

KIERKEGAARD'S SOCRATES, THE *CORSAIR* AFFAIR, AND THE MARTYRDOM OF LAUGHTER

ANDREW J. BURGESS, Department of Philosophy, University of New Mexico, USA

BURGESS, A. J.: Kierkegaard's Socrates, the *Corsair* Affair, and the Martyrdom of Laughter
FILOZOFIA 68, 2013, No 1, p. 38

This essay follows Kierkegaard's treatment of the concept of Socratic irony through the course of his whole authorship, starting with his dissertation (1841) on Socratic and Romantic irony. Later, in 1846, Kierkegaard's pseudonym Johannes Climacus mounts a critique of that dissertation in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, sharpening Kierkegaard's earlier definition of irony through the concepts of jest and earnest. The focus of this essay, however, is on Kierkegaard's late period, after 1846, when the satirical Copenhagen journal *The Corsair*, mounted a set of vicious attacks upon Kierkegaard, subjecting him to months of public ridicule. The result was that Kierkegaard came to feel a much closer personal identification than before with the situation at Socrates' trial.

Keywords: Irony – Martyrdom – Jest and earnest – Humor – Rhetoric – Journalism – Mass media

From his dissertation all the way to his last reflections, the thinker to whom Kierkegaard refers most often, and whom he admires most, is Socrates. "Reading about him has made my heart beat as violently as did the young man's heart when he conversed with him," Kierkegaard writes in 1847; "the thought of him has been the inspiration of my youth and has filled my soul; my longing for conversation with him has been entirely different from the longing for conversation with anyone with whom I have ever spoken."¹

Kierkegaard's affinity for Socrates is understandable, since the two are alike in many ways. Both of them, for example, sometimes get labeled as heroes, although each would surely laugh off such praise with an ironic quip. Both, too, leave complex intellectual heritages, so that today it is at least as hard to track down Kierkegaard's own viewpoints among all his papers and his pseudonymous works as it is to do the same with Socrates' among Plato's various dialogues.

That latter point raises particular challenges for the project I am embarking on here, of interpreting Kierkegaard's Socrates in terms of what he calls "the martyrdom of laughter," because there is more than one picture of Socrates in Kierkegaard's works. Accordingly, commentators today commonly distinguish between at least two ways in which Kierkegaard sees Socrates. On the one hand, Kierkegaard's dissertation, *The Concept of*

¹ SKS 10, 247 / CD, 241. Cf. *Symposium* 215de.

Irony, with Continual Reference to Socrates (1841), pictures a Socrates somewhat like the brash young ironist in Plato's dialogue *Protagoras*, who demolishes the sophists he is opposing. Within the works Kierkegaard publishes at the mid-point of his authorship, on the other hand, one finds a less confrontational Socrates, who sounds rather like the man Plato describes in dialogues such as the *Meno*. Very often, therefore, present-day Kierkegaard scholars confine their studies primarily to one or the other of these alternative portraits of Socrates.²

In addition to those two, already well-researched, alternatives, however, I propose to emphasize a third, in which Kierkegaard interprets Socrates as a martyr. This third alternative appears primarily in the latter half of Kierkegaard's authorship, after *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*.

The analysis in this essay follows Kierkegaard's treatment of the concept of Socratic irony through the course of his whole authorship, from his dissertation in 1841, to Climacus' critique of the dissertation in *Postscript* (1846), and into the late period. As the concept of irony develops, the theme of the martyrdom of laughter also emerges, through the so-called "Corsair affair," during the period after the publication of *Postscript* and until Kierkegaard's death in 1855.

The Concept of Irony in *The Concept of Irony*. Not until more than half of Kierkegaard's dissertation has gone by does it provide a formal definition of irony, and even then it defines that concept only as it appears in literary works, rather than in the much broader sense that it had been using earlier. Literary irony, Kierkegaard writes: (1) says the opposite of what it means; (2) leaves the ironist "negatively free" from any responsibility to defend the statement just put forth; (3) is "self-canceling" – that is, the ironical statement somehow indicates (to those who catch the ironist's clues) that it does not mean what it says; and (4) is aristocratic, in that only a select group of people is able to see through the irony.³

Unfortunately Kierkegaard's definition of literary irony in his dissertation has often led readers to imagine that it can simply be applied to his dissertation itself; and it cannot, because the irony Kierkegaard employs in the dissertation departs from that definition in significant ways. On the basis of these four features, for example, many commentators

² Recently two major studies regarding Kierkegaard's relation to Socrates have appeared: K. Brian Soderquist, *The Isolated Self: Truth and Untruth in Søren Kierkegaard's On the Concept of Irony* (Copenhagen: Reitzel, 2006) (Danish Golden Age Studies, vol. 1), on the dissertation; and Jacob Howland, *Kierkegaard and Socrates: A Study in Philosophy and Faith* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), on the literature Kierkegaard wrote under the pseudonym "Johannes Climacus." The most comprehensive recent treatment of Kierkegaard's picture of Socrates appears in the essays within *Socrates and Plato*, Tome I of *Kierkegaard and the Greek World*, eds. Jon Stewart and Katalin Nun (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2010) (*Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources*, vol. 2) (abbreviated *Socrates and Plato*).

³ SKS 1, 286-287 / CI, 247-249.

have concluded that Socrates' crucial claim,⁴ that his wisdom consists solely in the knowledge of his own ignorance, means the opposite of what it says; that is to say, that Socrates is acknowledging that he is wise but that he says this in a "self-canceling" way. Recent scholarship argues plausibly, however, that in the dissertation Kierkegaard interprets Socrates' claim to mean just what it says. On this newer interpretation, Socrates is indeed admitting his ignorance: "In the philosophical sense... he was ignorant. He was ignorant of the ground of all being, the eternal, the divine; that is, he knew that it was, but he did not know what it was."⁵

On the basis of this more recent scholarship, the interpretation of Socratic ignorance in Kierkegaard's dissertation fits the second and fourth features of literary irony, but not the first and third. That is, in making the claim of ignorance Socrates remains negatively free and aristocratic, but the ironic claim itself means just what it says. Socrates is speaking with irony of an unusual kind, which says exactly what it means and thereby does not require any self-canceling to be effective.⁶

Nonetheless, even though Kierkegaard calls Socrates' claim of ignorance ironic, in this special sense, Kierkegaard's interpretation still leaves to irony the features of negative freedom and aristocratic attitude. Socrates still finds himself "negatively free" from his interlocutors as well as from any commitment to what he has said, and in that freedom he feels aristocratically superior to those interlocutors. That negative freedom and the aloofness it fosters drive Socrates into radical isolation from his pupils and from the culture as a whole.⁷ In his unlimited irony, Kierkegaard writes, Socrates "stood ironically above every relationship..." "His connection with the single individual was only momentary, and he himself was suspended high above all this in ironic contentment." For this reason, "no relationship was strong enough to bind him and he continually felt himself free above it, the enjoyment of being sufficient unto himself, to which he abandoned himself—all this suggests something aristocratic."⁸

Accordingly, Kierkegaard's dissertation portrays Socrates as a fully isolated individual. His critique is accurate, but he feels no sympathy or other emotional bond with the Athenian citizens. He simply provokes the old order of Greece to self-destruct and then looks on with an amused smile as it falls apart. It is no wonder then that Kierkegaard's dissertation prefers Aristophanes' image, of Socrates hanging in a basket over the citizens

⁴ Cf. *Apology* 21d.

⁵ *SKS* 1, 217 / *CI*, 171. Cf. the illuminating discussion by David D. Possen, "Protagoras and Republic: Kierkegaard on Socratic Irony," in *Socrates and Plato*, 87-104, esp. 88-94. Possen here demonstrates that, while the distinguished twentieth-century Platonist Gregory Vlastos thinks he is disagreeing with Kierkegaard's dissertation regarding Socratic ignorance, in fact Kierkegaard anticipates Vlastos on this very point. Cf. Vlastos, "Socrates' Disavowal of Knowledge," *Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 35, 2-31, esp. 10.

⁶ Cf. *SKS* 1, 287 / *CI*, 248, where Kierkegaard describes a rare form of irony that sets out "to say as a jest, jestingly, something that is meant as earnest."

⁷ Cf. "Kierkegaard's Nihilistic Socrates," in Soderquist, *The Isolated Self*, 53-84.

⁸ *SKS* 1, 229 / *CI*, 182.

of Athens, to the more mundane portrayals by Xenophon and Plato.⁹

The Balance between Jest and Earnest in Climacus' *Postscript*. Is the Socrates in *The Concept of Irony* really Socrates? If so, how could this picture square with the way Plato portrays Socrates in his *Apology*, a work to which Kierkegaard is supposed to be deeply indebted?¹⁰



Any reader who finds the picture of Socrates in Kierkegaard's dissertation to be one-sided will find at least one other person who agrees wholeheartedly with that objection: Johannes Climacus, the pseudonymous author of Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Against the comic picture of Socrates that Kierkegaard draws in his dissertation, Climacus raises a blunt question, and he then proposes his own answer. The question is: "What, then, is irony, if one wants to call Socrates an ironist and does not, like Magister Kierkegaard, consciously or unconsciously, want to bring out only one side?"¹¹

Climacus' *Postscript* answers the question with a much more balanced image of Socrates' teachings than that in Kierkegaard's dissertation. Unlike *The Concept of Irony*, *Postscript* shows Socrates as empathizing with the Athenian people while he practices irony, and as a result the Socrates in *Postscript* is more approachable and more human than the one in

Kierkegaard's dissertation. Gone is Socrates' "negative freedom" from responsibility for his teachings; now he exists in his own teachings. Gone, too, is the cold, aristocratic side of *The Concept of Irony*'s Socrates, the ironic aloofness; and in its place Climacus' Socrates presents an egalitarian viewpoint. For example, after repeatedly using Socrates as a paradigm for what it means to be a "wise person," Climacus writes that "the difference between the wise person and the simplest person is this little evanescent difference that the simple person knows the essential and the wise person little by little comes to know that he knows it or comes to know that he does not know it, but what they know is the

⁹ SKS 1, 202-203 / CI, 152-153. Cf. Aristophanes, *The Clouds*, Act II, lines 217-225 (CI, 512, note 321).

¹⁰ Cf. Paul Muench, "Apology: Kierkegaard's Socratic Point of View," in *Socrates and Plato*, 7, note 13.

¹¹ SKS 7, 456 / CUP1, 503.

same.”¹² Thus, whereas in Kierkegaard’s dissertation Socrates’ irony exhibits the second and fourth features of literary irony (the ironist’s negative freedom and aristocratic attitude), *Postscript* dispenses with these two features as well as the other two.

Even though the dialectic of Climacus’ Socrates lacks any of the four marks of literary irony listed in *The Concept of Irony*, Climacus thinks he is perfectly justified in speaking of Socrates as an ironist, because he is ascribing to Socrates only *legitimate* irony, which combines the ironical jest with an equal earnestness. As Climacus warns: “the legitimacy of the existing ironist is that he himself, existing, expresses it, that he keeps his life in it and does not dally with the grandness of irony and have his own life in philistinism, because then his irony is illegitimate.”¹³ That is, Climacus insists upon two points: the first, that legitimate irony must be based on truth and must not (like the “philistinism” of unrestrained irony) lash out in all directions without regard to the truth of the allegations; and second, that the ironist has to take ethical responsibility for one’s own life, “existing” in it, that is, combining jest with earnestness and earnestness with jest.

Climacus’ protest against the one-sidedness of the portrait of Socrates in *The Concept of Irony* objects only to the first of these two points. He does not object to Kierkegaard’s presentation of Socrates in *The Concept of Irony* with respect to the first point, the requirement that legitimate irony must be based on fact. He objects only to the one-sidedness of the portrayal of Socrates’ irony in Kierkegaard’s dissertation, because the presentation of Socratic irony there does not make clear that Socrates “himself, existing, expresses it, that he keeps his life in it.”¹⁴

The word “existing” [*existerende*] here is a technical term, which implies a balance of jest and earnest. Earlier *Postscript* insists that the communication style of a “subjectively existing thinker” such as Socrates ought to include an equal mixture of jest and earnestness.¹⁵ Kierkegaard’s dissertation, however, portrays Socrates as merely jesting without being in earnest. A balanced account of Socrates ought to show him as neither merely jesting nor merely earnest, but being both *simultaneously*, because the two aspects are complementary. That is why, Climacus remarks, when Socrates’ pupils are “laughing one moment and crying the next” at the death scene in Plato’s *Phaedo* 115b-118a, they betray that they have not appropriated his teaching.¹⁶ In legitimate irony, jest and earnest are inextricably bound up together in the unity of the comic and the tragic.¹⁷

These two categories (the comic and the tragic) are critical for the notion of the martyrdom of laughter, because Climacus’ analysis of irony’s proper role starts out from the concept of pain. Climacus understands the concept of irony to be related both to the concept of the comic and to that of the tragic, but, of the two, it is more closely related to the

¹² SKS 7, 149 / CUP1, 160. Italics in original.

¹³ SKS 7, 473 / CUP1, 521.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ SKS 7, 70-72 / CUP1, 69-71.

¹⁶ SKS, 6, 388 / SLW, 419. Cf. *Symposium* 223d.

¹⁷ Cf. SKS 6, 339-340 / SLW, 365-366.

comic. Comic and tragic situations are alike in that both involve incongruities (“contradictions”) between the way things are and the way they should be. When the ironist portrays the situation in such a way that the person who is laughed at can see that the incongruity does not really matter, because that person sees a “way out” of the situation, there is no need for the person who was laughed at to feel shame or embarrassment (“pain”). Then the apparently tragic situation becomes merely comical. On the other hand, when the irony cannot simply be laughed off, the situation becomes tragic, and the person laughed at may be driven to despair.¹⁸ What makes Socrates’ irony in Kierkegaard’s dissertation so one-sided is that the dissertation’s Socrates exploits the comic incongruities of the Athenian citizens for his own amusement and fails to provide them with a “way out.”

According to Climacus, therefore, the purpose of legitimate irony is not to provoke laughter that makes anyone feel embarrassment or shame (“pain”). The same is essentially true of related concept of satire, too, since, although legitimate satire can cause temporary embarrassment or shame, its long term goal is to strengthen the individual.¹⁹

Kierkegaard’s Martyrdom of Laughter in the *Corsair* Affair. After writing *Postscript*, Kierkegaard increasingly stresses the personal side of Socrates, that is, how he “exists in” his irony rather than simply being the proponent of a position, and at the same time Kierkegaard brings out respects in which he and Socrates resemble each other. After suffering a set of attacks during 1846, Kierkegaard comes to feel a deeper empathy than he had before with the attacks Socrates had suffered. Indeed, the quotation with which this essay began is a testimony to this development, since Kierkegaard claims there that Socrates is the only person to whom he is able to communicate his key concerns.

The Greek scholar Sophia Scopetea aptly describes this transition in Kierkegaard’s treatment of Socrates with the metaphor Socrates uses in *Apology* 27b about the relationship between flute-playing activities and a flute. After Kierkegaard’s dissertation, and even more after *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, she writes, Kierkegaard’s focus shifts from the flute-playing activities–Plato’s text–to the flutist–Socrates himself.²⁰ Yet perhaps it would be more apt to speak of *flutists* rather than *a flute* in this context, since Kierkegaard joins right in with Socrates’ music-making, and he loves to extemporize on his own, so that often it is hard to pick out just which of the two is carrying the melody line.

Unfortunately, Kierkegaard’s treatment of Socrates after *Postscript* has not received the same attention as his earlier works. Partly this may be because the literary genres of most of the writings after *Postscript* are distinctively religious, even sermonic, and com-

¹⁸ SKS 7, 465-469 / CUP1, 514-516.

¹⁹ SKS 7, 467 / CUP1, 515.

²⁰ Sophia Scopetea, “Becoming the Flute: Socrates and the Reversal of Values in Kierkegaard’s Late Work,” *Kierkegaardiana*, vol. 18, 1996, 28-43, esp. 39-40. Cf. “Den beslutsomme martyr [The Resolute Martyr],” *Kierkegaard og Græcitetten: En Kamp med Ironi* (Copenhagen: Reitzel, 1995), 410-430.

mentators may not expect to find serious interpretations of a philosopher in such contexts. In fact, they might not even notice the references to Socrates, since Kierkegaard regularly omits the name of Socrates in his late works and instead substitutes some variant of the phrase “a simple wise man of antiquity.”

The turning point in Kierkegaard’s treatment of the person of Socrates comes just after the publication of *Postscript* at the very beginning of 1846. In Climacus’ first publication, *Philosophical Fragments* (1844), for example, all the emphasis is on the principle of “the Socratic” rather than on the person of Socrates. For *Fragments* the Socratic teacher is of no importance, after all, because through recollection the student already possesses the teaching and only needs to be reminded of it.²¹

Shortly after the publication of *Postscript*, however, Kierkegaard’s confrontation with the satirical magazine *The Corsair* in 1846 convinces him of the power and inherent viciousness of public opinion. The controversy arises when the young editor (Meir Goldschmidt) of a new satirical magazine, called *The Corsair*, comes to adopt a policy of making sensational, often blatantly false, claims about many of the best-known people in Denmark and, by following this strategy, the magazine soon becomes the most popular publication in the country. After seeing that no one dares criticize this practice (for fear of attracting the magazine’s attention) and hoping thereby to arouse public indignation against *The Corsair*, Kierkegaard publicly asks *The Corsair* to attack him too. When *The Corsair* mounts a vigorous attack on Kierkegaard, however, no one from the cultural or religious establishment comes to his defense, with the result that Kierkegaard becomes deeply suspicious of the cultural and religious leaders of the city.²²

Not surprisingly, Goldschmidt blames everyone but himself for the havoc he creates. In his memoirs he complains: How can I be expected to do good comic writing when I do not know what it is? When he was starting the magazine in 1841, he had asked Kierkegaard for advice and Kierkegaard had encouraged him in the effort to do comic writing but did not spell out explicitly what that is. Later, when Goldschmidt criticizes Kierkegaard for the harshness of his satirical writing, Kierkegaard appeals to a “higher right,” but Goldschmidt claims Kierkegaard does not demonstrate to him what that “higher right” is.

Yet, although Goldschmidt initially insists that he does not see this “higher right,” a time does come that, as Kierkegaard passes him by on the street, saying nothing, there is a certain “loftiness and ideality” in his manner that Goldschmidt cannot forget, even more than thirty years later, when he writes his memoirs. Then, Kierkegaard gives Goldschmidt an “intense, wild glance that drew the curtain, as it were, away from the higher right that I had not been able, rather, was unwilling to see, although I did suspect it. It accused and

²¹ Cf. *SKS* 4, 220 / *PF*, 11-12.

²² Cf. Howard Hong’s introduction to *The Corsair Affair*, in *COR*, vii-xxxviii; Andrew J. Burgess, “A Word-Experiment on the Category of the Comic,” in *The Corsair Affair*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon GA: Mercer University Press, 1990) (International Kierkegaard Commentary, vol. 13), 85-121, esp. 87, 93-94.

depressed me... On my way home I decided that I would give up the *Corsair*.”²³

The effect on Kierkegaard of the *Corsair* affair is no less than its effect on Goldschmidt, perhaps more. By the two criteria from *Postscript*, the irony in Goldschmidt's journal is completely illegitimate, since it is not at all based on fact and it shows no appreciation for the psychological pain it is inflicting on its victims.²⁴ What affects Kierkegaard most strongly is the insidious way in which the attack enters into his private life. *The Corsair*'s caricatures, which exaggerate grotesquely Kierkegaard's crooked back and style of dress, help make him a target of ridicule all over the city, even from complete strangers, whenever he leaves home. Each time he goes out on the street, children follow him, pointing and shouting “Søren! Søren!” or “either/or!” To experience this torment day after day, for the nine months until Goldschmidt leaves *The Corsair*, is devastating.

One unexpected result of the *Corsair* affair is that new parallels between Socrates and Kierkegaard turn up in Kierkegaard's notebooks and publications, parallels both in viewpoint and in style. Kierkegaard comes to see a direct connection between the public practice of irony and the martyrdom Socrates experienced. Repeatedly Kierkegaard refers back to incidents in the Platonic dialogues and other classical sources, and especially to the trial scene depicted in Plato's *Apology*. These references are often colored by an emphasis on Socrates' radical isolation from “the crowd,” so radical in fact that it sometimes sounds as if the references must have been influenced by Aristophanes' play *The Clouds*; but that apparent allusion is deceptive, because the references are prompted by the example of Socrates himself. Socrates turns *toward* the people, not away. It is the Athenian citizens who turn away from Socrates, with derision and outrage, and that is the way it is with Kierkegaard and the citizens of Copenhagen too.

In a draft for *Works of Love* (1847), for example, Kierkegaard writes that it is not “the government's persecution” that is the real danger, but “the crowd” and the press. The press encourages the crowd “to mock and scorn everything they do not understand” and thereby helps transform the town's confused gossip into something it can designate officially as “public opinion.” Then follows the parallel to Socrates: “And this is the danger to which I am exposing myself, this fighting with shadows, as Socrates calls it in his defense when he declares that those who accuse him today are mentioned by name, but those who over the years have accused him are like shadows.”²⁵ That trial scene, in turn, Kierkegaard connects to aspects of his own struggles in the aftermath of the *Corsair* controversy. Moreover, he makes use of both of these contexts within the corpus of his later works, which are mostly religious meditations. As a result, a commentator needs to keep all of these senses in mind when interpreting such passages.

²³ Meir Goldschmidt, *Livs Erindringer og Resultater* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1877), vol. 1, 76, 421-430 / *COR*, 139, 145-150 (abbreviated *Livs Erindringer*).

²⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, where Goldschmidt remarks that his report of a scandalous rumor concerning Kierkegaard “seemed both witty and pertinent and seemed to be true....Was it really so?” After some reflections he continues: “With some malice I took it to be true and on my own responsibility became an instrument for that indefinite floating rumor and got my pleasure out of it.”

²⁵ *Pap.*, VIII 2 B 73 / *WL*, 460-461. Cf. *Apology* 18cde.

Although the temptation for Kierkegaard is to withdraw from the battle, he has to stand his ground, since only by drawing upon himself the full force of *The Corsair's* attack can he possibly succeed in demonstrating to people of good will the viciousness of the tactics the magazine has been using, not only against himself but also against countless other victims. Like Socrates, who refuses to flee Athens, Kierkegaard has to stay at his post and direct most of the enemy fire upon himself. The cost, however, is terrible. In effect, he writes in a later notebook, it is necessary to become a “martyr of laughter.” Like Marshal Ney, one of Napoleon’s generals, Kierkegaard has to give the command for his own execution.²⁶

Kierkegaard’s Socratic Rhetoric as Preparation for Martyrdom. “Socrates, Socrates, Socrates!” Kierkegaard’s pseudonym “Anti-Climacus” exclaims in *Sickness unto Death* (1849). “Yes, we may well call your name three times.... Popular opinion maintains that the world needs a republic, needs a new social order and a new religion – but no one considers that what the world, confused simply by too much knowledge, needs is a Socrates.”²⁷

Why does Kierkegaard go so far afield and choose Socrates for his mentor? Surely there are many more plausible candidates for that role who are closer at hand than Socrates and who could have spoken more directly than he to the specific nineteenth century context.

For example, there is Hegel, along with many other Idealist philosophers and theologians like him, from all of whom Kierkegaard borrowed ideas; and yet Kierkegaard does not call upon Hegel or the others as he does upon Socrates. Instead, *Postscript* argues that, if Socrates and Hegel were brought back from the dead today, Socrates would get a big laugh at Hegel’s grandiose systematic pretensions, since “Socrates must have changed considerably if he would be even remotely impressed if Hegel were to reel off paragraphs and promise that everything would become clear at the end.”²⁸

Or Kierkegaard could have called upon Luther,²⁹ or any of the other Christian theologians of the past, whose views more closely approximate his than do those of Socrates. For example, Christianity commands that one should love the “un-lovable object,” the neighbor, but Socrates “did not know that the neighbor existed and that one should love

²⁶ SKS 21, 279, NB10:42 / JP 6, 6348 / COR, 236. In 1815 Marshal Ney, one of Napoleon’s generals, was condemned to death for treason, and the general gave the firing squad the order to fire upon himself. Cf. SKS K21, 260 / CA, 305, note 474.

²⁷ SKS 11, 205 / SUD, 92. One reason Kierkegaard prefers Socrates to Plato may be that Plato is not radical enough in his irony and thereby retains “too much knowledge.” Cf. SKS 1, 171-177 / CI, 119-126.

²⁸ SKS 7, 40 / CUP1, 34.

²⁹ Kierkegaard frequently criticizes Luther, not so much for having the wrong principles as for compromising those principles in order to accommodate the reformation to the prevailing political and ecclesiastical context.

him.”³⁰ Nonetheless Kierkegaard prefers the philosophy of Socrates to the rationalizations of the theologians. Indeed, after exclaiming “O Socrates, you were and are, after all, the only philosopher in the realm of the purely human,” Kierkegaard goes on to call all these “so-called Christian philosophers” “muddleheads” [*forvirrede Hoveder*].³¹

Although this claim, that Socrates is for Kierkegaard “the *only* philosopher in the realm of the purely human,”³² is surely better understood as the extravagant outburst of a lover rather than the sober assessment of a critic or an historian, it does contain a kernel of truth. There is a Socratic thrust in Kierkegaard’s philosophy that almost inevitably implies the concept of martyrdom. Such martyrdom would not have to be a public execution, as it was for Socrates, but it would likely involve public derision and rejection, that is, a martyrdom of laughter. Moreover, for the purpose of demonstrating this point, it is unnecessary to contrast Kierkegaard’s Socratic approach with any of the modern “muddleheads,” since that can be done more effectively by drawing upon Aristotle, a giant in the ancient world.

Although it is not widely recognized, Kierkegaard starts writing the manuscript of what later became *Postscript*, with the goal of creating a Christian rhetoric “*admodum* Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*.”³³ While taking notes on Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, however, Kierkegaard notices that Aristotle deals very little with one of the three key aspects of rhetoric: the listener,³⁴ and Kierkegaard sets out to correct that lack of emphasis by writing his *Postscript* very differently from Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*. In fact, Climacus devotes about nine-tenths of *Postscript* to what he calls the “subjective issue,” an expression which, for Climacus, sums up all those issues someone needs to face in order to become an effective listener (or reader) of a religious speech.

The reason Climacus feels he must spend so many pages on this topic is that he believes that such listeners (or readers) are unlikely to be aware of the staggering, perhaps insuperable, challenges they face if they are to take a religious speech seriously. In all likelihood they would, he thinks, face derision, emotional and physical isolation, danger, and possibly even death – in a word: “martyrdom.” Therefore the curriculum Climacus assigns such listeners is rigorous in the extreme: complete renunciation, unlimited sufferings, and total guilt.³⁵ Moreover, *Postscript* is merely the introductory textbook. For the advanced course in preparation for martyrdom, the assignments get so tough that Kierkegaard finds that Johannes Climacus, as a non-Christian, lacks the experiential qualifications to be the instructor,³⁶ and Kierkegaard admits that he himself is unqualified too, so

³⁰ SKS 9, 367 / WL, 373. Cf. *Symposium* 210bc. Italics and bold in original. Cf. SKS 12, 22-23 / PC, 12.

³¹ SKS 26, 31, NB31:42 / JP 4, 4299.

³² Ibid. Italics added.

³³ SKS 18, 236, JJ:305 / KJN 2, 217 / JP 1, 627.

³⁴ SKS 27, 340, 326.3 / JP 5, 5782. Cf. SKS K27, 730-731; Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, book 3, 1358a 36-1358b 29.

³⁵ SKS 7, 352-504 / CUP1, 387-555.

³⁶ SKS 7, 454 / CUP1, 501.

that he has to create another, still more rigorous, pseudonym, “Anti-Climacus,” to write *Practice in Christianity* (1851), which contains the lesson plans.

What makes martyrdom likely (whether a martyrdom of laughter or physical martyrdom), Kierkegaard thinks, is that people resent the presence of anyone who sets extremely high ethical standards. Like Socrates, Climacus sets the ethical goal (the “ethical infinite requirement”³⁷) at nothing less than perfection, although of course neither Socrates nor Kierkegaard expects ever to reach it. Unlike Socrates and Kierkegaard, however, Aristotle’s ethical expectations include long life and sufficient physical means to thrive.³⁸ Fittingly, then, Aristotle leaves the city when facing persecution. Socrates and Kierkegaard do not, willing to accept martyrdom if it comes.³⁹

By arguing that his desire for money and status ought to excuse his behavior in the *Corsair* affair,⁴⁰ Goldschmidt’s memoirs demonstrate that his goals are far lower than those of either Aristotle or Socrates. Goldschmidt is so caught up with his plans for wealth and fame that he cannot even take the trouble to check whether or not the trash he is printing has any basis in fact. Perhaps he has caught a fleeting glimpse of Kierkegaard’s vision of the “higher right,” as he claims, but that is by no means enough. At the very least he ought to make sure that he is telling the truth. As Kierkegaard learns from Socrates, truly comic writing “requires a rational basis, and if that is lacking the laughter is the ludicrous.”⁴¹

The proposed readership for *Postscript*’s rhetoric includes not only those who listen to religious speeches but also those who deliver them, and the curriculum for such speakers would have to be at least as demanding as the one for their listeners. Faced with a possible martyrdom of laughter, Kierkegaard acknowledges that he himself dreads to ascend a pulpit, and he wonders whether there is anyone else around Copenhagen who, if they realized what doing so entailed, would not feel the same way.⁴² The one person Kierkegaard recalls who is sure to combine the requisite “personal character and dialectical power” is Socrates.⁴³

Only a Half Hour with Socrates. When Kierkegaard dies, he leaves unpublished on his desk the last of his ten-part attack on the Danish establishment, and in that manuscript is an article called “My Task,” with a passage directed to Socrates, the martyr of laughter: “You, antiquity’s noble, simple soul, you, the only *human being* I admiringly acknowledge as a thinker: there is only a little preserved about you, of all people the only true

³⁷ *SKS* 7, 455 / *CUP1*, 502.

³⁸ Cf. *Nicomachian Ethics*, books eight and nine.

³⁹ Unlike Kierkegaard, however, Climacus himself would not follow Socrates’ example, since he is a “humorist” – that is, a person who sees what ought to be done and empathizes with those who do it, but who still remains merely a sympathetic observer. Cf. *SKS* 7, 458 and 454 / *CUP1*, 505 and 501.

⁴⁰ Cf. *Livs Erindringer*, vol. 1, 426 / *COR*, 148.

⁴¹ *SKS* 8, 232 / *UDVS*, 133.

⁴² *SKS* 24, 341-342, NB24:42 / *JP* 3, 3520.

⁴³ *SKS* 25, 106-107, NB31:141 / *JP* 3, 3535. Cf. *SKS* 13, 39 / *FSE*, 9.

martyr of intellectuality, just as great *qua* character as *qua* thinker; but how exceedingly much this little is! Even though over the centuries there have lived in Christendom a few isolated thinkers – how I long to speak with you for only a half hour, far away from those battalions of thinkers that “Christendom” places in the field under the name of Christian thinkers!”⁴⁴

The statement is a remarkable testimony to the impact Socrates has upon Kierkegaard’s thought and life. By itself, however, it still leaves two questions unanswered. First, why is it so important for Kierkegaard to speak with Socrates personally rather than just to get a secondhand report about his teaching? Second, what adequate message could Socrates deliver to Kierkegaard in such a short conversation?

One answer suffices for both questions. As Kierkegaard understands it, Socrates is the supreme paradigm for what a true martyr would have to be. “Impoverished, ridiculed scorned, accused, condemned, he became the noble, simple, wise man of old,” Kierkegaard writes.⁴⁵ Yet could any other human being than Socrates endure such constant striving toward the infinitely higher standard? Isolated by ridicule from without and by doubts from within, year after year, Kierkegaard does not desire martyrdom, but he longs for some reassurance that the Socratic task he is undertaking is humanly possible. One visit, even one half hour, with the historical Socrates would demonstrate to him that such a life may be open to others too.

Socrates’ role is thus similar to that of Job as Kierkegaard describes him in an 1843 up building discourse: Job is “a teacher of humankind who had no teaching to hand over to others but left humankind only himself as a prototype, his life a guide for everyone, his name a security for many, his work an encouragement for those who are being tried.”⁴⁶ What Job can be for every person facing trials, Socrates can be for those who face the daunting prospect of becoming the martyr that he was.

Only a half hour. Such a short time! Yet if Kierkegaard could conceivably spend the time with that same Socrates who long ago kept tormenting Athenian citizens with provoking questions, that half hour would be enough.

Andrew J. Burgess
Department of Philosophy
MSC 03 2140
1 University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, NM 87131-0001
USA
e-mail: andrewburgess7@gmail.com

⁴⁴ *SKS* 13, 405 / *M*, 341.

⁴⁵ *SKS* 9, 233 / *WL*, 232.

⁴⁶ *SKS* 5, 115 / *EUD*, 109.