

Holberg in Context: A View from Intellectual History

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Abstract: A prolific and versatile writer, Ludvig Holberg has long been the subject of intense scholarly debate about the identity of his thought and the best way of interpreting his works. What, in particular, has muddied the waters is his use of multifarious textual techniques and conventions, including the use of a broad array of literary genres, a plurality of voices, and diverse literary, historical, and intellectual sources. Engaging, critically, with current contextualist scholarship, this article focuses on what intellectual history can bring to the study of Holberg. Hence, as the article aims to show, thinking in a particular way about the context of Holberg's works, that is, in conjunction with the languages and personae that inhabit his writings, may help us to better understand the textual conventions and techniques that he employed in his writings, thereby illuminating his identity as a writer.

Keywords: Ludvig Holberg; contextualism; language; persona; intellectual history; interpretation.

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Introduction

In the past decade, Ludvig Holberg has been the subject of renewed and revitalized scholarly interest.¹ Whilst the digitized edition of Holberg's oeuvre, *Ludvig Holbergs Skrifter* (Ludvig Holberg's Writings), has furnish Holberg's texts with up-to-date introductions and editorial comments,² recent scholarship – including several PhD dissertations – has shed new light on the diverse contexts that shaped Holberg's works and their reception.³ Besides reinterpreting some of Holberg's most studied works,⁴ recent scholarship has also sparked a renewed interest in his conception of natural law and the variety of his historical writings.⁵ Yet, conflicting views of Holberg still prevail. In 2020, for instance, volume 17 of the present journal featured a polemic exchange between, on the one hand, Knud Haakonssen and Sebastian Olden-Jørgensen, whose volume *Ludvig Holberg (1684-1754): Learning and Literature in the Nordic Enlightenment* examines Holberg's works in a variety of contexts, and Ole Thomsen, on the other, who criticized the volume for

¹ I am grateful to the two anonymous reviewers for their comments on an earlier version of this essay, and to one of the reviewers for indispensable help with Latin translations. Unless modern, English editions are cited, all translations are my own.

² See holbergsskrifter.dk or holbergsskrifter.no.

³ Knud Haakonssen and Sebastian Olden-Jørgensen, eds. *Ludvig Holberg (1684–1754): Learning and Literature in the Nordic Enlightenment* (London: Routledge, 2017). [Crossref](#); Brian Kjær Olesen, 'Monarchism, Religion, and Moral Philosophy: Ludvig Holberg and the Early Northern Enlightenment' (PhD diss., European University Institute, 2016). [Crossref](#). On the reception and publishing contexts of Holberg's writings see Jens Bjerring-Hansen, *Ludvig Holberg på bogmarkedet: Studier i Peder Paars og den litterære kultur i 1700- og 1800-tallet* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanums Forlag, 2015); Thomas Slettebø, 'In Memory of Divine Providence: A Study of Centennial Commemorations in Eighteenth-Century Denmark-Norway (1717-1760)' (PhD Diss., University of Bergen, 2016). [Crossref](#).

⁴ See Bent Holm, *Ludvig Holberg, a Danish Playwright on the European Stage: Masquerade, Comedy, Satire*, trans. Gaye Kynoch (Wien: Hollitzer Verlag, 2018), [Crossref](#); Thomas Velle, 'Ludvig Holberg's Mobile Novel Niels Klim's Travels Underground (1741–1745): A Functionalistic Approach to its Place in European Literary History' (PhD Diss., University of Gent, 2018). [Crossref](#); Trygve Tronhuus Svensson, 'Ludvig Holberg's retorikk' (PhD Diss., University of Bergen, 2018). [Crossref](#).

⁵ Eiliv Vinje and Jørgen Magnus Sejersted, eds. *Ludvig Holbergs Naturrett* (Oslo: Gyldendal Nordisk Forlag, 2012); Jørgen Magnus Sejersted and Sebastian Olden-Jørgensen, eds. *Historikeren Ludvig Holberg* (Oslo: Scandinavian Academic Press, 2014); Are Bøe Pedersen, "'En Knude, som ved Menneskelige Raisons og historiske Exempler ikke kand løses': Hebraisk mytologi og forsvar mot religionskritikk i Ludvig Holbergs Den Jødiske Historie (1742)' (PhD Diss., University of Bergen, 2022). [Crossref](#); Inga Henriette Undheim, 'Historie og komedie: Litterære strukturer og strategier i Holbergs rikshistoriografi' (PhD Diss., University of Bergen, 2019). [Crossref](#).

its lack of interpretative unity.⁶ On Thomsen's account, Haakonssen and Olden-Jørgensen's volume succumbs to postmodernism – a somewhat exaggerated claim, however, considering the range of positions conventionally covered by this term – and fails to recognize the universality of Holberg's thought, by which we are to understand the Enlightenment. On Haakonssen and Olden-Jørgensen's account, such allegedly universal concepts as the Enlightenment have become obstacles to appreciating the multifaceted writings of Holberg. Instead, they advocate a 'contextual intellectual history' that aims to resist the 'common practice of privileging certain parts of Holberg's complex oeuvre' by situating Holberg's 'major genres and subjects' in the contexts 'provided by Holberg's own works'.⁷ This exchange is indicative of two prevailing approaches within current Holberg scholarship. While the first approach, given voice by Thomsen, sees the task of interpretation as that of identifying a single, unified context in which Holberg's works become meaningful, the second approach (of which Haakonssen and Olden-Jørgensen's volume is a pivotal example) takes Holberg's writings as evidence for a plurality of identities and contexts.

In this article I argue that both these approaches have led to mistaken claims about Holberg's identity as a writer, in part because of their methodological commitments. While the universalist approach insists on placing Holberg's writings in the context of free-floating unit-ideas such as *the* Enlightenment, thereby obscuring the relationship between Holberg's thought and the context which shaped it, the pluralist approach operates without any clear distinction between Holberg's intellectual, social, and political contexts, which has resulted in misleading accounts of Holberg's intellectual activity.⁸

I have two principal aims in this article. First, I wish to challenge some of the directions taken in recent scholarship. As most, if not all Holberg-scholars acknowledge today, the architecture of Holberg's writings is both complex and multilayered. As a writer, Holberg was as versatile as he was prolific, his style of writing, as eclectic as it was entertaining and enlightening. Focusing on Holberg's

⁶ Ole Thomsen, 'Lidt om synet på Holberg i anledning af en engelsk-sproget bog om ham [Review of Knud Haakonssen & Sebastian Olden-Jørgensen (eds.): 'Ludvig Holberg (1684–1754): Learning and Literature in the Nordic Enlightenment' (New York, 2017)]', *1700-tal: Nordic Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 17 (2020), pp. 218–24. [Crossref](#); Knud Haakonssen and Sebastian Olden-Jørgensen, 'Svar til Ole Thomsen [Reply to 'Lidt om synet på Holberg i anledning af en engelsksproget bog om ham']', *1700-tal: Nordic Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 17 (2020), pp. 225–28. [Crossref](#).

⁷ Knud Haakonssen and Sebastian Olden-Jørgensen, 'Preface', in *Ludvig Holberg*, eds. Haakonssen and Olden-Jørgensen, p. x.

⁸ On this point see also Kasper Eskildsen, 'Ludvig Holberg og den nordeuropæiske oplysning', *Historisk Tidsskrift* (Copenhagen) 117 (2017), pp. 549–65.

use of diverse literary genres, a plurality of voices, and a broad variety of literary, historical, and intellectual sources, I seek to demonstrate that the prevailing methods of contextual interpretation fall short of accounting for key aspects of the textual conventions and techniques that shaped Holberg's writings.

My second interrelated aim is to advocate a contextualist approach, drawing on central methodological insights developed within the field of intellectual history. Considering the construction of a writer's identity a particular kind of intellectual problem, the core concern of the article is with what Holberg was doing in his writings. Coming to terms with the textual conventions and techniques used by Holberg to cultivate his identity as a writer, I argue, we need not only to contextualize Holberg's writings using the techniques of historical reconstruction, we need moreover to do so in a particular fashion, that is, by approaching Holberg's works as situated expressions of linguistic action.

The central claim of the article is thus that in so far as we wish to understand Holberg's identity as a writer, we should start by recovering not only the *languages* that Holberg used and inhabited,⁹ but also the authorial *personae* cultivated throughout his writings.¹⁰ The contextual perspectives on which I draw here are by no means representative of the field of intellectual history at large, which comprises a broad range of approaches, and nor have they gone unchallenged.¹¹ Nevertheless, the claim I wish to defend in the following is that they do push forward our understanding of Holberg's intellectual world. Reconstructing how Holberg engaged in contemporary debates through the application of different languages and the cultivation of different personae, we shall be in a better position to grasp not only the contexts that shaped Holberg's interventions and what he was doing when contributing to specific debates, but also the conditions

⁹ Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics, I: Regarding Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). [Crossref](#); J. G. A. Pocock, *Political Thought and History: Essays on Theory and Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

¹⁰ Ian Hunter, 'The History of Philosophy and the Persona of the Philosopher', *Modern Intellectual History*, 4 (2007), pp. 571–600. [Crossref](#); See also Conal Condren, Stephen Gaukroger, and Ian Hunter, eds., *The Philosopher in Early Modern Europe: The Nature of a Contested Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). [Crossref](#); Conal Condren, 'Specifying the Subject in Early Modern Autobiography', in *Early Modern Autobiography: Theories, Genres, Practices*, eds. Ronald Bedford, Lloyd Davis, and Philippa Kelly (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2006), pp. 35–48. [Crossref](#).

¹¹ Richard Whatmore, *What is Intellectual History?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016). For recent criticism see Martin Jay, 'Historical Explanation and the Event: Reflections on the Limits of Contextualization', *New Literary History*, 42 (2011), pp. 557–71. [Crossref](#); Peter E. Gordon, 'Contextualism and Criticism in the History of Ideas', in Darrin M. McMahon and Samuel Moyn, eds., *Rethinking Modern European Intellectual History* (Oxford 2014), pp. 32–55. [Crossref](#).

under which his works were produced, which is to say those conditions that both structured and created the very possibility of cultivating a particular identity as a writer.

By way of illustration we may consider a statement which appears in the first instalment of Holberg's memoirs, the *Ad virum perillustrem *** epistola* (1728), where he writes, 'while I pull philosophical beards, I wear one of my own.'¹² Holberg's statement, or so we may assume, was meant as an engagement with rival philosophical languages, doctrines, and conceptions. Deciphering exactly what the nature of the intervention he was making was, that is, which particular 'move in an argument' he intended to make, requires that we situate Holberg's works in relation to the languages of philosophy available at the time.¹³ Yet, the statement holds one further clue to what he was doing. Making this statement about pulling philosophical beards he was also engaged in a debate about what constitutes a philosophical persona. Wearing a philosophical beard of his own, he was reacting to what he considered a false idea of philosophy (his pulling of philosophical beards). What Holberg was doing was in other words to address one of the major philosophical issues of the day by using the conventions of ironic self-description to fashion his own philosophical authority.

Fleshing out this perspective, I proceed in three steps, structured around the most widely used textual conventions and techniques in Holberg's works. Focusing on Holberg's genres, his voices, and sources, the article discusses the methodological presuppositions upon which recent interpretations rest and draws out their implications. For the sake of argument and illustration I furnish the discussion with examples from Holberg's writings and the contexts in which he acted. My aim in doing so, to think anew about Holberg's identity as a writer.

Holberg's genres

I turn first to Holberg's genres. Throughout his writings, Holberg explored a wide range of genres and he often reflected on the duties and possibilities that each genre entailed. Recent scholarship has paved the way for a broader understanding of Holberg's genres and the contexts in which he authored his works. As Bent Holm asserts in his contextual study of Holberg's plays, for instance, the classification of a

¹² Ludvig Holberg, *Ad virum perillustrem *** epistola*, 1728, ed. Finn Gredal Jensen (Ludvig Holbergs Skrifter, 2015ff, vers. 2.13), p. 208: 'barbas Philosophorum vellico, ipse tamen philosophor' (accessed 21.03.2023). Cited in Ludvig Holberg, *Ludvig Holberg's Memoirs: An Eighteenth-Century Danish Contribution to International Understanding*, ed. Steward E. Fraser (Leiden: Brill, 1970), p. 151.

¹³ Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, p. 115.

specific play as a representation of a specific genre is ‘a questionable strategy’ that ‘swiftly close down for more nuanced, complex readings’ and shifts the focus away from the political and religious contexts in which Holberg wrote his comedies.¹⁴ Another direction in recent scholarship has demonstrated close ties between the genres that Holberg used and the personae he cultivated in his writings. Haakonssen, for instance, connects ‘different authorial personae’ in Holberg’s oeuvre to ‘different practices that Holberg as a matter of fact engaged in’, including such ‘interwoven’ offices as ‘the natural lawyer, the pragmatic gentleman historian, that of the minimalist religionist and that of the eclectic moralizing “entertainer”’.¹⁵ Moreover, whilst Thomas Slettebø has analysed how Holberg responded to the social tensions arising from his use of different genres by dividing his oeuvre into what he referred to as his honourable and his humorous works,¹⁶ Sebastian Olden-Jørgensen has emphasised the broad variety of historical subgenres that constitute Holberg’s historical works.¹⁷ Although Holberg, on Olden-Jørgensen’s account, ‘was an historian first and last’, the pragmatic, gentleman historian had many faces.¹⁸

Despite the advances made by recent scholarship, contextual treatments of Holberg’s genres still foster misleading conclusions about his identity as a writer. The core problem here is that treatments of Holberg’s genres seem to presuppose or rely on a concept of coherence, whereby the strictures of genre is supplanted to other levels of interpretation. Especially two versions of coherentism dominate the current climate of scholarship. The first version aims to extract from Holberg’s writings a set of coherent ideas that are believed to make up his identity as a writer or thinker. To illustrate the presuppositions and implications of this method of interpretation we may turn, here, to recent accounts of Holberg’s religious writings. Holberg was, or so we are told, an ‘intellectual protestant’ and an anti-Catholic, whose ‘view on morals and religion’ was characterized by ‘a basic continuity’.¹⁹ Although ‘the perspective changes’ in Holberg’s later writings as ‘questions of moral theology and philosophy’ give way to ‘a methodical subjectivism’, derived

¹⁴ Holm, *Ludvig Holberg*, p. 110.

¹⁵ Knud Haakonssen, ‘Introduction, Part 2: the Author and the Work’, in *Ludvig Holberg*, eds. Haakonssen and Olden-Jørgensen, pp. 13–25 (on p. 21). [Crossref](#).

¹⁶ Thomas Slettebø, ‘Holberg’s Authorial Personae’, in *Ludvig Holberg*, eds. Haakonssen and Olden-Jørgensen, pp. 29–44. [Crossref](#).

¹⁷ Sebastian Olden-Jørgensen, ‘History: National, Universal and Dynastic’, in *Ludvig Holberg*, eds. Haakonssen and Olden-Jørgensen, pp. 159–81. [Crossref](#).

¹⁸ Olden-Jørgensen, ‘History’, p. 159.

¹⁹ Jørgen Magnus Sejersted, ‘Jewish History’, in *Ludvig Holberg*, eds. Haakonssen and Olden-Jørgensen, pp. 196–215 (on p. 197). [Crossref](#); Jørgen Magnus Sejersted, ‘Morals and Religion in Holberg’s Essays’, in *Ludvig Holberg*, eds. Haakonssen and Olden-Jørgensen, pp. 80–97. [Crossref](#); Sebastian Olden-Jørgensen, ‘Den antikatolske Holberg: Kirke, stat og naturet i skyggen af Samuel Pufendorf’, *Historisk Tidsskrift*, 117 (2017), pp. 1–34.

from ‘German protestant eclecticism’,²⁰ the intellectual context in which Holberg formed his religious ideas was strongly influenced by intellectual currents coming out of Germany such as Pufendorffian natural law, Thomasian eclecticism and ideas of natural religion. The implication here seems to be that by extracting from across Holberg’s works a set of coherent ideas this method is supposedly able to ascribe to Holberg a stable and continuous identity as a writer. This, however, is not my perspective.

Holberg, so much is certain, remained an anti-Catholic his entire life, but this does not account for the alleged continuity (or coherence) of his religious views. Holberg’s early religious views, or so I take it, are best described as orthodox Lutheran. In the *Ad virum perillustrem *** epistola*, for instance, he embraces a set of traditional Lutheran doctrines and describes a series of encounters he had on his European travels with the Catholic Counter-Reformation.²¹ By contrast, his later religious views clusters around such ideas as religious toleration, the freedom of the will, the goodness of God, intellectual enquiry or examination, the truth of the Christian religion, and the fundamental articles of faith. German eclecticism and natural religion were arguably pivotal to Holberg’s formulation of these ideas, but the most important context for the formation of these ideas was neither German or Pufendorffian or Thomasian. The main intellectual context that shaped Holberg’s religious ideas is rather related with enlightened Arminianism and Grotian irenicism.²² In Epistola XXXII, included in the first volume of the *Epistler* in 1748, Holberg argued that ‘both Le Clerc and Grotius worked for the best of the Christian religion’, urging ‘concord and mutual tolerance upon those, who, although in agreement about the fundamental articles of faith, are separated by petty differences’.²³ Moreover, in Epistola CXXXIII and again in Epistola CCXXXVIII, which appeared respectively in the second and third volume of the *Epistler* in 1748 and

²⁰ Sejersted, ‘Morals’, pp. 80, 84–86.

²¹ See especially Holberg, *Ad virum perillustrem *** epistola*, pp. 170–77.

²² For a comprehensive account see Olesen, ‘Monarchism’, 215–301. For enlightened Arminianism and Grotian irenicism see J. G. A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion, vol. 1: The Enlightenment of Edward Gibbon, 1737–1764* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). [Cross-ref](#); Martin van Gelderen, ‘The Low Countries’, in Howell A. Lloyd, et al, eds., *European Political Thought 1450–1700: Religion, Law and Philosophy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), pp. 398–403.

²³ Ludvig Holberg, *Epistler*, I–V, 1748–54, eds. Eiliv Vinje og Nina Marie Evensen (Ludvig Holbergs Skrifter, 2015ff, vers. 2.13), Tomus I, p. 180, 181: ‘Clericus saavel som Grotius have været vel intentionerede for den Christelige Religion, sees af deres grundige Skrifter om den Christelige Troes Sandhed [...] Eenighed og indbyrdes Tolerance, dem som formedelst smaa Stridigheder separere sig fra hinanden, skjønt de ere eenige udi Troens fundamentale Article’ (accessed 27.04.2023). Cited in Ludvig Holberg, *Selected Essays of Ludvig Holberg*, ed. P. M. Mitchell (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1955), p. 36, 37.

1750, he defends the religious views of Jacob Arminius as his own, praising his defense of ‘the freedom of the will’ and ‘God’s goodness and righteousness’ along with his ‘Christian toleration and compassion towards heretics’.²⁴ Holberg’s engagement with enlightened Arminianism and Grotian irenicism not only shaped his intervention in contemporary European religious controversies, it also underpinned his thinking about Christian education and the persona of the Christian believer in *Moralske Tanker* and the *Epistler*, especially his moral catechism suggested in Epistola XLVI.²⁵ These works were written as much as in response to Erich Pontoppidan’s *Sandhed til Gudfrygtighed* (1737), an epitome of pietist reform, as to the orthodox Lutheran view of religious education outlined, for instance, in Frandtz Thestrup’s *Underviisnings Spørmaale* (1721).²⁶ Hence, by reconstructing Holberg’s *languages*, as opposed to extracting a set of coherent ideas from across his writings, we are in a better position to recover the discontinuities in Holberg’s religious writings, his changing religious commitments and identities, first as an orthodox Lutheran, then an irenic and a tolerationist writer.

The second version of coherentism aims at interpreting a particular work by focusing on the relationship between the genre in which the work is written and its corresponding authorial persona. In order to illustrate the presuppositions and implications of this method of interpretation we may turn again to Holberg’s thinking about philosophical office-holding. As Kristoffer Schmidt has recently argued, a ‘turning point’ in Holberg’s literary career occurred in the late 1730s, when he ‘took the decisive step from pragmatic historian to moral philosopher’.²⁷ Venturing into the Plutarchian genre of parallel biographies, Holberg’s *Adskillige store Heltes og berømmelige Mænds, sær Orientaliske og Indianske sammenlignede Historier og Bedrifter efter Plutarchi Maade* (1739) marked the ‘beginning’ of ‘a literary turn’ as the ‘historian Holberg’ here ‘attempted to write as a moralist’.²⁸ Though Hol-

²⁴ Holberg, *Epistler*, Tomus II, p. 226: ‘den fri Villie’, ‘Guds Godhed og Retfærdighed’; Holberg, *Epistler*, Tomus III, p. 209: ‘christelig Tolerance og Medlidenhed mod Vildfarende’.

²⁵ Ludvig Holberg, *Moralske Tanker*, 1744, eds. Eiliv Vinje og Nina Marie Evensen (Ludvig Holbergs Skrifter, 2015ff, vers. 2.13), Libr. I, Epigramm. 5., pp. 47–61; Holberg, *Epistler*, Tomus I, pp. 246–255.

²⁶ Erich Pontoppidan, *Sandhed Til Gudfrygtighed, Udi En eenfoldig og efter Muelighed kort, dog tilstrækkelig Forklaring over Sal. Doct. Mort. Luthers Liden Catechismo* (Copenhagen: det Kongel. Waysenhusets Bogtrykkerie, 1737); Frandtz Thestrup, *Underviisnings Spørmaale For at forstaae og i Levnet til Brug at føre D. Morten Luthers Liden Catechismus* (Copenhagen: J. J. Høpffner, 1721).

²⁷ Kristoffer Schmidt, ‘Heroes and Heroines: the lives of men and women’, in *Ludvig Holberg*, eds. Haakonssen and Olden-Jørgensen, pp. 98–115 (on p. 109). [Crossref](#).

²⁸ Schmidt, ‘Heroes and Heroines’, p. 112. See also Ludvig Holberg, *Adskillige store Heltes og berømmelige Mænds, sær Orientaliske og Indianske sammenlignede Historier og Bedrifter efter Plutarchi Maade*, I–II, 1739, eds. Finn Gredal Jensen and Karen Skovgaard-Petersen (Ludvig Holbergs Skrifter, 2015ff, vers. 2.13).

berg's comparative biographies only cautiously assessed 'the virtues and vices of the portrayed' persons, the sequel, the *Adskillige Heltinders og Navnkundige Damers Sammenlignende Historier efter Plutarchi Maade* (1745), 'was the work of an experienced and confident and moralist', thereby completing the literary turn from history to moral philosophy in Holberg's career as a writer.²⁹ However, this account of the changes in Holberg's thinking presupposes that these personae and the genres in which they appear are coherent, or, that is, fixed and compartmentalised identities. Although I share the emphasis on Holberg's authorial personae as a way of interpreting the genres he used, the perspective I am advocating takes a different direction. Consider, for example, the wider intellectual context in which Holberg's thinking about philosophy took shape.

Holberg's perception of philosophy developed along two distinct, yet intertwined lines of contestation. The first perception of philosophical office-holding was central to Holberg already from an early stage in his professional career. In his *Introduction til Naturens- og Folke-Rettens Kundskab*, which first appeared in 1716, Holberg included *philosophia moralis* or moral philosophy along with medicine, mathematics and history in the category of the useful sciences most beneficial to the state and society. Like Pufendorf and Thomasius – two of his principal interlocutors in the treatise on natural law – Holberg too considered human sociability and the possibility of peaceful coexistence 'the fundamental problem in philosophy'.³⁰ Advocating this image of philosophy, what Holberg was doing at this stage of his career was to offer a secular alternative to the prevailing Lutheran theory of clerical authority in matters of government that had risen to prominence during and after the monarchical revolution of 1660.³¹ Advocates of this tradition such as Johann Wandal and Hector Gottfried Masius argued not only that Lutheranism best served the interest of absolutist state, they also advised the king in matters pertaining to morality and religion and passed moral judgement on the actions of absolute monarchs.³² Tra-

²⁹ Schmidt, 'Heroes and Heroines', p. 112. See also Ludvig Holberg, *Adskillige Heltinders og Navnkundige Damers Sammenlignende Historier efter Plutarchi Maade*, I–II, 1745, ed. Karen Skovgaard-Petersen (Ludvig Holbergs Skrifter, 2015ff. vers. 2.13).

³⁰ Knud Haakonssen, 'The History of Eighteenth-Century Philosophy: History or Philosophy?', in *The Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Philosophy*, ed. Knud Haakonssen, 2 vols., vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 1–25 (on p. 14). [Crossref](#).

³¹ For the broader outlook of this theory and its centrality to Danish absolutism see Brian Kjør Olesen, 'The Monarchical Moment: Constitutionalism, Lutheran Political Thought, and the Rise of Danish Absolutism', in *Constitutional Moments: Founding Myths, Charters and Constitutions through History*, ed. Xavier Gil (Leiden: Brill, Forthcoming 2023).

³² Johann Wandal, *Den Stormægtigste og Høybaarne Arffve-Konnings og Monarchs/ HER CHRISTIAN DEN FEMTES...* (Copenhagen: Hendrick og Jørgen Gøede, 1671); Hector Gottfried Masius, *Interesse Principum Circa Religionem Evangelicam Ad Serenissimum ac Potentissimum Danicæ Regem* (Copenhagen: Joh. Phil. Bockenhoffer 1687), esp. p. 168.

ditionally the preserve of theologians, Holberg argues that moral judgement and counsel should be based not on clerical authority, but be drawn from the precepts of natural law and the examples of history. The persona of the philosopher, cultivated by Holberg in his early writings, commands not only moral philosophy, which serves the ‘creation and preservation of human society’, but also history, from which one learns about ‘Geography and language’ as well as ‘Jus publicum and politica’.³³ Rejecting clerical authority, Holberg claims the predominance of philosophical authority in the world of politics. The philosopher has become a civil servant, an advisor to the prince and his government.³⁴

The second perception of philosophy cultivated in Holberg’s writings turns on the distinction between a true and a false philosophical persona. In his plays and elsewhere, he intended to discredit a particular culture of learning, steeped in neo-scholastic and rationalist ideas about philosophy. Drawing on the social representations of the persona of the philosopher, flourishing within the context of the theatre, especially in the tradition from Moliere,³⁵ several of Holberg’s comedies are themed around the abuse of the philosophical office, the philosopher’s pedantry and misconstrued sociability. In *Erasmus Montanus* (1731), to mention only the most notable example, a young student, returning from Copenhagen to his place of birth, arrogantly believes himself capable of defending any proposition using the techniques of *philosophia instrumentalis*, that is, logic and metaphysics.³⁶ Montanus thus refuses to concede that he is wrong in a dispute with the locals about whether the earth is flat or oblong, the locals being of the opinion that it is flat. Once a philosopher has defended a statement in public, Montanus claims, he can never be persuaded otherwise.

Holberg’s representation of the false philosophical persona in his plays and elsewhere took aim at more than mere satire. Like Christian Thomasius and Johann Burkhardt Mencke, whom he had met respectively in Halle and Leipzig in 1708, Holberg used satire to attack the prevailing academic culture at Protestant universities, ripe with neo-scholastic theology, philosophical rationalism, and met-

³³ Ludvig Holberg, *Ludvig Holbergs Introduction til Naturens- og Folke-Rettens Kundskab, uddragen af de fornemste Juristers besynderlig Grotii Pufendorfs og Thomasii Skrifter, illustreret med Exempler af de Nordiske Historier, og confederet med disse Rigers, saa vel Gamle som Nye Love* (Copenhagen: Johan Kruse/Ove Lynnov, 1716), Fortale til Læseren, p. 9, 10: ‘Menneskelige societets opbyggelse og ved liigeholdelse’, ‘Geographie og sprog’, ‘Jus publicum og politica’.

³⁴ On this point see Knud Haakonssen, ‘Indledning til Natur- og Folkeretten’ (Ludvig Holbergs Skrifter, 2015ff, vers. 2.13); Olesen, ‘Monarchism’, pp. 33–34.

³⁵ Stéphane van Damme, ‘Philosophe/philosopher’, in *The Cambridge Companion to the French Enlightenment*, ed. Daniel Brewer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 153–66 (on p. 154). [Crossref](#). See also Holm, *Ludvig Holberg*.

³⁶ Ludvig Holberg, *Erasmus Montanus*, 1731, ed. Finn Gredal Jensen (Ludvig Holbergs Skrifter, 2015ff, vers. 2.13), Femte akt, scene 2, p. D5v.

aphysics.³⁷ In contradistinction to the neo-scholastic and rationalist philosopher that he ridiculed in his plays, Holberg went on to espouse a different philosophical persona elsewhere in his writings. In his *Oratio valedictoria*, for instance, delivered in 1736, when he retired from the office of rector to the University of Copenhagen, Holberg sets out to define the duties of philosophical office-holding. ‘We consider the one a true and genuine Philosopher’, declares Holberg, ‘who would rather be than seem to be, who knows when to keep quiet, no less than when to talk, and who educates more by his way of life, than by his words’.³⁸ The persona of the philosopher, Holberg suggests, must be judged not by the adherence to some philosophical doctrine (his words), but by his conduct (his way of life), that is, the performance of the social duties attached to the philosophical office. Holberg further elaborates on these duties, arguing that ‘a true Philosopher’ is one who ‘searches for the truth through deliberations, avoids tortuous arguments, who admits to be defeated whenever he is persuaded, he reads only little, but thoroughly digests what he reads, and seeks the right taste in literature’.³⁹ The philosopher lives a modest, though active and useful life. This was Holberg’s version of philosophy as a form of *negotium*, as opposed to the contemplative and withdrawn ideal of philosophy as an *otium*, central to early-modern philosophy.⁴⁰

We are now in a better position to reassess the relation between the gallery of personae that Holberg cultivated and the genres in which he wrote. Consider again Schmidt’s argument that Holberg in the late 1730s decisively shifted his own persona from a pragmatic historian to a moral philosopher. Whilst Holberg, admittedly, turns towards moral philosophy in the late 1730s, publishing what may be considered his major works on moral philosophy in the 1740s and 1750s, the assertion that the shift implied a corresponding change in Holberg’s persona is

³⁷ Holberg, *Ad virum perillustrem *** epistola*, pp. 40–41. On the German context see Thomas Ahnert, *Religion and the Origins of the German Enlightenment: Faith and Reform of Learning in the Thought of Christian Thomasius* (Rochester, N.Y.; Rochester University Press, 2006); Ian Hunter, *The Secularisation of the Confessional State: The Political Thought of Christian Thomasius* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). [Crossref](#).

³⁸ Ludvig Holberg, *Oratio valedictoria*, 1736, ed. Finn Gredal Jensen (Ludvig Holbergs Skrifter, 2015ff, vers. 2.13), p. 94: ‘Verum nos & genuinum credimus Philosophum, qvi mavult esse quam videri, qvi non minus tacere callet, quam dicere, qvique moribus potius, quam verbis, instruit’ (accessed 21.03.2023).

³⁹ Holberg, *Oratio valedictoria*, 1736, p. 94: ‘Veri est Philosophi meditando verum indagare, vertigines fugere, victum se fateri, quoties convictum se intelligit, pauca legere, lecta bene digerere, & rectum in literis gustum venari’ (accessed 21.03.2023).

⁴⁰ Anne Beate Maurseth, ‘Falske og ekte filosofer: Holbergs posisjon i en europeisk 1700-tallsdebatt’, *Edda*, 109 (2022), 156–69 (on p. 165). [Crossref](#). See also Stephen Gaukroger, *Francis Bacon and the Transformation of Early-Modern Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 44–57. [Crossref](#); Condren, Gaukroger, and Hunter, eds., *The Philosopher*.

less convincing. Moral philosophy along with history had been central themes in Holberg's thought from his early writings all the way through to his major works on moral philosophy. As we have seen, the persona of the philosopher and that of the historian not only coexisted throughout his oeuvre, they were closely intertwined. Thus, there is no decisive transition from the persona of the historian to that of the philosopher, set in motion in order for him to write as a moralist.

What Holberg was doing was not to change one persona and one genre for another. In light of Holberg's thinking about philosophical office-holding, we may offer another explanation. Indeed, when situated in this context, what Holberg was doing was to re-cultivate the persona of the moral philosopher in order to adjust to changing circumstances. In his treatise on natural law Holberg combined history and moral philosophy in order to cultivate the persona of the moral philosopher as a counselor to the prince and his government. By contrast, the persona of the moral philosopher, which Holberg cultivates from the late 1730s onwards, seeks instead – not unlike the playwright and the satirist of the 1720s – to educate the wider public. The reason why the pragmatic historian plays no role in this regard is that history, as he writes in his *Betænkning over Historier*, included in the third volume of his *Dannemarks Riges Historie* (1735), is first and foremost written for princes, governments, and people of nobility.⁴¹

There are two general points to be made here about Holberg's genres and his identity as a writer, both of which renders the methods of interpretation discussed above untenable. First, the genres and personae that appear in Holberg's writings are not to be considered closed entities that embody coherent authorial identities. Holberg was not first a natural lawyer, then a satirist and a playwright, then a historian, and finally a moral philosopher. At times, Holberg expressed the same ideas through different genres and personae – his irenicism, which he voiced both as a historian and as a moral philosopher, is one such case in point – at others, he refurbished what it meant to write in a particular genre and to cultivate a particular authorial persona. Second, throughout Holberg's writings there are important family resemblances that tie the persona of the philosopher to those of the historian, the playwright, and the satirist. As Holm, for instance, has put it, there were no 'firewalls' between his authorial personae.⁴² What this suggests is that the wider intellectual context in which Holberg wrote was one of contestation and transformation. Not only were the boundaries between philosophy, rhetoric, and poetry shifting in the eighteenth century, so were the demarcations of philosophy, history,

⁴¹ Ludvig Holberg, *Betænkning over Historier*, in *Dannemarks Riges Historie*, Tomus III, 1735, ed. Eiliv Vinje og Nina Marie Evensen (Ludvig Holbergs Skrifter, 2015ff, vers. 2.13), p. c1r.

⁴² Bent Holm, 'Holberg's comedies: intentions and inspirations', in *Ludvig Holberg*, eds. Haakonssen and Olden-Jørgensen, pp. 135–56 (on p. 135). [Crossref](#).

anthropology and physics.⁴³ Seen in this light, Holberg's consideration of the duty and office of a particular persona offers important clues as to his intentions in writing what he did. Holberg's identity as a writer is thus closely tied to changing constellations of personae and genres, cultivated throughout his writings in order to make possible a range of interventions in contemporary debates.

Holberg's voices

I wish to consider next the issue of Holberg's voices. As recent scholarship has shown, Holberg often sought to mask his own identity and opinions. His published works – particularly his comedies and his satirical works, but also his essays – embody a plurality of voices and perspectives, and he often plays with notions of authorship, publishing both pseudonymously and under his own name. In the late 1710s and 1720s, for instance, Holberg published all of his satirical works under the pseudonym 'Hans Mikkelsen', often accompanied by yet another invented author, 'Just Justesen', a figure, whom Holberg used as the voice of his more general literary reflections on satire and comedy. Throughout his published works, these pseudonyms appear alongside other pseudonyms such as 'Zille Hans's Daughter', through whom he addressed issues of meritocracy and the social role of gender, and 'Nicolaus Klimius', who appeared as the author of the utopian novel *Nicolai Klimii Iter subterraneum* in 1741.⁴⁴ Although Holberg only publicly declared his authorship of the early comedies and satirical works in 1728, when he discussed his literary production in the first part of his memoirs, his authorship was a poorly kept secret. Besides being known to his publishers in Copenhagen, his distributor in Norway, and, possibly, to a small group of friends, often considered fictitious,⁴⁵ about whom he writes without any further specification,⁴⁶ Holberg's pseudonymity had been revealed by Albert Thura in his *Idea historiae litterariae Danorum* (1723).⁴⁷

⁴³ Conal Condren and Ian Hunter, 'The Persona of the Philosopher in the Eighteenth Century', *Intellectual History Review*, 18 (2008), pp. 315–17 (on p. 316). [Crossref](#).

⁴⁴ Haakonssen, 'Introduction', pp. 15–16; Karen Skovgaard-Petersen, 'Journeys of humour and satire: Peder Paars and Niels Klim', in *Ludvig Holberg*, eds. Haakonssen and Olden-Jørgensen, pp. 116–34 (on p. 128). [Crossref](#).

⁴⁵ Lars Roar Langslet, 'Ludvig Holberg – det store overblik', in G. Dahlberg, P. C. Teilmann, and F. Thorsen, eds., *Holberg i Norden: Om Ludvig Holbergs författarskap och dess kulturhistoriska betydelse* (Stockholm: Makadam Förlag, 2004), pp. 27–40 (on p. 29).

⁴⁶ Holberg, *Ad virum perillustrem *** epistola*, p. 134. On Holberg's authorship see Bjerring-Hansen, *Ludvig Holberg på bogmarkedet*, p. 50.

⁴⁷ On this point see Niels Grotum Sørensen, 'Indledning til Just Justesens Betenkning over Comoedier' (Ludvig Holbergs Skrifter, 2015ff, vers. 2.13) (accessed 19.04.2023).

Yet, even in his autobiographical writings, he presents his self-portrait with a cloak of fiction.⁴⁸

Holberg, in other words, playfully expressed his opinions through diverse authorial voices and fictional characters. To be sure, Holberg was not the only early Enlightenment thinker to play with pseudonyms and a plurality of voices in his writings. Indeed, some of the writers that Holberg most admired, used similar literary strategies. Pierre Bayle's *Dictionnaire Historique et Critique*, for instance, contained a plurality of authorial voices and personae brought to life through a labyrinth of cross-references,⁴⁹ and Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, played with pseudo-factuality in much the same way as Holberg did in both *Peder Paars* and *Nicolai Klimii Iter subterraneum*.⁵⁰ Yet, Holberg's use of different voices begs the pertinent question of what it means to say that Holberg – 'the person', as Haakonssen has aptly formulated it, 'who was born in 1684 and died in 1754' – held any of the opinions voiced in his works.⁵¹ Recent scholarship has sought to explain Holberg's voices and opinions by placing his writings in social context. Yet, this general approach seems to presuppose a correspondence between Holberg's writings and the social setting in they are said to belong, thereby reducing Holberg's works to a medium through which an external reality is acting. To fully grasp the scope of this problem I shall consider three variations of this perspective on social context that have resulted in different interpretations of Holberg's authorial practices.

Scholars who adhere to the first perspective on social context are generally content to understand Holberg's voices and his use of pseudonyms in light of his social status. Besides his intention to entertain his readers by introducing a plurality of voices into his satirical works, Holberg used these voices to shield himself from criticism and to avoid losing his social status.⁵² At the time when Holberg's published his satirical works and his comedies, he was a professor at Copenhagen, and since it was unbecoming of a professor to engage with low culture such as comedy and satire, Holberg had to disguise his authorship. Holberg's social status as a university professor conflicts with his work as a poet and a playwright. Whilst such considerations may have motivated Holberg, this interpretation tells us very little about why he chose to publish some of his writings pseudonymously

⁴⁸ Karen Skovgaard-Petersen, 'Holberg's autobiographical letters', in *Ludvig Holberg*, eds. Haakonssen and Olden-Jørgensen, pp. 45–56. [Crossref](#).

⁴⁹ Mara van der Lugt, *Bayle, Jurieu, and the Dictionnaire Historique et Critique* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). [Crossref](#).

⁵⁰ Skovgaard-Petersen, 'Journeys', p. 124, 128;

⁵¹ Haakonssen, 'Introduction', 16.

⁵² Lars Roar Langslet, *Den store ensomme: En biografi om Ludvig Holberg* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 2002), pp. 108–09, 113.

or how he intended the plurality of voices and opinions to be read. What is certain, however, is that concerns for his social station is an implausible explanation of the textual techniques and conventions that governed this aspect of his writings. When Holberg publicly declared his authorship in the *Ad virum perillustrem* *** *epistola*, well-known as it had been for several years, his social station was the same as when he wrote and published his early satirical works, that is, he was a university professor.

Scholars who subscribe to the second perspective on social context have turned to the structures of absolutism in the early eighteenth century for an explanation of Holberg's use of pseudonyms. If the reference to Holberg's social status fails to offer any satisfying explanation of why he published his satirical works pseudonymously, scholars who emphasise the structures of absolutism suggest that Holberg struggled with the institution of censorship. Unable to develop a fully comprehensive philosophy of history and society, Holberg used such pseudonyms as 'Nicolaus Klimius' in order to avoid censorship of what is often considered his most subversive work.⁵³ Yet, while Holberg indeed was a fierce critic of the prevailing norms of censorship, he never advocated their complete abandonment. Moreover, this interpretation does not explain why Holberg only used pseudonyms in some cases, whilst uttering similar views in other works, published under his own name, nor does it explain why he chose to cloak his identity by using pseudonyms in his comedies.

The exponents of the third perspective on social context have rejected the emphasis on censorship, focussing instead on the close connection between different voices and opinions, on the one hand, and, on the other, the social offices that Holberg aspired to by taking upon himself different authorial personae. For instance, as Olden-Jørgensen has shown, what Holberg struggled with in his historical works was not censorship and suppression, but the tension between the duties of the historian and those of the citizen.⁵⁴ What this suggests is that the cultivation of a persona such as the historian or the citizen limits the author by imposing upon the writer a set of social obligations belonging to distinct offices in society while simultaneously making possible the expression of distinct voices

⁵³ Torben Damsholt, 'Historikeren Holberg mellem utopi og skepsis', *Almanak* (1985), 157–66 (on pp. 162–63); Øystein Rian, 'Ludvig Holbergs historie- og samfunnsforståelse', in Peter Christensen Teilmann and Gunnar Sivertsen, eds., *Ind i Holbergs fjerde århundrede* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanums Forlag, 2004), pp. 47–58; Øystein Rian, *Sensuren i Danmark-Norge: Vilkårerne for offentlige ytringer 1536–1814* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2014); Nagel, 'Borgerlige og menneskelige rettigheter', pp. 113–14

⁵⁴ Sebastian Olden-Jørgensen, "'Saa at jeg har efterlevet en Historieskrivers uden at overtræde en Borgers Pligt' – naturret og historie i Holbergs behandling af enevældens indførelse 1660", in *Ludvig Holbergs Naturret*, eds. Vinje and Sejersted, pp. 118–139.

and a corresponding range of opinions. Consider yet another example. As Slettebø suggests, the ‘aging Holberg’, keen as he was on ‘defending himself and his writings’ against mounting criticism, felt the need to demonstrate his ‘social responsibility and respectability’.⁵⁵ In order to do so, Holberg began to distinguish his honourable from his humorous works – a distinction first introduced in the late 1720s and only fully explored in the mid 1740s. Whilst the honourable works, comprising history and jurisprudence, were uncontroversial and should be read ‘in the context of Holberg’s professional career as a university professor’, the humorous works, that is, his satirical works from the late 1710s and 1720s, were controversial.⁵⁶ Responding to ‘public reactions to his writings’ and to the ‘boundaries set by political and institutional factors such as censorship and anti-libel legislation’ Holberg sought to justify the most controversial parts of his published oeuvre by creating what Slettebø calls an ‘overarching persona of the moralist’.⁵⁷

It is doubtful, however, that Holberg ever cultivated such a persona. In the preface to *Moralske Tanker*, for instance, Holberg discusses different ways moralising, distinguishing the ‘serious’ forms, including fables, dialogues, novels, fictional travel accounts, fictional letters, and Spectator-journals, from the ‘humorous’, that is, satires and comedies. Discussing the strengths and weaknesses of each of these ways of moralising, Holberg turns to his own literary production, arguing that he has attempted ‘to moralize in various ways’.⁵⁸ Now, the argument that Holberg was making in *Moralske Tanker* is thus that whilst there are numerous ways of moralising, they are unable of being comprised together under one single moralising persona. Hence, in Holberg’s essentially unsystematic system of moral philosophy, there is no trace of any overarching persona of the moralist. Instead, he structured his works around a web of family resemblances between different personae, speaking with different moral voices. Returning to this point in the preface to the first volume of the *Epistler*, Holberg offers further reflections on the plurality of moralising personae and voices in his works. As he writes:

With this last piece of writing I have finally fulfilled my resolution to *moralise* in all useful ways, and the reader must judge for himself which method may be said to be the most forceful. The different ways I have made use of to this purpose are merry *Poëmata*, satires, reflections on the exploits of heroes and heroines, serious moral thoughts, fic-

⁵⁵ Slettebø, ‘Holberg’s authorial personae’, pp. 29–30.

⁵⁶ Slettebø, ‘Holberg’s authorial personae’, p. 30.

⁵⁷ Slettebø, ‘Holberg’s authorial personae’, pp. 29–30.

⁵⁸ Holberg, *Moralske Tanker*, p. 20: ‘at moralisere paa adskillige Maader’.

titious travel accounts, and finally the present *Epistles*. So it remains only to undertake moral issues through conversations, which, however, may be said to have happened through my plays that consist of dialogues and which nearly all are moral.⁵⁹

What is missing from this list of useful ways of moralising both in the *Moralske Tanker* and the *Epistler* is natural law and history, or, that is, his honourable works. This leads us to the distinction that Holberg makes between the humorous and the honourable works. On Slettebø's account, the key motivation behind the contradistinction was whether a given work was considered controversial or not. This reading, however, seems to place Holberg's intentions in making such distinctions in a misleading light. Consider, for instance, Holberg's treatise on natural law. In spite of being written in the context of his professional career as a university professor, this work was a controversial work, not only because of its rejection of clerical authority in the world of politics, but also because of its intellectual allegiance with a distinct language of natural law associated most of all with Grotius, Pufendorf and Thomasius. The distinction between honourable and humorous works that Holberg introduces in his later works turns therefore not on the issue of controversy. Rather Holberg differentiated his works on the basis of their method of moralising and their intended audiences. Hence, the contradistinction is best understood along the same lines as Holberg's changing perception of the persona of the philosopher, that is, as part of the shift that occurs in his later writings from the philosopher as an advisor to the prince to a public moralist. This reading may furthermore explain why Holberg left out history and natural law from the eclectic survey in the *Epistler* of the various ways in which he had sought to moralise – the public, that is.

What these perspectives share in common is a reliance on external factors for the elucidation of Holberg's linguistic practices. The shared assumption is thus that for us to understand Holberg's identity as a writer, we need to see his writings as a product of his social context, reducing his voices to retrospective rationalisations, occurring *ex post facto* or after the fact. This, however, is not my perspective. The emphasis on social context confuses motives for intentions, or, that is, what Skinner, following J. L. Austin's classical exposition of speech acts

⁵⁹ Holberg, *Epistler*, Tomus I, p. 3r–3v: 'Jeg haver saaledes endeligen ved dette sidste Skrift nogenledes fuldført mit Forsæt at *moralisere* paa alle brugelige Maader, og maa Læseren selv dømmе om, hvilken *Methode* kand holdes for den kraftigste. De differente Maader, hvoraf jeg til den Ende haver betient mig, ere ved lystige *Poëmata*, ved *Satires*, ved *Reflexioner* over Helte og Heltinde Bedrifter, ved alvorlige *moralske* Tanker, ved *fingerede* Reyse-Beskrivelser, og endelig ved disse *Epistler*; saa at der fattes ikkun at udføre *moralske Materier* ved Samtaler, hvilket dog ogsaa kand siges at være skeed ved mine Skue-Spill, som bestaae udi *Dialoger* og fast alle ere *moralske*' (accessed 01.05.2023). Cited in Haakonssen, 'Introduction', p. 19.

theory, calls the ‘illocutionary force’ of texts.⁶⁰ Considering Holberg’s identity as writer from the contextualist perspective with which I am concerned, the pressing question is not what motivated Holberg’s use of pseudonyms and the plurality of voices in his writings, but rather what he may be said to have intended in composing his work as he did. Holberg did not intend to mask his authorship and his opinions in order to pre-empt the loss of social status or to defend his satirical works, nor did he employ such literary practices to escape the institution of censorship. Rather, considered as interventions carrying a certain illocutionary force, Holberg’s use of pseudonyms and the plurality of voices in his works should be read as part of an ongoing dispute about the proper understanding of the offices or personae that Holberg cultivated. Consider, for example, the turn in Holberg’s thinking about moral philosophy which took shape in the 1740s. As Slettebø rightly points out, Holberg’s preoccupation with moralising in the mid-1740s is contemporaneous with the emergence of a new generation of inexperienced moralist writers in Denmark and Norway, with whom ‘Holberg did not want to be associated’.⁶¹ As Slettebø argues, Holberg’s negative reaction to the new generation of moralists was ‘motivated’ in part by a grave concern for ‘increased competition’ on the book market, in part by ‘the concomitant threat this represented to the social status of the author’.⁶² While this may well have been Holberg’s *motivation* for attacking the young moralists, focusing on his *intentions* in doing so had to do with their conception of philosophy and philosophical office-holding. In the first half of the 1740s, Andreas Lundhoff, for instance, authored several short works in which he defended a rationalist conception of philosophy and refuted the position advocated by Holberg, a position which according to Lundhoff places *negotium* above *otium* and substitutes laughter for reason.⁶³

This being said, there is still a case to be made for studying the motives of a writer, that is, for studying external restraints as a way of decoding ‘what conventionally recognisable meanings’ an author may have ‘intended to communicate’.⁶⁴ Holberg’s works were not, of course, detached from the broader social

⁶⁰ Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, p. 133; J. L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words*, ed. J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa, second edition (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962/1975), [Crossref](#), pp. 94–108. For the distinction between motives and intentions see, importantly, Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, pp. 96–102.

⁶¹ Slettebø, ‘Holberg’s authorial personae’, p. 38.

⁶² Slettebø, ‘Holberg’s authorial personae’, p. 39.

⁶³ Andreas Lundhoff, *Een kort historisk Beskrivelse paa En sand Philosophi Liv og Levnet Meddeelt alle Sandheds og Dydens Elskere* (Copenhagen: Johan Christoph Groth, 1744). See also Olesen, ‘Monarchism’, pp. 200–203.

⁶⁴ Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, p. 87.

context in which they were written. Seeking to moralize the public, Holberg may well have been responding to what he saw as a very real threat to his identity as a writer.

Holberg's sources

The third aspect I wish to consider turns on Holberg's use of diverse sources in his writings. Throughout his oeuvre, Holberg draws on, imitates and copies a range of authors, often without acknowledging his sources. Consequentially, a long-standing tradition of scholarship has been devoted not only to mapping Holberg's sources in his essays,⁶⁵ his comedies,⁶⁶ and his historical works,⁶⁷ but also to recovering the influence on Holberg's thought of such major European thinkers as Pufendorf,⁶⁸ Bayle,⁶⁹ Locke,⁷⁰ and Descartes.⁷¹ The merit of this tradition of scholarship has been to shed light on such pivotal aspects of Holberg's writings as which books he was reading, when he was reading them, and the way in which he used them in the composition of his own texts, that is, what he used and what

⁶⁵ F. J. Billeskov Jansen, *Holberg som Epigrammatiker og Essayist*, 2 vols. (Copenhagen: Ejnar Munksgaards Forlag, 1938–1939); F. J. Billeskov Jansen, *Ludvig Holberg og menneskerettighederne ... og andre Holbergstudier* (Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzel, 1999), pp. 160–99.

⁶⁶ Jens Kr. Andersen, *Holbergs kilder? Studier i komediedigterens mulige litterære forudsætninger* (Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag, 1993); Gunnar Sivertsen, *Kilden til Jeppe paa Bierget* (Aarhus: Aarhus Universitetsforlag, 2010).

⁶⁷ Olden-Jørgensen, *Ludvig Holberg som pragmatisk historiker*; Olden-Jørgensen, "Saa at jeg har efterlevet"; Kristoffer Schmidt, 'Kildestudiernes nytte: Om Holbergs kildebrug i udvalgte biografier i Heltehistorier', in *Historikeren Ludvig Holberg*, eds. Sejersted and Olden-Jørgensen, pp. 279–302; Kristoffer Schmidt, 'Holbergs naturretslige og historiske syn på spaniernes kolonisering af Amerika', in *Ludvig Holbergs Naturrett*, eds. Vinje and Sejersted, pp. 140–58.

⁶⁸ Tim Berndtsson, "Hvad Contra-Parten har at sige derimod": Historiografisk dialog mellem Holberg och Pufendorf', in *Historikeren Ludvig Holberg*, eds., Sejersted and Olden-Jørgensen, pp. 147–180; Rolv Nøtvik Jakobsen, 'General Church History', in *Ludvig Holberg*, eds., Haakonssen and Olden-Jørgensen, pp. 182–195 (on p. 192). [Crossref](#); Sebastian Olden-Jørgensen, "Absolut enevolds Regiering er de sikkerste af alle": Ludvig Holbergs statsforståelse på baggrund af samtidens politiske kultur', in *Historikeren Ludvig Holberg*, eds., Sejersted and Olden-Jørgensen, pp. 89–117; Olden-Jørgensen, 'Den antikatolske Holberg'; Olden-Jørgensen, 'History', pp. 173–174.

⁶⁹ Inga H. Undheim, "De vanskeligste Verk nogen kand foretage sig": Om Holbergs og Pierre Bayles betenkninger over historier', in *Historikeren Ludvig Holberg*, eds. Sejersted and Olden-Jørgensen, pp. 181–205.

⁷⁰ Thomas Bredsdorff and Lasse Horne Kjældgaard, *Tolerance – eller hvordan man lærer at leve med dem, man hader* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 2008), pp. 51–52.

⁷¹ Anne E. Jensen, *Holberg og kvinderne eller Et forsvar for ligeretten* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1984).

he chose to ignore or leave out. Especially recent scholarship has led to a better understanding of his eclectic methods of writing. Whilst Jørgen Magnus Sejersted and Slettebø, for instance, has shed important new light on Holberg's methods of compilation,⁷² Haakonssen has depicted him as an epistemic entertainer, whose epistemic and eclectic attitudes resulted in the attempt 'to entertain by getting his audience to entertain ideas' not necessarily Holberg's own.⁷³ Although there is 'a very basic Pufendorffian framework for Holberg's intellectual universe', the 'Holbergian labyrinth' branches out into different directions.⁷⁴ Having said Pufendorf, we must necessarily follow up by asking which Pufendorf.⁷⁵ However, the question to which much recent scholarship is addressed has come to be framed, largely, as a question of originality. What this seems to imply is that the task of interpreting Holberg's works consists in the identification of one or more original sources that can explain his thought and ideas.

Current scholarship harbours three central variations of this approach. The first, and by far the most common variation, focuses on Holberg's contribution to eighteenth-century intellectual history. Offering a negative perspective, scholars working on Holberg's treatise on natural law have portrayed Holberg as an unoriginal thinker.⁷⁶ As argued by Ditlev Tamm, the most recent advocate of this line of interpretation, Holberg's treatise on natural law is of little interest in the wider context of European natural law.⁷⁷ Following Pufendorf's major works on natural law down to the title, the contents and the chapter headings, Holberg did not intend for his work to be an original contribution to the Pufendorffian tradition of natural law. Seeking to establish an alternative origin for Holberg's treatise, Tamm turns to the legal tradition in Denmark, arguing that Holberg meant for his treatise to supplement the existing law code of the Danish monarchy, Christian den Femtes Danske Lov of 1683, by introducing to a Danish readership the basic principles of law.⁷⁸

⁷² Jørgen Magnus Sejersted, 'Jewish History', pp. 200–202; Thomas Slettebø, 'Kompilatoren Holberg. Om patriotisk og protestantisk kompilasjon i Ludvig Holbergs Dannemarks Riges Historie', *Historisk Tidsskrift (Copenhagen)*, 120 (2020), pp. 13–46.

⁷³ Haakonssen, 'Introduction', p. 18.

⁷⁴ Haakonssen, 'Introduction', 14; See also Knud Haakonssen, 'Holberg's Law of Nature and Nations', in *Ludvig Holberg*, eds. Haakonssen and Olden-Jørgensen, pp. 59–79. [Crossref](#).

⁷⁵ Knud Haakonssen, 'Naturretten, Pufendorf og Holberg – men hvilken naturret? Hvilken Pufendorf?', in *Ludvig Holbergs Naturrett*, eds. Vinje and Sejersted, pp. 31–45.

⁷⁶ Kåre Foss, *Ludvig Holbergs naturrett på idéhistorisk bakgrunn* (Oslo: Gyldendal, 1934); Ditlev Tamm, 'Holberg og juristerne', in *Holberg og juristerne*, eds. Klaus Neiiendam and Ditlev Tamm (Copenhagen: Jurist- og Økonomiforbundets Forlag, 1984), pp. 35–144 (on p. 46).

⁷⁷ Ditlev Tamm, 'Ludvig Holberg og hans naturret', p. 47.

⁷⁸ Ditlev Tamm, 'Holberg og naturretten', in *Holberg i Norden*, eds. Dahlberg, Teilmann, and Thorsen, pp. 106–18 (on p. 110).

Other scholars, by contrast, have offered a positive perspective on Holberg's originality, turning from natural law to his idea about woman and gender equality. On this issue, Anne-Hilde Nagel asserts, Holberg's Enlightenment, which embraced basic conceptions of civic and human rights, was far ahead of such towering figures as Rousseau.⁷⁹ Thomas Bredsdorff reaches a similar conclusion, arguing that some of Holberg's ideas were only caught up with in the twentieth century. As Bredsdorff further asserts, Holberg was unoriginal in all aspects of his thinking except for his ideas about equality between the genders.⁸⁰ Rejecting Anne E. Jensen's contention that Holberg's thinking rests on a Cartesian foundation, that is, the separation of mind and body, Bredsdorff turns to Holberg's theatrical experience in Rome and Copenhagen in search of an explanation of the origin of his thinking about woman and gender equality.⁸¹ Even Holberg's most original ideas must rest on a pre-existing and unshakable foundation.

Both these perspectives are, however, flawed. Leaving aside the Whiggish assumption that some ideas and persons are ahead or behind in the grand scheme of history, the celebration of originality comes at the expense of contextual interpretation. Holberg's thinking about woman and gender equality belonged not to a discourse of civic and human rights – Holberg was mainly concerned with duties, not rights – nor to his experience of how the theatre functioned behind the scene. Rather, Holberg's view on the subject at hand was shaped in the context of his meritocratic contentions.⁸² Moreover, turning to his allegedly unoriginal conception of natural law, the central point here is not whether Holberg authored any original doctrines about natural law, but rather how he partook in the dissemination and consolidation of the tradition of modern natural law in which he placed himself. As we have seen, Holberg's intention in writing his treatise on natural law was not to reconfigure the tradition of natural jurisprudence, but to substitute for the figure of the moral theologian a moral philosopher as the advisor to the prince. Consequentially, we should read Holberg's natural law not in light of the lofty canon of political philosophy, that is, Holberg as an unoriginal copy of Pufendorf, nor should we be primarily concerned with the treatise as a supplement to the Danish legal tradition. Although the latter reading might elucidate

⁷⁹ Anne-Hilde Nagel, 'Borgerlige og menneskelige rettigheter: Politisk tenkning i Ludvig Holbergs *Naturens og Folkerettens Kundskab*', in *Ludvig Holbergs Naturrett*, eds. Vinje and Sejersted, p. 115. See also Anne-Marie Mai, 'Holberg, Ludvig', in *Encyclopedia of the Enlightenment*, 4 vols., ed. Alan Charles Kors (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 218.

⁸⁰ Thomas Bredsdorff, *Den brogede oplysning* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 2003), p. 135.

⁸¹ Jensen, *Holberg og kvinderne*, pp. 70–71; Bredsdorff, *Den brogede oplysning*, 166–68; Thomas Bredsdorff, 'Originalitet og import i Holbergs oplysningstænkning', *Sjuttonhundretallet: Nordic Yearbook for Eighteenth-Century Studies* (2014), pp. 11–24. [Crossref](#).

⁸² For a discussion see Olesen, 'Monarchism', p. 190.

what may well have been an important motive for Holberg, it nevertheless offers little insight into what he thought about natural law and what he intended to do in writing his treatise.

The second variation portrays Holberg as a plagiarist. In his studies of Holberg's parallel biographies, Schmidt has shown that Holberg eagerly translated and copied the contents of previous works on the persons he was portraying in his parallel biographies, only rewriting and adding new information when the sources did not fit his agenda. This was no unorthodox practice, but unlike his contemporaries Holberg carefully avoided referring to his sources.⁸³ Retracing Holberg's use of sources in his biography of the Russian tsarina Catherina I, Schmidt, furthermore, points out that Holberg's idea of women and gender equality was not original – as Bredsdorff claims – but rather a commonplace, if not a cliché.⁸⁴ Holberg based his entire account of Catherine I on the French historian Rousset de Missy, whose work on the Russian tsarina opened with a rejection of 'the idea that women were naturally inferior.'⁸⁵

Whilst it is important to note the extent to which Holberg not only drew on and imitated the style of other authors, but also plagiarised their works, this line of research is potentially misleading. Interpreting Holberg's texts in relation to an original source reduces them to mere copies, taken to be original only when Holberg needed to work his sources over in order to make them fit his agenda, that is, the moral argument he wished to showcase. The task of interpretation thus consists of mapping which parts of Holberg's works are original as opposed to those that are mere unoriginal or plagiarised copies.

The third variation concerns rationality and truth. As Olden-Jørgensen has shown, Holberg's historical works and his treatment of historical sources are occasionally manipulative and incorrect, as Holberg seeks to balance the conflicting duties of the historian and the citizen. Nowhere in his writings is this conflict clearer than in his treatment of Frederik III and the introduction of Danish absolutism in 1660.⁸⁶ As Olden-Jørgensen asserts, Holberg's historical writings – especially *Dannemarks og Norges Beskrivelse* (1729) – are characterised by a 'strained political correctness'.⁸⁷ Indeed, 'quite contrary to the evidence', Holberg rejected earlier accounts of the introduction of absolutism in which political conflict took

⁸³ Kristoffer Schmidt, 'Ludvig Holbergs Heltehistorier – mellem moralfilosofi og historie' (PhD diss., University of Copenhagen, 2015), p. 269; Schmidt, 'Kildestudiernes nytte', pp. 279–302.

⁸⁴ Schmidt, *Ludvig Holbergs Heltehistorier*, pp. 125–127.

⁸⁵ Schmidt, 'Heroes and Heroines', pp. 108–109.

⁸⁶ Olden-Jørgensen, "'Saa at jeg har efterlevet'", pp. 128–137.

⁸⁷ Olden-Jørgensen, 'History', p. 175; Sebastian Olden-Jørgensen, 'Ludvig Holbergs dansk-norske enevælde', *Magasin fra Det Kongelige Bibliotek*, 17.3 (2014), pp. 17–26. [Crossref](#).

centre stage and argued that ‘the nobility was not forced to accept absolutism but freely assented to the proposal of the burgers and the clergy’,⁸⁸ Holberg was thus manipulating his sources to make the ‘coup d’état’ of 1660 fit the ‘official ideology’ of the absolute monarchy. Although Holberg slightly altered his account in *Danemarks Riges Historie* (1732-35), admitting some degree of force, albeit the force of necessity, to have occurred, the basic narrative structure still ‘underlies’ this work, following a ‘moderately patriotic and royalist line’ of interpretation.⁸⁹

As Olden-Jørgensen suggests, Holberg knew perfectly well what the sources really said. This leads to the question of how to make sense of Holberg’s disposition. The two possibilities we are presented with is either that Holberg misunderstands his sources, that is, that he suffers a failure of rationality, or that he deliberately manipulates them, that he in pursuing his own agenda sets aside the historical truth. Olden-Jørgensen’s preference lies with the latter, the meaning of the sources and thus the events they relate being – as he presupposes – readily understandable. In either way, we are told, Holberg’s disposition is to be understood as an attempt to depict the introduction of absolutism according to the account of the foundation of states and societies in modern natural law theories. To be sure, the language of natural law was quintessential to Holberg’s historical thinking, but the claim that Holberg was manipulating the sources and the historical truth is misleading.

Olden-Jørgensen’s argument confuses two distinct perspectives on Holberg, the historian. The first is historiographical or propaedeutic and aims at discerning what Holberg may have meant about a given past phenomenon, treating him as a colleague in conversation. From this perspective, entering into dialogue with Holberg about the truth-claims he makes about a given issue is fully legitimate, as is a concernment with the rationality of those claims. Holberg’s writings should thus be rationally reconstructed with an eye on the task of better understanding a given past phenomenon. The second perspective is historiographical in the sense that it takes aim at understanding Holberg as an historian, writing in his own context, speaking to his own time. Approaching Holberg from this perspective we need to be concerned with what he was doing when authoring his historical works. On the basis of this kind of historical reconstruction the establishment of truth and rationality has no bearing on the interpretation of his works.⁹⁰ Hence, Olden-Jørgensen’s treatment of Holberg is misleading because he purports to be historiographical in the second sense, all the while he is proceeding in the mode of the first. By contrast, in so far as we need to think about rationality and truth, a far

⁸⁸ Olden-Jørgensen. ‘History’, p. 175.

⁸⁹ Olden-Jørgensen. ‘History’, pp. 175–176.

⁹⁰ For an important discussion of this perspective, see Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, pp. 27–56.

richer perspective would be to approach the relation between Holberg's language of natural law and his historical accounts in terms of a framework of understanding, a world view, a horizon. Within such a perspective, the truth claims presented by Holberg in his historical works are neither manipulative or untruthful, nor are they irrational.

Whilst the strategies for mapping literary and intellectual dependencies discussed above are far from irrelevant to the contextualist perspective with which I am concerned – indeed there are rich and as of yet unexplored potential in their combination – they are reductionist in the sense that they limit the task of interpretation to a search for origins. This diverts our attention away from or deliberately ignores what the contextualist perspective considers the more pressing issue, that is, what Holberg was doing.⁹¹ Rather than searching for origins, the contextualist perspective with which I am concerned focuses on redescription. Consider, for instance, Holberg's treatise on natural law and its relation to Pufendorf. As we have seen, history played a central role to the persona of the philosopher that Holberg cultivated in this work. Portraying the persona of the philosopher as an advisor to the prince and an opponent of moral theology, Holberg not only re-described the Pufendorffian language of natural law – Pufendorf had categorized history amongst the 'Elegant and Curious' forms of learning – he also re-described the office of the philosopher to better meet the challenges to the modern absolutist state.⁹²

Conclusion

This article has attempted to think anew about Holberg's identity as a writer by approaching the task of interpretation as an intellectual historian. One idiosyncrasy related with this approach (it will be apparent by now) is that this task has very little, if anything, to do with Holberg himself. Rather, the article insists, to understand his identity the task must be engaged by thinking contextually about the textual conventions and techniques that structured the composition of his works. Going against the current, the article has challenged some of the conclusions that currently dominate the climate of scholarship, their presuppositions and implications.

The last thing this article has attempted is to privilege one particular kind of historical enquiry over others. Only our imagination may justifiably be said

⁹¹ Olden-Jørgensen, at least, is up front about this; Olden-Jørgensen, *Ludvig Holberg som pragmatisk historiker*, p. 83.

⁹² Samuel Pufendorf, *Of The Law of Nature and Nations: Eight Books*, ed. Basil Kennett (London: J. Walthoe, R. Wilkin, J. and J. Bonwicke, S. Birt, T. Ward, and T. Osborne, 1729), p. 173.

to limit the ways in which a study of Holberg's identity as a writer or indeed any aspect of the past may fruitfully be undertaken. Rather, what has concerned me in this article has been the extent to which a contextualist approach that focuses on *languages* and *personae* can lead to a better understanding of Holberg's identity as a writer. This, I take it, should be the subject of conversation. If, as Holberg suggests, it takes a philosopher to pull philosophical beards, pulling historical ones likewise requires the cultivation of a historian's persona. This is the spirit in which this article has been written; its aim, to contribute to the ongoing conversation about how best to cultivate and practice our trade.

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