

LETTERS TO THE  
EDITOR

OCTOBER 16, 2019



# Writing Kierkegaard's life

Writing Kierkegaard's life, Sarah  
Bernhardt, Iris Murdoch in film, etc

Sir, – Clare Carlisle accuses me of being either “unable or unwilling” to approach her biography of Kierkegaard “on its own terms”. She is unclear herself, however, on what those terms are. Is the work a piece of historical fiction of the order of Hilary Mantel’s *Wolf Hall*, or is it a biography as she repeatedly claims? Even if it were the former it

would be questionable because writers of historical fiction generally endeavour to get the facts on which they creatively elaborate correct and Carlisle, as I showed in my review, gets some important facts wrong.

She claims that my charge that the book's references are incomplete is "simply false". Where then are the references to document from where Carlisle took the quotation at the end of the first paragraph on page 38, the quotation that begins at the bottom of page 40 and continues on the top of page 41? Where is the note for the quotation on page 45? Where is the note for the quotation that follows the block quotation on page 47? I counted twenty such missing references, some for quotations and others for factual claims, before I finally quit counting at page 112 of this 262-page book.

Carlisle attacks a straw man when she accuses me of claiming that what she alleges was Kierkegaard's ambivalence towards Christianity questioned his commitment to it. I never made such a claim. My claim was that Carlisle uses Kierkegaard's clearly

pejorative references to “Christendom” to support her claim that he was ambivalent towards Christianity when, in fact, she should have known that “Christendom” is the English translation of the Danish “Christenhed” which Kierkegaard does not use to refer to Christianity but to a culture of people who were only nominally rather than genuinely Christian. If Carlisle wants to argue that Kierkegaard was ambivalent towards Christianity, then she needs other evidence than these imagined pejorative references to it and such evidence is sadly wanting in her book.

Notably, Carlisle fails to address most of the substantive points of my review such as that she mistakenly restricts *The Corsair*'s campaign against Kierkegaard to 1846. In fact, more criticisms could be advanced against the book than the length restrictions on the review allowed. How, for example, is it possible to write a biography of Kierkegaard after the revelations of Peter Tudvad's *Stadier på antisemitismens vej: Søren Kierkegaard og jøderne* (Stages on the Way of Antisemitism: Søren Kierkegaard and the Jews; Rosinante, 2010), or without including any material whatever on Kierkegaard's attitude towards Jews and Judaism?

Dr Carlisle claims she found writing her biography of Kierkegaard “difficult”. I don’t doubt that. Nor do I doubt that she encountered, in that process, “literary challenges along with profound questions about the shape, truth and value of a human life”. Unfortunately, some of those challenges would appear to have defeated her and that she struggled to produce this uneven work is hardly a vindication of it.

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### **Sarah Bernhardt**

Sir, – Although Oscar Wilde admired Sarah Bernhardt greatly, having seen her in Racine’s *Phèdre* in 1879 (prompting a sonnet), he was not one of the many “authors in whose plays she acted” (Claude Grimal, Letters, October 11).

She had agreed in 1892 to act in his *Salomé*, but the performance was banned by the Lord Chamberlain because it represented biblical characters.