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# Kierkegaard and the Roman World

*Edited by*  
JON STEWART

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# Nepos:

## Traces of Kierkegaard's Use of an Edifying Roman Biographer

Jon Stewart

Cornelius Nepos ranks as one of Rome's lesser historians, well behind familiar giants such as Livy or Tacitus. His surviving works are not extensive, and they are of little actual historical value. His work has a moralistic or eulogizing tone, presenting celebrated figures primarily from Greek and Roman history and holding them forth as moral exemplars for others to follow. The intent is that their virtues and vices should serve for the edification of the reader.

It was natural that Kierkegaard, as a lover of Latin literature, would take some interest in Nepos. There are references to the Roman historian in a couple of places in the early authorship. It is possible that Kierkegaard was inspired by the moralistic treatment of some of the generals and orators whom Nepos discusses. Like Nepos, Kierkegaard also likes to present specific characters, such as Johannes Climacus, Johannes the seducer, the young man in *Repetition*, or Judge William as examples of specific positions or world-views. These figures are painted in vivid colors so that the reader can examine and evaluate them with great scrutiny. Given this similarity, it is possible that Kierkegaard's methodology in this regard was in part inspired by Nepos, or minimally that he found in him a kindred spirit.

### *I. The Life and Work of Nepos*

Little is known about the life of Cornelius Nepos.<sup>1</sup> He was born in Cisalpine Gaul, today's northern Italy, sometime around 99 BC. He later moved to Rome, where he soon entered the capital's literary circles. He was on friendly terms with a number

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<sup>1</sup> For the life of Nepos, see the introduction in *Cornelius Nepos*, with an English translation by John C. Rolfe, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, London: William Heinemann 1984, pp. vii–xiii; Joseph Geiger, *Cornelius Nepos and Ancient Political Biography*, Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag Wiesbaden 1985, pp. 67–78; Arnaldo Momigliano, *The Development of Greek Biography*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press 1971, pp. 97–9; Edna Jenkinson, “Nepos—An Introduction to Latin Biography,” in *Latin Biography*, ed. by T.A. Dorey, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1967, pp. 1–15; Friedrich Leo, “Cornelius Nepos” in his *Die griechisch-römische Biographie nach ihrer litterarischen Form*, Leipzig: B.G. Teubner 1901, pp. 193–218.

of well-known Romans such as Cicero (with whom he corresponded), Atticus (whose biography he writes), and the poet Catullus (who dedicated a book to him). In addition to his historical writings, Nepos is also said to have been a publisher. He died sometime around 24 BC, although the exact date is uncertain. Pliny the Elder mentions merely that he died under the reign of Augustus.<sup>2</sup>

Although Nepos wrote a vast number of works, only a small part survives. The Younger Pliny mentions that Nepos wrote a volume of love poems.<sup>3</sup> In the aforementioned dedication, Catullus refers to a work, known from other sources as *Chronica*, which was a history of the world from the earliest times in three books: “To whom should I present this / little book so carefully polished / but to you, Cornelius, who have always / been so tolerant of my verses, / you who of us all has dared / to take the whole of human history / as his field / —three doctoral and weighty volumes!”<sup>4</sup> The writer Aulus Gellius quotes from a lost work called *Exempla*, which was apparently a series of anecdotes intended for rhetorical use.<sup>5</sup> In addition to his short extant account of Cato, Nepos himself mentions a more detailed biography, which is now lost.<sup>6</sup> Gellius also refers to a lost *Life of Cicero*.<sup>7</sup> Finally, the Elder Pliny implies that Nepos authored a work on geography.<sup>8</sup>

The sole work by Nepos which survives, albeit only in part, is his *De Viris Illustribus* or *On Illustrious Men*, which is thought to have originally contained sixteen books. This work describes the lives of famous Roman and foreign kings, historians, generals, poets and orators. Given the fact that the work appeared before the death of Atticus in 32 BC, scholars conjecture that it was probably published around 34 BC. Of this work only two sections survive; the first is the book *De Excellentibus*

<sup>2</sup> Pliny, *Natural History*, Book IX, 137 and X, 60.

<sup>3</sup> Pliny, *Epistles*, Book V, 3, 6.

<sup>4</sup> Catullus, *Carmina*, I: “*Cui dono lepidum nouum libellum / Arido modo pumice expoliturum? / Corneli, tibi; namque tu solebas / Meas esse aliquid putare nugas, / Iam tum cum ausus es unus Italorum / Omne aeuum tribus explicare chartis, / Doctis, Iuppiter, et laboriosis!*” (English translation quoted from *The Poems of Catullus*, trans. by Peter Whigham, Harmondsworth: Penguin 1966, p. 49.) For an account of the *Chronica*, see Geiger, *Cornelius Nepos and Ancient Political Biography*, pp. 68–73.

<sup>5</sup> Aulus Gellius, *Attic Nights*, Book VI, 18. 11: “Furthermore Cornelius Nepos, in the fifth book of his *Examples*, has recorded also that many of the senators recommended that those who refused to return should be sent to Hannibal under guard, but that the motion was defeated by a majority of dissentients. He adds that, in spite of this, those who had not returned to Hannibal were so infamous and hated that they became tired of life and committed suicide.” (English translation quoted from *The Attic Nights of Aulus Gellius*, vols. 1–3, trans. by John C. Rolfe, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, London: William Heinemann 1967–70, vol. 2, p. 77.) For an account of the *Exempla*, see Geiger, *Cornelius Nepos and Ancient Political Biography*, pp. 73–6.

<sup>6</sup> Nepos, Book XXIV, 3: “Concerning this man’s life and character I have given fuller details in the separate book which I have devoted to his biography at the urgent request of Titus Pomponius Atticus.” (English translation quoted from *Cornelius Nepos*, with an English translation by John C. Rolfe, p. 287.)

<sup>7</sup> Aulus Gellius, *Attic Nights*, XV, 28, 2.

<sup>8</sup> Pliny, *Natural History*, Book V, 4. For this, see Geiger, *Cornelius Nepos and Ancient Political Biography*, pp. 76–7.

*Ducibus Exterarum Gentium* or *On Excellent Leaders of Foreign Peoples*, which survives *in toto*. This text contains accounts of the careers of Greek generals such as Miltiades, Cimon, and Epaminondas as well as other foreign generals such as the Persian, Datames, and the Carthaginians, Hamilcar and Hannibal. The second text is a part of a book called *De Historicis Latinis*, of which two brief biographies of the Romans, Marcus Porcius Cato and Titus Pomponius Atticus, survive.

Nepos' favored genre is the biography. Indeed, he is hailed as the first author of biography in history. As one scholar puts it, "Cornelius Nepos is the originator of political biography as a literary form and the earliest writer of any sort of biography in Greek or Latin from whom whole Lives survive."<sup>9</sup> Nepos tells of the successes and failures of great leaders, highlighting the conditions that contributed to their greatness. He is not a scholarly writer, but rather his goal is to appeal to a general public and to edify the reader by means of examples of well-known historical figures. He belongs to a tradition of authors including Plutarch, who compare the lives of famous Romans with Greek and foreign counterparts. Another scholar explains Nepos' importance in contrast to his forerunners Varro and Atticus:

With Nepos, indeed, biography acquired a new dimension. It became the means by which Greek and Roman men and achievements could be compared. Valerius Maximus and Plutarch are unthinkable without Cornelius Nepos; and Cornelius Nepos must also have helped to familiarize the Romans with the Hellenistic distinction between history and biography.<sup>10</sup>

While this positive view does have its detractors,<sup>11</sup> there can be no doubt that Nepos, for all his shortcomings as a historian, played an important role in the development of the biography as a genre.

Stylistically Nepos is not known as a great writer.<sup>12</sup> This judgement may, however, be somewhat harsh given the high standard set by contemporary authors with whom he is inevitably compared. He uses a limited vocabulary, and his sentences are relatively short—features that have made him well suited for elementary Latin instruction in later ages. He does now and then depart from this simple style, but these occasional rhetorical flairs have been often criticized. His sentences are said to lack balance, and he is purportedly overly fond of alliteration.

Nor is he known as a great historian. His accounts cannot be trusted for historical accuracy. As one scholar puts it, "All the *Lives* afford a happy hunting-ground for those in quest of historical errors."<sup>13</sup> There are confusions of persons, mistaken dates and distances, particularly in Nepos' treatment of the Greek figures. Understandably enough, his accounts of Roman and Carthaginian matters are more accurate. In

<sup>9</sup> Geiger, *Cornelius Nepos and Ancient Political Biography*, p. 66.

<sup>10</sup> Arnaldo Momigliano, *The Development of Greek Biography*, pp. 98–9.

<sup>11</sup> B. Baldwin, "Biography at Rome," in *Studies in Latin Literature and Roman History I*, ed. by Carl Deroux, Brussels: Latomus 1979 (*Collection Latomus*, vol. 164), pp. 100–18; p. 114.

<sup>12</sup> See Bernhard Lupus, *Der Sprachgebrauch des Cornelius Nepos*, Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung 1876; Edna Jenkinson, "Nepos—An Introduction to Latin Biography," in *Latin Biography*, pp. 11–13.

<sup>13</sup> Jenkinson, "Nepos—An Introduction to Latin Biography," in *Latin Biography*, p. 10.

his treatment of foreign peoples, Nepos tends to Romanize customs and habits, transposing onto them Roman political or religious institutions.

Some of these criticisms would probably seem to Nepos himself to miss the point. He is consciously aware of his genre as biography, which he distinguishes from history. Right away in his Preface he is quick to defend himself against the critics who regard biography as unworthy and of little value. Writing in Latin for a people known for its *gravitas*, he notes that some of the personal character traits of or anecdotes about the figures portrayed may appear fatuous in comparison to serious history; for example, he notes that he describes how the Theban general Epaminondas in his youth was taught dancing and singing to the flute. However, Nepos argues that those who make these criticisms do not understand the different customs of foreign peoples. Thus, while some things may seem silly to the Roman reader, to the Greeks of the age, they were perfectly accepted customs. The larger point is that in biography there is room for such things, in contrast to the more sober historical writing. In any case it is clear that his goal is to entertain and edify the reader, and the accuracy of his accounts is subordinated to this end.

## II. Kierkegaard's Knowledge of Nepos

Kierkegaard learned Latin at an early age at the Borgerdyd School in Copenhagen.<sup>14</sup> In 1830 the headmaster of the school, Michael Nielsen (1776–1846), wrote for him both a school evaluation and a testimony, which functioned as a letter of recommendation for Kierkegaard's application to enter the University of Copenhagen. The purpose of the former document was in part to give an overview of Kierkegaard's studies at the school. In this context Nielsen provides a list of both the Latin and the Greek authors that were covered in the school. Here Nepos is mentioned among the Roman authors whom Kierkegaard read.<sup>15</sup> He appears together with a handful of Roman historians, that is, Livy, Caesar, and Sallust, who were presumably standard reading in the Latin courses at the time.

Given that we know that Kierkegaard read Nepos in the school, it is odd that there are no editions of Nepos in his book collection. However, in Appendix II of the *Auction Catalogue*, entry 27 is described merely as "various schoolbooks in a bundle,"<sup>16</sup> and entry 28 is apparently the same.<sup>17</sup> It is tempting to think that Kierkegaard's school edition of Nepos was among the works in this group, but unfortunately there is no way to confirm this. There does seem to have been some confusion at a fairly early stage about what happened to Kierkegaard's schoolbooks. In 1869 Frederik Peter Welding (1811–94), a former schoolmate of Kierkegaard, in a

<sup>14</sup> For this period of Kierkegaard's life, see Valdemar Ammundsen, *Søren Kierkegaards Ungdom. Hans Slægt og hans religiøse Udvikling*, Copenhagen: Universitetsbogtrykkeriet 1912; Per Krarup, *Søren Kierkegaard og Borgerdydskolen*, Copenhagen: Gyldendal 1977.

<sup>15</sup> *B&A*, vol 1, pp. 4–5 / *LD*, Document V, p. 5. (See also Bruce H. Kirmmse (ed.), *Encounters with Kierkegaard: A Life as Seen by His Contemporaries*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1996, p. 273.)

<sup>16</sup> *ASKB A II 27*: "Forskjellige Skolebøger i 1 Bundt."

<sup>17</sup> *ASKB A II 28*: "Dito dito i 1 dito."

correspondence with Hans Peter Barfod (1834–92), writes, “Doesn’t someone have S.K.’s schoolbooks, his Horace or his Cicero’s *de Oratore*? The underlining and the marginal notes would be enlightening.”<sup>18</sup>

While a student at the University of Copenhagen, Kierkegaard himself later taught Latin at the Borgerdyd School.<sup>19</sup> He thus was presumably either reusing his old textbooks or making use of new ones that had been adopted in the interim. Unfortunately no record survives of what exactly he read in these courses or what textbooks he used, and thus we cannot know if Nepos belonged to his favorite instructional material.

There was, however, no shortage of editions of Nepos’ works at the time. In his overview, Marshall lists some 9 different works that appeared between 1750 and 1850.<sup>20</sup> There were also a number of Danish editions (not listed by Marshall), which Kierkegaard might have known. One of these, published in Copenhagen in 1776, was designed especially for classroom use in Danish and Norwegian schools.<sup>21</sup> In 1778 there appeared in Copenhagen a critical work on Nepos with the title *Observationes criticae et historicae in Cornelium Nepotem* by Johann Heinrich Schlegel (1724–80).<sup>22</sup> Another edition of the primary text appeared in Copenhagen in 1811 and was edited by Børge Riisbrigh Thorlacius (1775–1829), professor of Latin at the University of Copenhagen.<sup>23</sup> A further edition followed in 1829, edited by Carl Wilhelm Elberling (1800–70).<sup>24</sup>

In addition to these editions of the primary texts, there were also, somewhat surprisingly, at least three different contemporary Danish translations that Kierkegaard might have come across. A certain Mathias Rathje, about whom nothing is known, published the first in 1796.<sup>25</sup> A second translation was published in 1819 by the Latinist and jurist, Carl Frederik Gerdson (1798–1856),<sup>26</sup> who was also responsible

<sup>18</sup> “Letter F. Welding to H.P. Barfod,” October 23, 1869, in Kirmmse, *Encounters with Kierkegaard*, p. 9.

<sup>19</sup> The exact dates of his employment at the school are disputed. The estimates range from the beginning of the 1830s until 1840. See Kirmmse’s illuminating discussion in the note apparatus to *Encounters with Kierkegaard*, p. 276.

<sup>20</sup> See “Conspectus editionum,” in *Cornelii Nepotis Vitae cum Fragmentis*, ed. by Peter K. Marshall, Leipzig: Teubner 1977, pp. X–XII.

<sup>21</sup> *Cornelii Nepotis Vitae excellentium imperatorum et alia, quae supersunt omnia. Ad exemplar Keuchenianum in usum scholarum Daniae et Norvegiae*, Copenhagen: A.H. Godiche 1776.

<sup>22</sup> J.H. Schlegel, *Observationes criticae et historicae in Cornelium Nepotem cum chronologica rerum graecarum et persicarum, carthageniensium et romanarum ad eundem auctorem illustratandum*, Copenhagen: Philibert 1778.

<sup>23</sup> *Cornelii Nepotis Vitae & fragmenta. Textum ad optimarum editionum fidem constituit & lectionum maxime memorabilium varietatem adjecit*, ed. by M. Birgerus Thorlacius, Copenhagen: Brännich 1811.

<sup>24</sup> *Cornelii Nepotis quae exstant*, ed. by Carolous Guil. Elberling, Copenhagen: Soldenfeldt 1829.

<sup>25</sup> *Kornelius Nepos Om store Generalers Liv og Levenet*, trans. by Mathias Rathje, Copenhagen: P.M. Liunge 1796.

<sup>26</sup> *Cornelius Nepos’s Store Hærføreres Levnetsbeskrivelser*, trans. by C.F. Gerdson, Copenhagen: H. Soldin 1819.

for some Danish translations of Cicero's works. A third translation, containing only the first eleven Lives, appeared in 1839, the work of Carl Ludvig Jensen (1810–?), a teacher and later parish pastor.<sup>27</sup> These translators do not seem generally to be well-known figures in Golden Age Denmark.

Although there are no editions of Nepos' works in Kierkegaard's library, he had at least some ancient texts which mention Nepos, such as Cicero's letters, which contained Nepos' correspondence with the famous orator,<sup>28</sup> and Pliny's letters, an edition of which appears in the first appendix of the *Auction Catalogue*.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, he owned a few books by modern authors who mention or discuss Nepos. Johann Heinrich Ludwig Meierotto's (1742–1800) *Ueber Sitten und Lebensart der Römer in verschiedenen Zeiten der Republik*, from 1814, refers frequently to Nepos as a source.<sup>30</sup> There are also a few references to Nepos in the German philosopher Christoph Meiners' (1747–1810) *Geschichte des Verfalls der Sitten und der Staatsverfassung der Römer*.<sup>31</sup> Finally, the Hegelian philosopher Carl Ludwig Michelet (1801–93) refers to Nepos' account of Themistocles in his *Vorlesungen über die Persönlichkeit Gottes und Unsterblichkeit der Seele oder die ewige Persönlichkeit des Geistes* from 1841.<sup>32</sup>

### III. References to Nepos in Kierkegaard's Writings

The first mention of Nepos in Kierkegaard's *corpus* appears in his *Journal EE*, which he wrote in during the time when he was studying for his theological examination. There is little continuity or defining theme in this journal, which instead consists of 197 rather heterogeneous entries. This said, some clear continuous traces of his theological studies are present. Kierkegaard mentions Nepos explicitly in an entry dated May 10, 1839, where he writes:

Cornelius Nepos tells the story of a general who was besieged in a stronghold with a substantial body of cavalry and who, in order to prevent the horses from becoming sick

<sup>27</sup> *Cornelius Nepos's udmerkede Feltherrers Levnetsbeskrivelser*, trans. by C.L. Jensen, 1. Hefte, Copenhagen: J.H. Schubothes Boghandling 1839.

<sup>28</sup> *Markus Tullius Cicero's Vermischte Briefe*, vols. 1–5, trans. by August Christian Borheck, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Frankfurt am Main: Hermann 1789–1801 (ASKB 1240–1244); M.B. Weiske, *Auswahl der besten Briefe Ciceros*, 3<sup>rd</sup> printing, Braunschweig: Schulbuchhandlung 1824 (ASKB 1245). M.B. Weiske, *Erklärende Anmerkungen zur Auswahl der besten Briefe Ciceros*, Braunschweig: Schulbuchhandlung 1796 (ASKB 1246).

<sup>29</sup> C. Plinius Caecilius Secundus, *Epistolae et Panegyricus*, Halle: Orphanotropheum 1789 (ASKB A I 182).

<sup>30</sup> Johann Heinrich Ludwig Meierotto, *Ueber Sitten und Lebensart der Römer in verschiedenen Zeiten der Republik*, vols. 1–2, 3<sup>rd</sup> revised and enlarged ed., Berlin: in der Myliussischen Buchhandlung 1814 (ASKB 656).

<sup>31</sup> Christoph Meiners, *Geschichte des Verfalls der Sitten und der Staatsverfassung der Römer*, Leipzig: bey Weidmanns Erben und Reich. 1782, p. 69; p. 160 (ASKB 660).

<sup>32</sup> Carl Ludwig Michelet, *Vorlesungen über die Persönlichkeit Gottes und Unsterblichkeit der Seele oder die ewige Persönlichkeit des Geistes*, Berlin: Verlag von Ferdinand Dümmler 1841, p. 207 (ASKB 680).

through having to be stationary for so long, had them whipped every day in order thus to get them moving—so I live in my room like one under siege—I don't care to see anyone, and every moment I am afraid that the enemies will mount an assault, i.e., that someone will come and visit me; I don't care to go out; but in order not to take any harm from having to be stationary for so long—I cry myself into a state of exhaustion.<sup>33</sup>

In the context of the journal, this strikes one as a rather off-handed anecdote. It seems doubtful that Kierkegaard had just reread Nepos at this time. Instead, the tone of the entry suggests that he is citing it from memory. However, it is worthy of note that he explicitly identifies Nepos as the source of the story.

This is a reference to Nepos' account (Book XVIII, 5) of the Greek general Eumenes of Cardia, who lived from ca. 362 to 316 bc. Although a Greek, Eumenes lived in Macedonia during its most glorious period. He was the secretary first of Philip of Macedon and then of Alexander the Great. Upon the death of the latter as the kingdom was divided, Eumenes was put in charge of the satrapy of Cappadocia, although it still remained to be conquered. There he waged a series of campaigns, doing his best to keep Alexander's empire in tact. When the other generals revolted, he remained loyal to Perdiccas, whom Alexander had appointed as his successor. When Perdiccas was ultimately killed by his enemies and Antipater assumed power, Eumenes was condemned *in absentia*. Since he had limited resources and inexperienced soldiers, Eumenes was forced to use a defensive strategy, avoiding pitched battles. Ultimately his fortunes turned, and after the battle of Paraecene in 317 bc he saw his best troops desert. Due to the resentment among the Macedonians caused by him, as a foreigner, holding such great power over them, he was betrayed to his enemy Antigonus. He was ultimately executed in 316 bc.

The story Kierkegaard refers to relates how Eumenes was on the run, being pursued by the army of general Antigonus. He was forced to take refuge in a fortress in a place called Nora. Nepos writes:

Being besieged there and fearing that by remaining in one place he might ruin the horses of his army, because there was no room for exercising them, Eumenes hit upon a clever device by which an animal standing in one place might be warmed and exercised, so that it would have a better appetite and not lose its bodily activity. He drew up its head with a thong so high that it could not quite touch the ground with its forefeet, and then forced it by blows of a whip to bound and kick out behind, an exercise which produced no less sweat than running on a race-track. The result was that, to the surprise of all, the animals were led out of the fortress after a siege of several months in as good condition as if he had kept them in pasture.<sup>34</sup>

In the context of the overall narrative, this anecdote is by no means striking. It is merely one of the many examples that Nepos gives to illustrate the intelligence and ingenuity of Eumenes, often under trying circumstances.

The reader is naturally inclined to read Kierkegaard's entry from *EE* as an autobiographical statement: it seems to be a self-description of Kierkegaard's lonely

<sup>33</sup> SKS 18, 26, EE:59 / *KJN* 2, 21.

<sup>34</sup> *Corneli Nepotis Vitae*, ed. by E.O. Winstedt, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1962, Book XVIII, 5. (English translation quoted from *Cornelius Nepos*, trans. by Rolfe, p. 217.)

life during a time when he was obliged to focus intensely on his studies and for this reason did not have the opportunity to go out or meet with people. Thus, he feels as if he were under siege since he cannot leave his books. Moreover, he fears that an unexpected visitor will come by and distract him from his studies. According to this interpretation, Kierkegaard recalls an anecdote from Nepos that he interprets so as to fit with his then current situation.

This autobiographical interpretation of the entry takes on a new twist, when one sees that this same text appears in a slightly shortened version as one of the “Diapsalmata” in *Either/Or*, Part One. There this anecdote is attributed not to Kierkegaard himself but to his anonymous esthete A. Here one reads:

Cornelius Nepos tells of a general who was kept confined with a considerable cavalry regiment in a fortress; to keep the horses from being harmed because of too much inactivity, he had them whipped daily—in like manner I live in this age as one besieged, but lest I be harmed by sitting still so much, I cry myself tired.<sup>35</sup>

Kierkegaard modifies the original passage from *EE* by eliminating the apparently main self-referential part: “I don’t care to see anyone, and every moment I am afraid that the enemies will mount an assault, i.e., that someone will come and visit me.”<sup>36</sup> However, he keeps the line “in like manner I live in my room as one besieged.” This can be taken as evidence that he identified with the esthete in some aspects since he could, with only minor modification, revise the originally self-referential statement to fit the esthete. Indeed, as has been noted, a number of journal entries, especially from *EE*, appear later in the “Diapsalmata.”<sup>37</sup>

In any case, in the context of *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard is interested in portraying the esthete as someone isolated from the rest of society, someone who shuns established social customs and habits and instead prefers to live in his own subjectivity. Thus, the anecdote from Nepos represents this metaphorically with the image of general Eumenes under siege. Despite being cut off from the outside world, Eumenes nonetheless attempts to keep up with the physical training of the horse by the mentioned device. In the same way the esthete tries to keep fit by crying until he has grown tired.

The esthete returns to Nepos at the end of “The Tragic in Ancient Drama Reflected in the Tragic in Modern Drama.” There in the analysis of Sophocles’ *Antigone*, he explains the tragic conflict between Antigone, the loyal daughter of Oedipus, and her beloved Haemon, in whom she cannot confide the tormenting secret of her family: “Only in the moment of her death can she confess the fervency of her love; only in the moment she does not belong to him can she confess that she belongs to him.”<sup>38</sup> In short, if she reveals the secret, she must die, for she cannot continue to live with the knowledge that she has betrayed the crimes of her father. However, if she does not reveal this secret to Haemon, then she betrays her love for him by keeping such

<sup>35</sup> SKS 2, 30 / *EOI*, 21.

<sup>36</sup> SKS 18, 26, *EE*:59 / *KJN* 2, 22.

<sup>37</sup> See Leon Jurnow and Steen Tullberg, “Tekstrederegørelse” to the *Journal EE* in *SKS* K18, 17.

<sup>38</sup> SKS 2, 162 / *EOI*, 164.

an important secret from her beloved. The esthete then recalls another story from Nepos: "When Epaminondas was wounded in the battle at Mantinea, he let the arrow remain in the wound until he heard that the battle was won, for he knew that it was his death when he pulled it out."<sup>39</sup> This is then used as a parallel to the account of Antigone: "In the same way, our Antigone carries her secret in her heart like an arrow that life has continually plunged deeper and deeper, without depriving her of her life, for as long as it is in her heart she can live, but the instant it is taken out, she must die."<sup>40</sup> In this account Nepos is not mentioned by name, and Kierkegaard leaves it to the reader to identify the source.

The printed passage was actually revised from an earlier draft, in which the parallel with Epaminondas is recounted in the first person by Antigone herself. In this draft, the passage reads: "I feel that my life must soon end—it goes with me as with Epaminondas after the battle at Mantinea; my secret is an arrow sticking in my heart; as long as it remains sticking there I can no doubt live, but as soon as I pull it out, I must die. Now I have revealed myself; now I must die."<sup>41</sup> One reason for the reformulation of this passage might have been that, for reasons of chronology, it would have been impossible for Antigone to utter it. While the story of Oedipus and Antigone belongs to the distant legendary past, the battle of Mantinea in fact belongs to historical times, taking place in 362 BC. Thus, it would be anachronistic to have Antigone recall an event that took place centuries *after* her time.

This passage refers to Nepos' treatment of the aforementioned Theban general Epaminondas (Book XV, 9). Epaminondas played an important role in Thebes' brief rise to power among the Greek states. He became famous for defeating an invading army of Spartans and later aiding the subjugated states in the Peloponnesus win their freedom from Sparta. In his portrayal Nepos depicts primarily Epaminondas' moral character and not so much his biography as such.

The account of Epaminondas' death that Kierkegaard recalls, appears as follows in Nepos' narrative:

Finally, when commander at Mantinea, in the heat of battle he charged the enemy too boldly. He was recognized by the Lacedaemonians, and since they believed that the death of that one man would ensure the safety of their country, they all directed their attack at him alone and kept on until, after great bloodshed and the loss of many men, they saw Epaminondas himself fall valiantly fighting, struck down by a lance hurled from afar. By his death the Boeotians were checked for a time, but they did not leave the field until they had completely defeated the enemy. But Epaminondas, realizing that he had received a mortal wound, and at the same time that if he drew out the head of the lance, which was separated from the shaft and fixed in his body, he would at once die, retained it until news came that the Boeotians were victorious. As soon as he heard that, he cried: "I have lived long enough, since I die unconquered." Then he drew out the iron and at once breathed his last.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>39</sup> SKS 2, 162 / *EOI*, 164.

<sup>40</sup> SKS 2, 162 / *EOI*, 164.

<sup>41</sup> *Pap.* III B 179:40 / *EOI*, Supplement, p. 544.

<sup>42</sup> *Corneli Nepotis Vitae*, ed. by E.O. Winstedt, Book XV, 9. (English translation quoted from *Cornelius Nepos*, trans. by Rolfe, pp. 181–2.)

Like the previous anecdote, this one is in no way outstanding in the narrative. In fact Nepos mentions others that are more striking and more entertaining. The point of this narrative is clearly to show the virtue and noble-mindedness of the Theban general, whose sole interest was the safety of the homeland and not his own welfare.

Once again Kierkegaard seems to recall this passage from memory. There is no reference to Nepos, and the allusion has only been identified by commentators. As in the passage before, Kierkegaard seems simply to recall an anecdote suitable for the given situation, here for illustrating something in the text he is working on. The image fits well with the description he gives of Antigone's situation in the retelling of the story in the version the esthete presents.

#### *IV. Kierkegaard's Use and Understanding of Nepos*

Comparatively speaking, Kierkegaard's use of Nepos was minimal. He presumably knew Nepos' biographies from having read them as a schoolboy. Then, as he was beginning his authorship, he recalled individual stories and anecdotes that served by way of illustration to things that he was trying to describe and analyze. It should be noted that his appropriations of the anecdotes found in Nepos are rather far-fetched from their original context as is most clearly illustrated by comparison of the contraption conceived to keep the horses fit with Kierkegaard's or the esthete's lonely, isolated situation. While Kierkegaard has an eye for an odd or striking story, he is most interested in reworking it by putting it into his own context and universe of thought. Thus Nepos is, for Kierkegaard, a ready source of anecdotal material that he draws upon when he wishes, regardless of whether or not the appropriation is a natural or obvious one in the context in which he wishes to use it. It is not out of the question that other appropriations of Nepos await our discovery in Kierkegaard's authorship.

It is possible that Kierkegaard was attracted to the "edifying" element in Nepos' biographies. In Nepos the anecdotes are supposed to illustrate the moral virtue of the figure being described in a way that invites the reader to imitation. In his authorship Kierkegaard also wanted to have a similar effect on his readers. He hoped that by problematizing certain issues about, for example, Christianity, his readers would of their own accord be obliged to reflect on their own relation to faith, sin, and the Christian message. Thus it is possible that one can regard Nepos as a kind of pagan edifying author in a way that Kierkegaard appreciated. It must, however, be conceded that the cleverness of Eumenes or the patriotic virtue of Epaminondas are not the main focus in Kierkegaard's use of these stories, although these are clearly the elements that Nepos wished to illustrate with the stories. In the absence of the identification of other appropriations of Nepos in the authorship, the notion of the influence of Nepos as a kind of edifying author must remain a mere suggestion or tentative working hypothesis awaiting more definitive confirmation or contradiction.

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None.

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None.



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