

Mads Bunch. 2017. *Isak Dinesen Reading Søren Kierkegaard: On Christianity, Seduction, Gender, and Repetition*. Cambridge: Legenda. Xiii + 183 pages. ISBN: 978-1-78188-493-5.

Writing about two of the most internationally recognized, prolific Danish authors is a challenging task under any circumstances, but it becomes exponentially more difficult when both of the authors in question are known for their works' resistance to direct interpretation. Both Karen Blixen (1885-1962) and Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), who feature in Mads Bunch's new book *Isak Dinesen Reading Søren Kierkegaard*, used various narrative strategies—from authorial pseudonyms to irony to linguistic games—to complicate straightforward readings of their narratives. In addition, the gender, ideological, and temporal divides between them—Blixen was born almost thirty years after Kierkegaard's death—carry with them all manner of cultural, social, and geopolitical differences that affect the ways both authors engaged with the world around them. Putting these authors into dialogue with each other would require taking all of these complicating factors into account, which would also result in a much longer book than most readers would be willing to slog through. Instead of trying to give Kierkegaard and Blixen equal space within a fully articulated sociohistorical context, therefore, Bunch opts for a narrower and more manageable focus: Blixen's explicit and implicit engagement with ideas and themes from Kierkegaard's first authorship in her own works.

Given the self-conscious elusiveness of the narratives he is dealing with, Bunch is wisely careful about outlining the parameters of his study: identifying his primary sources, clarifying the reasons for his exclusive use of Blixen's pen name throughout the book, noting the relationship between this book and his own previous work on the subject, and distancing himself from Blixen's often very simplistic views of Kierkegaard. He also stays very close to his main goal, which is “to uncover how Dinesen in her tales interprets, critiques and subverts major ideas, characters and plots from Kierkegaard's aesthetic-pseudonymous authorship (1843-46)” (5). Despite its title, the book is less concerned with Blixen's reading of Kierkegaard's actual writings than with her literary subversions of the social norms his texts seem to support. For readers looking for a reflective treatment of both authors' approaches to the subjects Bunch flags in the subtitle, *On Christianity, Seduction, Gender, and Repetition*, Blixen's reductionist treatment of Kierkegaard's complex authorship, in particular her conflation of Kierkegaard himself with all of his pseudonymous personas, and the book's generally uncritical reproduction of Blixen's biases about Christianity come as something of a disappointment, particularly in light of Kierkegaard's critical relationship with religion. In many ways, Kierkegaard appears in Blixen's work as a caricature of himself; Bunch admits: “One could even say that Dinesen at times is reading

Kierkegaard ... like the Devil reading the Bible” (5). Nevertheless, Bunch does an excellent job of pursuing his stated goal of exploring, à la Harold Bloom, how Blixen deliberately misreads Kierkegaard in “an act of creative correction that is actually and necessarily a misinterpretation” (qtd. in Bunch 5). Bunch shows clearly how Blixen, in the tradition of a Western “history of anxiety and self-saving caricature, of distortion, of perverse, willful revisionism,” extracts certain “Christian-Bourgeois” motifs, characters, and themes from Kierkegaard’s early works with the intent of rewriting, subverting, and refuting them. At the same time, she seems to agree with and even appropriate some aspects of Kierkegaard’s depiction of the aesthetic, to the extent of reclaiming the term “aesthete” as a positive, even heroic designation.

Bunch divides his analysis into five main sections, each with several sub-chapters. In “Part I: Dinesen and Kierkegaard,” he uses Blixen’s correspondence with friends, contemporaries, and family members to document her earliest encounters with Kierkegaard’s works in the 1920s and the gradual evolution of her critical view of Kierkegaard, especially his endorsement of Christian inwardness as the highest expression of individuality. As Bunch notes, she shared this opinion with the Danish literary critic Georg Brandes, whom she admired greatly and whose own deliberate misreading of Kierkegaard has been highly influential on the latter’s international reception. In “Part II: Christianity,” Bunch explores Blixen’s rejection of Kierkegaard’s Christian philosophy, particularly as articulated in his 1843 text *Frygt og bæven* [*Fear and Trembling*] attributed to Johannes de silentio, and *Begrebet Angest* [*The Concept of Anxiety*] from 1844, published under the pseudonym Viligius Haufniensis. In this section, Bunch focuses on Blixen’s early marionette comedy *Sandhedens Hævn* (1926) and her short story “The Pearls” (1942), showing how Blixen’s rejection of a Christian God underlies her endorsement of the aesthetic views put forth in the first part of Kierkegaard’s *Enten—Eller* [*Either/Or*], from 1843.

Bunch explores in greater detail the connections and disconnections between Blixen’s feminism and Kierkegaard’s negatively laden aestheticism in the next two sections. “Part III: Seduction” juxtaposes Blixen’s stories “Carnival” and “Ehrengard” with Kierkegaard’s notorious seducer characters Johannes and Don Juan. In these stories, Bunch argues, Blixen dismisses the notion of seduction as an anachronism in an age of sexual liberation but also offers two models of female seducers as counterparts to Kierkegaard’s characters. “Part IV: Gender” considers Blixen’s engagement with the characters in the sketch “In Vino Veritas” attributed to William Afham [Byhim] from *Stadier på Livets Vej* [*Stages on Life’s Way*], which appeared in 1845 under the pseudonym Hilarius Bogbinder [Bookbinder], and with Judge Wilhelm in the second part of *Either/Or*. In his close readings of Blixen’s texts, Bunch posits Blixen’s substitution of “God with Woman” in an attempt to subvert “nineteenth-century gender roles, where man is seen as primary and woman as the weaker sex, described in Kierkegaard’s terminology as man being

equal to 'Mennesket' (a human being) whereas woman is reduced to 'being-for-other'" (126). In the final section of the book, "Part V: Repetition," Bunch reads Blixen's stories "The Poet" and "Babette's Feast" in opposition to Kierkegaard's 1843 novel *Gjentagelsen* [*Repetition*], attributed to Constantin Constantius, in order to demonstrate how Blixen reorders Kierkegaard's three stages of human existence, with the aesthetic taking precedence over the ethical and the religious.

On the whole, Bunch's book is successful at demonstrating how Blixen adapts, inverts, subjects, and rejects certain tropes and ideas about religion and gender that also appear in many of the pseudonymous texts from Kierkegaard's first authorship, though the textual connections are sometimes rather tenuous. Bunch is to be particularly congratulated for the rich archival material he has gathered here, which will be of use to future scholars. Since the book relies heavily on a few crucial but somewhat dated pieces of Blixen and Kierkegaard scholarship, it is less connected to contemporary scholarly discourse than it would have been if it had engaged with more (and more recent) scholarship in not only Kierkegaard and Blixen studies, but also gender studies, feminist theory, and religious studies. While many of Bunch's insights are valuable in terms of understanding Blixen's works, he stops short of making an argument for how this enhanced understanding of the tension between Kierkegaard's and Blixen's life-views contributes to a deeper understanding of either Danish literary culture or the broader categories of faith and gender. The conclusion gestures in this direction, notably by suggesting that Blixen's subversion of Kierkegaard qualifies her as a "strong poet" worthy of international attention, but needs further development and nuance to be compelling. The inclusion, in the last paragraph of the book, of a table of reductionist dichotomies according to which Kierkegaard's and Blixen's works should be understood is an unfortunate, jarring note on which to end an otherwise thoughtful and thought-provoking text.

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