

“I CANNOT BECOME INVOLVED WITH THIS”:
KIERKEGAARD, GOLDSCHMIDT AND LODOVICA DE BRETTEVILLE
<http://doi.org/10.54354/OLIW1731>

Nate Kramer
Brigham Young University, Utah

*The history of men’s opposition to women’s emancipation
is more interesting perhaps than the story
of that emancipation itself.¹*

Abstract

This article explores Kierkegaard’s “silence” on the issue of emancipation in Denmark and in particular what is known as the Clara Rafael feud. Mathilde Fibiger’s 1850 publication *Clara Rafael: Tolv breve* ignited a controversy in which several well-known figures (and many others) weighed in on the role of women in society. Meir Goldschmidt was one of these along with Lodovica de Bretteville. While Kierkegaard remained silent on the issue, he was nevertheless implicated in interesting ways in the cause. This paper explores the connections between Kierkegaard, Goldschmidt and de Bretteville, and especially the ways that both Goldschmidt and de Bretteville make use of and appropriate Kierkegaard for their views on emancipation.

Keywords: Lodovica de Bretteville, emancipation, Meir Goldschmidt, The Clara Rafael feud, Danish Golden Age.

Resumen

Este artículo reflexiona sobre el “silencio” de Kierkegaard frente a la cuestión de la emancipación en Dinamarca y, de forma particular, frente al incidente conocido como la polémica de Clara Rafael. La publicación de 1850 de Mathilde Fibiger, *Clara Rafael: Tolv Breve*, inició una controversia en la cual varias figuras conocidas (y muchas otras) expresaron su parecer acerca del papel de la mujer en la sociedad. Meir Goldschmidt y Lodovica de Bretteville fueron dos de estas figuras. Sin embargo, si bien Kierkegaard no comentó nada al respecto, aun así se involucró de otras maneras en la cuestión. El presente artículo explora las conexiones entre Goldschmidt, Kierkegaard y de Bretteville, con énfasis en la forma en que tanto Goldschmidt como de Bretteville utilizaron el pensamiento

¹ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1929, p. 57.

de Kierkegaard para sus propias afirmaciones sobre el tema de la emancipación.

Palabras clave: Lodovica de Bretteville, emancipación, Meir Goldschmidt, polémica de Clara Rafael, Edad de Oro de Dinamarca.

Introduction

In 1851, or rather around Christmas time of the year before, the publication of Mathilde Fibiger's *Clara Raphael: Twelve Letters* sparked a feud that would rock for a brief time the world of the Copenhagen social and cultural elite. With a foreword penned by J.L. Heiberg himself, thereby giving the novel at least an implicit stamp of approval, the novel would not only ignite a feud that would last at least until September of 1851, but effectively propel the emancipation movement in Denmark and throughout Scandinavia. C.J.L. Almqvist's *Sara Videbeck and the Chapel*, published in Sweden in 1839 almost a decade before, would launch a similar debate about marriage and the status of men and women. But as Katalin Nun has pointed out, Fibiger's novel is noteworthy in Danish history because the ensuing feud predates John Stuart Mill's *On the Subjection of Women* (1869) in England and Georg Brandes's 1870 translation of the same into Danish that would pave the way for Brandes's lectures that would spur the Modern Breakthrough in Scandinavia.² The Modern Breakthrough and its placing of pressing social issues and concerns, including the question of emancipation, front and center would lead directly to Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, published in 1879, a play that would also become controversial in its own right as these same questions of the status of women in marriage flared up once again.

As a flashpoint in the history of emancipation in Denmark, the Clara Raphael controversy was particularly intense. Gotfred Appel suggests that there were "innumerable contributions in newspapers, pamphlets and books" that made up the feud.³ And among the flurry of commentary and reviews were well-known individuals including Fredrik Dreier, a physician and social agitator, N.F.S. Grundtvig, the Danish theologian, Magnús Eiríksson, the Icelandic theologian, and Meir Aron Goldschmidt, whose

² Katalin Nun, "Mathilde Fibiger: Kierkegaard and the Emancipation of Women," in *Kierkegaard and His Danish Contemporaries. Tome III: Literature, Drama and Aesthetics*, ed. by Jon Stewart, Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate, 2009. 83-103.

³ Gotfred Appel, *En brevvæksling om kvindens stilling i samfundet*, Copenhagen: Futura 1979, p.7.

involvement will be described in more detail below. Several women also weighed in on the debate including Fibiger herself who would write two books dealing with the question: *What is Emancipation?* and *A Visit*. Athalia Schwartz, a writer and journalist, wrote two different pieces dealing with the Clara Rafael Feud, including *En Contravisite hos Clara Rafael*. Pauline Worm, a teacher from Jutland, wrote a pamphlet titled *Fire brev om Clara Raphael*, and another on whom this paper will focus, Fanny Lodovica de Bretteville, a woman well-known in social circles in Copenhagen and one who proved to be one of Fibiger's most ardent supporters.

That Kierkegaard's career as a writer should coincide with the emergence of the emancipation movement in Denmark is in itself remarkable. It is equally remarkable that Kierkegaard said so little about it. This relative silence has itself been a source of some consternation amongst scholars who have tried to reconcile on the one hand the significance of one of the most provocative and daring thinkers of the 19th and 20th centuries and on the other a figure who seemingly remained indifferent to the cause of emancipation. The issue of emancipation, of course, is a more specific development in the broader question surrounding the role and significance of women generally speaking and concerning this broader question Kierkegaard is problematic to say the least. That Kierkegaard could be an inspiration for the likes of Simone de Beauvoir and that Céline Léon and Sylvia Walsh along with Birgit Bertung and so many others could devote themselves to this question is a testament not perhaps to Kierkegaard having the most interesting things to say about women, but rather that the question of a woman's role in society and her status politically, socially and culturally is our question, one that we still have not come to terms with. Kierkegaard was, of course, not altogether silent on the question of the woman. His work is filled with discussions of love, marriage, seduction, the nature of woman, the relations between men and women, etc. It is also the case that such discussions are themselves rarely pronouncements but intricate and complex ruminations that bear the marks of the history of philosophy, Danish and western European history, Kierkegaard's own historical moment as well as Kierkegaard's own inventive genius. And yet, Kierkegaard's ostensible refusal to become engaged whatsoever on the topic of emancipation is curious to say the least.

In the following, I would like to suggest that the either/or of the above might be nuanced a bit further. One of the enduring problems of understanding Kierkegaard's position in all of this is who in fact are we talking about at all when we refer to Kierkegaard. In their introduction to *Feminist Interpretations of Søren Kierkegaard*, Léon and Walsh suggest

at the outset that “any assessment of Kierkegaard’s position on the issues that interest us here [feminism] is immensely complicated by the fact that his production—often designated as his ‘authorship’—follows two parallel paths that sometimes converge, sometimes diverge, and by the fact that no two critics see eye to eye.”⁴ The reference to two parallel paths refers, of course, to the indirect and direct communication of Kierkegaard’s authorship and the problem of assigning any of the ideas found in the pseudonymous works to Kierkegaard’s own personal views and vice versa. While this presents challenges to understanding Kierkegaard’s position on the woman question, there lurks another problem in Kierkegaard’s authorship and indeed all authorships. In the famous essay “What is an Author?” from 1969, Foucault explores the ways in which our notions of author and authorship not only underwrite various interpretative assumptions, but also fail to include other possible ways authors and authorships function. Importantly for Foucault, one of the most important functions the author serves and what makes it fundamentally different from a proper name is that the author serve as a means of classification. And because the author serves as a means to classify and categorize, it functions more broadly and discursively than by referring to a biographical person outside of discourse. Foucault writes that:

... unlike a proper name, which moves from the interior of discourse to the real person outside who produced it, the name of the author remains at the contours of texts—separating one from the other, defining their form, and characterizing their mode of existence. It points to the existence of certain groups of discourse and refers to the status of this discourse... The author’s name is not a function of a man’s civil status, nor is it fictional; it is situated in the breach, among the discontinuities, which gives rise to new groups of discourse and their singular mode of existence.⁵

This breach between the biographical and the fictional and the difference between the two, is where I suggest we look in order to think about “Kierkegaard’s” relationship to feminism. This is to say that Kierkegaard is not only a biographical figure to which certain ideas can be associated or not associated but a name that carries a whole host of meanings that Kierkegaard as a biographical figure may or may not have held or to which

⁴ Céline Léon and Sylvia Walsh, *Feminist Interpretations of Søren Kierkegaard*, University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997, p.1-2.

⁵ Michel Foucault, “What is an Author?”, in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews by Michel Foucault*, ed. by Donald F. Bouchard, Ithaca and New York: Cornell University Press, 1977, p. 123.

he would have subscribed. In fact, as I shall explore below, Kierkegaard as an "author function" becomes coopted in interesting ways both for and against the cause of emancipation.

The biographical person of Kierkegaard, as the story goes, refused to engage with the issue at hand and instead chose to remain "silent." And yet Kierkegaard in another sense does not, cannot, remain silent despite his desire to do so. He is woven into the story of Denmark's emancipation movement whether he likes it or not such that whatever Kierkegaard's personal reactions might have been to the events at the end of 1850 and the following year, he is none the less a part of them. He is, to borrow a term from Michael Rothberg's book *The Implicated Subject*, implicated. This implication takes the form in the following of Kierkegaard being "borrowed," appropriated (against his will presumably) by various figures—in this case Meïr Goldschmidt and Lodovica de Bretteville—and enlisted both against and for the cause of emancipation. Thus, by the term implication I mean following Rothberg a state or condition of being entangled, involved, or connected closely to or "folded into" (im-plied in) events that at first seem beyond our agency as individual subjects.⁶ *The Implicated Subject* addresses the Black Lives Matter movement, slavery more generally, the Holocaust, and other similar moments in order to chart a path between and beyond the categories of victim and perpetrator and to suggest a kind of subjectivity that is a "participant in histories and social formations that generate the positions of victim and perpetrator, and yet in which most people do not occupy such clear-cut roles."⁷ In the case of Kierkegaard, it seems that Kierkegaard does not occupy or cannot occupy such a clear-cut role when it comes to feminism or to the issue of emancipation. Even when he wishes to remove himself from the fray and be silent, he is nevertheless enmeshed in the struggle for emancipation. I want to make clear that this paper does not aim to remake Kierkegaard into a proponent of emancipation. Far from it. Rather, his silence only further underscores his implication in complex ways in the issue of the emancipation and its initial Danish moment.

In what follows, I wish to explore a curious triangle of figures of which Kierkegaard might be understood as the apex. The first is Meïr Aron Goldschmidt, the well-known publisher, journalist and author; a figure who had sparred with Kierkegaard some years before and the teacher and writer

⁶ Michael Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019, p. 1.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

Fanny Lodovica de Bretteville, a relatively little known figure today, but one who was much more well-known during her lifetime and an important voice in the early days of the Danish story of women's emancipation in Denmark, mostly evidenced in her defense of Fibiger's *Clara Rafael*. What makes her remarkable is not only her forward thinking during a time of women's suppression in Denmark but her little known encounter with Kierkegaard as well as her correspondence both public and private with Goldschmidt. This is a curious threesome to be sure, with Kierkegaard a silent but nonetheless important presence, brought together curiously and importantly enough by the Clara Rafael feud and the question of emancipation.

I. Meir Goldschmidt and Kierkegaard as the Last Word on Emancipation

Meir Aron Goldschmidt's interest in the Clara Rafael feud resulted in several contributions to his literary organ *North and South*, a follow up periodical to *The Corsair*. Primarily, this involvement took the form of a public exchange with de Bretteville in two separate "letters" as well as a final parting shot in the feud, something of a review of the various contributors to the Clara Rafael feud in a piece titled "The Clara Literature." This final piece appears to be something of a concluding statement on the affair, but it was not to be. The exchange between Goldschmidt and de Bretteville in the form of these published letters was not just about Fibiger's novel but constituted a broader discussion of the role of women in society. Goldschmidt reveals himself to be thoroughly conservative and at times a dismissive and even uninterested partner. On the other hand, de Bretteville's civility and careful tiptoeing around Goldschmidt's more caustic and mean-spirited comments while also providing a vigorous and more nuanced defense of the role of women reveals herself to be a more than adequate interlocutor. It is unfortunate we do not have more of her writing.

I will discuss the exchange between Goldschmidt and de Bretteville in more detail below, but "The Clara Literature" piece in *North and South* is particularly interesting because of its surprising invocation of Kierkegaard and Victor Eremita's *Stage's on Life's Way*. Hardly a serious consideration of the feud itself or of the various participants, Goldschmidt initially notes the flurry of letters written in the wake of the publication of Fibiger's *Clara Raphael*: "After Clara Raphael's Twelve Letters are followed a housewife's five letters, Theodor Immanuel's Twelve letters, Sibylla's letter, Cecilie's

letter, Pauline's letter and probably still others."⁸ Goldschmidt hardly has the time or the interest it seems to undertake a serious consideration of the feud. But, as he closes his "review," he makes a curious recommendation. He suggests that those interested in Fibiger's novel and the ensuing controversy would do well to read Kierkegaard's *Stages on Life's Way*: "Without beating around the bush any longer, I will tell you where one should refer oneself: to *Stages on Life's Way*, published in 1845 by Hilarius Bookbinder (Magister Kierkegaard)."⁹ According to Goldschmidt, Kierkegaard provides in *Stages*, a "higher, comprehensive, and far-sighted view of the different positions [regarding women] and lets them stand as subordinated moments."¹⁰ High praise indeed for one whom Goldschmidt sparred with only a few years before. Goldschmidt continues: "those who are emancipated will be able to find not only the already foregoing discussions, but all possible future contributions accurately reproduced"¹¹ in *Stages*. Goldschmidt is no doubt referring to "Some Reflections on Marriage in Answer to Objections" by the pseudonym A Married Man in *Stages*, but mentions more specifically the section "In vino veritas" where William Afham is joined by Victor Eremita, Johannes the Seducer, Constantin Constantius, the Young Man from *Repetition*, and the Fashion Designer to discuss, among other topics, woman. Naming each of the pseudonyms one by one, Goldschmidt implicitly endorses these voices as carrying out a comprehensive exploration of woman and that such an exploration is to be preferred over the disparate voices of the various contributors to the Clara Rafael feud.

This use or rather appropriation of Kierkegaard at the conclusion of Goldschmidt's review of the "literature" on the Clara Rafael controversy should cause us to stop short. Birgit Bertung, following Gotfred Appel, suggests that there is nothing necessarily odd about Goldschmidt's appropriation of Kierkegaard, that Goldschmidt sincerely believes *Stages*'s representation of women as some kind of valid explanation of their role and value. And yet the irony of such an endorsement is hard to ignore, something that Bertung half-acknowledges by bringing up the very possibility that it might be read ironically. The rather odd endorsement of Kierkegaard by Goldschmidt as someone who might sum up the issue of emancipation and as the veritable last word, as it were, on the Clara Rafael feud is not only highly suspect but in and of itself strange. Goldschmidt is

⁸ Meir Goldschmidt, "Clara-Literaturen," *Nord og Syd*, vol. 6, 1851, p. 321.

⁹ Goldschmidt, "Clara-Literaturen," p. 325.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 327.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 327.

certainly no friend of Kierkegaard given the Corsair affair that occurred a scant five years before, and the selection of *Stage's on Life's Way* as the definitive statement on women by Kierkegaard is tendentious at best. There are also other statements by Kierkegaard or his pseudonymous authors that Goldschmidt might have chosen (those in *Sickness Unto Death*, for example, provide other ways of thinking the relation of Kierkegaard to the question of woman, statements that I will consider further on in this paper). How should this endorsement or really appropriation of Kierkegaard by Goldschmidt be understood?

Kierkegaard, as noted above, failed to contribute anything to the brewing controversy. He did own Fibiger's novel, having purchased it shortly after its publication. He also wrote a review of it, though it was never finished and never published (a significant part of Kierkegaard's silence). Furthermore, Johnny Kondrup in an article on Meir Goldschmidt notes the oddity of this with direct reference to Goldschmidt's review of the literature:

In addition to the review, Kierkegaard mentions Clara Raphael a single time in his journal. It is a very short entry from around January 20, 1851, where he remarks that she was not so much a neuter as a shabby common gender. But with this, his occupation with Mathilde Fibiger's book also seems to be over. Neither Goldschmidt's review nor his later article on the 'Clara-literature' left any trace in his papers.¹²

Kondrup continues that it stretches the imagination to think that Kierkegaard did not read Goldschmidt's articles on Clara Raphael. Kierkegaard was, after all, as Kondrup puts it, an "avid reader" of Goldschmidt's periodical *North and South*:

Why did Goldschmidt's remarks about Victor Eremita and "In vino veritas" leave no trace in Kierkegaard's entries? When one further considers what literature Bishop Mynster's innocent references to Goldschmidt and Kierkegaard could give rise to it is almost incomprehensible that Kierkegaard could have ignored Goldschmidt's polemical remarks.¹³

And yet, ostensibly, he did. At least as far as we know, Kierkegaard did not respond publicly or even privately beyond what is mentioned above.

¹² Johnny Kondrup, "Meir Goldschmidt: The Cross-Eyed Hunchback," in *Kierkegaard and His Danish Contemporaries. Tome III: Literature, Drama and Aesthetics*, ed. by Jon Stewart, Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate, 2009, p. 144.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

If this was an ironic or strategic attack by Goldschmidt on Kierkegaard, perhaps trying as it were to draw him into a discussion of which he presumably wanted no part (one explanation for his silence), it is also ironic for another reason. The other object of Goldschmidt's attack may well be emancipation itself and indirectly de Bretteville. Goldschmidt dismisses the intentions and motivations of the emancipation movement as misguided and abstract, especially de Bretteville's defense, and does this not only by direct rebuttal in his exchange with de Bretteville but also by referring the entire matter to Kierkegaard and his *Stages*. In fact, Goldschmidt seemingly closes any further discussion on the Clara Rafael feud by simply referring contemporary and future readers to *Stages*.

It is not only Goldschmidt's appropriation of Kierkegaard for his opposition to emancipation that is interesting here, but his opposition to de Bretteville's being influenced by Kierkegaard that makes the reference to *Stages* curious. Goldschmidt had previously noted in his private correspondence to de Bretteville a certain Kierkegaardian quality in de Bretteville's writing, suggesting that "you seem to be influenced by Søren Kierkegaard or the little theological school founded on his ideas."¹⁴ De Bretteville had not revealed herself to Goldschmidt at this point in the exchange of letters and Goldschmidt seems to be trying to deduce who in fact de Bretteville is—part of the game he thinks de Bretteville is playing. He continues: "I have had the displeasure of reading this letter and discovering the true atmosphere of your mind between the lines."¹⁵ Goldschmidt is conceivably channeling his dislike of Kierkegaard following the Corsair affair, but de Bretteville defends her interest in Kierkegaard, while at the same time denying it, when, in a letter dated January 26, she argues that her pursuit of the right of emancipation for woman as a human being "is not more Søren Kierkegaardian than anyone is who takes stock of themselves—every human being is at bottom a divine thing! A prophet! A Sibylle!"¹⁶ Although it can only be a matter of speculation as to how de Bretteville reacted to Goldschmidt's invoking Kierkegaard in his "Clara-Literature" given her own being influenced by Kierkegaard on the status and existential nature of women (a fuller discussion of this follows), as I will show below de Bretteville's reaction was undoubtedly complex. Whatever her reaction, Goldschmidt's turning to Kierkegaard to oppose the emancipation movement and indirectly de Bretteville suggests that

¹⁴ Appel, *En brevveksling*, p. 34.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

Kierkegaard's silence was anything but, even if he himself had nothing directly to say. Despite Kierkegaard's silence on Goldschmidt's use of *Stages* in his opposition to emancipation, he is nevertheless a source or reference point in the controversy.

II. *Lodovica de Bretteville and Her Letter to Kierkegaard*

Fanny Lodovica, as Gotfred Appel calls her in one of the few book length studies devoted to her, was born on June 22, 1827 in a maternity institution in Copenhagen to the unmarried, 18 year-old Margrethe Magdalene Petersen.¹⁷ The presumed father was Louis le Normand de Bretteville of Ålborg, who formally adopted de Bretteville in 1837, though according to Appel de Bretteville was already living with her father by the age of five. Louis de Bretteville was a major-general in the Danish army which afforded Lodovica de Bretteville a good education and access to important social circles. Appel notes that little is known about de Bretteville's education and her childhood, but she read German and French and was well-read and knowledgeable far and above the average Dane. Later in 1851, at the conclusion of the Clara Rafael feud, de Bretteville would marry Rasmus Simesen and tragically live only a short while longer. She would die at the age of 32 in 1859 leaving behind her husband and four children.

De Bretteville appears frequently in the literature on emancipation in Denmark and Kierkegaard, but usually in conjunction with other well-known progressive women of the time: Mathilde Fibiger, Pauline Worm, Athalia Schwartz, etc. She is often mentioned as an author, though her authorship is fairly limited. However, in the flurry of reviews and commentary that form the Clara Raphael controversy, de Bretteville's involvement stands out. Publicly, her involvement begins with "An Exchange Concerning the Woman's Position in Society," the piece for which she is best known, published in Goldschmidt's *North and South* in January of 1851.¹⁸ She also signs the piece, as noted above, using a pseudonym, Sibylla, which keeps Goldschmidt guessing as to who the author is for several weeks before she at last reveals herself. Continuing the public exchange, Goldschmidt responds to Sibylla in an issue of *North and South* dated the 14th of February and titled

¹⁷ The Danish word is *fødselstiftelsen* and designates an institution in Copenhagen that took care of expecting, but unwed mothers.

¹⁸ Sibylla [Fanny Lodovica de Bretteville], "En Brevveksling om Kvindens Stilling i Samfundet. I." *Nord og Syd*, no. 6, 1851, pp. 123-31.

“An Exchange Concerning the Woman’s Position in Society II. A Response to Sibylla”. Sibylla would follow with a response to Goldschmidt, published not in *North and South* this time, but as a pamphlet with the subtitle “Sibylla’s Answer to the Letter in *North and South* Nr. 5.” De Bretteville’s vigorous defense of Fibiger and the position she took was seen as ardent support of Fibiger and several contemporary scholars have lauded her contribution to the issue of the emancipation of women: “Mathilde’s only real support was the 23 year-old teacher Fanny Normand de Bretteville (1827-59) who wrote the pamphlet ‘An exchange concerning the woman’s position in society’. She understood Clara’s need to be an independent individual and not just in thrall to man.”¹⁹

But the exchange between Goldschmidt and de Bretteville goes beyond what the above would suggest. Gotfred Appel in his 1979 *En brevveksling om kvindens stilling samfundet. 1851: Lodovica de Bretteville og Meir Goldschmidt* details a fairly extensive correspondence that took place privately between de Bretteville and Goldschmidt. Goldschmidt was clearly intrigued initially at the anonymity of the letter writer, but continued for some time an exchange with de Bretteville behind the scenes as it were. The private correspondence between them mainly dealt with the issues of emancipation, though the tone certainly changed when de Bretteville revealed herself as author of both the public pieces and the author of the private letters. De Bretteville was in fact frustrated at Goldschmidt’s lack of seriousness in the exchange initially because Goldschmidt chose to see the exchange as more a game or bit of entertainment than a serious exploration of the status of woman in relation to man. But de Bretteville was serious in her attempt to make a case for position of woman as an individual in her own right and an equal to man.

And it is in part her connection and interest in Søren Kierkegaard that links Goldschmidt and de Bretteville together. In a letter dated 10 December, 1850, just prior to the Clara Raphael controversy, de Bretteville sent a letter to Kierkegaard of a more personal sort. In the letter, she addresses Kierkegaard as a philosopher and styles herself as a confessant. In a tone that shifts quickly between sureness and pleading, Bretteville asks Kierkegaard essentially to become her confessor; someone to hear her out as she struggles with personal matters of religion and faith. In the absence of a priest or a father (she is not Catholic and her father had passed away), she begs Kierkegaard to listen. Unsure, however, if he would consent to

¹⁹ Anna Katharine Svenning, “*Gid jeg var en mand!*”, Copenhagen: Kvindemuseet, 2019, p. 17.

such a surrogate role, she at least makes an appeal in the letter in the hopes of some acknowledgement if not a recognition of the genuine commonality between the two.

De Bretteville continues that the form of the letter itself must suffice as vehicle for such communication since “convention” denies her more direct access to Kierkegaard. She writes that she had on more than one occasion been quite physically close to Kierkegaard and had wanted to ask him questions, but had to remain silent because of the aforementioned convention and social propriety. If nothing else, the letter demonstrates the strict social rules that governed relations between the sexes that made it necessary to resort to a letter. Demonstrating her education and her intellectual capacity, Bretteville refers to Oehlenschläger’s *The Spirit in Nature*, a short poem by Schiller, and a poem by the popular pious German poet Hölty. De Bretteville despairs that in the awakening of her reflection on her spiritual situation, however:

... our old faith reproaches us—we fear for ourselves—we fear being disobedient to God’s Commandments, we seem to ourselves to be willful and ungrateful. In our fear we then cast ourselves into the arms of faith, but soon we sense that the former trust has been shaken. In order not to see the manifold shapes of doubt, we must then close our eyes; in order not to hear its thousand voices, we must close our ears—a dumb stupor has replaced the former devotion.²⁰

De Bretteville hoping to find a kindred spirit in Kierkegaard, that is one who fails to find solace in the church or in others, concludes her letter with:

Now my confession is over. Perhaps you will say that in despair I have willed to be myself and am now too weak to sustain myself. Now the judgment is up to you. Oh, if it is possible, please restore my faith in myself. If you are now angry with me, distressed with me, surprised at my presumptuousness, then I beg you to remember how difficult it is to find anybody to whom one can turn for refuge.²¹

Although Bretteville requested Kierkegaard to “throw these confessions into the fireplace and let them be devoured by smoke and flames” if he

²⁰ SKS 28, 472, Brev 311. The translation I am using for both de Bretteville’s letter and Kierkegaard’s unpublished response can be found at <https://theamericanreader.com/december-10-1850-soren-kierkegaard-and-lodovica-de-bretteville/>. Access date 13 June 2021.

²¹ SKS 28, 473, Brev 311. See note 20 for English translation.

could not or would not listen to her, he did not.²² But he did not respond to her either. Kierkegaard does pen a response to Bretteville, but never sends it. Instead, he tucks both the letter and his response into an envelope and writes on the outside of it: "I cannot become involved with this."²³ Kierkegaard's response is, of course, hardly a response at all, existing as only a series of fragments that only just begin to form a coherent response to de Bretteville. While Kierkegaard does acknowledge de Bretteville's abilities as an author, he objects to her request by stating that de Bretteville is confused, styling herself simultaneously as a confessant and not a thinker when she is more a thinker than a confessant. Perhaps the most concerning comment Kierkegaard makes is when he writes:

It is typically feminine, whenever one has ventured too far in self-reflection, then to cry out suddenly to another person, "Restore me to myself!" But that cannot be done, and to demand it is self-contradictory. Yet, it is also typically feminine in a more momentary mood to consider the danger far greater than it really is. Should this in any way be the case with you, then you yourself will surely come to realize in time that it was fortunate that I am not a confessor.²⁴

Bertung's assessment of Kierkegaard's reaction is surprisingly neutral, but Céline Léon comments on this particular episode at length, as does Sylvia Walsh and Katalin Nun. Léon writes that:

Even though Lodovica was perhaps one of his most articulate and systematically minded correspondents, the philosopher inveighs against her with a testiness reminiscent of that manifested by Judge William each time the issue of women's liberation is broached.... not just content with putting her back in her place, he finds shocking that she could voice an opinion different from his own and hence concludes that she must be hysterical to do so.²⁵

In a footnote, Léon invokes Wendy Martin's "Anne Bardstreet's Poetry: A Study of Subversive Piety" and Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* and the fear of the intellectual woman that dominated much of the nineteenth century (to say nothing of our current moment) to describe Kierkegaard's concern with de Bretteville. However, what Kierkegaard also finds objectionable in de Bretteville's letter is that she would seek him out

²² SKS 28, 473, Brev 311. See note 20 for English translation.

²³ SKS 28, 475, Brev 312. See note 20 for English translation.

²⁴ SKS 28, 472, Brev 311. See note 20 for English translation.

²⁵ Céline Léon, *The Neither/Nor of the Second Sex: Kierkegaard on Women, Sexual Difference, and Sexual Relations*, Macon: Mercer University Press 2008, pp. 123-4.

as a confessor when all along he has suggested that such a spiritual path leads not away from the self to another but to the self alone before God. This is entirely consistent with what Kierkegaard in his pseudonymous and authorships has suggested elsewhere. In fact, one might even suggest that this is what de Bretteville found so compelling about Kierkegaard in the first place.

Kierkegaard's lack of sympathy and the "testiness" of his unsent response—others have called it terse and dismissive—may betray, however, other concerns as well. Although Bertung is perhaps too generous in her assessment of Kierkegaard's response, she does note that "the fact that she addressed herself to him may well suggest that she saw him as one who did not consider women of lesser spiritual worth."²⁶ Taking Bertung's comment further, what may also be at work in Bretteville's letter to Kierkegaard is either a wish or a belief that Kierkegaard might be enlisted in the cause of emancipation. Kierkegaard in fact recognizes her letter as "a small scholarly essay of emancipated thought."²⁷ That Kierkegaard recognizes or at least intimates the aspect of emancipation in Bretteville's letter is an implicit recognition of the historical moment in which the letter is written, a moment that would soon be fanned to full flame with Fibiger's epistolary novel. Kierkegaard's general silence on the issue of emancipation and the pseudonymic engagement with the role of women may have lead Bretteville to seek not only a spiritual relationship with Kierkegaard, but also possibly as a fellow contributor to the cause. The "this" that Kierkegaard refuses to become involved in—scribbled on the envelope that contains her letter—might then not only refer to de Bretteville herself but to the cause of emancipation as well. Certainly, this would be consistent with his refusal to publish his review of Fibiger's novel as well as his lack of response to Goldschmidt's recommendation to read Eremita's *Stages on Life's Way* as commentary on emancipation.

While the above does not cast Kierkegaard I think in a positive light with regard to the question at hand, it does reveal a perception amongst Kierkegaard's contemporaries that he may well have been sympathetic to the cause of emancipation, or at least a keen observer of men and women and that such observations might serve the question of emancipation. That is for those who read him closely. From a biographical perspective, this perception may well have been misguided, but Kierkegaard is, of course, no

²⁶ Birgit Bertung, *Om Kierkegaard, kvinder og kærlighed: en studie i Søren Kierkegaards kvindesyn*, Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzels forlag 1987, p. 70.

²⁷ SKS 28, 474, Brev 312. See note 20 for English translation.

longer nor was ever his biography alone, as the case of Goldschmidt's and de Bretteville's appropriation suggest. Whatever the case, Kierkegaard's role, involuntary and even unwitting as it is, is still a significant part of the story of emancipation within Denmark. Even if only via his silence.

III. De Bretteville's "An Exchange Regarding the Position of Women in Society"

The significance of de Bretteville resides more squarely in her defense of Fibiger's novel and the cause of emancipation found in her "An Exchange Regarding the Position of Women in Society I" published in *North and South* in 1851. As noted above, this would be the start of a public and private exchange between her and Goldschmidt that would last into May of 1851. Initially Goldschmidt felt that the "letter" which he received sounded more personal and wondered if it should be published at all. It was signed by the name Sibylla, a pseudonym that de Bretteville adopted here and nowhere else, and Goldschmidt printed on the back of *North and South* the question as to whether or not the letter should be published. Sibylla responded in the affirmative and with its publication Goldschmidt published a continuation of the debate in his "An Exchange Regarding the Position of Women in Society II. Response to Sibylla".

Katalin Nun sums up de Bretteville's position in these letters by noting "the main point is that there is something wrong with society when it does not make possible a better education for its female citizens."²⁸ In this plea for better educational opportunities for women (de Bretteville was also a teacher), she echoes Pauline Worm, also a teacher, that education should be a priority in the question of women's emancipation. But as Appel notes, de Bretteville was not interested necessarily in the political or economic dimensions of emancipation, but in the more abstract status of women in relation to men and perhaps more importantly, the status of woman as a human being. This more abstract appeal was one of the targets of Goldschmidt's objections to de Bretteville, that her demands were not concrete enough. But de Bretteville is not interested in revolutionizing society so much as she is in revolutionizing a woman's conception of herself as a self. Appel writes that de Bretteville "doesn't write about women's emancipation in terms of political rights or economic independence. She can't. Rather she writes about women's rights as a human being... the central issue: The recognition

²⁸ Nun, "Mathilde Fibiger," p. 91.

of a woman as a human being on par with the man.”²⁹ Appel’s point is that de Bretteville came from the upper echelons of society and while she may have sympathy with the lower classes, the issue of women’s emancipation for her is not a class issue. It is an existential one. Appel continues that “emancipation consists to her precisely in this: the woman, understood and considered in her relation to a man, ought to be considered independent and should be given the opportunity for independent development.”³⁰ De Bretteville herself writes:

... it is the woman who stands closest in the first stirrings of life, the first seeds of development, it is she who should educate the home and make a husband’s life lighter and happier; but can she do this if she is bored, when her only enjoyment is news (gossip), when she suffers over her own inner emptiness... Can she teach children to be when she is an enigma to herself?³¹

For the above reasons, de Bretteville is often perceived as one of the more astute and sophisticated proponents of emancipation in the ensuing feud.

It is Birgit Bertung’s assertion, however, that de Bretteville’s more sophisticated defense of emancipation rests on the thought of Kierkegaard that interests us here. The explicit connections between de Bretteville and Kierkegaard are admittedly thin (nowhere in “An Exchange” is Kierkegaard mentioned by name nor his work), but Bertung claims she is “somewhat sure that [de Bretteville] has read Kierkegaard’s *Sickness Unto Death* (to be dead in life), which was published in 1849, and where Kierkegaard writes that the human being is a synthesis of body and spirit.”³² Furthermore, I have it on good word that there is additional evidence that de Bretteville read *Sickness Unto Death* indicated by the markings in her copy of the book.³³ If Bertung is correct about a deeper philosophical kinship with Kierkegaard and it is *Sickness Unto Death* that subtends de Bretteville’s arguments about the

²⁹ Appel, *En brevveksling*, p. 9.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

³¹ Birgit Bertung, *Gyldne lænker: kvindernes guldalder*, Copenhagen: Forlag1.dk, 2011, p. 95-96.

³² Bertung, *Gyldne lænker*, p. 91.

³³ From a conversation with Troy Wellington, Fellow at the Kierkegaard House Foundation. The catalogue record in which de Bretteville’s marginalia are referenced reads “ST OLAF: Kierkegaard Library copy 14: HVH Collection. Rohde/Hong set. Half-leather binding; black cloth over boards; original printed wrappers bound in; bound by Anker Kyster; signed in ms. on front wrapper: ‘FL de Bretteville’; notes in ms. inside cover signed by H.P. Rohde.” See https://bridge.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/discovery/fulldisplay?context=L&vid=01BRC_INST:SOC&search_scope=SOC_MyCampus_CI&ab=Everything&docid=alma991007890909702971. Accessed 24 July 2021.

equality of the sexes, then this is at the very least a far cry from Goldschmidt's recommendation that *Stages on Life's Way* represents the culmination of Kierkegaard's thinking on the question of woman.

Of course, *Sickness Unto Death* is no sustained argument in favor of women and their equality and even those mentions of women are often problematic and ambiguous. Still, it is possible that de Bretteville found in Anti-Climacus's pages the assertions of an existential equality between man and woman compelling, especially given her recognition of the need for woman to discover her own self. Anti-Climacus's description of the basic structure of the self and the idea that in the relationship with God the distinction between men and women vanish would also have been quite compelling.³⁴ In fact the entire discussion of masculine and feminine despair in the important footnote in *Sickness Unto Death* arguably presents the most extensive discussion of masculinity and femininity in such gender equal terms. Though here too, it must be quickly added, the language is charged and problematic. But de Bretteville from the foregoing discussion does not necessarily object to certain masculine and feminine roles as long as woman is allowed to develop the fullest extent of her nature.

Bertung is careful to note that de Bretteville's interest in Kierkegaard's *Sickness Unto Death* leads to a fairly unique reading of it on her part because she is deploying what Anti-Climacus would argue is a Christian existential argument about the significance of the individual but here in the socio-political realm of emancipation. For de Bretteville it is apparently not the ultimate relation between the human being and the divine that is of consequence, but rather Anti-Climacus's initial assertion that the woman is a human being in the first place and capable of her own existential movements quite apart from the man. She is a human being in her own right. De Bretteville writes in "An Exchange Regarding the Position of Women in Society III" that "The churchly organization is beautiful and solemn, but it belongs to the individual's views on faith. Bring her up to acknowledge her own law—only then will she recognize that she is a human being, only then will she understand and have her freedom; only then will she be a self!"³⁵ In Bertung's *Gyldne lænker*, Bertung connects these ideas of de Bretteville to Kierkegaard writing that only these two "had this clear common view."³⁶ This is a remarkable claim and one that would bear further investigation. Is it possible that de Bretteville is the first to use

³⁴ SUD 50, n. 49.

³⁵ Appel, *En brevveksling*, pp. 98-9.

³⁶ Bertung, *Gyldne lænker*, p. 96.

Kierkegaard to make a feminist argument? And an argument so early on in the history of emancipation in Denmark? Kierkegaard accordingly would then be deployed as an ally in the fight for emancipation by de Bretteville, certainly an unexpected connection at this point in time and no doubt one that Kierkegaard himself would perhaps have avoided. Nevertheless, it does appear that de Bretteville marshals Kierkegaard's ideas in the service of emancipation even as Goldschmidt marshaled Kierkegaard's ideas against the cause.

IV. Conclusion

In the last paragraph of "An Exchange I," de Bretteville refers to a general malaise or sickness that pervades Danish society. While this sickness is not Anti-Climacus's "sickness unto death", if de Bretteville is as influenced by Kierkegaard as I hope to have suggested above and given Bertung's assertion as well, then the use of the word sickness is a further compelling link between the two (as well as to Goldschmidt). De Bretteville writes "If you have still not become tired and bored and cold in the reading of this and if you think I have presented only 'black on black', I would remind you of the doctor, who doesn't only speak of the healthy parts, but concerns himself with the sickness, and only with the sickness, because he knows that it can be healed, that the roots at the heart of it are healthy."³⁷ The language of sickness and health and healing are certainly general enough, but for de Bretteville this malaise that has set in the Danish society is in need of remedy because it is quite literally for her a sickness unto death.

If, as the story goes, Kierkegaard is a silent and unwilling participant in the early days of the emancipation movement in Denmark, he is nonetheless a participant. He is implicated in complex ways in the story of emancipation. And not only is he implicated now in our turning back to Kierkegaard to understand his views on women and emancipation, but he was implicated already then. We sometimes, I believe, want those luminaries we study to be somehow progressive in all respects. To essentially mirror our own commitments. Despite the more complicated picture Kierkegaard presents, he was clearly seen by his contemporaries as voicing arguments and opinions, whether they represented his own views and perspectives or not, about the issue of emancipation. Bertung writes in her *Om Kierkegaard, kvinder og kærlighed* that the exchange between de Bretteville and Goldschmidt in fact

³⁷ Sibylla [de Bretteville], "En Brevveksling I", p. 131.

“shows to a fantastical high degree how advanced Kierkegaard was in his view of women—that they ought to be on the same plane as men—as well as how far his empathy extended to the situation of women.”³⁸ Bertung may well overreach in her assessment of Kierkegaard’s position with regard to women, but the Clara Rafael feud, and the public and private relationship between de Bretteville, Goldschmidt and Kierkegaard is a revealing moment in Kierkegaard’s involvement with these questions.

Bibliography

Appel, Gotfred, *En brevveksling om kvindens stilling i samfundet*, Copenhagen: Futura 1979.

Bertung, Birgit, *Gyldne lænker: kvindernes guldalder*, Copenhagen: Forlag1.dk 2011.

— *Om Kierkegaard, kvinder og kærlighed: en studie i Søren Kierkegaards kvindesyn*, Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzels forlag 1987.

Foucault, Michel, “What is an Author?” in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews by Michel Foucault*, ed. by Donald F. Bouchard, Ithaca and New York: Cornell University Press 1977, pp. 113-38.

Goldschmidt, Meir, “Clara-Literaturen,” *Nord og Syd*, vol. 6, 1851, p. 321-?

Kondrup, Johnny, “Meir Goldschmidt: The Cross-Eyed Hunchback,” in *Kierkegaard and His Danish Contemporaries. Tome III: Literature, Drama and Aesthetics*, ed. by Jon Stewart, Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate 2009, pp. 105-49.

Léon, Céline, *The Neither/Nor of the Second Sex: Kierkegaard on Women, Sexual Difference, and Sexual Relations*, Macon: Mercer University Press 2008.

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

Nun, Katalin, “Mathilde Fibiger: Kierkegaard and the Emancipation of Women,” in *Kierkegaard and His Danish Contemporaries. Tome III: Literature, Drama and Aesthetics*, ed. by Jon Stewart, Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate 2009, pp. 83-103.

Rothberg, Michael, *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators*, Stanford: Stanford University Press 2019.

Sibylla [Fanny Lodovica de Bretteville], ”En Brevveksling om Kvindens Stilling i Samfundet. I,” *Nord og Syd*, no. 6, 1851, pp. 123-31.

³⁸ Bertung, *Om Kierkegaard, kvinder og kærlighed*, p. 70.

Svenning, Anna Katharine, "*Gid jeg var en mand!*", Copenhagen: Kvindemuseet, 2019.

Woolf, Virginia, *A Room of One's Own*, New York: Harcourt, Brace 1929.