

Mogens Leisner-Jensen. *Da Holberg blev poët: Tre studier i vittighedsværkernes oprindelse*. Odense: Odense universitetsforlag, 1995. Pp. 171. ISBN: 87-7838-109-6.

The title of this interesting book promises much and its contents indeed deliver much, but not always of the same thing. Though formally divided, like Gaul, into three parts, it really falls into two even sections. Parts One and Two are concerned with dating Holberg's first interest in satire and with the more vexed question of just when he began writing his plays. Part Three, the second half of the book, is essentially a history of the professorate in *eloquentiæ* in the University of Copenhagen, with notes on Holberg's part in it. This part is more loosely related to the first two. This sounds like dull stuff, but Leisner-Jensen has a small axe to grind, which

he does gently and persistently, if not completely.

The book begins with Leisner-Jensen's dissatisfaction with two assumptions about Holberg's comic writing: first, that his satiric muse was set to work only with Andreas Hojer's attack on Holberg in 1719, the so-called 'Hojer Feud', and second, that neither of the two explanations of Holberg's *poetisk raptus* which, among other things, brought about five comedies in the first four months of the theatre in the Lille Grønnegade is adequate.

With respect to the first, Leisner-Jensen shows reasonably that Holberg's appearance as a satirist was something he had a natural bent for anyway and that the controversy with Hojer only provided the occasion for that talent and interest to manifest itself.

With respect to the second, the question has three subsections. First, were the plays Holberg's idea or someone else's? Holberg himself confused the issue by offering two explanations for his excursion into the theatre. His first maintained that several unnamed friends, aware of his talent as a comic writer, had encouraged him to write plays. He later suggested that it was all his own idea, the position Leisner-Jensen comes near, for lack of any clear evidence other than Holberg's own to the contrary. He shows that Holberg had a habit of claiming that many of his publications came about after the approval of (always) unnamed friends and sees this as a typical rhetorical defense, in case they were not well-received. Second, there is the matter of when he wrote them. It seems, on the one hand, inconceivable that he could have produced the first five, which included *Den politiske Kandstøber*, *Jean de France*, and *Jeppes paa Bjerget*, between the time permission was granted to open a *Danish* theatre in the Lille Grønnegade and the first performance, though Leisner-Jensen points to other fast-working playwrights, such as Lope de Vega. On the other hand, there is no evidence that he had begun writing them earlier. Interest focusses, then, upon the citations from Classical authors in the first plays and this suggests a connection with his appointment as *professor eloquentæ* in 1720 and the assumed interest for Holberg in the authors that formed the *corpus* of his teaching subject, above all, Terence and Plautus. Leisner-Jensen is not entirely convinced of this theory, either. Third, there is the question of the rôle the director of the new playhouse, René Magnon de Montaigu, played in all of this. After a brief biography of Montaigu, Leisner-Jensen concludes that the Frenchman was extremely

unlikely to have approached Holberg on his own.

This all leads to the third, and largest, part of this book, which is concerned with Holberg as *professor eloquentiæ* and tries to answer the question of just what it is that Holberg would actually have *done* in that job. Most of this long, interesting, and completely tangential chapter is aimed at showing that Holberg would have been unlikely in his role as professor to have studied Terence, Plautus, and the other Classical authors mentioned *as literature* but only for their rhetorical and linguistic models. This conclusion is reached through an extensive study of the post, from its establishment in the university statutes of 1539 to the last change in Holberg's lifetime, in 1732. This is oddly interesting information, the gist of which is that Holberg would have had no professional interest in Terence as a practical dramatist. He goes on to observe that, indeed, by Holberg's day, the use of Latin plays as devices for teaching more than language had fallen well into desuetude.. Holberg's own evidence, in his autobiographical first letter *Ad virum perillustrem* [1728], actually claims he loathed reading Terence or Plautus or Vergil or Juvenal just for fun. Yet, given *Jacob von Tyboe*, could Holberg really have disliked Plautus' *Miles gloriosus*?

In trying to suggest where Holberg got his practical theatre knowledge, Leisner-Jensen makes two suggestions. Most usefully, he points out that, at least from 1718 on, the capital "*sydede...af teaterprojekter*" (45) and that, anyway, Étienne Capion's construction of the theatre in the Lille Grønnegade was under weigh. Furthermore, he points out that, though Holberg does not actually *say* he went to the theatre while he was in Paris, neither does he say he did *not*. Though Leisner-Jensen speculates much on Holberg's acquaintance with living theatre, he seems to assume that during Holberg's two years in England, some of the time in London, he probably saw no plays. While the evidence of *Epistel 241* is late (1747) and discouraging, it does, in fact, refer to plays that Holberg could have seen while in England and which, by the evidence of the *epistel* itself, he actually knew.

This is an entertaining little book that does not, I think, have a clear sense of direction. It is filled with those minute polemics we all know and love and carefully makes the various positions of the numerous combatants on these questions of dating clear. Its own questions and substance are of speculative biography, and Leisner-Jensen makes no

claims for more than that. He is not much concerned with Holberg's texts themselves, though his last sentence threatens a new study on Holberg's debt to the Romans.

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