HENRY ALEXANDER

Seven One-Act Plays by Holberg

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TRANSLATED FROM THE DANISH BY

HENRY ALEXANDER

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

SVEND KRAGH-JACOBSEN

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INTRODUCTION

LUDVIG HOLBERG'S comedies, Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tales, and Steen Steensen Blicher's short stories are the chief pillars in the structure of Danish literature, and a common feature of these three writers is that their genius appears even in their slightest works. Their fame, national as well as international, naturally arises from their most important work, but even in their less significant products there is a suggestion of greatness. The seven one-act plays that Professor Henry Alexander presents to us here exhibit this quality in the great Danish dramatist.

Holberg's greatest works are his comedies, which constitute perhaps the proudest chapter in the golden book of Danish literature, but it is obvious that his fame does not depend on these one-act plays, nor do they clearly show his full importance. And yet in this modest portion of his extensive and impressive production there is so much of the genuine Holberg that it is surprising that a Canadian should be the first to think of collecting these one-act plays into a book as a sample of the Danish maestro's art. In their present form they enter the Danish Foreign Office with a friendly greeting from The American-Scandinavian Foundation, following the two volumes of longer plays by Holberg already presented in an English version by this body. And if we examine them more closely, we shall see one feature added to another, until we have a miniature of Holberg and his comedy that is not at all inadequate—although in one respect it fails: it cannot, naturally, give us an idea of the scale he works in, which in his main comedies measures up to the standards of world literature. For this the seven full-length plays, already translated in the same series, must be studied.

NOTE: Mr. Kragh-Jacobsen is Master of Arts (1934) in Danish and French. He has written several books and is now chief dramatic critic of the *Berlingske Tidende.*

The plays presented here follow Holberg's career from the time when in his eager youth his dramatic inspiration broke forth, down to 1753, a year before his death in his house in Kannikestraede in the Copenhagen Latin quarter, on a cold night in January. These one-act plays also show us the enormous variety in the Holberg drama. There are suggestions of Molière's comedy of character and the pictures of manners in the English *Spectator* and its followers. We detect the influence of the Italian *Commedia dell'arte,* which Holberg had got to know during his youthful visits to Paris and Rome, as well as the popular Roman comedies, in which he was always interested. Even the former professor of philosophy can be seen here in these dramas, as in his old age he turns back to his beloved theater. We get a glimpse of the Copenhagen middle class as well as fashionable provincials, and each play gives the impression of the dramatist impelled by his irrepressible desire to write. The native of Bergen who had become a professor in Copenhagen was driven by true inspiration. In his enormous mass of writing—about twenty thousand printed pages—we feel how everything is easy and natural; he never blotted a line. In his most important field, the drama, he is one of the greatest names in European literature.

Ludvig Holberg was thirty-five, a professor at Copenhagen University—first in metaphysics, then from 1720 in Latin literature, and after 1730 in history and geography—and already a well-known historian, when he was inspired by a poetic "raptus" and began to write verse—satiric verse, first and foremost the comic epic *Peder Paars.* Already in this first piece of belles lettres we can see the dramatist who emerged a few years later and became the creator of Danish comedy and, in more than one field, the pioneer in Danish literature.

A good deal was happening in the capital Copenhagen during those years; what is most important for us was that

the idea of a theater was realized. It was in the air; there was a great desire for a Danish stage—a place where the national tongue could be heard instead of the court actors' French or the German of the market-square buffoons. When the plan was started, it received support from the highest quarters. Frederik IV, the absolute monarch, had dismissed his French court actors, but their leader, René Magnon de Montaigu, married to the daughter of a Copenhagen court confectioner, had not the courage, after thirty-five years of activity in the Danish capital, to return, middle-aged and poor, to his native land. Capion, the organizer of places of entertainment, built a theater with all the necessary conveniences in Little Grønnegade, and when the high chancellor Holstein and the first secretary of the "Danish chancellery," Frederik Rostgaard, both related to the king, supported the idea of a theater, everything went smoothly. In a lucky moment about New Year 1722 Professor Holberg was approached, and six months later—even before the theater in Little Grønnegade was opened on September 23, 1722—Holberg had given his first five comedies to the Danish actors. Within a year and a half he had completed his monumental achievement—the fifteen full-length plays that are still the essence of Danish dramatic literature. The theater in Little Grønnegade had five or six years of as varied an existence as any theatrical company had ever experienced. At times there was great rejoicing and the house was so full that the balcony almost caved in. But more often there were great difficulties, and after various crises the theater went bankrupt for the first time in 1725. It started again in 1726, and Holberg wrote once more for the actors, but in 1727 it collapsed again, and this time Holberg put an end to his dramatic activity.

However, a man who has once breathed the delightful aroma of the theater can never forget it; he is like the circus horse who has once danced to music: when the fascinating notes are sounded, he must obey. When the pietistic regime that had been introduced by Christian VI expired in 1746,

the capital awakened to a new and gay life under the young, cheerful Frederik V. The actors got busy, and Holberg with them, even before they moved to Kongens Nytorv, where they built their own theater in 1748, on the lot by the side of the Royal Theater, in which in December 1948 their successors celebrated the two hundredth anniversary of the Danish theater with tributes from theaters throughout the world, and with three of Holberg's comedies brought to life vividly on the stage. Holberg, now an old man, supported the foundation of this royal theater, and not merely in a consulting capacity. He once more took up his pen and added six new comedies to his earlier series. It is true that none of these measures up to the brilliant masterpieces of his youth, but none is without signs that it was written by the great maestro of Danish comedy. Let us look more closely now at the group of plays that Professor Alexander has presented to us.

Master Gert Westphaler or The Talkative Barber is part of the first fruits of the Holberg drama, as it is one of the first five comedies already written before the opening of the theater in Little Grønnegade. It is the last play in the first volume of Hans Mikkelsen's comedies; Holberg used the pseudonym Hans Mikkelsen when he published his early satirical works and the three first volumes of his comedies. Even before he produced this comedy about a barber he had depicted a figure like Gert Westphaler. We find him in the third canto of the fourth book of *Peder Paars*, where Corporal Niels tells about "Gert Westphaler who often talks sixteen hours about one word"; that talkative barber had become so unbearable that his chatter had driven Corporal Niels out of doors. Barbers are well known in the world's literature, and the most famous of them all, Señor Figaro of Seville, undoubtedly was loquacious too. But Holberg's character is entirely his own invention and stands out solidly in the play. We may note that *Master Gert Westphaler* was not originally a one-act play, as the

first edition of the comedy—the one we know from the first volume of Hans Mikkelsen's comedies—is in five acts, which were, however, soon reduced by Holberg to the one-act play we find here. And in 1816 Knud Lyhne Rahbek wrote a three-act play which included a number of the good scenes that had been omitted, and by so doing gave the actor who played Gert a better part.

The reason for Holberg's reduction of the play from five acts to one act was undoubtedly the poor success of the first performances of the barber comedy. It was not only the other characters in the comedy who could not stand the everlastingly talking barber and ran away from him. The public, too, was bored. They reacted in the same way as the people on the stage. For once the illusion was too great; Holberg notes that some of the audience left the theater before the piece ended. In the one-act version, which he made later from the original text by means of drastic cuts—unfortunately eliminating a few of the best scenes and characters—he got more unity and vigor into the story, especially by making Master Gert's unsuccessful wooing the pivot of the whole plot. The play is a comedy of character, closely related to the first, and one of the most famous, of Holberg's comedies of character, *Den politiske Kandestøber* (*The Political Tinker*, published by The American-Scandinavian Foundation). The talkative Master Gert is a spiritual cousin of the politically eloquent Master Hermann; both are workers, and—when they do not abandon their trades in order to talk—good workers, but they are both possessed by fixed ideas. In the barber comedy there is a suggestion that Master Gert was a politician too, but Holberg has stressed his loquacity and reserved the satire of the ignorant but conceited amateur politicians for the play about the tinker. The play steers a course, even in its title, between the abstract comedies of character in which a vice or weakness is portrayed—"the talkative man" by the side of, for instance, "the

weathercock," i.e. the changeable woman, or "the fussy man"* —and the comedies of character that satirize a trade or profession, for instance the tinker or the officer (in *Jacob von Thyboe*). We recognize the technique in Holberg's comedies of this type. He learned it from Molière's great comedies of character. The main character is first discussed by the secondary ones so that we get an idea of the defect he is suffering from. We already know Master Gert and his tendency to talk too much, even before he appears on the stage. Then he arrives, and at once shows his weakness in several scenes; finally the denouement comes, which can take one of two forms. Either the victim is cured by the drastic experience he has undergone and promises to turn over a new leaf as, for instance, Master Hermann in *The Political Tinker*, or else he is given up as hopeless, as in the case of Master Gert. The reason for this is perhaps to be found in the plot, the little love episode. In the course of the comedy another and better suitor for Leonora has appeared, the young and sympathetic distiller, Leonard. In the plot by which he gets the girl we recognize the traditions of classical Latin comedy, in which the shrewd slave—in Holberg the servant Henrik—helps his young master to get his beloved by playing a clever trick on those who oppose the union—in *Gert Westphaler* the girl's father, the chemist Gilbert, and Master Gert, who has already been designated as the future husband.

Thus we see that even in this small one-act play the great European traditions of comedy have been combined: the plot from Roman comedy and the play of character from Molière—together with Holberg's own power of inventing and creating an original character, drawing him at full length with living and realistic features, and surrounding him with equally well-observed secondary figures. Of these we note especially poor Mother Gunild, who even has her own characteristic

* See *Four Plays by Holberg*, Princeton University Press for the American-Scandinavian Foundation. 1946.

speech, the Jutish dialect, and the sweet, patient girl Leonora, who at first submits to her father and receives Master Gert amicably but is gradually repelled by his talkativeness.

The Arabian Powder shows in the first place how quickly Holberg became a skillful dramatist. The little comedy is written playfully, but although the central character again is a monomaniac, the author has not produced a comedy of character. *The Arabian Powder* should rather be included among the social comedies, where Professor Vilhelm Andersen places it, and set among the minor works that deal with the follies of society—in this case scientific charlatanism as reflected in alchemy. Professor Hans Brix in his great book on Holberg's comedies, a work on which this introduction leans heavily, has shown that *The Arabian Powder* probably was suggested by an actual contemporary event. Holberg got the story from the Latin collection in the *Utopia* of Biedermann (written in 1604 but first printed in 1640 after the death of the author, the German Jesuit Jacob Biedermann), a work from which he also obtained some material for *Jeppe paa Bjerget* and *Den pantsatte Bondedreng* (*The Peasant in Pawn*, p. 133). The occasion that called forth *The Arabian Powder* can be found in the Copenhagen paper *Extraordinaire Relationer*, where in October 1723 it was reported that the Chevalier Johan Jacob de Maldini had been summoned to Copenhagen where the king had asked to see samples of his "curious sciences." The eighteenth century is of course the time of the great European adventurers, and the alchemists who claimed they could produce gold were known everywhere —and feared by sensible people. In this comedy Holberg may have wished to warn the public against a pseudo-scientific swindle, and at the same time he takes the opportunity to strike a crushing blow against snobbery and the worship of riches. The main character, Polidor, is possessed by a mania; he is ruining himself and his family with his chemical experiments. But Holberg does not give us any specially interesting

or individual characterization of him; on the contrary he works out his plot in the manner of the comedy of intrigue and uses it, among other things, to unmask snobbery in the final big scene, in which he shows us the crowd of people streaming in to offer congratulations and flattery when the rumor goes round that Polidor has manufactured gold. In this scene *The Arabian Powder* reaches its climax and has a character of its own. Otherwise it suggests for the most part a routine performance written to provide a short entertaining comedy for the actors. The most original figure is the swindler Oldfox, who shows surprising qualities; we get the impression of a man who has long since realized the baseness of human beings and knows that the world wants to be cheated —so he cheats to benefit himself, but at the same time with a suggestion of contempt for humanity. Oldfox is a swindler of international dimensions. *The Arabian Powder* appears in the second volume of Hans Mikkelsen's comedies and was first performed in 1724. It was written at a time when Holberg was producing comedies at a great pace.

The same period sees *The Christmas Party* (*Julestuen*), but this play is much more significant and of higher quality. It is his best one-acter and one of his most important social comedies—or comedy of manners, to use the terminology of international literature. Without any sign of conscientious scruples, Holberg stole the subject from a contemporary dramatist J. R. Paulli, who had handed over to the Danish actors an incomplete play *Jule-Stuen og Masqueraden* (*The Christmas Play and the Masquerade*). It was never acted, but somehow Holberg got hold of it and made from it two of his best works—the three-act play *Masquerades*,* which contains the best portrayal of the servant Henrik in Holberg's work, and the one-acter, *The Christmas Party*, with its entertaining picture of a social setting. In his comedy Paulli satirizes social

* See *Four Plays by Holberg*, Princeton University Press for the American-Scandinavian Foundation. 1946.

abuses—the Christmas games that caused all kinds of frivolity —and the frivolous Shrovetide masquerades. Holberg's comic treatment of the same subjects is much richer and really dramatically brilliant. A great humorist has found material that suits him.

The Christmas Party was to some extent a successor of Holberg's most English comedy *Barselstuen*, which was inspired directly by the *Spectator* papers and contains a group of cleverly drawn female figures around an elderly man in an awkward situation—just like Jeronimus in this shorter comedy. In *The Christmas Party* Holberg deals with a bad Scandinavian custom, the old Christmas games, and the tone in this little comedy of manners is characterized on the whole by a cheerful and untroubled paganism. These Christmas games, with their roots in the superstitions and mystic rituals of primitive times, are the culmination of the party, which reflects the life and setting of the Danish provinces and which is conjured forth on the stage in thirteen scenes that with a steadily rising tempo lead to the catastrophe which after the fall of the curtain will cause great alarm in the strait-laced little provincial town with the fruity and fragrant name of Aebeltoft (Applefield). In *The Christmas Party* Holberg shows us a series of types in the house of a rigidly conservative provincial merchant. Jeronimus rules like a monarch over his little world with a paternal hand both strict and mild, and only his rebellious wife Leonora can stand up to him; he is so fond of her that she can, when she wants, wind him around her little finger. We see the solid country superstition in Jeronimus' sister, the faithful Magdelone, and a picture of peasant naïveté in the figure of the simple Karl Arv. We meet a travesty of Latin learning in the schoolmaster, the hypocrite who wheedles his master and makes a fool of the maid Pernille. She is her mistress's intimate helper when Fru Leonora suddenly falls in love with the gallant visitor, Monsieur Leander, and immediately decides—as proudly as

any unfaithful Frenchwoman—to cuckold her old spouse, whom she has tired of long ago.

Holberg works out his comedy in a masterly fashion. He constructs character after character with features and qualities that make them living and convincing against a variegated and captivating setting. We meet the black-clothed schoolmaster, his cane raised, at the head of his group of children, whom he ushers in with the oft repeated slogan "Christopher, Henning, Peer, Else, Marie, Anne." We see the behavior of Fru Leonora, a mother of six children and still ready to misconduct herself with a stranger, but the comedy does not hide the author's amusement at the situation and the erotic atmosphere of the Christmas games with its final explosion. The skillful playwright lets the curtain fall while the riotous proceedings are at their height and the watch are dragging the whole Christmas party to the town hall. Holberg has avoided the chilly awakening next morning; his comedy ends with the climax, and when the curtain falls, we still sit and enjoy the gay comedy of manners we have been watching. *The Christmas Party* is a great comedy, even though it is on a small scale, and it is above all a lively play about real people with human desires and human failings.

Diderich Menschenskraek (*Diderich the Terrible*) is another comedy from the 1720's. It is not one of the most important, and Professor Brix is certainly right in thinking that Holberg wrote it to provide the actor who took the part of Henrik with a bravura role. Henrik Wegener was one of the young students who were captivated by the theater in Little Grønnegade, and his talent was so great that Holberg, as a permanent compliment to his young actor, gave the name Henrik to the servant in his plays. In *Diderich Menschenskraek* there is one of these parts for a Henrik, in which the actor is able to show off in his servant's uniform and also in two big scenes in which he is disguised as a soldier and as a Jew, figures that Holberg is fond of introducing into his plays.

In its form and subject *Diderich Menschenskraek* is one of the least Danish of the plays—it resembles both Roman comedy and Molière; we recognize the idea of slavery from ancient times and we find prototypes of Diderich in Plautus's *Pseudolus* and *Curculio*, and elements of the plot are also taken from Molière's *Les Fourberies de Scapin*, which contains both Turks and robbers and other undesirable people. In *Diderich Menschenskraek* it is the rapidity of the action that makes it effective, and it is the clever "slave" Henrik who manages to get Mr. Leander his beloved Hyacinth, whom the swaggering soldier from whose name the bombastic title of the play is taken has acquired by paying a large sum of money. The comedy is certainly good theater; this is shown, among other things, by the fact that it continually attracts theatrical companies. The Dano-French artiste Gabriel Axel (Mørch), who was trained on the Holberg stage, as the Royal Theater in Copenhagen can still be called, later became associated with the greatest figure in the modern French theater, Louis Jouvet, and is now engaged at his Théâtre Athénée in Paris. During the winter of 1948-1949 he successfully produced *Diderich Menschenskraek*, not performed in Copenhagen since 1864, on a Parisian stage, where the old comedy was revived in a luxurious setting and with the *lazzi* (jests) of the Italian *Commedia dell'arte*.

The Peasant in Pawn (*Den pantsatte Bondedreng*) is not a one-act play nor is it one of Holberg's great works, but it has the merit of possessing a principal character whose one significant speech has become a well-known Danish phrase. "Ask my steward" is the poor peasant boy's continual slogan. *The Peasant in Pawn* was first produced at the theater in Grønnegade in the summer of 1726, but was certainly written earlier. Its construction is rather poor, as it falls into two parts that are not too well connected. This is shown most clearly in the character of Pernille, who at first appears as an important person in the plot but suddenly fades out and never plays the part that she is obviously intended to do in the beginning. This

lack of unity suggests—and this is Professor Brix's opinion in his commentary—that the comedy was written in one form and then quickly changed for some other purpose. It looks as if *The Peasant in Pawn* was written at the same time as *The Arabian Powder*—the end of 1723. Its theme, like that of *The Arabian Powder*, was taken by Holberg from Biedermann's collection of stories called *Utopia*, a source that he often used. The play was a pure comedy of intrigue, written for the players and as entertainment for the public. But it was not produced at the time when it was written. In the early summer of 1726 Holberg returned from his last long trip abroad and found the theater in Grønnegade once more flourishing after having been closed for a year. The theater wanted a closing play for June 11—there were people in town and the comedies were going well—and so Holberg rewrote the play about the peasant boy and the swindlers, a work that was lying in his desk. Though a little incoherent, it still was a success, even though it was not produced until some weeks after the June season in 1726.

It is useful to compare *The Peasant in Pawn* with one of the great comedies, *Jeppe of the Hill* (*Jeppe paa Bjerget*) which is also derived from the *Utopia*. The main character in both plays is a peasant who for a brief period becomes a great lord and lives in state, but while Jeppe is a real person who takes an active part himself in the plot, the peasant boy is simply a fool who is used by swindlers and schemers. In his new version Holberg has introduced a touch of the Copenhagen theatrical season into his story. He has also taken the liberty of changing the moral from that of the anecdote in the *Utopia*, where the poor peasant boy was actually hanged in the end. The evildoer was punished; in Holberg's play he gets off more lightly. The whole thing has little depth. *The Peasant in Pawn* is just a stage joke but it shows in various scenes the mark of the true dramatist—and the high spot in the comedy,

which has kept its appeal as Professor Brix has shown, is the speech, "Ask my steward."

Holberg's first comedy in the 1750's was modeled on Aristophanes' *Plutus*; it has the same title and is called by Holberg a heroic comedy. The next one was an amusing little farce, a gay interlude that is most often produced at the end of a theatrical evening. The subject of *Sganarel's Journey to the Land of the Philosophers*—as this one-act play is called—was taken by Holberg from his own work, for this comedy can best be described as a dramatization of a section of his long story called *Nicolai Klimii Iter Subterraneum*, written in Latin in 1741. Holberg wanted his great satirical and philosophical work to reach the world, and this desire was amply fulfilled. It was quickly translated into Danish, Swedish, German, Dutch, French, and English, and later into Russian, Hungarian, Polish, and Finnish. As late as 1944 it appeared in a new French translation by a young Swiss scholar, who spent the bitter isolated years of World War II doing this piece of translation. Holberg's *Niels Klim* won its place in great European literature together with Thomas More's *Utopia* and Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. For *Sganarel's Journey* Holberg uses the section in Chapter IX, in which Niels Klim during his journey around the planet Nazar reaches "the land of the philosophers." In the one-acter, various philosophical types appear before the Holberg servant, here called by the Franco-Italian name Sganarel; one scene in the comedy is borrowed from Molière's *Le mariage forcé*. The play runs along easily. Sganarel and Leander have bitter experiences as a result of their encounters with the philosophers; they think they are being rescued by the doctor, but discover that they have merely jumped from the frying-pan into the fire. The philosophers' neglected wives help them out of danger, and the comedy ends with the moral stated in a gay refrain, everybody singing with joyful hearts: "Farewell, land of philosophy."