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Bunch, Mads. *Isak Dinesen Reading Søren Kierkegaard: On Christianity, Seduction, Gender, and Repetition*. Cambridge: Legenda, 2017. xiii, 183 pp.
Reviewed by Troy Wellington Smith

In the inter-and post-war periods, the Danish baroness Karen Blixen published, in English, several story collections and the autobiographical novel *Out of Africa* in the United States under the *nom de plume* Isak Dinesen. These same works appeared soon after under her legal name in her own Danish translations in Denmark. During the same period, works by Dinesen's deceased countryman Søren Kierkegaard were being translated into English and published in the United States by Princeton University Press. No longer merely "world-famous in Denmark" (as the saying goes), Kierkegaard became a shibboleth for anxious intellectuals on both sides of the Atlantic. If the Danish philosopher was praised as a prophet, whose prolepsis of the present age proved to be uncanny, then Dinesen was valued for directing her gaze in the opposite direction, away from the horror of the present and towards the refinement and *noblesse oblige* of the previous centuries. Both authors provided their reader with something of essential importance; the one explained modernity; the other offered an escape from it—if ever so brief.

Mads Bunch's new book, *Isak Dinesen Reading Søren Kierkegaard: On Christianity, Seduction, Gender, and Repetition*, is, to my knowledge, the first monograph to be devoted exclusively to Kierkegaard's influence on Dinesen, aside from Bunch's own PhD thesis, *The Devil's Advocate: Reading Blixen in the Light of Kierkegaard*, which he submitted to the University of Copenhagen's Department of Nordic Studies and Linguistics in 2013. As a synthesis of his thesis and a handful of articles he has published on Kierkegaard and Dinesen, Bunch's *Isak Dinesen Reading Søren Kierkegaard* will probably be the first resource anyone interested in this subfield will consult for many years to come. Bunch has done an admirable job combing the Dinesen archive for new material on Dinesen's reception of Kierkegaard, and his assiduousness has both bolstered his own arguments and corrected a number of his predecessors' omissions and misconceptions. Employing the theory of Harold Bloom's seminal treatise, *The Anxiety of Influence*, and Gérard Genette's notion of "serious parody," Bunch demonstrates how Dinesen reads—and willfully misinterprets—Ki-

erkegaard in her variations on his works; misprision is the essence of literary *agon*, as Bloom understands it. By drawing on *The Anxiety of Influence* and Genette, Bunch has chosen a fruitful means of analyzing Dinesen's position *vis-à-vis* Kierkegaard; one only wishes that he had applied these methodologies more thoroughly and consistently in his discussion of Dinesen's texts. The implications of employing an Oedipal theory such as Bloom's "anxiety of influence" to a female author, especially one who chose to publish her work under a male penname, should be of interest to an author whose book's subtitle includes the word "Gender."

In the introduction, Bunch wisely makes a point of alerting his reader to the fact that "the views and opinions on Kierkegaard presented in this book are *not my view or opinions* on Kierkegaard. *They are exclusively Dinesen's views on Kierkegaard* (or rather *my interpretations of Dinesen's view on Kierkegaard*) — and often they are not very nuanced" (5). With this disclaimer, Bunch washes his hands of the parodic Kierkegaard of Dinesen. This step is a necessary one, but the reader might like to know just how exactly Bunch's own interpretation of Kierkegaard differs from Dinesen's. This subject would perhaps be best saved for another book, but it is vital to note that recent advances in Kierkegaard scholarship have placed the philosopher in a camp closer to the materialist position assigned to Dinesen by Bunch.¹

In the section entitled "Christianity," Bunch quotes a letter from Dinesen to Johannes Rosendahl, in which she contrasts her *Weltanschauung* to that of the Christians she knows. Instead of relying exclusively on the Bible, as these Christians allegedly do, she writes that "[a] multitude of renowned historical events . . . have helped to form my view of the context of human life, without therefore having given me an absolute explanation on the very being of life and the universe" (qtd. in Bunch 42). While an epistemic arrogance may characterize certain Christians, this sort of self-assurance is a far cry from Kierkegaard's much more tentative stance. First of all, the philosopher was skeptical of biblical scholarship, and for him faith was not an objective fact that could be rationally justified; rather, it was a subjective premonition to which one clung with passion, however absurd it might seem. The Christian Kierkegaard may well be a straw man in Dinesen's reading, but Bunch's book would be more robust if he had demonstrated just how far Dinesen departs from the "real" Kierkegaard.

As Bunch argues in the next section, "Seduction," Dinesen contests "the common notion of seduction and the (male) seducer . . . of the nineteenth century where man played the role as the active and cunning part in a seduction, and woman the passive and innocent part" (73). In the character Annelise of the early tale "Carnival," Bunch finds an honest, feminist alternative to Kierkegaard's deceptive, misogynistic Johannes the Seducer, who dresses up as Kierkegaard for a masquerade, and suggests to a potential lover that they spend the night together—but it can only be that one night alone. Johannes the Seducer, on the other hand, abandons the young Cordelia unexpectedly after they consummate their relationship. Bunch identifies Pellegrina of "The Dreamers" as a contrast to the male Don Juan of Kierkegaard's essay "The Immediate Erotic Stages," since she "seduces without effort" (82). And yet, such a character is not actually a subversion of Kierkegaard's authorship. One finds a woman (or a girl, rather) who seduces effortlessly in the Cordelia of "The Seducer's Diary." According to the pseudonym A, who introduces the "Diary," Johannes' "affair with Cordelia was so intricate that it was possible for him to appear as the one seduced."² Kierkegaard biographer Joakim Garff has even claimed that the novella "ought to have been titled 'The Seduction's Diary.' . . . For indeed, the diary presents some quite clear instances of the reversibility of the traditional codes of activity for the sexes."³ Here again, Bunch cannot be faulted for omitting this counterevidence, since his book is dedicated to Dinesen's reading of Kierkegaard. Still, if he were to write a longer book, or a sequel to this one, the discussion would be richer if he were to highlight the manifold ways in which Dinesen's Kierkegaard differs from the Kierkegaard of twenty-first century scholarship—the philosopher as he is now understood.

In the conclusion to his book, Bunch asserts that Dinesen's "stories are concrete, materialistic counter-stories to biblical narratives and to Kierkegaard's theoretical-idealistic works" (171), a claim that might have been true in Dinesen's eyes, but that does something of an injustice to Kierkegaard. The appeal of Kierkegaard to fiction writers such as Dinesen lies precisely in the fact that he often put fictional ("concrete") flesh on the ("theoretical") bones of his philosophy, most notably in narratives like "The Seducer's Diary," but also in his use of pseudonyms as literary characters. More perplexing is the table on the conclusion's penultimate page:

Kierkegaard – Dinesen
Christianity – Atheism
Religious – Aesthetic
Philosopher – Artist
Theoretical – Pragmatic
Spiritual – Sensuousness
Man – Woman
God – Devil

“All in all,” Bunch concludes, “we can juxtapose Dinesen’s view on Kierkegaard, Christianity, and gender in relation to Kierkegaard in these pairs of opposites” (172). While Bunch has convincingly demonstrated that each of these binaries holds true to some extent, this schema feels more like an introduction than a conclusion. In other words, this book would have benefited from a reconsideration and a finer analysis of the binaries with which it begins and ends. Surely, Kierkegaard is not a purely “religious” author, not even in Dinesen’s own estimation of him, nor is Dinesen entirely “aesthetic,” either. Furthermore, Kierkegaard is as much of an artist as a philosopher, something Dinesen undoubtedly would have recognized, just as she would have admitted certain philosophical tendencies in her own work.

In this review of *Isak Dinesen Reading Søren Kierkegaard*, I have chosen to occupy myself mostly by pointing out the places where Bunch could have elaborated his argument in order to give it more nuance and depth. I could have just as easily spent my time citing the many examples of fine work Bunch has done, particularly in the Dinesen archive, but that would have, to some extent, defeated the purpose of this review. Instead, what I had hoped to do was to give an impression of the wide and fascinating subfield that Bunch has opened up with his book, as well as to suggest some of the directions that the future scholarship in this subfield might take. Whatever direction that may end up being, Bunch’s *Isak Dinesen* will serve as a valuable resource for future generations of Dinesen-Kierkegaard scholars.

Endnotes

¹ For the materialist Kierkegaard, see, for example, Michael O'Neil Burns, *Kierkegaard and the Matter of Philosophy: A Fractured Dialectic* (London: Rowan & Littlefield, 2015).

² Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 1: 308

³ Joakim Garff, *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography*, trans. Bruce H. Kirmmse (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 280.