Book Review

Feminist Interpretations of Søren Kierkegaard *

***Feminist Interpretations of Søren Kierkegaard*. Edited by Céline Léon and Sylvia Walsh.** University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997.

It is surprising that recent feminist philosophers have paid so little attention to Søren Kierkegaard's sustained engagement with the "otherness" of woman--especially since Simone de Beauvoir deployed Kierkegaard's "In Vino Veritas" dialogue from his *Stages on Life's Way* (Kierkegaard 1988) to ground her account of woman's alterity. *Feminist Interpretations of Søren Kierkegaard* (Léon and Walsh 1997) is the first anthology in English that seeks to fill this significant gap. As such, it is to be offered a hearty welcome.

The anthology comprises fourteen essays--eight reprints--with an introduction. In the latter, Céline Léon and Sylvia Walsh explain that the volume has been organized dialectically. The opening essays (Wanda Warren Berry, Birgit Bertung, Julia Watkin, Robert Perkins) show that Kierkegaard was not a common misogynist. The second set of essays (two by Léon and one by Silviane Agacinski) emphasizes that Kierkegaard's writings are nevertheless dangerous for feminism in that Kierkegaard continues to exclude women from culture. The third group (Mark Lloyd Taylor, Walsh, Leslie A. Howe) synthesizes critique with commendation, emphasizing tensions within the *oeuvre*. The final essays (Jane Duran, Walsh, Berry, Tamsin Lorraine) are described as offering a reclamation of the feminine.

That the volume falls into any such pattern, however, is far from clear. Instead, the organizing principle seems to be--at least in part--that Kierkegaard's writings fall into three bands: the early, so-called pseudonymous "aesthetic" works (whose philosophical views Kierkegaard refuses to identify as his own), the ethical texts (also pseudonymous), and the religious works Kierkegaard published under his own name. Thus, the first articles in this **[End Page 172]** anthology deal primarily with the aesthetical works and the last with the religious. In general, the volume strengthens towards the end.

I was particularly impressed by Taylor's analysis of Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (Kierkegaard 1992). Taylor boldly goes where some of the other contributors fear to tread and sets down three "assertions" and four questions relating to the importance for contemporary thought and the practice of reading Kierkegaard from a feminist perspective. His piece usefully explores some of the continuities in Kierkegaard's position on woman--continuities that do not necessarily emerge in the volume as a whole. Thus, for example, in the second of her two contributions, Wanda Warren Berry argues (persuasively) that Kierkegaard is a misogynist of a quite extreme kind (he recommends, for example, in his religious works that woman should be silent in church), but claims that his mode of misogyny is nevertheless recuperable for feminism. By contrast, Bertung argues (also persuasively) that any apparent discrimination against woman in Kierkegaard's works is "a projection by the reader" (Léon and Walsh 1997, 66).

A number of the essays move between the authored works and Kierkegaard's autobiographical journals to untangle Kierkegaard's views about woman or marriage. Thus, in the second of two essays, Léon produces textual "evidence" that Kierkegaard's rejection of marriage was because of impotence or physical inadequacy. Léon's essay is

suggestive and informative, but does not deflect me from the hypothesis that what Kierkegaard develops is an ontology and epistemology that is appropriate to the sexually abused boy. However, to put this forward as an "objective truth" would be to go against the notion of truth internal to Kierkegaard's position. In one of her two reprinted essays, Walsh offers an interesting exploration of the analogies between Kierkegaard's attack on objective truth and that which a variety of feminisms provide. Walsh's is a useful article, but in the end, she opts for a too neutral tone in summarizing the various alternative linkages. A little less objectivity might have been more compelling.

Walsh's other essay, a much earlier piece from 1987 on "despair," is suggestive, but seems preliminary. It links Kierkegaard's model of the relational self to that of Carol Gilligan but without exploring the differences between Gilligan's "ethics of care" and the repeated claims in Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*--in which the good mother "blackens" and "conceals her breast" (Kierkegaard 1983, 11, 13). Nor does Walsh explore the divergences between Gilligan's ontologically conservative position (that accepts selves and others as unproblematized unities) and the more fluid ontology opened up by Kierkegaard's works. [1]

I have several reservations about this volume despite its many good points. It seems primarily a forum in which Kierkegaardian "authorities" talk to each other about their differing responses to Kierkegaard's *oeuvre*. The main question **[End Page 173]** asked is, Can Kierkegaard's philosophy be reconciled with feminism? not How does an engagement with Kierkegaard's ontology, ethics, and theology help us as feminist philosophers? The selection of essays is, on the whole, too safe. The extract from Agacinski's *Aparté* is an exception, [2] but her argument in Léon and Walsh's collection does not emerge clearly in such an abbreviated format. In the final essay of Léon and Walsh's volume, Lorraine offers a Kristevan reading of Kierkegaard's *The Sickness unto Death* (1980), which also has the merit of seeming to engage with Kierkegaard from a position that is not internal to the rather small world of Kierkegaardian scholarship.

The editors' decision to include two of their own essays each and two essays by Berry reinforces the impression of sampling a fairly small variety of the range of possible feminist rejoinders to Kierkegaard's *oeuvre*. I found myself longing for less cautious responses to Kierkegaard from feminist and philosophical "outsiders"--for essays with the passion of Catherine Clément's address to Kierkegaard in her *Opera: Or the Undoing of Women* (1988), for example. The inclusion of such a piece would have also assuaged a further, more philosophical, reservation I have about this volume: that it conveys a bias against Kierkegaard's aesthetic stage as productive for feminism.

In this respect, I find two essays particularly bothersome. The first is the opening essay in this anthology, Berry's "The Heterosexual Imagination and Aesthetic Existence in Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*, Part 1." [3] The second is Perkins's piece entitled "Woman-Bashing in Kierkegaard's 'In Vino Veritas': A Reinscription of Plato's *Symposium*." [4] Both Berry and Perkins offer harsh judgments on the validity of the primary kind of love described in Kierkegaard's aesthetic works--that between (male) seducer and (female) seduced. Against seduction and Kierkegaard's delineation of the aesthetic stage of existence, Perkins defends the perspective of the ethical and "the quiet and contented security of married love" (Léon and Walsh 1997, 99).

Perkins too easily equates statements about female difference with misogyny and overlooks the unpleasant (and patronizing) aspects of the relationship between two characters who walk on towards the end of Kierkegaard's drinking party: Judge William and his (unnamed) wife. In a way that is disturbing, Perkins holds their love up as offering a clear refutation of the arguments of Kierkegaard's unmarried banqueteers who restage Plato's *Symposium* in heterosexual mode. It is a shame that Perkins did not indicate that he is himself the husband of one of the two editors of this volume and did

not link this positioning with Kierkegaard's claim that all truth is subjective. However, it is necessary to look outside the essay itself (in the Editorial "Acknowledgments") to uncover his marital links with Walsh. Later in the anthology, Duran also seems to portray Kierkegaard's aesthetic stage as misogynist--a misogyny that is transcended with his move into the "ethical."

What all three articles downplay is the way the seducers operate within the **[End Page 174]** Kierkegaardian text to leave the woman "free" to "choose" her seduction. This is philosophically significant because the ambiguity of the female subject-position effectively undermines the illusion that selves are free and autonomous --an illusion that Kierkegaard portrays as masculine. Instead, Kierkegaard uses the seduced woman to set up a model for the relational self. I'm not claiming agreement amongst the contributors on the relation between the ethical and woman. Thus, in her first essay Léon counters Perkins's position: For her, Judge William is certainly no hero. Watkin also takes an opposing view to Perkins in her careful account of the logic of Kierkegaard's misogyny. But Watkin (and the anthology as a whole) does not address the possibility that it might be Kierkegaard's aesthetic writings--and not his ethical or religious texts--that have the most value for a feminist rethinking of identity and the self. The transformative potential of Kierkegaard's aesthetic works for feminist philosophy can be disentangled from the question of whether or not Kierkegaard was himself a misogynist.

Kierkegaard uses the seducer/seduced relationship to destabilize Hegel's account of the development of "universal Spirit" via the master/slave relationship**--**and then builds on this to reconfigure the self. The seduced woman is not a slave: neither is she just a victim--she is not simply raped. Refusing to set the "singularity" of woman aside in the manner of Kant, Kierkegaard responds to the antinomies of the female subject-position in ways that are also different from Hegel. Thus, in *Either/Or*, Part 1 (Kierkegaard 1987), Kierkegaard rewrites "Antigone" *contra* Hegel. Antigone becomes a (modern) daughter of Oedipus who is neither the fully responsible, Kantian (male) person of modernity, nor simply a token of the family to be punished by (pre-modern) Fate. Because the essays in this anthology do not, on the whole, read Kierkegaard against the philosophical background that he is seeking to disrupt, the radicality of what Kierkegaard is doing with the concept of "woman" does not emerge strongly enough.

This is a shame. As I have argued elsewhere (Battersby 1998), Kierkegaard's aesthetic works not only deconstruct traditional philosophical models of the self, they also provide us with resources for rethinking the self in ways that privilege natality, relationality, ontological dependency, and epistemological uncertainty. In other words, Kierkegaard's writings can help us reconstruct identity in ways that take the female subject-position as the norm.

None of the reprinted essays is cross-referenced adequately. The index is also weak, even in noting proper names (such as Hegel). Despite these criticisms, *Feminist Interpretations of Søren Kierkegaard* (1997) offers intriguing openings. It feels like a preliminary to many further works on this philosopher who uses the paradoxical alterity of "woman" as the impetus for several ontological, epistemological, and ethical "leaps" that can help the feminist philosopher re-imagine the self.

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Notes

1. However, Howe's thoughtful "Kierkegaard and the Feminine Self" (1994) builds on Walsh's 1987 piece in interesting ways.

2. For the complete *Aparté*, see Agacinski (1988).

3. See Kierkegaard (1987).

4. For Kierkegaard's "In Vino Veritas," see *Stages of Life's Way* (1988).

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