

Leaving Out Rome. Ludvig Holberg's Comical Presentation of a City and its Travellers¹

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What shall I treat and what shall I leave out when talking about Rome? This is not only a question that occupies the minds of scholars while writing for publications as the present one, but also a dilemma travelling authors have faced for centuries. By the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century the book market had already been swamped by descriptions of Rome. It was a common lamentation of travellers not being able to add something of true value to the works of their predecessors. The Scottish bishop Gilbert Burnet was one of them. In his work *Some Letters containing an Account of what Seemed most Remarkable in Switzerland, France, and Italy, Germany, &c.* (1687), he says “I will not ingage [sic] in a description of Rome either ancient or modern, this hath been done so oft, and with such exactness, that nothing can be added to what hath been already published.”² Burnet nevertheless inserts a lengthy enumeration of various sights, for, what is a description of Italy without Rome? European travellers, moreover, had strikingly similar paths to follow through Rome. Joseph Addison inserts in his *Remarks on Several Parts of Italy* (1705), letters from King Henry VIII to Ann of Boleyn, transcribed from a manuscript in the Vatican Library. He adds delicately: “These letters are always shown to an Englishman that visits the Vatican Library.”³ Indeed, his fellow traveller Burnet had mentioned the letters as well, almost two decades earlier.⁴

In the winter of 1715–1716, at the age of thirty, the Dano-Norwegian author and playwright Ludvig Holberg also visited Rome, for the first and only time. Many of the travellers who had come before him had, like himself, entered Rome near the Vatican,⁵ stayed near *Piazza di Spagna*, saw the Colosseum and the Pantheon, and visited some of Rome's renowned libraries. It had become practically impossible to write something new about Rome. The description of his stay in Rome would be published twelve years after the events in *Epistola ad virum perillustrem* (*Epistle*

1. I wish to thank Wim Verbaal for his unceasing support and our vibrant discussions, which were of great value for the coming of age of the present paper.

2. Burnet 1686, 238.

3. Addison 1705, 367.

4. Burnet 1686, 227.

5. Holberg does not name the exact gate through which he enters Rome, and there is still some disagreement on this topic amongst scholars. For a short discussion on the issue, see Jensen 2015, 99. Jensen himself seems to prefer the option of *Porta Cavalleggeri* over *Porta Angelica*.

to an *Illustrious Man*, 1728).⁶ In this supposed private letter to a fictive addressee, Holberg talks about his early writings and youth travels in a generally anecdotal style that often lacks geographical and personal details.⁷ The biographical information provided in the *Epistola*, therefore, gives at best a fragmented and selective view on Holberg's life. Because the *Epistola* is still the main source of information about Holberg's youth, however, scholarship has been inclined to read many of the adventures Holberg describes as a historical report, including the passage on Rome.⁸

In this article, I will turn away from questions as “what sites does Holberg refer to” or “where has he actually been?” As Holberg narrates his four-month stay in Rome in only fifteen pages, the central question will rather be “what did he leave out when writing about Rome?” I will demonstrate that Holberg parodies travel literature and previous descriptions of Rome by leaving out the historical city from his report.⁹ Instead, Holberg creates an image of Rome that is closer to that of a theatre stage, with changing pieces of scenery and masked characters interacting in front of them. The city of the *commedia dell'arte* becomes the stage for Holberg's own life comedy.

6. Holberg published three autobiographical letters in Latin throughout his career (1728, 1737 and 1743). Although the three letters should be conceived as one project, they differ greatly in style and length. For discussions of the structure of Holberg's *Epistolae* in general, see Skovgaard-Petersen (2017), Kondrup (1982) and the introduction to Aage Kragelund's text edition (Kragelund 1965). A fourth letter, written in Danish and posthumously published as part of Holberg's voluminous 'Epistles' (vol. 5, Epistle 447), is often considered to be the final part of this autobiographical project.

7. As shown in many general studies of the *Epistola*, the role of the addressee, *vir perillustis*, is one of the most striking indications of the fictionalized character of the *Epistola*. For a discussion of the illusion of privacy that Holberg hereby establishes, and about related problems of reliability in the *Epistola*, see Skovgaard-Petersen 2017, 48–51. Steinar Gimnes even considers the *vir perillustis* as a part of Holberg's split personality, or as an active instance in the creation of Holberg's text and in his “communication strategy” (Gimnes 1998, 230).

8. The historical approach to Holberg's passage on Rome (*Epistola ad virum perillustrem* I, 98–112) can particularly be found in the article of Haastrup and Olsen (2011). Other studies have focussed on the importance of Holberg's stay in Rome, and his acquaintance with the *commedia dell'arte*, for his development as a playwright. It has been pointed out that several characters Holberg meets in Rome, according to his report, bear resemblance to figures in the comedies he would write in the 1720s. Examples are the article 'Holberg i Rom' by Rubow, who searches for “something Italian in Holbergs writings” (Rubow 1937, 6), Neiiendam (1973), Bull (1960, 38–40) and Müller (1943, 200–211). Although these studies have a different aim, they also depart from the idea that Holberg's passage on Rome is a reliable, historical report of his stay. This is somewhat problematic as the *Epistola* is published after Holberg's most prolific period of writing comedies. It is thus unclear whether the characters of Holberg's comedies are modelled after the characters in Rome, or the other way around.

9. Skovgaard-Petersen already touches upon the relevance of Holberg's selectiveness for reading the *Epistolae*: “Playing with conventions of both letter-writing and historiography, Holberg teasingly reminds us of his power to select and to leave out, to decide what should count as truth and what not” (Skovgaard-Petersen 2017, 51). In the present article, the conventions of travel writing and comedy will be added to the list.

Holberg, a Grand Tourist in Rome

From the above sketch of Holberg's writing style, it may have become clear that Holberg never intended to write a guidebook of Rome. He wanted to write about himself, particularly his literary self.¹⁰ Still, he is very much aware of the guidebook tradition and suggests that he has used some of them to guide him on his walks through Rome:

I was strictly confined to Roman antiquities and some new descriptions of Rome. The reading of such books was a guide for me while roaming the districts and quarters of the city and wandering amidst ruins. For, almost every day when the sky was clear, I dragged my feet along for a whole hour, wounded by the pointy stones and gravel, while holding excerpts in my hand, only the clarity of which kept me on the right track and showed me the way.¹¹

Holberg presents himself as the typical Grand Tourist who almost fanatically follows the works of predecessors in search of the Ancient Rome. However, becoming a Grand Tourist does not go without a hitch. The "Roman antiquities and new descriptions of Rome" were not his first choice. The fact that he was "strictly confined" to these travel books refers to the previous passage in which Holberg reports his visits to Rome's university, *La Sapienza*, and the Minerva library. There, Holberg "starved, like another Tantalus, in the midst of abundance" because every book he asked for belonged to the prohibited class.¹² Later, in *La Sapienza*, a library servant hands him Pierre Bayle's *Dictionnaire historique et critique*, unaware that this book is on the black list. Unfortunately for Holberg, the Dominican librarian intervenes before Holberg can actually read it. Holberg still tries to convince the librarian that the reading of these prohibited books can never corrupt him because he is a heretic, but his efforts are in vain.¹³

10. Literary critique is a central topic throughout the *Epistolae*. In the first letter, Holberg alternates anecdotes about his actions and adventures with discussions of his writings, especially his early satirical writings and his comedies. The second letter focuses upon Holberg's historical writings, while the third letter (1743), which is characterized by a more reflective and essayistic style, prefigures Holberg's moralistic writings at the end of his life.

11. "In solis antiquitatibus Romanis ac novis quibusdam descriptionibus Romæ hærebam. Ejusmodi librorum lectio fax mihi erat regiones ac vicos urbis lustranti interqve rudera erranti; Nam qvovis ferè die cum serenum esset cœlum, integrâ horâ per scrupos glarearumqve fragmenta trahebam saucios pedes, excerpta manu tenens, qvorum solum lumen evicit errorem ac viam ostendit" (*Epistola ad virum perillustrem* I, 107). References are to the online, critical edition of Holberg's writings (Holberg 2015). This database contains the original numbering of the first editions. In case of the *Epistolae*, the Danish translation by Aage Kragelund (1965) is also included in the database, and an extensive text commentary by Finn Gredal Jensen (2015). English translations in this article are based upon Fraser's translation (Holberg 1970), but were all slightly revised by myself.

12. "adeò ut in ipsa affluentia alter ego Tantalus sitirem" (*Epistola ad virum perillustrem* I, 58).

13. *Epistola ad virum perillustrem* I, 107.

Holberg's reading preference is of course to be interpreted as a mockery of Catholic censorship. I will come back to Holberg's identity as a Lutheran traveller later in this article.¹⁴ For now, I would like to stress the comical effect of the situation this Lutheran Grand Tourist got himself into, and its role in Holberg's parody of travel descriptions. Holberg presents himself as a Grand Tourist in desperation, like Tantalus, craving for knowledge and even quarrelling with librarians. As a result of his selectiveness and desperation, Holberg is now stuck with (*haerebam*) Roman antiquities and modern descriptions of Rome, the next best thing. Holberg is now forced to walk the beaten tracks of other Grand Tourists.¹⁵

In the following passage, it goes from bad to worse for the reluctant Grand Tourist. Holberg is not only stuck with sources he did not want to consult in the first place, but even experiences difficulties in using them on his walks through the city:

Almost an entire month I searched for the Porta trigemina of the Horatians, of which I have finally found the ruins by using these same [excerpts] as a guide. Most of the old monuments are unknown even to literati, for, when you for example ask passers-by for the Pantheon, you get the answer "*non lo so*", and the Amphitheatre of Vespasian, "*non intendo*", though they are very remarkable monuments that remained undamaged by time. So, if you don't want to wander around forever, you should learn the names that later periods have given to the monuments; ask for *Il Coliseo* and you will find the Amphitheatre of Vespasian; say *La Rotonda* and you will be lead to the Pantheon.¹⁶

The guidebooks are of no use at all, so it seems. They cannot guide a Grand Tourist even to the most notable sights, in broad daylight. They lead to more confusion, rather than illuminating the way of erring travellers. Therefore, Holberg advises his readers to just learn the modern names and ask it directly to locals. The guidebooks fail both as a *fax*, illuminating in broad daylight, and as a *dux*, a guide, a role that fits the locals much better.

14. The ridicule of Catholicism is an important theme throughout the first *Epistola*, and particularly in the debates with converted Danes (*Epistola ad virum perillustrem* I, 61–69) and Catholic priests (I, 170–176).

15. The letters of the Swedish astronomer and traveller Anders Celsius (1701–1744) presents an experience of Rome that is strikingly similar to Holberg's – although described with less irony and wit. As is frequently the case in Northern European travel literature, Celsius criticizes Catholicism, but, like Holberg, he also complains about the necessity to turn to Roman antiquities because of the poor situation of learning in the superstitious, Catholic Rome (see Stefano Fogelberg Rota 2013, 127–128).

16. "Integrum ferè mensem qværebam portam trigeminam Horatiorum, cujus tandem rudera inveni iisdem ducibus usus. Nam pleraqve vetusta monumenta etiam literatis incognita sunt, si enim ex. gr. ab obviis qværas Pantheôn, respondetur *non lo so*, Amphitheatrum Vespasiani, *non intendo*, cùm tamen monumenta sint maximè monstrabilia & vetustatis injuriâ adhuc invicta; ni igitur perpetuò erres, discenda sunt nomina, qvæ posterior ætas his monumentis imposuit, qværendus est *Il Coliseo* & invenies Amphitheatrum Vespasiani; Dices *La Rotonda* & ducèris ad Pantheon" (*Epistola ad virum perillustrem* I, 107–108).

But which kind of guidebooks does Holberg refer to? Holberg does not give any specifics about the books that might have guided him on his walks. The “new descriptions of Rome” might refer to the above mentioned travelogue of Gilbert Burnet. Holberg owned a copy of the French translation from 1688, published in Rotterdam, in his private book collection.¹⁷ Haastrup and Olsen also suggested François Deseine’s *L’Ancienne Rome and Rome moderne* (1713) or the second edition of Maximilian Misson’s *Nouveau voyage d’Italie* (1694).¹⁸ They base their suggestion upon the fact that these guidebooks also mention the confusion of names of the Colosseum and the Pantheon. Seeking Holberg guidebook sources will, however, always remain a speculative activity.

Holberg does not just parody the potential inaccuracy of *novae descriptiones Romae*, or the (in)ability of travel books to lead you from one street or sight to the other. In the beginning of the passage, Holberg also mentions *antiquitatibus Romanis*. This could mean works on Roman antiquity, but also books of the ancient Romans, the Classical authors. Holberg depicts these guidebooks as if they solely describe the ancient Rome, a Rome of ruins, using the Classical authors as their *fax* or *lumen*. In Holberg’s view, these guidebooks and travellers who write them lose their grip of reality because they consider the Classical authors as being normative.

The Classics are only illuminating for Classicist travellers who are looking for literature to come alive in the city, sometimes literally. A well-known example, also to Holberg, might be Michel de Montaigne’s experience of Rome as described in his essay *De la vanité*.¹⁹ There, Rome is more of a fantasy, than an actual city:

Finding myself of no use to this age, I throw myself back upon that other, and am so enamored of it, that the free, just, and flourishing state of that ancient Rome (for I neither love it in its birth nor its old age) interests and impassionates me; and therefore I cannot so often revisit the sites of their streets and houses, and those ruins profound even to the Antipodes, that I am not interested in them. Is it by nature, or through error of fancy, that the sight of places which we know to have been frequented and inhabited by persons whose memories are recommended in story, moves us in some sort more than to hear a recital of their acts or to read their writings? [...] It pleases me to consider their face, bearing, and vestments: I pronounce those great names betwixt my teeth, and make them ring in my ears.²⁰

17. Bruun 1869, 35.

18. Haastrup, G. *et al.* 2011, 6.

19. Michel de Montaigne, *Les essais* III.9.

20. “Me trouvant inutile à ce siècle, je me rejette à cet autre, et en suis si embabouyné que l’estat de cette vieille Romme, libre, juste et florissante (car je n’en ayme ny la naissance ny la vieillesse) m’intresse et me passionne. Parquoy je ne scauroy revoir si souvent l’assiette de leurs rues et de leurs maisons, et ces ruynes profondes jusques aux Antipodes, que je ne m’y amuse. Est-ce par nature ou par erreur de fantasie que la veue des places que nous sçavons avoir esté hantées et habitées par personnes desquelles la memoire est en recommandation, nous esmeut aucunement plus qu’ouïr le recit de leur faicts ou lire leurs escrits? [...] Il me plaist de considerer leur visage, leur port et leurs vestemens; je remache ces grands noms entre les dents et les faicts retentir à mes oreilles” (Montaigne 1965, 996–997). For the English translation, see Montaigne 1910, vol. 9, 127–128.

In this essay, he talks about how he imagines the old Romans, their posture and clothing, while murmuring their great names. For Montaigne, the old Romans are conversation partners and friends. He revives the characters of Rome's glorious past to make them walk the streets once again. Another example that Holberg might have known, is Addison's *Remarks on Several Parts of Italy*, published a decade before Holberg's journey to Rome.²¹ Addison says in his preface that he refreshed his memory before leaving England by reading the Classical authors again. He uses quotations of these authors constantly, and explains this as follows:

I must confess it was not one of the least entertainments that I met with in Travelling, to examine these several descriptions, as it were, upon the spot and to compare the Natural face of the country with the landships that the poets have given us of it. However, to avoid the confusion that might arise from a Multitude of quotations, I have only cited such verses as have given some image of the place, or that have something else besides the bare name of it to recommend 'em.²²

When reading the travelogue of Addison, it seems that literature takes over. At some points, Addison's text becomes literary critique. He gives passages of Classical authors that he could not entirely understand before his journey to Italy. Many of his "remarks" thus become footnotes in a dramatized text edition of Classical authors, rather than they are describing the actual, historical Rome or Italy. Addison's experience of Rome serves the reading of literature, while it is the other way around in the case of Montaigne. These two works show the far-reaching consequences of when travellers let the Classical authors be their *fax* through the city.

The Classics as Holberg's fax

In Holberg's text the Classics are equally present, but in a satirical and parodical manner. A closer analysis of the passage on the *antiquitatibus Romanis* will demonstrate this. An attentive Latin reader recognizes that Holberg is using Petronius' *Satyricon* as an intertext. This is the passage in Petronius:

There was no guiding torch to show us the way as we wandered; it was now midnight, and the silence gave us no prospect of meeting anyone with a light. Moreover, we were drunk, and our ignorance of the quarter would have puzzled us even in the daytime. So after dragging our bleeding feet nearly a whole hour over the flints and broken pots which lay out in the road, we were at last put straight by Giton's cleverness. The careful

21. We have no evidence that Holberg has read Addison's travel description. However, Holberg was definitely familiar with Addison's essayistic work in *The Spectator*, after which he modelled to a large extent his own practice as essayist in the last part of his career. There even has been some speculation about the possibility that Holberg might have met Addison when the first was residing in Oxford for two years as a young traveller (Argetsinger 1994, 142).

22. Addison 1705, *Preface*.

child had been afraid of losing his way even in broad daylight, and had marked all the posts and columns with chalk; these lines shone through the blackest night, and their brilliant whiteness directed our lost footsteps.²³

Petronius' main character, a runaway slave named Encolpius, has just left the house of the *nouveau riche* Trimalchio in Naples, where the famous, exuberant dinner party was taking place. There are some striking transformations in this quotation. The rocks and pottery fragments that lay out in the road in Naples are now turned into Roman antiquities. Holberg depicts Rome as if it were a collection of stones and pebbles, spread all over the place, which again hurt the feet of the traveller. Holberg is transformed into Petronius' main character, Encolpius, a slave who roams through the maze of Neapolitan streets, drunk, after he has snuggled out one of the wildest and most abundant banquets in Latin literature and cannot find his way back to his inn.

The sources Holberg uses during his walks undergo the most interesting transformation. Through the intertextuality with Petronius' text, these guidebooks of previous travellers and the Classical authors turn into the young companion and lover of Encolpius, Giton. The latter has left marks in chalk on pillars and columns on his way over to Trimalchio's place. He is described as a clever boy who was afraid of losing his way. As Encolpius wanders through the city in the middle of the night (*noctis mediae*), the chalk is a light (*lumen*) to him and Giton is his *fax*. Holberg clearly plays with this metaphor of light throughout the passage. Holberg wanders through Rome in broad daylight, when the sky is clear (*serenum coelum*), and the excerpts of Roman authors are his light (*lumen*). However, they are not as illuminating as Giton's chalk markings. For an Enlightened author as Holberg, the Classics fail when they are considered to be the norm. He mocks Classicist writers who use the Classics as their ultimate *fax*, and he fights them with the same weapons: quotations from Latin authors.

Further in the passage, Holberg mentions beside the Pantheon and the Colosseum, also the Porta trigemina, the Horatian gate with three passageways. It was thought that the Roman triplet went through the *Porta Trigemina* – literally “gate of the triplet” – to fight the Curiatians of the neighbouring city of Alba Longa.²⁴ However, the *Porta Trigemina* is not only known for the Horatians. It was a typical place for beggars. The Roman playwright Plautus, one of the great literary examples for the playwright Holberg, mentions this porta in the play *Captivi* (“The Captives”). In the opening act a slave, called Ergasilius, hangs around this gate. He is a parasite, always on the

23. “Neque fax ulla in praesidio erat, quae iter aperiret errantibus, nec silentium noctis iam mediae promittebat occurrentium lumen. Accedebat huc ebrietas et imprudentia locorum etiam interdum obscura. Itaque cum hora paene tota per omnes scrupos gastrarumque eminentium fragmenta traxissemus cruentos pedes, tandem expliciti acumine Gitonis sumus. Prudens enim pridie, cum luce etiam clara timeret errorem, omnes pilas columnasque notaverat creta, quae lineamenta evicerunt spississimam noctem, et notabili candore ostenderunt errantibus viam” (Petronius *Satyricon* 79.3). The translation is taken from the *Loeb* edition of *Satyricon* (1913).

24. For the tale, see Livius *Ab Urbe Condita* 1.24–26.

look out for a free meal. The fact that Holberg particularly looks for the favourite spot for beggars in Plautus' Rome, is not a coincidence. Throughout his travels, Holberg presents himself as a helpless traveller who constantly seems to run out of money. While Montaigne imagines himself being an interlocutor of glorious Roman politicians and writers, Holberg imagines himself, or the comical Grand Tourist, to be the new embodiment of a wandering Encolpius and a hungry Ergasilius.

The Classics do not only transform Holberg's identity in the *Epistola*. The city of Rome changes as well. At the beginning of the passage, Holberg mentions St. Peter's Basilica. This is the only building in Rome he describes, and he does this with only one sentence:

Above all, I was struck by the splendour of the Church, for, wherever the unaccustomed eye turns it encounters either brilliant marble with coloured veins or the artefacts of old craftsmen.²⁵

The last part of this sentence is borrowed from the Roman poet Statius who wrote a miscellaneous compilation of poems called *Silvae*. Holberg's words are two separate verses from Statius' description of the villa of Manilius Vopiscus in Tivoli. In this poem, Statius enumerates different elements of the villa, such as coloured marble. At first, Statius' poem seems to be ekphrastic. Throughout the poem, however, Statius is rather in doubt of what he should or would like to describe. Instead of actually describing the villa, he asks his reader "What shall I sing to begin with or halfway, on what ending shall / I fall silent?"²⁶ In the end, you still cannot see the villa before your eyes. This is how Holberg presents Rome to his reader. We see glimpses of elements we know, without seeing the whole, and in the end even the specific elements are not what we thought they would be. The Pantheon and the Amphitheatre of Vespasian were given new names, the *Porta Trigemina* is in ruins, and St. Peter's Basilica is a splendid Church, but also a Roman villa no one can visualize.²⁷

If Holberg does not really talk about architecture – or about paintings or sculptures, for that matter; if he cannot read what he wants to read or find the sights he wants to see; what does our comical Grand Tourist actually do in Rome? Most of the time he spends in Rome, Holberg is ill and retires to his room in the inn. There, he talks about another art form:

25. "Ante omnia verò me in admirationem rapuit splendor templi, nam quocunqve se rudis oculus vertit, passim offendit / Aut picturatâ lucentia marmora venâ / Aut artes veterumqve manus" (*Epistola ad virum perillustrem* I, 99).

26. "Quid primum mediumque canam, quo fine quiescam?" Statius *Silvae* 1.3.34. The translation is taken from the *Loeb* edition of *Silvae* (2015).

27. Sven H. Rossel argues that "Rome was for Holberg primarily a city of splendid architecture [...]. What appealed to him, however, was not so much the ancient Rome that later captivated the romantics, as the contemporary baroque buildings with this style's regularity and symmetry – the ordered world of absolutism translated into architecture" (Rossel 1994, 17). This proves to be a romanticized view in itself as Holberg only pays a few sentences to baroque architecture, and even uses a text from ancient Rome to describe it.

If I made little progress in refined studies in Rome, I at any rate gained a solid knowledge with regard to the kitchen. I learned how much time and fuel it took to cook soup, porridge, peas or other legumes, and how many Ave Marias were required to boil an egg, that sort of things; so that if this discipline is entitled to any respect, this vulgar saying cannot be applicable to me, that I went to Rome uneducated and returned as uneducated as I went.²⁸

The *fax* of our Grand Tourist is not the chalk of Giton or the Classics, but the *ignis*, the cooking fire. It illuminates Holberg's dark and lonely room. Our hungry slave, Ergasilus, did not find the *Porta Trigemina* in one piece, but at least he found the meal he was looking for.

Rome as the Comical Stage

Due to the failure of the Classics and travel books as Holberg's *fax*, and due to Holberg's preference to stay indoors, the historical Rome is strikingly absent in the *Epistola*. But the absence of the city does not only serve Holberg's parody of Grand Tourists and their travelogues. It has been shown before that the first *Epistola* is the comical one of the three. The persons Holberg meets along the way on his Grand Tour are often anonymous, have rather plain characteristics, and are sometimes even arguably fictive.²⁹ At the end of Holberg's most productive period as a playwright, in the 1720s, Holberg writes himself dead as a joking and satirical writer by sending a comedy into the world that includes himself as the main character.³⁰ Holberg's report of Rome fits in perfectly with this larger idea behind the first autobiographical letter. One could even argue that the description of his youth travels and early career circles around the passage on Rome, approximately half way the first letter, where Holberg, instead of describing a historical city, presents himself as a comical character on the stage of the *commedia dell'arte*.

Experiencing the city from his room in the inn, Holberg remarks that the building is totally abandoned, until the comedians flock together and fill up the city:

My inn was entirely unoccupied till the end of December; but at the time around New Year, when all the jokers, pantomimists, comedians and ropedancers in Italy flock to Rome, the entire house was filled with people

28. "Si in studiis elegantioribus parùm Romæ profecerim, didici tamen solidiora, quæ ad culinam spectant, didici quantum temporis, quantum ignis postulat jusculum ritè coquendum, quantum puls, quantum pisa, quantum alia legumina, quot Ave Maria requiruntur ad coctionem ovi, & id genus alia; Adeo ut, si ejusmodi disciplinæ aliqva ratio habeatur, in me non cadat istud vulgare dicitur: Indoctus Romam venit, indeque æque indoctus reversus est" (*Epistola ad virum perillustrem* I, 101–102).

29. Aage Kragelund, for example, unmasks characters in Holberg's text as being fictive, such as the "friends" Holberg often refers to who give him literary or editorial advice (Kragelund 1965, xi).

30. For the passage in which Holberg announces his career switch away from comical genres, see *Epistola ad virum perillustrem* I, 211–212. For a discussion on the relevance of this passage for the *Epistola*, see Kondrup (1982, 131–132).

of this class. Their acting, which lasted well into the night, made my nights extremely uncomfortable, as I had fever, and interrupted my studies during the day.³¹

Holberg also witnesses performances of the *commedia dell'arte* at Piazza Navona, where he is particularly struck by one aspect of these performances:

The leader of the company played the part of the doctor, and continued to be the doctor during the whole winter, because they did not perform any other plays. Hence, everyone addressed him as Doctor (*Sign. Dottore*), even when they spoke with him about serious matters. He answered so readily to this title, that he might have passed for a legitimately certified Doctor, instead of someone who mimics a doctor.³²

Holberg is fascinated by the ease by which the characters can cover up their true identity, and can get away with it. The way Holberg describes the performance of the *commedia dell'arte* is a key to the interpretation of the entire report on Rome. In Holberg's Rome, nothing is what it seems. It is a comical stage on which the few images of historical buildings like the Colosseum, the Pantheon, and St. Peter's Basilica function as quickly transportable pieces of scenery. Before this changing décor, masked persons perform the life of lowly figures that could easily perform in a Holbergian play: a sick innkeeper and his drunken, seductive wife, a shoemaker who can heal illnesses, and a Pope who is actually just a helpless old man.

Moreover, Rome is the perfect setting for the interactions between these comical figures and the main character of the *Epistola*. Holberg puts on several masks himself: that of the parasite Ergasilius, the drunk slave Encolpius, and a lonely hypochondriac.³³ During the entire trip to Italy, Holberg wears an additional mask. The reader is only informed of this identity switch when Holberg talks about his stay in Genova. He meets a young man who speaks in flawless French. Only when he sees the latter writing down his own name, Holberg realizes that the man had actually been a Dane all along. This is Holberg's reaction to the finding:

31. "Tanta in hospitio meo erat solitudo usque ad exitum Decembris; At exactò veteri annò, cùm quicquid in Italia erat balatronum, pantomimorum, comœdorum, funambulorum Romam advolaret, tota domus comœdis impletur, qui usque ad intempestam noctem histrioniam exercendo feбри mihi laboranti noctu valdè incommodabant, ac interdiu studiis meis obstrepebant" (*Epistola ad virum perillustrem* I, 104).

32. "Dux gregis personam medici egit, tota que istà hyeme medicus mansit, cum non nisi eadem fabula ludetur. Hinc ab omnibus vocari solebat Doctor (Sigr. Dottore) etiam cùm seriò cum illo ageretur; Neque titulum hunc ille respuebat, adeò ut non mimicum sed legitimè promotum Doctorem diceret" (*Epistola ad virum perillustrem* I, 104–105).

33. The shifting identity of Holberg goes by many names in scholarship. Kondrup speaks of Holberg's Tigellius-nature, in reference to Horatius's singer with extreme mood swings (Kondrup 1982, 129–130), while Gimnes uses the term *homo mutabilis* (Gimnes 1998, 233–234). Holberg himself often ascribes his paradoxical nature to the working of humours inside the human body; yet, he also repeatedly makes use of the metaphor of the mask to explain human nature. As Jens Kruuse has argued in *Holbergs Maske*, the metaphor of the mask is even crucial to Holberg's moralistic project: "Reality needs disclosure, an act of unmasking" (Kruuse 1964, 243).

I was delighted to find that I had received so much kindness from a countryman, who on his part was equally ignorant of my name and country; I kept silent about both of them while being in Italy. When someone asked me about my home country, I answered that I came from Aix-la-Chapelle, and did someone ask for my name, I would call myself Mikkel Røg. Because I had no passport, my friend and townsman Mikkel Røg had given me his before I left for Italy.³⁴

To be able to travel to Italy in the first place, Holberg apparently loaned the travel documents of a man called Mikkel Røg. Røg was Holberg's schoolfellow back in Bergen and had made a career as a medallist at the French court. With Røg's travel documents in his pockets, Holberg is not himself during the entire trip to Italy. He is disguised as a Grand Tourist, an artist on his educational rite of passage, *Michele Recco*.

Holberg's audience in Copenhagen was probably also aware of the fact that Røg converted to Catholicism to facilitate his career in France. The rumour was circling around that Holberg might have done the same thing. Holberg had received a travel grant of the Rosenkrantz legacy, a monthly fee of 120 Reichsthaler that could only be used to study theology at different Lutheran universities. Holberg ignored this rule, and used the fund for a stay of a year and a half in Paris and for a trip to the centre of Catholicism, Rome. Because of this context, scholars have often read the entire first *Epistola* as an apology of Holberg.³⁵ Rather than apologizing, Holberg mocks the rumour of conversion and his critics by creating a tension between his two identities, the one of a Lutheran, and the one of Catholic, after Mikkel Røg. Before his departure to Rome, Holberg claims to have felt a sudden *cupido peregrinandi*.³⁶ The double meaning of the urge "to travel" or "to pilgrimage", prepares the reader for the ironical image of Holberg as a pilgrim that runs as a motive throughout the entire passage of Rome.

After transforming into the newly converted Mikkel Røg, he enters Rome near the Vatican, stays in an inn near the *Via Giulia*, a central axe for the pilgrimage route, and visits the *Chiesa Nuova*. The climax of Holberg's role as a Catholic is when he makes a double confession at the end of the passage on Rome. First, he confesses that he fell upon his knees when the Pope passed, like the rest of the crowd. "I am a Lutheran, for sure," Holberg remarks, "but I am not one of those hundreds who deem it a crime to treat a sovereign, whose religion differs from our own, with the usual marks of reverence."³⁷ The other confession Holberg justifies as follows:

34. "Mirè lætabar ab incognito populari præstita mihi hæc officia fuisse. Qvippe ignorabat ille tàm nomen quàm patriam meam. Utrumqve enim dissimulaveram in Italia, nam interrogatus de patria Aquisgranensem me dicebam, de nomine, vocabar Michael Røg [sic], idqve eam ob causam, qvò profecturo in Italiam, & testimonium non habenti, suum mihi tradiderat amicus & municipalis meus Michael Røg" (*Epistola ad virum perillustrem* I, 91).

35. See, amongst others, Kragelund 1965, xviii–xix.

36. *Epistola ad virum perillustrem* I, 76.

37. "Lutheranus eqvidem sum sed non ex eorum centuriis, qvibus nefas habetur Principem sacra nostris op-

The other offence that could seem inexcusable is that, without being obliged to commit it, I ascended the Holy Stairs on my knees, which were once in the courthouse of Pontius Pilatus. Our Saviour is said to have trodden them when he was taken before that judge. I considered that, if this was really true about the sanctity of the stairs, it would not be inappropriate to follow in these holy footsteps. If it was not true, I still might be excused because simply the error itself would be a proof of my piety and humility.³⁸

Holberg clearly responded to the rumours of his conversion in a provocative but also ironical manner. Holberg plainly claims to be a Lutheran while falling on his knees for the Pope and climbing the *Scala Sancta*, two Christian acts that could easily symbolize his conversion to Catholicism. It illustrates that Holberg deliberately creates a tension between identities. Like a spectator of the performance of *il Signor Dottore*, the reader of Holberg's text is challenged to distinguish Holberg's "true" identity from his masks. But like any good performance of the *commedia dell'arte*, it is not clear what the mask is, and what is behind the mask.

Conclusion

Holberg's passage on Rome is neither a historical report, nor a catalogue of real people who would later influence the playwright in creating his characters. Holberg deliberately blurs his life story with a thick literary filter. He stages himself in a comical Rome where nothing is what it seems and where travellers and residents all wear masks, including Holberg. He does not want to be a Grand Tourist who follows the light of the Classics – or of any other guidebook for that matter. Holberg wants to be an *enlightened* writer who finds his own way through a city so many have described before him, and, more importantly, his own way through an entire literary tradition that was born there as well. He is not interested in the stable architecture of the Eternal city, but in the temporariness and mobility of its literary image, and the versatility of its people.

Looking back at his youth travels, Holberg stages the birth of his comical authorship in Rome; he walks onto the stage of the *commedia dell'arte* wearing masks of Roman slaves, Classicist Grand Tourists, and of the Catholic Dane Mikkel Røg. These masks never fall off entirely, especially the one of Mikkel Røg. For, it is striking that the comical plays and some other works Holberg published both before and after his first *Epistola*, were written under a mask as well: the pseudonym of Hans Mikkelsen, or "the son of Mikkel".

posita sectantem cultu civili prosequi" (*Epistola ad virum perillustrem* I, 111).

38. "Alterum facinus in eo inexcusatus videri potest, quòd nullâ existente necessitate genibus meis scanderem scalam sanctam, quam olim in atrio Pilati positam Salvatorem generis humani calcasse ajunt, cum tribunali ejusdem Pilati sisteretur, sed cogitabam mecum, si verum sit quod ajunt de sanctitate hujus scalæ, haud infra dignitatem erit sancta ista Vestigia venerari, si non verum, reprehensionem tamen non mereri, cum ipse error piæ humilitatis sit argumentum" (*Epistola ad virum perillustrem* I, 111–112).

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