

# **THREE COMEDIES**

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Three comedies by Ludvig Holberg

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**LUDVIG HOLBERG**

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BY

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BARON HOLBERG

TRANSLATED FROM THE DANISH BY

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## PREFACE

IN the following translations Holberg's meaning is given to the best of the translator's ability, without tenacious adherence to phrases or punctilious attention to words. A translator, like other persons, may be over-righteous.

Holberg was born in Bergen in 1684, eleven years after the death of Molière, and seven years after the birth of George Farquhar, the youngest of the so-called "Comic Dramatists of the Restoration," and he died in Copenhagen in 1754. He was a man of comprehensive intellect, and wrote several valuable and laborious works in addition to his thirty-three comedies. The edition of his comedies referred to in this book is *Holbergs Komedier, udgivne af Julius Martensen*, in 13 vols., Ernst Bojesen, Copenhagen, 1897.

In the preface which he wrote (in French) to Fursman's French translation of some of his plays Holberg explains briefly his views on comedy (xii. 256). He wished, he says, to revive the taste for Plautus and Molière, whom he took for his guides; and he followed them even in their irregularities—that is, their frequent disregard for the unities of

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place and time. No play, he thinks, deserves the name of comedy unless it has a well-connected (*bien liée*) plot and striking catastrophe, and unless it is quickened by what the ancients called *festivité*, which is the soul of the theatre.

In the great majority of his plays Holberg has successfully carried out these views; but in more than one case he had "second thoughts," which were far from being "the best," and he injured some of his plays by altering them to fit more closely to "the rules." Herr Martensen mentions the fifth act of the altered play *Barselstuen* as "a curious example of how Holberg could injure his comedies in order to make them more conformable to the rules" (i. 35). It is difficult to explain these after-thoughts in the case of a man so well acquainted with Molière and the protest against the rules uttered by Uranie in the *Critique de l'École des Femmes*, sc. 6 : *Quand je vois une comédie, je regarde seulement si les choses me touchent ; et lorsque je m'y suis bien divertie, je ne vais point demander si j'ai eu tort, et si les règles d'Aristote me défendaient de rire.* In a few of his latest plays, too, he has allowed himself to be led astray by the principle of Horace :—

*Omne tulit punctum, qui miscuit utile duli.*

The *utile* is as praiseworthy in comedy as in other subjects, but it should be left to take care of itself. "I do not object to a dramatic poet having a moral influence in view," said Goethe (*Eckermann's Con-*

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versations, &c., p. 228), "but when the point is to bring his subject clearly and effectively before his audience, his moral purpose proves of little use, and he needs much more a faculty for delineation and a familiarity with the stage to know what to do and what to leave undone. If there be a moral in the subject, it will appear, and the poet has nothing to consider but the effective and artistic treatment of his subject. If a poet has as high a soul as Sophocles, his influence will always be moral, let him do what he will."

Holberg was aware that his comedies were not in accordance with the French taste of the period in which he wrote, and he explains why he deliberately avoided the French style. To write such pieces, he says, is no more than to write brilliant dialogues *qui n'ont aucune ressemblance aux Pièces de Théâtre*. Holberg thus set his face against that undue domination of wit, however brilliant, over action, plot, and dramatic propriety, which was exemplified on the English stage in the plays of Wycherley, Congreve, and Vanbrugh. Holberg wrote first of all as a dramatist, not as a man of letters. This is made clear by his defence against the charge that some of his characters were overcoloured. They are overcoloured, he says in effect, and they must be overcoloured, because they are meant for the stage. *C'est de propos délibéré que j'ai quelquefois chargé les couleurs et outré les peintures, l'expérience m'ayant appris que la justesse demandée par les Académiciens,*