

¶ Mogens Leisner-Jensen: *Scena er på teatro, Studier over Ludvig Holberg og den romerske komedie*. Odense: Odense universitetsforlag, 1999. Pp. 355. ISBN: 87-7838-402-8.

In the last sentence of his 1995 study, *Da Holberg blev poet*, Mogens Leisner-Jensen made it clear he had his sights set on writing a full account of Holberg's debt to Roman comedy. This book fulfills that promise.

Leisner-Jensen is mostly concerned with Holberg's use of Plautus and Terence. After a survey of previous work in the area, he offers a brief introduction to Plautus' and Terence's plays, with a few words, as well, about Menander (about whose mostly lost plays there are, alas, only a few words to say). There follows a brief, but suggestive, chapter collecting Holberg's own remarks about Plautus and Terence which essentially shows that Holberg held them both, but especially the former, in high esteem.

The fourth chapter is the heart of the book. Here, Leisner-Jensen presents and comments upon Holberg's textual borrowings from the classic theatre, play by play. He rightly calls this his *catalogue raisonné*. Here he gives parallel citations, often has interesting things to say about Holberg's usage of the source, and occasionally offers, thereby, perceptive readings of specific passages. This long chapter—140 pages—aims to be exhaustive, but it is not exhausting to read. Curiously, extensive as this chapter is, if one steps back and considers the whole of Holberg's dramatic production, the amount of direct borrowing from Classical writers turns out to be relatively limited. Indeed, certain aspects of it, characters, for instance, could almost be said to have become standard

comic goods by Holberg's day, an issue Leisner-Jensen does not duck, but one in which a broader perspective would be useful. The question of the dramatic import of all of Holberg's borrowings, contemporary as well as Classical, is one that still awaits energetic discussion, however.

The next three chapters evaluate Holberg's borrowings, discuss his adaptation of characters from Roman comedy, and attempt to say something about Holberg's dramatic technique. These three chapters are not as well-focussed as the preceding ones, however, and often seem to serve as a rag-bag for left-over things to say. As in any rag-bag, there is sometimes silk among the synthetics.

In looking generally at Holberg's borrowings, Leisner-Jensen sees that what Holberg chiefly found in Plautus was the latter's *festivitas* (228-29). This, he believes, is what made the plays "comic." In a number of places in his book, Leisner-Jensen emphasizes that Holberg was writing for a theatre, but never quite comes to grips with what this essential fact requires and implies, both for the performer and for the modern reader: these play-texts never quite seem to become *scripts*.

He returns to this issue in his seventh chapter, where he turns it into a question of realism and illusion. He takes over the argument about spectators on the stage—a source of great irritation for writers as different as Voltaire and Garrick—from Klaus Neiiendam [*Om iscenesættelsen på teatret i Lille Grønnegade* (Copenhagen: Gad, 1981)], who put the matter into the context of an anti-illusionistic intimacy between loge, stage, and auditorium. I am not sure why this is an issue here, especially in a book about Holberg's Classical borrowings, but an argument about illusion/realism based largely on the physical aspects of a performance area seems not to take into account what actually *happens* to a spectator in any theatre. It ignores the theatrical contract between author and audience and between player and audience which makes possible what Coleridge called "the willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith." My own experience suggests that questions of illusion are of relatively low interest for the spectator. That the theatre of Holberg's time was not one of "complete illusion," whatever *that* turns out to be (p. 289, citing Neiiendam, p. 40), seems beyond dispute.

The issue, especially in a chapter entitled “Dramatic technique,” is surely what is made of the theatre space one has to dispose of. As one answer, Leisner-Jensen points to the use of lines as traffic signals, of the kind which announce the entrance (usually) of a character. Though this chapter has many good bits in it, it seems to be more a collection of good bits rather than a complete argument about Holberg’s dramatic technique, about which much more needs to be said.

As a source-book for Holberg’s uses of the Classical writers, this book will be useful and necessary, a complement to Jens Kr. Andersen’s *Holbergs kilder?* (1993). It is enthusiastically written by someone who seems actually to enjoy Holberg. There are, however, two tedious elements to Leisner-Jensen’s otherwise attractive rhetoric. Most problematic is that he easily drifts off into excurses which, while often interesting or provocative in themselves, disrupt the clear movement of his argument and are not always coherently pursued. Less difficult is the fact that he seems almost deathly afraid of not giving credit where it is due, both in his narrative as well as in his 693 footnotes. The result is that the reader stumbles over the names and arguments of so many other scholars that Leisner-Jensen’s own contribution is in severe danger of being drowned by the chorus of colleagues. Though this study loses direction toward its end, it is good to be reminded, in its central theme, of the breadth of Holberg’s dramatic sense.

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