pens of other Danish authors, so long as the information it contains is correct. Unfortunately, much of the information in Garff's book is *not* correct. Names are wrong, dates are wrong, all kinds of information that is important to understanding what kind of person Kierkegaard was, such as how much money he gave to charity, how many servants he had, how extensive was his conflict with the newspaper *The Corsair*, is simply wrong. Garff was forced to admit this when Tudvad came with the relevant documents in 2001 and then again in 2004 after Tudvad discovered yet more damaging material while doing the research for his own critically acclaimed book, *Kierkegaards København* (Kierkegaard's Copenhagen) (Politikens Forlag, 2004). Yet Garff failed to make any corrections to the book.

Readers of the *Chronicle* won't know that though. The *Chronicle* article explains that Tudvad "agreed to help Mr. Garff correct some agreed-upon factual errors found in the book," but neglects to inform readers that Garff rejected Tudvad's offer with the result that the errors went uncorrected into the English translation. This omission was brought to the attention of the *Chronicle*, but they refused to publish a correction and have so far failed to publish even letters to the editor, from either myself or Tudvad, containing what many purchasers of the biography that Princeton describes as "a marvelous success for us" might consider an important bit of information.

This isn't the only plagiarism case to make Danish headlines in the last year. Frank Esmann's biography of Henry Kissinger (*Kissinger* [Aschenhoug, 2004]) was exposed in October of 2004 in the newspaper *Berlingske Tidende* as substantially plagiarized from the American Walter Isaacson's biography (*Kissinger* [Simon and Schuster, 1992]). Danish scholar Steffen Krogh determined that there were at least 350 passages in Esmann's book, one more than twenty lines long, that were copied verbatim from Isaacson, yet both the University of Southern Denmark and the University of Copenhagen declined to investigate the issue of whether Esmann's book constituted plagiarism ("Esmann plagierede 350 gange" [Esmann plagiarized 350 times], *Berlingske Tidende* 21 July, 2005).

The two cases, taken together, were likened by Dorte Hygum Sørensen, writing in the newspaper *Politiken*, to "The Tamil Case," the immigration scandal that toppled the government of Danish Prime Minister Poul Schlüter back in 1992 (*Politikken* 21 August 2005). Judging from the number of articles on the subject that have appeared in the Danish media, the comparison is an apt one. There were more than fifty articles on the Kierkegaard controversy last summer and it looks as if that number may be surpassed this year since Danes got word Garff had failed to correct the text of the English translation.

Kirmmse could be in trouble if the controversy spreads to the U.S. where Garff's error-ridden and plagiarism-ridden book has done so well for its publisher, Princeton. Of course there are few people who would be in a position to expose the fact that Kirmmse should have caught the errors. Even fewer who could expose the respects in which Kirmmse's translation makes the plagiarized passages harder to identify than they were in the original. Of those few, I am the only one who has demonstrated that I am likely to do it. Could Kirmmse have been attempting to destroy my credibility before I could come with the evidence of his complicity in Garff's crimes?

That question, like so many in this case, is impossible to answer definitively. I am thus going to do for Kirmmse what he did not do for me. That is, I'm going to give him the benefit of the doubt. I am going to assume that his failure to recognize the historical inaccuracies in Garff's book, his failure to "raise a red flag about the plagiarism" and, finally, all the irregularities and anomalies in his translation may have innocent explanations.

There is one charge, however, that can unequivocally be made against Kirmmse. Tudvad received an official reprimand in 2004 from his boss, Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, the director of the Kierkegaard Research Center, for publicly exposing the problems with Garff's book and has now been driven out of his job. Kirmmse knew that Tudvad's criticisms of Garff's book were well founded and that it was perfectly appropriate of Tudvad to bring this issue before the public, given that Garff had refused to make any of the necessary corrections. Kirmmse knew this and yet he failed, throughout the controversy to come to Tudvad's defense. He sat by silently while Tudvad's career was sacrificed to preserve Garff's reputation. That was just wrong.

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