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Publication Date

2019-04-01

Undergraduate

The Invalidation of the Female Ironist in Kierkegaard's *The Seducer's Diary*

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I will present a critical reading of the irony present in Søren Kierkegaard's *The Seducer's Diary* through the lens of gender norms. Following the Socratic exploration of Kierkegaard's irony, I will first argue that irony is a liberating force, and crucial for the transformation of the immediate aesthete into an autonomous reflective aesthete. I then argue that Kierkegaard's model of the female ironist is unsustainable, due to the insurmountable gender conventions and financial dependency characteristic of women during the Danish Golden Age. I argue that although the Socratic education of irony liberates the inner self, there are severe social and psychological consequences for transgressing ethical constructs, especially for women. I also argue how Kierkegaard is skeptical of women's Socratic education in irony within *The Seducer's Diary*, and examine Kierkegaard's contemporaries' positions on women's education. I discuss the invalidation of the concept of the female ironist in *Either/Or's* autobiographical context, and analyze how Kierkegaard indirectly communicates his aim to reaffirm his and his former fiancée Regine Olsen's love through religious faith.

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In his pseudonymous works, Søren Kierkegaard emboldens readers to perceive different modes of existential thought by thrusting them into a state of mental gymnastics; in the case of *The Seducer's Diary*, he draws particular attention to the reflective aesthete. This essay aims to examine the dynamic between irony and Johannes the Seducer's relationship with Cordelia Wahl, in the context of Kierkegaard's stages of existence—namely, the aesthetic and ethical. Simultaneously, this essay will also deconstruct Kierkegaard's stance on gender within the literary layers of *The Seducer's Diary's* original text, *Either/Or*. The invalidation of the female ironist will subsequently be interpreted in a biographical context, pertaining to Kierkegaard's broken engagement with his fiancée Regine Olsen. In testing the possibility of becoming ironist for females in Cordelia's social position, Kierkegaard responds to historical conditions of Golden

Age women in his contemporary Copenhagen. Kierkegaard integrates indirect communication in Johannes's intellectual seduction of Cordelia to ultimately prove that irony is a liberating force. However, the precariousness of Cordelia's psychological and social position post-seduction questions the validity of such a conclusion, revealing how wealth and gender disparities create brutally real barriers to successfully becoming an ironist.

The examination of irony in *The Seducer's Diary* draws from Kierkegaard's existentialist discussion of isolation in his work *On the Concept of Irony*. In the work *The Isolated Self: Irony as Truth and Untruth in Søren Kierkegaard's On the Concept of Irony*, K. Brian Soderquist engages with Kierkegaard's dissertation, adopting a critical perspective on the opening and closure of the self through irony. Of most significance is the definition of Kierkegaard's irony as the movement from immediacy and an inward turn toward self-consciousness. As Socratic philosophy strongly influenced Kierkegaard's philosophy, there exists unquestionable parallels between Socratic irony and Kierkegaardian irony, of which Kierkegaard appends the concept of faith:

For Socrates "infinite absolute negativity" would express the belief that the individual's response to infinite and indeterminate flux is to create personal values in face of life's instability. Socrates' belief (Socratic ignorance) is at the same time an acceptance of man's finitude and of universal pluralism, and an ardent call to ethical lucidity and inquiry. Irony is the verbal dialogical consequence of the attempt to merge the finite and the infinite into acceptable metaphors of action.¹

This infinite negativity isolates the individual from external influence, forcing them to self-reflect. Self-reflection consolidates Kierkegaard's use of "indirect communication," through which he encourages the reader to manifest their own opinion, as opposed to

¹ Merrill, 1979, p. 224.

the author claiming a certain perspective as absolute. In *The Seducer's Diary*, Johannes's art is "to use amphibolies so that the listeners understand one thing from what is said and then suddenly perceive that the words can be interpreted another way" (EO1 370). Johannes's skill further strengthens Kierkegaard's value of autonomy and individuality, in that readers are intended to derive their own meaning from his language, isolating themselves from immediacy. For instance, "A," the pseudonymous transcriber of *The Seducer's Diary*, states that Johannes "has so developed her esthetically that she no longer listens to one voice but is able to hear the many voices at the same time." (EO1 309). Additionally, there are two forms of ethics: the received bourgeois conventions, and the higher metaphysical form of ethics. In the case of *The Seducer's Diary*, Johannes teaches Cordelia to reject received ethical conventions through irony and reflection. Although numerous forms of literary irony exist, the internal separation from conventional thought or the societal code of ethics will serve as the basis of this essay's characterization of Kierkegaard's irony.

In *The Seducer's Diary*, Johannes eagerly seeks out Edward, the epitome of social triviality, to awaken Cordelia's subconscious perception of irony. Johannes manipulatively pairs Edward with Cordelia, so that she may see that Edward is "inadequate for her passion. She looks down on such a person... she becomes almost diffident about her own reality when she senses her destiny and sees what actuality offers... Then becomes proud in her love" (EO1 62). By exposing Cordelia to the ethical convention of engaging mundane small talk, Johannes teaches Cordelia an aristocratic sense of superiority. Cordelia gradually picks up on irony by eavesdropping on Johannes's calculated conversations with her aunt, and her distaste towards Edwards grows as she becomes restlessly self-aware of her internal unfulfillment. This awareness of irony elevates her psychological being, gradually metamorphosing her aesthetic immediacy, the fundamental stage of the individual, to aesthetic reflection. The reflective aesthete, which Johannes personifies, transcends the immediacy of sensual

pleasure, and seeks intellectual pleasure. Through Edward's superficial courtship of Cordelia, Johannes wants Cordelia to feel that her "womanliness is neutralized by prosaic common sense and ridicule... by the absolutely neutral, namely, intellect" (EO1 346). Johannes's aesthetic point of view describes womanliness as true, authentic beauty. Throughout the text, Johannes repeatedly refers to the neutralization of woman, suggesting that ethical thought—in particular, societal norms—interfere with the aesthetic transformation of woman. In upholding an air of reflective superiority, Cordelia is unsettled by the ethical proposition of a dull future with Edward, subconsciously recognizing Johannes as the pure aesthete. In doing so, her "womanliness," which equates to her essence, reawakens, free from the threat of society extinguishing her authenticity and restricting her psychological exploration.

Johannes's principle regarding love and true beauty corresponds with that of the German Romantics and Idealists, in that romantic love is not reconcilable with ethical markers—in particular, institutional marriage. Prominent during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, German Romanticism and Idealism movements sparked dialogue regarding the theological rationalization of marriage. Described as an "uncivil" union, marriage was uncivil "in that the unification effected in it drew only on itself, structure itself only in reference to itself, and required, for its legitimacy, its essence, and its purpose, no reference to a civil society outside."² According to the Romantic thinkers' philosophy, marital relations should not be governed by civil codes—in other words, the ethical. The Romantics and Idealists reasoned that relationships should be private, preserving the autonomy of marriage by "unmooring it from state or ecclesiastical structures."³ Young romantics and Idealists criticized the contractual nature of the traditional marriage union, believing that the union's strength steadfastly exists regardless of bourgeois reinforcement. The Romantic theories regarding the

² Daub, 2012, p. 8.

³ Daub, 2012, p. 6.

metaphysics of marriage were anarchic, struggling to reconcile with the human rationalization of marriage; romantic love, when externalized from a contemporary context, removes societal constraints that are irrelevant or invalid to the relationship. Through irony, Cordelia comes to this realization of the ethical as it pertains to marriage.

Following the awareness of irony, Johannes ultimately plans for Cordelia to break her and Johannes's engagement herself—a critical point to becoming an ironist, in which she attempts to secure her autonomy. Johannes believes that “the banefulness of an engagement is always the ethical in it. The ethical is just as boring in scholarship as in life... engagement does not have ethical reality such as marriage has” (EO1 367). In Johannes's perspective, the concept of engagement is unsubstantial, a ridiculously abstract event before marriage ungrounded by actuality. A broken engagement provides the prime opportunity for Johannes to secure a more “beautiful and significant relationship” with Cordelia; through the isolation from ethical ideals, such as the notion that marriage is life's objective, Cordelia preserves her pure, youthful love for Johannes. After close observation of Johannes's irony “over the foolishness” and “cowardliness” of people, Cordelia eventually sends a letter to Johannes in which she makes fun of engagements, revealing her growing consciousness of irony (EO1 360, 392). The experience and revelation of authentic, erotic love causes Cordelia to realize the love does not, and should not, be constrained to marital duty and social obligations. By breaking the engagement herself, Cordelia thus liberates herself from the received conventions of the ethical. Johannes's relationship with Cordelia mirrors that of Socrates and his pupils— “he is not involved with any relationship with them but... he continually hovers freely above them, enigmatically attracting and repelling” (CI 146). In Johannes's philosophizing of his seduction, Johannes believes himself an occasion like Socrates, rather than a teacher, of reflective irony. Although Johannes's seduction of Cordelia is perceived as controlling rather than liberating through the lens of modern

gender politics, a Socratic understanding of the seduction reveals how it serves more so as a catalyst that ultimately aids Cordelia in selfhood and autonomy.

In reality, however, the traumatic effect Johannes's departure has on Cordelia calls into question this optimistic emancipation from ethical constraints, and the price of becoming an ironist. Egotistically, Johannes believes he successfully poetizes himself out of Cordelia's life, having "neither eyes nor ears for her," and takes pleasure in having her "discover this change in her solitude" (EO1 421). Even A sympathizes with Cordelia, having received her distraught letters to Johannes, which suggest the interpretation of Johannes as a cruel and despicable character. When distinguishing between Johannes's perception of the seduction and the reality of the situation, the reader questions whether he is deliberately cruel, or deluded. As Leo Stan and Céline Léon discuss in "*Fertile Contradictions: A Reconsideration of 'The Seducer's Diary'*" and *The Neither/Nor of the Second Sex*, respectively, Cordelia would see few possibilities for her future. Johannes's seduction leaves a permanent social and psychological mark on her— she can either commit societal suicide, or she can become a seducer herself.⁴ As a woman, Cordelia is "fallen" and "tainted" due to her loss of innocence, which create barriers to societal re-assimilation and future marriage, if she even chooses so. This option would seem unlikely, considering how Cordelia has forsaken the ethical. It is inconclusive whether her newfound isolated self is compatible with society or not. Johannes speculates that "she will want to take [him] captive with the same means [he has] employed against her—with the erotic" (EO1 421). In this sense, there is a possibility that she can become a seducer herself; but full recovery from her existential angst and despair over the disappearance of Johannes is unlikely. Johannes believes that if he "were a god, [he] would do for her what Neptune did for a nymph: transform her into a

⁴ Stan, 2016, p. 92-95; Léon, 2008, p.71.

man,” which calls into question the compatibility of irony and convention applied to the female gender (EO1 446).

Although irony frees any individual through isolation and self-reflection, it fails to fully liberate women in the long term, due to the social duty and dependency pertaining to their gender. Through an intervention of modern gender politics, the reader observes how gender plays a prominent role in *The Seducer's Diary*, depicted by the stereotyped male fantasy seen through Johannes's eyes: “the cheerful smile, the roguish glance, the yearning eye... the slender figure, the soft curves, the opulent bosom, the curving hips” (EO1 428). The diary structure of the text allows the reader to see into an overexaggerated point of view, which appears sexist when interpreted in modern gender politics. In his discussion of the biblical origins of Adam and Eve, Johannes remarks in accordance with Eve:

She became flesh and blood, but precisely thereby she falls within the category of nature, which essentially is being-for-other. Not until she is touched by erotic love does she awaken; before that time she is a dream. But in this dream existence two stages can be distinguished: in the first, love dreams about her; in the second, she dreams about love. As being-for-other, woman is characterized by pure virginity. That is, virginity is a being that, insofar as it is being-for-itself, is actually an abstraction and manifests itself only for-other. Feminine innocence has the same characteristic. Therefore, it can be said that woman in this state is invisible (EO1 430).

Johannes's language suggests that woman cannot be brought into actuality without man, inherently creating an asymmetric sexual dynamic in which woman is foremost for-other. The seducer's sexual fantasy calls into discussion the dominance of man in a firmly patriarchal society. In *Woman-Bashing in Kierkegaard's 'In Vino Veritas'*, Robert L. Perkins applies this language to the sexism of Western society, especially the image of woman through entertainment.⁵ Through *The Seducer's Diary*, Kierkegaard

⁵ Perkins, 1997, p. 97.

examines the role of women in society, by amplifying Johannes's stereotypical male narrative in order to criticize ethical standards revolving around the significance of woman. Consequently, irony turns the reader inward to the self, overlooking stereotypes and immediate beliefs. In Cordelia's case, Kierkegaard acknowledges the social disparity between male and female sexes, suggesting that being a male would allow her to become an uninhibited ironist, due to her obligations as a woman. Therefore, the reader questions the possibility of the female ironist, given the restriction on social freedom and privilege of upper class females, in contrast to those of upper class males.

Aside from the deeply ingrained stereotypes in society obstructing the path to becoming a true ironist, the financial dependency of women creates another social barrier. Johannes's wealth and reputation among his peers is a key factor in acquiring the freedom necessary to reject society—this freedom becomes increasingly apparent when compared to Cordelia's familial situation. Through the awareness of irony, Johannes's objective is to free Cordelia from the obligation to blindly follow conventional norms. However, as both of her parents are deceased, Cordelia is dependent on her aunt (EO1 340). Not only is she obligated to follow ethical routines to become a socially respectable woman, such as her course at the royal kitchen, but she also does not have the financial independence nor the societal freedom as an unmarried woman to become an ironist. Her fallen status post-seduction makes it increasingly difficult to recover her social position, for which marriage is necessary to cover her basic needs. In Johannes's case, he “always [had] money at hand in order to be able to set out upon a journey” (EO1 328). In contrast, the woman at the beginning of the novel nervously walks “alone” at night, but has a “servant in tow.” (EO1 317). Literally speaking, Johannes has greater freedom of movement in a way that other women in the narrative do not. In the context of *The Seducer's Diary*, social mobility and exploration are much easier for men, whereas the ethical duty to marry anchors women, a cultural concept that persists in modern society. As a woman, Cordelia cannot become a self-

sufficient ironist or distance herself from ethical constructs, due to an inflexible societal structure restricting her financial and social freedom.

A juxtaposition of Kierkegaard's *Early Polemical Writings* and Johan Ludvig Heiberg's *On the Significance of Philosophy for the Present Age: An Invitation to a Series of Lectures on Philosophy* reveals Kierkegaard's stance on female privilege—in particular, those regarding education. Heiberg was Kierkegaard's contemporary during his time, contributing toward the discussion of Hegelian philosophy. In the invitation to his philosophy lectures, Heiberg “dares to believe that cultured *ladies* will also be able to participate in the lecture's serious investigations, in that they make the group more beautiful by their presence.”⁶ Noting how women have “a sharper and more consistent understanding, a greater dialectical proclivity”—the certain intuition that men lack—Heiberg presents the idea of women attending lectures, despite the fact that they are not permitted to attend the university.⁷ Heiberg's perspective grounds the importance of women's education in a broader historical context. However, Kierkegaard was critical of educating women during the Danish Golden Age, questioning the motives for inviting women to lectures. In his article *Another Defense of Woman's Great Abilities*, Kierkegaard wittily states, “from Eve's hand we shall receive the apple of knowledge... So fly, then, from this ungrateful earth, raise yourselves on the wings of philosophy and look down with contempt on those... [who] prefer to remain behind by the fleshpots” (EPW 5). Kierkegaard appreciates women's artistic abilities—he highly praised Thomasine Gyllemboug's *An Everyday Story*, which was published anonymously, but the identity of the female author remained an open secret. However, he is skeptical of women's academic potential in “dissertations, plays, [and] philosophical works” (EPW 5). *The Seducer's Diary* echoes this sentiment from the beginning of Kierkegaard's authorship. Kierkegaard has reservations regarding the indirect, Socratic education of

⁶ Heiberg, 1883, p. 118.

⁷ Ibid.

women, as well as a direct education. Through Cordelia's firsthand experience with irony in *The Seducer's Diary*, Kierkegaard questions the validity of women's existential education.

To further understand the unsustainability of the female ironist, it is crucial to examine *The Seducer's Diary* in its autobiographical context. Through indirect communication, Kierkegaard intends to repulse his beloved fiancée Regine Olsen into acceptance of their broken engagement; however, he also wishes to win her back by “virtue of the absurd,” a concept central to his work *Fear and Trembling*. Here, Kierkegaard examines the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac, in which Abraham, despite his tumultuous, internal angst, places complete faith in God that Isaac will live. This “leap of faith” intertwines itself with the religious stage of life, one of the three spheres—the aesthetic, ethical, and religious—Kierkegaard provides Olsen following their broken engagement.⁸

Through A and B's perspectives in their respective volumes of *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard invalidates both the aesthetic and ethical stages of life. In his “editor's” note, A believes that by leading others astray, in this instance Cordelia, Johannes goes astray himself—“pursued by despair, he is continually seeking an exit and continually finding an entrance through which he goes back into himself” (EO1 308). Johannes pursues the aesthetic too fervently, restlessly navigating a psychological maze and constantly seeking reflective pleasure. Judge William, Kierkegaard's pseudonym in the second volume of *Either/Or*, also criticizes the aesthetic for cowardliness, in that the aesthete never makes decisions and miserably hovers above actuality. Cordelia writes in a letter to A, describing Johannes: “I threw my arms around him, everything changed and I embraced a cloud” (EO1 309). Johannes manifests the same traits mentioned in

⁸ It should be noted that the ironic and the humorous are the *confinia* between these stages of life; Kierkegaard maps the three stages and their *confinia* in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. While Kierkegaard does not elaborate on humor—the border between the ethical and the religious—in *Either/Or*, it is assumed that one should not adopt it for the long term.

A's and Judge William's critique of the aesthete, in that he hovers above actuality, constantly in reflection. The aesthetic stage of life risks abstraction, and is thus invalidated as it causes the untethered confusion of self. On the other hand, Kierkegaard also invalidates the ethical stage of life. In the ethical defense of marriage, the Judge claims that the aesthetic can flourish within the repetitive structure of ethical marriage. Appealing to the aesthete, the Judge defends the aesthetic validity of marriage, in which the quality of the aesthetic is annulled and preserved in marital love. According to the Judge, the ethical dethrones the aesthetic, because the aesthetic should not dictate a relationship. However, while the Judge derives pleasure from the marriage arrangement, the patriarchal system limits the autonomy and voice of the wife. As Cordelia realized in her critique of the ethical, her pure love with Johannes does not require a social label or a sense of duty.

As stated in Kierkegaard's work *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Crumbs*, "irony is the *confinium* between the aesthetic and the ethical." Irony exists between both stages of life, and its invalidation as a possibility for the heartbroken Olsen has been previously established. Stereotypical gender obstacles and financial dependency in a patriarchal society obstruct the freedom of the female ironist. The remaining option for Olsen is the religious, which Kierkegaard does not invalidate, in accordance with the pseudonymous sermon at the end of *Either/Or*. In the last chapter, Judge William sends A a sermon by his friend, the Jutland pastor, in a letter:

How might a man be able to depict his relationship to God by a more or a less, or by an approximate definition? He then convinced himself that this wisdom was a treacherous friend, who, under the pretext of helping him, involved him in doubt, drew him alarmingly into a perpetual circle of confusion. What before had been obscure to him, but had not troubled him, became now, not any clearer, but alarming to his mind and troubling. Only by an infinite relationship to God could the doubt be calmed, only

by an infinitely free relationship to God could his anxiety be transformed into joy (EO2 354).

In the pastor's *Ultimatum, The Edification Implied in the Thought That as Against God We Are Always in the Wrong*, the pastor claims that regardless of whether a human lives aesthetically or ethically, they are always in the wrong, and God is just. To achieve an infinite relationship with God, a believer must come to this realization, and only then can they attain true joy. Through this jubilation, they transcend the inevitable despair of the aesthetic and ethical. Passionate faith would thus strengthen and protect the love between Kierkegaard and Olsen, without the contractual duties of marriage. By invalidating other stages of life with the exception of the religious, Kierkegaard indirectly communicates to Olsen that a spiritual, platonic marriage will preserve their love.

Although Kierkegaard proves that irony leads to a reflective aesthetic freedom, the irreconciliation of Cordelia's psychological and social position suggests the impossibility in the execution of such a philosophy, due to hegemonic class and gender barriers in Golden Age society. Through a Socratic manner of teaching, Johannes manipulates Cordelia into the self-awareness of irony, the separation from immediacy and the turn towards self-reflection. By becoming overly proud towards Edward and ending the engagement with Johannes, Cordelia becomes an ironist when she acquires a distaste for the ethical. However, after Johannes abandons her, Cordelia's future as an isolated ironist is uncertain and bleak. The inherent barriers in society prevent her from sustainably transcending ethical norms and becoming an ironist or seducer to Johannes's degree. While these insurmountable social constructs do not prevent Cordelia from transgressing against the ethical, they also do not safeguard her from the fallout of violating ethical norms. The female ironist must face this precarious social position, in that she cannot violate the ethical without severe consequences, which are less in force for male ironists. Kierkegaard questions the traditional education of women

at the start of his literary career with his *Another Defense of Woman's Great Abilities* essay, a theme that persists in *The Seducer's Diary*, through his skepticism of women's Socratic education in irony. In the larger context, Kierkegaard invalidates the aesthetic, ethical, and ironic as possible avenues for Regine Olsen after he breaks their engagement. While Kierkegaard does not delve into the religious sphere of life in detail in *Either/Or*, the *Ultimatum* at the end of the second volume suggests that a passionate, religious faith preserves platonic love. Through indirect communication, Kierkegaard draws readers' attention toward issues of gender in contemporary society, proving how irony is delimited by gender differences. As hinted by the optimistic conclusion of *Either/Or*, however, the invalidation of the female ironist opens to further discussion of the intimate connection between faith and love.

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