

When Grammar Becomes Interpretation

Four tests from a criticism of the Swenson and Hong translations

Series: A Corrigible Kierkegaard, Essay 3 **Status:** public scholarly working paper; open for correction **Version:** 0.4, 20 August 2026

Abstract

This essay asks how the present translation of *Kjerlighedens Gjerninger* would fare under four criticisms made by M. G. Piety in comparing the Swenson and Hong translations of *Works of Love*. The tests concern a lexical distinction (*Christenhed/Christendom*), the generic force of a Danish definite form (*Stavningen*), the syntactic scope of *er det*, and the inclusive noun *Mennesker*. The present English text substantially passes all four tests: it distinguishes Christendom from Christianity, treats spelling as a general process, construes unconditional certainty of being loved as a failure to love, and renders *Mennesker* inclusively as “people.” That finding should be stated without triumph. It covers four bounded passages, not the work as a whole; it does not settle stylistic questions; and it has not been reviewed by a Danish specialist. Two of the present sentences could in fact be improved by closer attention to the Danish. The larger lesson is that apparently small grammatical choices can organise Kierkegaard’s argument.

Keywords: Kierkegaard; Works of Love; Danish grammar; Christendom; translation criticism; Swenson; Hong

1. Criticism as a set of tests

M. G. Piety’s essay “Some Praise for the Hong as Translators” is valuable to this project for more than the verdicts it reaches.^[1] Its method resists allegiance to a preferred translator. Piety continues to prefer the style of the Swenson, Swenson-Lowrie, and Hannay translations, yet acknowledges places where the Hong is more accurate. Her governing question is local: what does the Danish say here, and what has this English sentence made of it?

That is an exacting but fair way to approach the present translation. A project cannot answer criticism merely by pointing to a charter, a large apparatus, or a laborious workflow. Each may assist correction; none can make a mistaken noun, a misunderstood article, or a misplaced syntactic predicate correct.

The four examples discussed below are therefore treated as tests rather than endorsements. For each one the procedure is modest:

1. identify the Danish feature named in the criticism;
2. examine what the current project text does with it;
3. ask whether the English preserves the argumentative distinction;
4. record any remaining loss or stylistic difficulty.

The controlling Danish is *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter* 9 (SKS 9).^[2] Quotations from the project translation refer to its current assembled working texts. “Current” matters: these remain revisable documents rather than a fixed edition.

2. Christenhed and Christendom: two words, two claims

At SKS 9, 53 Kierkegaard writes:

Det kunde rigtignok synes, at da Christenheden nu saa længe har bestaaet, maa den vel have gennemtrængt alle Forhold og - os Alle. Men dette er et Sandsebedrag. Og fordi Christendommen har bestaaet saa længe, dermed er jo dog vel ikke sagt, at det er os, der har levet saa længe eller saa længe været Christne.

Piety's objection to the Swenson rendering is precise: translating both *Christenheden* and *Christendommen* as "Christianity" suppresses a marked variation in Kierkegaard's sentence. The older Hong version preserves it as "Christendom" and "Christianity." Whatever larger account one gives of visible Christian society, institutional culture, and genuine Christian existence, an English translation should not erase the lexical event before interpretation begins.

The present Chapter 3 reads:

It may seem that since Christendom has existed so long, it must have penetrated every relation and all of us. But this is a deception of the senses. Christianity's long existence does not mean that we have lived so long, or have been Christians so long.

On Piety's test, this succeeds. "Christendom" names *Christenheden* and "Christianity" names *Christendommen*. The English reader can therefore perceive the movement from a historically extended Christian social world to a claim about Christianity's duration and then to Kierkegaard's refusal of an easy inference about the individuals living within it.

The distinction should not be made to carry more than the passage can support. A translator is not entitled to impose a complete visible-church/invisible-church theory merely because two Danish nouns appear. Nor need each member of the pair have exactly one English equivalent in every context. What is required here is smaller: the deliberate difference must remain available to interpretation. The project text meets that requirement.

There is also a stylistic point. "A deception of the senses" is close to *et Sandsebedrag* but less idiomatic than "an illusion." The closer phrase helps retain Kierkegaard's later repetition of the road-sign image and his concern with appearances; the smoother alternative makes the sentence easier. Neither choice alters the central lexical distinction. This is a case where accuracy and style contain more than one defensible answer after the primary error has been avoided.

3. Stavningen: a definite form used generically

At SKS 9, 136 Kierkegaard compares spiritual resolution with a child's learning to read. The great moment of decision feels fluent. Daily obedience returns the person to the slow work of spelling:

ak, det er tvertimod som ved Stavningen, der river Ordene fra hinanden og i Stykker, saaledes er det jo i de lange, lange Timer, naar man ikke kan komme til Meningen og forgjeves venter paa Sammenhængen.

Piety argues that the Swenson phrase "the spelling which tears the words apart into letters" may suggest a particular kind or method of spelling. The Danish enclitic definite article in *Stavningen* need not have that effect. In this context Kierkegaard is speaking of spelling generically: spelling breaks the fluent whole into its small components.

The present Chapter 5 reads:

They resemble spelling, which tears words apart into pieces. So it is through the long, long hours when we cannot reach the meaning and wait in vain for coherence.

This passes the grammatical test. Bare English "spelling" is generic and does not posit a special form of the activity. It also preserves the contrast between apparent fluency at the moment of promise and the fragmentation experienced in ordinary time.

The sentence can nevertheless be improved. *River Ordene fra hinanden og i Stykker* contains two linked effects: spelling pulls the words apart from one another and breaks them into pieces. "Tears words apart into pieces" compresses those motions and sounds slightly unnatural. A closer readable version would be:

It is instead like spelling, which pulls the words apart from one another and breaks them into pieces; so it is in the long, long hours when one cannot reach the meaning and waits in vain for coherence.

The proposed revision is not required to correct Piety's specific article objection; the present use of "spelling" already does that. It would simply allow more of the Danish image and parallel syntax to remain audible.

4. Er det: where the predicate falls

The most consequential of Piety's four cases occurs at SKS 9, 157. Kierkegaard has been considering Christ's three questions to Peter in John 21. The Danish reads:

thi dette er just Kjerlighedens Gaade, at der ingen høiere Vished er end den Elskedes fornyede Forsikkring; menneskeligt forstaaet er det, ubetinget at være vis paa at være elsket, ikke at elske, da det er at staae over Forholdet mellem Vennen og Vennen.

The Swenson version places the elements so that "humanly understood" appears to define unconditional certainty of being loved, while "not of loving" becomes difficult to attach. Piety's reading takes *er det* with the infinitive construction that follows: humanly understood, to be unconditionally certain of being loved is not to love. The final clause gives the reason: such certainty places a person above the mutual relation of friend to friend.

The current Chapter 7 reads:

This is love's riddle: no certainty is higher than the beloved's renewed assurance. Humanly speaking, to stand unconditionally certain of being loved is not to love, for it places one above the equal relation of friend to friend.

The essential syntax is right. "Is not to love" predicates a failure of love of the condition "to be unconditionally certain of being loved." The passage consequently retains its paradox. Human love does not possess an impersonal, elevated certainty. It seeks and receives the renewed assurance of the beloved.

The surrounding paragraph also supports Piety's interpretive caution. Kierkegaard is not simply contrasting erotic love with friendship. Christ's human need is directed towards one particular person, Peter. The repeated "Do you love me?" is treated as a human request for assurance within a relation whose divine asymmetry makes that request almost unbearable to contemplate. The present translation keeps this movement, including "more than these," Peter's grief, and the repeated "yes."

Yet the English sentence is not ideal. "To stand unconditionally certain" is stiff, and "equal" is an explanatory addition rather than a lexical equivalent present at that point in the Danish. Equality is supported by the next sentence's *lige Forhold*, but importing it here slightly anticipates Kierkegaard. A more restrained version would be:

Humanly understood, to be unconditionally certain of being loved is not to love, since that is to stand above the relation between friend and friend.

This alternative is close without becoming obscure. It also preserves the sequence by allowing Kierkegaard himself to name the relation as equal in the following sentence. The project should consider adopting it.

5. Mennesker: people, not men

The fourth case begins in a heading: *Vor Pligt at elske de Mennesker, vi see* (SKS 9, 155). Piety objects to the Swenson title "Our Duty to Love the Men We See." *Mennesker* means human beings or people; rendering it as "men" can narrow the reference in modern English and may falsely suggest a gender restriction in Kierkegaard's claim.

The present Chapter 7 is titled:

Our Duty to Love the People We See

This is accurate and idiomatic. “Human Beings” would be lexically explicit but heavier as a title. “People” has the advantage of pointing towards actual persons encountered in ordinary life, which is the discourse’s subject. The chapter’s first paragraph consistently uses “human being,” “human nature,” “humanity,” and “person” where the syntax requires singular or conceptual forms. There is no reason to introduce a masculine collective.

This example also shows why historical translation conventions require re-examination. “Men” may once have been defended as generic English. Its present reception is not reliably generic, and the Danish offers no necessity for the ambiguity. Updating the noun is therefore not an ideological embellishment to the source. It prevents an avoidable English narrowing.

6. What the four tests show-and what they do not

The results can be stated compactly:

Danish feature	Risk identified by Piety	Present project text	Assessment
<i>Christenhed / Christendom</i>	Erasing a lexical distinction	“Christendom / Christianity”	Distinction preserved
<i>Stavningen</i>	Making generic spelling sound like a special kind	“spelling”	Generic force preserved; image could be fuller
<i>er det ... ikke at elske</i>	Misattaching the predicate	“to be ... certain ... is not to love”	Scope preserved; wording could be less stiff
<i>Mennesker</i>	Narrowing human beings to men	“people”	Inclusive sense preserved

A critic applying these four tests would, we think, have reason to judge the current text favourably on the specified points. That is the most that follows. Four successful decisions do not establish that every source unit is complete, that every recurring term is sound, or that the prose has found the right balance between Kierkegaard’s difficulty and needless translator-made difficulty.

Piety’s own essay gives reason to maintain that distinction. She can praise the Hongs for accuracy in particular passages while retaining stylistic reservations about their work more broadly. The present translation should be judged in the same way. A scholar might agree with all four decisions above and still find its English over-explanatory, uneven, too modern, or insufficiently attentive to Kierkegaard’s changing voices. Those would be proper matters for further evidence and argument.

Nor do these examples prove that the project’s procedures caused the correct results. A translator may arrive at a sound sentence without a formal apparatus, or at a poor one despite it. The apparatus matters when it allows the distinction, article, predicate, and noun to be found, discussed, and revised.

7. A fifth test supplied by the project’s own error

The purpose of applying criticism is not to display only passages that survive it. The project’s treatment of *Elskov* supplies a counter-example. Its translation charter initially gave “erotic love” as a working default. A later corpus and lexical review found that this default risked making the category narrower and more sexualised than Kierkegaard’s usage warrants. *Elskov* often denotes spontaneous, preferential, pair-bond love, while the adjective *erotisk* is not used in the audited First Series corpus.^[3]

The resulting Essay 4 recommends suspending the blanket default and choosing among “preferential love,” “romantic love,” “the love of lovers,” “love between lovers,” and, where context actually supports it, “erotic love.” This is not yet a completed revision of every occurrence. It is a case in which the project’s own generalisation failed a test similar to Piety’s: the English word threatened to decide an interpretation before the local Danish and argument had been heard.

That self-correction prevents the present four favourable findings from becoming self-congratulation. The same translation can be sound in one distinction and mistaken in another.

8. A possible scholarly response

How, then, might the author of the critique view this translation? Any answer must remain hypothetical. Piety has not reviewed it, and the project should not place an endorsement in her mouth.

On the evidence examined here, the current text avoids the four concrete errors she identified. That finding is narrower than a prediction about her response. The preservation of *Christenhed/Christendom*, the syntactic sense of the Christ-Peter passage, and the inclusive rendering of *Mennesker* are points a reader applying her stated criteria could recognise. The same criteria could expose the stiffness of “to stand unconditionally certain,” the compression of the spelling image, and other places where close control becomes awkward prose. Her refusal of a style-versus-accuracy dichotomy asks the project to attend to both.

Such a mixed assessment would be useful rather than hostile. The appropriate response would not be “our method has been vindicated,” but “these decisions appear sound; these two can be improved; please test the rest.”

Limitations and invitation to correction

This paper has not been reviewed by a Danish specialist. It relies on the cited SKS text, the project’s source-aligned working files, and published criticism. It does not attempt a full history of *Christenhed* and *Christendom* in Kierkegaard’s authorship, a complete account of Danish generic definiteness, or a comprehensive syntactic analysis of cleft and extraposition constructions in nineteenth-century Danish.

Corrections are invited at the level of a definite claim. A response may identify the SKS location, quote the disputed wording, explain the grammatical or contextual evidence, and propose a better account. Public criticism elsewhere can be linked without any implication that its author has joined or endorsed this project.

Conclusion

Grammar becomes interpretation when an English noun collapses a distinction, an article creates a false subclass, a predicate attaches to the wrong phrase, or a generic human noun becomes masculine. Piety’s examples are small enough to inspect and large enough to matter.

The current project text substantially passes her four tests. It should say so modestly. It should also revise the two places where the English can be closer and clearer, and it should expect other readers to find tests not yet imagined. A corrigible translation earns the name only by making that next objection possible.

Contribution and AI-use statement

The project editor and series instigator prompted this inquiry by asking how the present translation would be viewed under published criticism of earlier translators. The editor established the project’s methodological direction, required a modest tone, and commissioned the series as a public object of correction. OpenAI Codex assisted with source alignment, local textual comparison, research discovery, bibliographic checking, analysis, and drafting. Codex is not an author. Any published human signatory must review, approve, and accept responsibility for the claims. Earlier English translations are treated as critical comparators; Kierkegaard’s Danish is the governing source.

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Notes

- [1] M. G. Piety, “Some Praise for the Hongs as Translators,” *Piety on Kierkegaard*, 12 May 2026, <https://pietyonkierkegaard.com/2026/05/12/some-praise-for-the-hongs-as-translators/>.
- [2] Søren Kierkegaard, *Kjerlighedens Gjerninger*, SKS 9 (Copenhagen: Gads Forlag, 2004), [volume information](#).
- [3] “What Kind of Love Is *Elskov*?”, especially sections 4-7. The local corpus finding is bounded to the seven completed First Series sections included in that audit.

Correction history

- **0.4 - 20 August 2026:** refreshed the Essay 4 cross-reference after the final reception-language review.
- **0.3 - 20 August 2026:** replaced a prediction about a named critic’s response with a narrower, evidence-based hypothetical assessment.
- **0.2 - 20 August 2026:** updated the active Essay 4 cross-reference.
- **0.1 - 19 August 2026:** first complete public-working-paper draft.