

An Aristophanic Reading of Ludvig Holberg's *Erasmus Montanus* and Henrik Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People* and *Ghosts*

Abstract

*The Scandinavian playwright Ludvig Holberg contributed to the debate of socio-political discussions with his entertaining comedies. Over a century later, Henrik Ibsen with his contemporary dramas also counteracts the way social order is established in certain communities. Both Scandinavian playwrights utilize similar comical techniques to critically question and oppose entrenched ideologies. Though their means to achieve what they intend are somewhat different, both seek to disclose how grand ideas can be brought down using seemingly low Aristophanic methods such as irony, satire, and imitation. Their common purpose in producing such works is to break out of fixed categories while fusing different fields to create even newer ones. Thus, both seek to disintegrate dominating structures to explore other ways of being and ruling. Present research aims to disentangle Holberg's and Ibsen's methods of intertwining Aristophanic Old Comedy as well as the Italian theatrical form of Commedia dell'arte. The analysis will therefore shed light on how social patterns of idealism, moralism, and criticism are manifested in Holberg's *Erasmus Montanus* and Ibsen's *Ghosts* and *An Enemy of the People*.*

Keywords: *Ludvig Holberg, Henrik Ibsen, Comedy, Social criticism, Aristophanes, Commedia dell'arte, problem plays.*

Öz

İskandinav oyun yazarı Ludvig Holberg, eğlenceli komedileriyle sosyo-politik tartışmalarına katkıda bulunmuştur. Yıllar sonra Henrik Ibsen dramalarıyla aynı zamanda belirli topluluklarda sosyal düzenin kurulma biçimine karşı çıkıyor. Her iki İskandinav oyun yazarı da köklü ideolojileri eleştirel bir şekilde sorgulamak ve karşı çıkmak için benzer teknikler kullanmaktadır. Amaçladıklarına ulaşma yolları biraz farklı olsa da ikisi de ironi, hiciv ve taklit gibi görünüşte düşük Aristofanik yöntemlerle büyük fikirlerin nasıl yıkılabileceğini açıklamaya çalışmıştır. Bu tür eserler üretmekteki ortak amaçları, farklı alanları birleştirerek yenilerine yol açmak için sabit düşüncelerden kurtulmaktır. Bu nedenle, her ikisi de baskın sosyal düzenlerini yıkarak farklı bakış açıları sunmaktadır. Bu araştırma Holberg ve Ibsen'in Aristofanik Antik Yunan Komedi biçimi ile İtalyan Commedia dell'arte yöntemlerini incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Son olarak Holberg'in Erasmus Montanus ve Ibsen'in Hayaletler ve Bir Halk Düşmanı oyunlarındaki idealizm, ahlakçılık ve sosyal eleştiri temalarının nasıl ortaya çıktığı açıklanacaktır.

Anahtar kelimeler: *Ludvig Holberg, Henrik Ibsen, Komedi, Sosyal eleştiri, Aristophanes, Commedia dell'arte, Problem oyunları.*

1. Introduction

The Scandinavian playwright Ludvig Holberg (1684-1754) contributed to new ways of perceiving individual and social relations with his comedies during the 18th century. His comedies not only reflected societal and contemporary issues but also included a transformative effect in the sense of altering, shifting, and shaking already established thought patterns (Brickman 3-4). What makes Holberg even more distinctive, apart from his socially/culturally critical themes in his comedies, is that his underlying and highly charged messages can to present day be recognized.

However, the paper at hand will limit the scope of these themes to the time in which the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) lived in order to detect how both remarkable playwrights manage to present societal issues by way of class, irony, and comedy. Indeed, Ibsen was said to admire Holberg's comedies and was influenced by his approach to handling certain themes (Andersson 159). Both Scandinavian writers have several features in common, among them, the ability to reshuffle ideas from previous and contemporary literary trends (Brickman 7); that is, both Ibsen and Holberg mastered recreating as well as deconstructing their works in a Bakhtinian-like fashion, turning ideas upside-down while presenting to their readers an everchanging stage with multiple doors left open. It would be wrong to state then, that both can be pinned down to a particular tradition, movement, or practice as they seem to generate literary tendencies without having to belong under any of them. If anything, perhaps, Holberg and Ibsen can be linked to the line "on the contrary"; a phrasing Ibsen associated his writings with and which essentially means the art of generating an idea just to oppose it again (Bentley 565).

It is the aim of this study to present Greek and Italian literary trends at the time of Holberg and Ibsen to delve into intertextual research of their comedies/dramas. Within the general framework, it is thus significant for this study to comment on Aristophanic comedy, *commedia dell'arte*, and Holberg's perception of comedy to shed light on both playwrights' methodologies of interweaving such thematic elements. On a particular level, the characters from Holberg's *Erasmus Montanus* (1723) and Ibsen's third and fourth plays in his cycle of twelve dramas, namely, *Ghosts* (1881), and *An Enemy of the People* (1882) will be analyzed comparatively. This paper will therefore be divided into three sections in which the first part presents a brief summary of Aristophanic satire while the latter parts will introduce a comparative study of Holberg's and Ibsen's plays. The recurring leitmotifs of class, irony, and comedy will function as the leading thread with other features such as criticism and didactic moralism tied into the analysis section. A comparative study of Holberg and Ibsen would be incomplete without a discussion not only on where they are thematically similar/different but also to see for what purpose the playwrights construct comedy. As a counterargument to this question, Ibsen's characters from his drama *Hedda Gabler* (1890) will also be briefly evaluated in the last section.

As a result, this research will attempt to answer the following questions: How are Ludvig Holberg and Henrik Ibsen similar/different in their approach of portraying class, irony, and comedy? What are the underlying social messages that both playwrights aim to communicate? In what ways is comedy used as a disguise to generate severe criticism of social customs? Can the audience expect to laugh at the comical scenes? If yes, at the expense of what and/or who? Above questions will lay the foundation for a comparative Holberg-Ibsen research. However, due to the limited scope of the study, only one of Holberg's comedies, i.e., *Erasmus Montanus*, will be put into an intertextual context with Ibsen's two contemporary dramas. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to decipher the meaning behind Holberg's and Ibsen's comical scenes, for indeed, they seem to be permeated with social criticism. According to Payne, both Scandinavians embarked on a journey (literally and metaphorically) "finding the air of Norway too sultry to breathe" and therefore felt the need to clear out entrenched and extant ideologies in their respective ways (Part I, 261).

2. Aristophanic Satire and Comedy

The origin of the word "satire" is believed to stem from the Latin "satura, medley or stew" (Condren 380). Although it is plausible to say that the word itself derives from the Romans, the idea behind it is argued to be Greek. Apart from its purpose of ridiculing wrongdoings and exposing impostors, satire also serves to punish lofty and idealized shared beliefs (379). Satire also refers to the satyr plays and it was an ancient Greek genre that conjoined both comedy and tragedy while acting out tales of mythical stories (Britannica.com). The human body was depicted with animal parts as well, for example with "the ears and tails of horses" (Britannica.com). This combination of human traits with the animal body can indeed be linked to Aristophanes' use of lofty speeches being interrupted by basely animalistic features. Although no animal parts are visible on the human body in Aristophanic comedy, readers still witness animal-like intrusions whose purpose is to make them critically question pedantic attitudes.

As Aristophanic type of satire is a prominent theme in both Holberg's and Ibsen's plays, it is crucial to first understand the high intellectual comedy of the Greeks for then to enter the chosen plays from the aspect of Old Comedy. Aristophanes sought to write his texts to satirize and mock established systems and/or individuals in order to "deflate with humor anything or anyone with elevated pretensions or an excessive aura of seriousness" (Rosen 254). He usually satirized by way of contrasts between bodily gestures and spoken words. Moreover, the Greek playwright, who is considered "the father of comedy", seeks to bring down anyone who thinks highly of themselves through exaggerated bodily intrusions (Hall and Wrigley 1). He dramatizes the bodily depictions of individuals whom he deliberately uses to generate "grotesque satire" (Greene 99). His play *The Clouds*, for example, is an epitome of physical satire in which Socrates is strongly ridiculed via caricatured and exaggerated images. Indeed, Aristophanes upends the lofty and superior attitude Socrates is associated with by portraying him in a degrading position thus showing him in such a way that he is "subject to the physical realm in its coarsest forms despite his attempts to spend his time contemplating more elevated

subjects” (Scott and Welton 57). Aristophanes’ portrayal of grotesque bodily interventions in grave situations has a subversive effect where the audience witnesses the absurdity of how simple and uncontrolled gestures can be the cause of critical interruptions of one’s intended performances. Stressing this absurdity, Aristophanes aims at pointing out the “incongruity between human pretension and human reality”, while representing how there is a serious mismatch in what one says and does (57).

To exemplify further, this incongruity is also illustrated in Plato’s *Symposium* where Aristophanes’ hiccupping prevents him from speaking which is why he eventually asks Eryximachus, the physician, to either cure him or speak in his stead (Plato 18). One could argue whether Plato mocks Aristophanes in a similar way as the comic playwright did with his portrayal of Socrates. Or there is also the possibility of Plato contributing to another layer of irony and satire when he subjects Aristophanes to uncontrollable hiccups right at the moment of his speech. Whatever the interpretation may be, Plato’s inclusion of the hiccupping scene creates an effect of intensifying what Aristophanes highlights; namely the unmasking of hypocrisy and discrepancy in one’s speech and actions. If the paradox was not clear in Aristophanes’ *The Clouds*, then it obviously is now with Plato adding an extra dimension of irony/satire in his version of “low comedy”.

3. Comparative Reading of Holberg and Ibsen

Before comparing Ibsen’s *An Enemy of the People* to Holberg’s *Erasmus Montanus*, it is significant to first analyze the former in terms of Aristophanic comedy so as to draw parallel lines between both playwrights.

In contrast to Dr. Stockmann’s passionate speeches about the contaminated bath water, speeches that in fact go beyond the actual topic to criticize the ruling of society, his actions seem comical. In one particular scene, Dr. Stockmann, who is very eager to reveal the polluted water in the town’s contaminated bath, mocks Mayor Stockmann’s behaviour, taking his hat and stick while roaming around in the pressroom and parodying him. This playacting, which is also highly postmodern, serves the purpose of ridiculing conventionalized way of thinking as the hat and the walking cane symbolize finalized, traditional rules not subject to change. The audience is thus invited to see the corrupt family structure by witnessing the pretence-reality conflict in the mayor’s pressroom. Despite Dr. Stockmann being right in his arguments of bath pollution, his approach is not suitable and as a result, he appears to be a detached and absurd figure whom people begin to despise within the small community in his hometown.

Dr. Stockmann’s parody of his brother to some extent reveals the problematic aspects in society, for instance, the undemocratic way of elitist ruling without feeling the need to include other people’s opinions. This leitmotif of the hat and the stick is a symbol of old habits and stands in contrast to hatless people, whose hair can be said to get in touch with air, rather than stuffed within the hat; hence, hatless individuals are represented to be *open* to fresh ideas and able to speak up their minds without feeling attached to customs. Yet, the paradox with Dr. Stockmann manifests itself in the last act when he denies the opportunity of free speech for the bourgeois, as he regards the common burgher to be “a pack of goats”, a herd without a shepherd

(354). This statement echoes Nietzsche's outlook on the middle class in his *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in which he discloses his fears of having "no shepherd and one herd" in the near apocalyptic future (10). Ibsen deliberately draws parallels to how the elitists were regarding the middle class in his time, and therefore seems to bring in Dr. Stockmann so that he can satirize the way mediocrity was ridiculed. Meta-irony is thus present when Dr. Stockmann parodies his brother's governance when he in fact is an equally corrupt potential leader due to his belief that "minority is always right" (Ibsen 356). This layer of irony is strengthened even more with Ibsen's attempt at ridiculing elitist way of thinking about the middle class.

Ibsen, in the final act of *An Enemy of the People*, carries Dr. Stockmann to a Socratic trial. During his long speech, Dr. Stockmann is interrupted by a drunkard and this scene is Ibsen's implicit reference to the Aristophanic pretence-reality contradiction. Social criticism in the form of the drunkard's hiccups seems to play an essential role. During Dr. Stockmann's arguments on how one group of people should have the right to "admonish and approve, to prescribe and to govern", the hiccups of the drunk intensify and interrupts his speech (358). At last, in the process of voting, the story reaches its climax when the drunk exclaims "let's have a blue one! And - let's have a white one, too!", which shows Ibsen's way of parodying the Stockmann brothers as the one does not seem to be any better than the other (363).

Aristophanic comedy is therefore presented to show how Dr. Stockmann's speech does not fit into the reality of life as the seemingly absurd bodily eruptions sabotage the lofty speeches. His version of the truth seems to be the only one, and whoever rejects it is deemed to be "the most insidious enemy of truth and freedom" (Ibsen 355). Just as Peter Stockmann's rigid bodily movements, his orthodox name and attire reflect his standardized views on society, Dr. Stockmann's narrowminded ideas are also ironically symbolized with, for instance, the umbrella he swings at Hovstad and Aslaksen (just like his brother's cane). These are some of the minute gestural details that Ibsen leaves for his readers to ponder upon. Thus, the external factors have essential underlying meanings, for it is in these incongruities between words vs. actions/setting that one is able to "expose the rulers of society as impostors, since they have forgotten in the process of defending their vested interests [...] that the law of life is change, succession, regeneration" (Fjelde 278).

Apart from Aristophanic comedy, Ibsen was also influenced by Holberg's interpretation of comedy which is also evident in his dramas. Both Aristophanes and Holberg are similar in their way of depicting polarities to ultimately create an effect of equilibrium. Although it sounds paradoxical to seek balance between extremities, Aristophanes aimed at juxtaposing "our pretension" and "absurd origins" because,

by bringing together these opposites, our pretensions are shattered and we achieve a kind of healing clarity. Here Aristophanes brings together the secret human desire for mastery with a beginning that shows that this desire is associated with a monstrosity. He thereby suggests that human beginnings were at one and the same both grand and ridiculous or that the first

humans were grotesque and laughable in proportion to their hubris, in a way that contradicted their pretensions. By associating human beings with such origins, he serves to undercut human pretension now to counteract any tendency toward hubris humans still may retain. (Scott and Welton 66)

As shown in the passage above, extremities can both connect and contradict two opposing ideas, and hence create room for counteraction to develop. Most significantly, the extremities can reveal the hypocrisy of a certain ruler in such a way that, in Horace's words, they can instruct and delight the audience (Horace 132). This didactic-extremist aspect is a dominant theme in Holberg's *Erasmus Montanus* (1723).

In his satirical play, Holberg presents Rasmus Berg, a young academic who, after his studies in Copenhagen, returns to his hometown, formulating himself mostly in lofty expressions which nobody seems to understand. Rasmus has even changed his name to the Latin version, namely Erasmus Montanus, and appears to be all-knowing and arrogant towards his surroundings. Just like Dr. Stockmann, he claims that his version of knowledge is the only truth. His overly pedantic tone resembles both Eryximachus's and Dr. Stockmann's speeches and like these speakers, Erasmus is also turned into a caricatured, grotesque figure who, though possessing scientific knowledge, fails to act with common sense. Holberg was familiar with the learning structures in the academic world and being a well-read university professor, he was able to criticize the way curriculum was established before and during his time (Brickman 5). He argued against "intellectual overburdening" whilst distinguishing between useful and useless knowledge (9).

According to Holberg, knowledge would be useless if it could not be applied in society and be functional in one's everyday life (9). In contrast to useless knowledge, be it academic or otherwise, useful knowledge "must begin with ethics and end with theology" while concentrating particularly on the faculty of reason, "a kind of *ars critica*" (9). Holberg was a strong critic of the educational and social systems in the Dano-Norwegian culture and widens his critique to include other European countries when he claims that "there is no country in Europe, perhaps, in which there are so many learned and so many ignorant members of the clerical profession" (10). Moreover, he does not limit knowledge within the framework of academic studies but also argues for knowledge gained from different life experiences. Having travelled to several European countries, Holberg was able to return to Scandinavia with the different literary styles he had acquired from e.g., French, Italian and German cultures (4). The Danish critic Georg Brandes rightly expresses Holberg's encounter with the yet uncultivated North after his return:

From the dawn of the 18th century then casting its light over Europe, he came home to find the long night of the 16th century... he felt that he stood in and Augean stable of pedantry and superstition which needed to be cleansed. (Payne, Part 1 260)

Thus, Holberg was able to present a mix of literary genres which is also manifested in *Erasmus Montanus*. Turning now to the comedy, Erasmus is not able to apply his learned academic knowledge pragmatically, and his insistence on the scientific truth of the world simply angers the townspeople around him even more. His use of airy Latin expressions creates the very first conflict of having difficulty in communicating, firstly with his family and then the townspeople whom he later encounters. The reader is forewarned how events will unfold to a critical point just by reading Erasmus' conversation with his brother Jacob:

JACOB. What does that word quidditas mean? Wasn't that it?

MONTANUS. I know well enough what it means.

JACOB. Perhaps Mossur knows it himself, but can't explain it to others. What little I know, I know in such a way that all men can grasp it when I say it to them. (Holberg 31)

Erasmus becomes Holberg's representation of one form of extremity which eventually clashes with its opposite; society's insistence on being ignorant. However, before commenting on Holberg's exaggerated way of representing societal issues, it is worth interpreting Jacob's behavior in relation to his brother. Jacob seems to be the voice of Holberg in the way he acts because he indeed represents both/and by being a pragmatic person. He belongs to neither of the extremities and even verbalizes this pragmatic reason when he at one point says to Erasmus: "I may be a rascal, but I earn with my hands the money for my parents that you spend" (11). At the end of the day, Jacob is the preferred pragmatist who brings food to the table. Though he does not have insight into the scientific world, he nevertheless can make use of his gained experiences and hence earn a living for himself and his family. Unlike Jacob, Erasmus is deemed to be "a wise man in the heavens, but a fool on earth" (8). The lieutenant, who will be analyzed in the subsequent paragraphs, is another example of a pragmatist person.

Following Aristophanic comedy, Holberg uses polarities to show comic hyperbole so as to promote understanding of human behavior. In *Erasmus Montanus*, the main character is the archetype of arrogance and pedantry and can therefore be likened to Dr. Stockmann's attitude toward his surroundings. Both Erasmus and Stockmann claim to possess scientific knowledge yet cannot communicate with their fellowmen without enraging them. Hence, both can be seen in the light of Old Comedy; Erasmus resembling Aristotle with his syllogisms and Dr. Stockmann who tries to imitate Socrates. However, the allusion to mythological figures is twisted and turned upside down in both Holberg's and Ibsen's plays. Instead of appearing as philosophical thinkers who want to intellectually and morally "instruct" their peers, both are turned into caricatures because they fail to find what Holberg defines to be the "middle-way" in between the polarities.

For Holberg, it is crucial to seek this grey zone of both/and instead of the extremes of either/or (Haakonssen and Olden-Jørgensen 193). However, hubris and megalomania take control of both Dr. Stockmann and Erasmus who eventually become social outcasts, failing to adhere to the common beliefs of existing social norms. Ibsen depicts the downfall of his

antihero by portraying Dr. Stockmann as an idealist while Holberg uses hyperbolic parodying in his comedy to create the desired effect. Both playwrights deal with Aristophanic polarities, though the former is more intricate and minimalistic in his style and the latter more burlesque. Despite their stylistic differences, Holberg and Ibsen address paradoxes to create a sort of counterbalance through which change and development can occur.

Conflicts are therefore essential for both playwrights as they propose fresh ideas that might lead to different outcomes. In both plays, specialized knowledge is criticized, however, the opposite extreme of this, i.e., ignorance or deception is questioned as well. In the case of *An Enemy of the People*, everybody around Dr. Stockmann is portrayed to be living a lie for the sake of financial profit and reputation. *Erasmus Montanus* presents all except the protagonist to believe in falsehood due to their religious beliefs. They refuse to accept that the world might be round and not “flat as a pancake” (Holberg 22). Herein lies Holberg’s critique of class and religion as well and the ultimate irony is that Erasmus, the man of knowledge, is forced to be governed by the mass even when he is telling scientific truths, just like Dr. Stockmann does. As he is not able to convey his knowledge appropriately, he, therefore, ends up unwillingly accepting society’s “truth” to make peace with the townspeople. Dr. Stockmann refuses to do so at the end of Ibsen’s drama, but Erasmus realizes that he cannot live without society.

Holberg has argued that the nature of mankind is to waver between extreme conditions. In one of his epigrams, he briefly outlines this concept in simple language that everybody could understand while using religion to further his point:

(...) when the Devil gets sick, a saint he wants to be: which is, to go from one extreme to another. This is seen in the heat of Reformation, disbelief turns into superstition, hot-temper into cowardice, courage into fear, chattering into ridiculous silence. (Mühlmann)¹

Hence, Holberg uses his comedies to indicate that people should opt for a middle path rather than thinking and acting in extreme ways. As mentioned above, his exaggerating style contributed to what he intended to achieve. Showing Erasmus to be the extreme version of arrogance and the rest of the community to be ridiculously ignorant, Holberg succeeds in promoting his message in *Erasmus Montanus*. One should always prefer to be pragmatic in all areas of life (Rossel 67). This constant fluctuation between oppositions, not staying at either of the polarities, would eventually make a person “susceptible to impressions and modifications” (67). Holberg even implemented this maxim into his lifestyle believing that it should indeed be the goal of each individual to have this “constant retreat to the *via media*” (67)². Like Ibsen,

¹ My translation from Danish: ”(...) naar Fanden bliver syg, vil han være Munk: hvilket er, at gaae fra een Yderlighed til en anden. Man haver seet ved saadan hidsig Reformation, Vantroet forvandles til Overtroet, Hidsighed til Feighed, Dristighed til Frygt, Sladderagtighed til latterlig Taushed.” (Mühlmann)

² *Via media*, essentially meaning the middle road, is a philosophical concept deriving from the ancient Greek world and is said to be a learning promoted by Aristotle to seek wisdom through moderation (Chiaradonna et al. 183).

Holberg reshuffled past and present ideas, and though he was more definite in his didactic approach than Ibsen, both playwrights make it clear to their audiences that society must constantly alternate between dualisms. Ultimately, it is within this fluctuation that society can improve itself without requiring a “radical or revolutionary change”, which Holberg strongly argued against (Mitchell 324).

Being a rationalist and a representative for the Enlightenment period, Holberg thus encouraged *via media* through his comedies and it is also the middle path that Erasmus ends up in when he finally has to give in to the ignorant ideas of his townspeople. However, these opposite ideas are Holberg’s way of “listening to both sides of an argument” (324). Aristophanic pretense-reality is also visible especially in act four where Erasmus is being beaten by the lieutenant for his attitude and preaching of his knowledge. The lieutenant, literally and metaphorically, beats common sense into Erasmus and positions him onto the middle path. This act can be seen in the light of Aristophanic bodily sabotage of lofty speeches. Erasmus’ studies in syllogisms are regarded as useless when compared to reality of life, where he cannot even defend himself in a situation that could easily have developed into a matter of life and death. Once again, low comedy is at work; contradictions function to unmask, mock and counteract hubris/pretension with ridiculous and absurd bodily images, just like with the hiccup scene in *An Enemy of the People*. It is highly ironic that the silly bodily representations work to downgrade and minimize highly intellectual ideas which were at their peaks during their time. Yet, it is this kind of powerful irony that Holberg and Ibsen strive to achieve in their own ways to represent the discrepancy of pretense-reality.

At the end of *Erasmus Montanus*, the protagonist admits that he has not been a pragmatic person in life and wishes that he had never studied. However, the middle road is emphasized again when the lieutenant says “if you are bound to pursue your studies [...] you go about them in some other fashion” (Holberg 37). Unlike Dr. Stockmann, Erasmus is willing to change and pursue the grey zone of both/and. Though there is critique of ignorance, religion and class, Holberg especially underlines what happens when these confront the other extreme of hubris and pedantry. As a result, one might say that there is the birth of counterargument which leads to counterbalance, change, constant regeneration. This essential subject matter was rather under-developed in Ibsen’s first play in the cycle of dramas, i.e., *Pillars of Society*. However, it is gradually established in Ibsen’s later dramas together with the theme of class/social hierarchy.

As shown, Dr. Stockmann and Erasmus are alike in many ways also regarding their underestimation of the middle class. Erasmus belittles the mob and deems them ill-equipped to have insight into the scholastic world and thus of society. In a dialogue he has with the deacon, Erasmus does not hesitate to leave his fiancée for the sake of standing his ground, and even strips the burgher of having any sense of understanding of such matters: “the common man, vulgus, will speak ill of it; but my commilitones, my comrades, will praise me to the skies for my constancy” (Holberg 26). In like fashion, Dr. Stockmann wishes a revolutionary change

claiming that the mass, the majority “has the might – unhappily – but lacks the *right*” (Ibsen 356). Yet ironically, Erasmus is, at last, being instructed and placed on *via media* by the common man, the lieutenant:

the first rule of philosophy is, Know thyself; and the further one advances, the lower opinion one should have of himself, and the more one should realize what there remains to be learned. (Holberg 37)

In this respect, Holberg is more explicit in his didactic approach which he delivers by way of comedy. Erasmus can therefore be considered a better masquerader than Dr. Stockmann. Despite knowing that the earth is not flat, Erasmus is willing to mask his belief to coexist with the townspeople. At the end of the play, he can appear in different personalities, constantly wavering between roles and avoid being categorized into a fixed extremity. To achieve this level of fluidity and adaptation, education is not the only required factor, as proven in the case of Erasmus, but also life experience which Holberg accentuates.

In contrast to Erasmus, Dr. Stockmann refuses to listen to the counterarguments of the mass and finally chooses to isolate himself while retreating “into a mythical existence by identifying himself with Prometheus” (Sohi 194). It becomes crucial for both Holberg and Ibsen to intertwine the Italian theatre form of *commedia dell’arte* in their plays as a way of revealing the true impostor and social order in a given society. Like a chameleon, the clown in *commedia dell’arte* is the one who has the ability to masquerade him/herself for the purpose of acclimatization. While the joker is considered to be the insignificant character in a given play, s/he through farce indicates another dimension that goes beyond pure entertainment. Indeed, behind the overly exaggerated performance, the clowns contribute to the exploitation of social corruption by way of simulating ideas and patterns of behavior (Fischer-Lichte 136).

The fool in the play is often represented by the common man, yet in a highly ironic way, the same fool contributes to twisting the social norms, turning the master-servant relationship upside down and eventually transforming society on a stage that reminds the reader of a proscenium arch. Fischer-Lichte further defines the stage in which *commedia dell’arte* is displayed as “an extraordinary realm of in-between [...] independent of any social relations and in ever new variations” (136). Social order in this type of theatre is constantly subject to change and modification and eventually, a new order is established after the chaos of the previous collapse. During the play, clowns appear not to be the actual “fools” then, only the spectators regard them in that way if they are unable to disentangle the underlying social criticism which in fact is their social reality. By the end of the play and within this tumult of everchanging relations, both actor and spectator should be able to achieve validation of self-identity (136).

In *Erasmus Montanus*, for instance, the protagonist appears to be the fool/clown, even when he is telling scientific truths to the mass. His exaggerated arrogance turns him into this grotesque figure and it becomes difficult not to laugh at his conduct. What makes Erasmus

different from Dr. Stockmann is his change of behavior at the end of the play where he at last masquerades himself with a different persona. Dr. Stockmann on the other hand, with his frantic efforts in persuading the mass, does not adapt to his surroundings nor does he allow the mass to argue against him. The similarity between Holberg and Ibsen's plays is quite clear. But where Holberg is more straightforward with his masquerading character, Ibsen saves Dr. Stockmann's dialectic change for his following dramas.

It is quintessential in *commedia dell'arte* not to identify the mask one is wearing and "what is behind the mask" (Velle 126). As such, rather than trying to figure out the true identity of the person wearing the mask, it is more crucial to observe the simulation of social order and the overturning of the master-servant relationship which the clown enacts on the stage of *commedia dell'arte*. Holberg sought to demonstrate his *ars critica* by introducing comical characters who would confront other examples of extremities. As a result of the conflict between two opposites, there would then be room for transformation which eventually could de-intensify the tension, thus making it possible to establish a new form of order.

Although Erasmus does not succeed in camouflaging himself to begin with, he, in the role of the clown, shakes the foundations of social beliefs, relationships, and exposes the ignorance of the townspeople through the collapse of social order. He then contributes to the reestablishment of a changed order by disguising himself in another persona. However, nothing is the same now as there has been a transformation of all characters in the play. In fact, both actors and audience can now reflect on this adjustment, for they should, according to Holberg, be able to evaluate society and themselves after the entertainment is over (Payne, Part II, 389).

With *Erasmus Montanus*, Holberg endeavored to bring enlightenment "to minds shut in and darkened", but this should happen with moderation not extremism (389). Likewise, Ibsen, who was greatly inspired by Holberg's satirical portrayals in his comedies, also applies similar techniques to convey social criticism – albeit in his own realistic, minimalistic and dialectic way (Mangang 1).

3.1 Irony and Aristophanic comedy in Ibsen's *Ghosts*

Ghosts also features Aristophanic elements of pretence-reality and to some extent even resembles *Erasmus Montanus* in terms of ignorance stemming from extreme religiosity. Just as religious beliefs are overturned in Holberg's comedy, so is it also in *Ghosts* in the form of pastor Manders, who throughout the play tries to convince Mrs. Alving and her son to live as dutiful and moral citizens in the name of law and religion (Ibsen 227). Like the townspeople in *Erasmus Montanus* whose knowledge of the world is driven by superstition and religion, Manders is also unable to stand up for his own beliefs independent of social ideas. Moreover, Manders' preaching during the story is ironically contradicted when he at the end does not object to Engstrand's suggestion of taking *his* blame for burning down the orphanage. After having argued for how to dedicate one's life entirely within the limits of duty, even if this meant sacrificing one's happiness in life, Manders and Engstrand decide to travel together

which is Ibsen's way of showing how the apparently "good" pastor partners up with the symbol of devil himself in the body of Engstrand.

Ibsen borrows this particular scene from Goethe's *Faust* to show the hypocrisy of Manders as an untrustworthy authoritative figure in society. Engstrand with his deformed leg symbolizes Mephistopheles, thus he is portrayed to be the immoral character in the play. Manders, however, is supposed to be the righteous one, yet Ibsen reverses the social ideas of a religious person and degrades his lofty position to the level of the most condemned figure in the eyes of a believing society, namely the devil. The description of seemingly opposite characters, who, after agreeing, cover up a serious deed together, serves Ibsen's purpose of ridiculing institutionalized knowledge. Pastor Manders' attempt to persuade Mrs. Alving to another lifestyle does not correspond to the way he acts at the end of the drama. Not only is Manders unable to stand for his own beliefs free from social ideas, but he also fails to stick to the ideals he has chosen to hide behind. The irony behind his name is also remarkable; it seems that Ibsen has put together the Dano-Norwegian expression "mande sig op", which means "to gather the courage" and to "man up" into one word: "Manders" (ordbogen.com). However, Manders acts just the opposite of what his name signifies for there appears to be an inconsistency in his supposed beliefs and actions. Manders' rigid bodily movements mirror his traditional ideas but Ibsen has incorporated Aristophanic satire in this play as well. Right after Manders says "Good-bye Mrs. Alving. And may the spirit of law and order soon dwell again in this house" the reader can sense his enthusiasm with the little dance he does just before leaving with the diabolical Engstrand (264). The extremities and contrasts of good and evil are evidently apparent to the extent that it provokes conflictual reactions.

The reader is left in surprise when Ibsen portrays the pastor leaving with the embodiment of Satan. But the intertextuality also presents two polarities in conflict with one another. Manders' bodily gestures play a significant role in showing oppositions for it serves the purpose of exposing that his pretence is in contrast with reality. Now that his hypocrisy is revealed to the reader, one can understand that even the morally good pastor, a symbol of a powerful institution and a character who is supposed to be most reliable in society, is brought down on such an absurd basis as silly bodily gestures.

Aristophanes' low comedy is thus also traced in *Ghosts* and the criticism of authority is analogous to *Erasmus Montanus*. Particularly, the scenes where the townspeople insist on the earth being flat and every argument against this belief is considered to go against the social norm. Erasmus' community does not accept to even consider the possibility of the earth being round. Although Erasmus is similar to Dr. Stockmann, the community is also like him in their way of behaving. They echo Dr. Stockmann's unshakeable attitude of steadfastness, believing that what they stand for is the unquestionable truth. Hence, Holberg places criticism on the institutionalized form of knowledge, be it ignorance or excessive knowledge, which in *Erasmus Montanus* appears through the shapes of religion, superstition and useless knowledge. In this

way, neither of the extremities are presented as likable, but only valid when counterbalanced through which order is recreated.

3.2 Counterargument against comical representations

Even though the first play, *Pillars of Society*, is still at its infancy stage when it comes to counterarguments, *An Enemy of the People* has clearer signs of such elements; in the subsequent speech Dr. Stockmann makes, the bodily interventions as signs of counterarguments are more clearly established. In *Hedda Gabler*, however, the reader is able to witness a counterargument against the comical representations in the drama; two historians, Løvborg and Tesman, are presented, where the former is depicted as eloquent while the latter comical. Hedda makes fun of Tesman's way of acting as well as his overly involved attitude in the study of "domestic handicrafts of Brabant in Middle Ages" (702). His exaggerated bodily gestures seem laughable for he is depicted to be a character who cares *too* much about embroidery and therefore of patch - and archival works. Hedda indirectly mocking him is obvious in her enactments, for instance, when she imitates his thrilled exclamations. Tesman's excitement about his slippers is also ridiculed and may seem too trivial a matter like the attention he gives for his hat and overcoat (753).

Løvborg's manuscript, on the other hand, is taken seriously and depicted as if it contained life itself. When it is torn into pieces, Mrs. Elvsted even says to Løvborg that "for the rest of my life it will seem to me as if you'd killed a little child" (760). Løvborg thus represents the Dionysian spirit who is above social rules, symbolizing vitality and regeneration. Is it then possible to argue that Aristophanic comedy applies to Tesman? For indeed his bodily gestures degrade his spoken and written words. Ibsen leaves this question for the reader to consider as with most of his challenging scenes that require a critical and observing approach. The following answer to the posed question is only one way of evaluating whether Aristophanic comedy applies to Tesman.

One can laugh at him but there is another aspect which Ibsen seems to raise regarding comical characters. They add important messages that demand serious considerations. Tesman's work is relevant for him and as a result people could respect it in line with other "significant" works of the time. Furthermore, he strives to write on local history rather than working on the master-narrative as Løvborg did. The supposedly "silly" man can therefore overturn the existing approach to history and introduce a new one by doing what seems to be simply "mediocre". However, it could be argued that Tesman's methodology is ahead of his time and thus valuable; it contains postmodern elements due to his intertextual style. Comedy therefore functions to negate old patterns of perceiving scholarly approaches while introducing the unconventional burgher as possessing an intellectual mind with significant perspectives. The academic understanding of history is challenged by the "goofy" Tesman whose first subject was to work with the cultural history of the seemingly insignificant craftwork of the Brabant tribe.

Laughing at the expense of comical characters therefore seems dubious here, for now the caricatured character has an important message to deliver, which is a new approach of perceiving society, history and culture. Behind his mask, there lurks a seriousness relevant not only for Tesman but for Ibsen's audience as well. Hence, like the intricate details in the embroidery of the Brabant culture, Ibsen also shows his readers the tiny detail with the two historians which he has interwoven by use of comical characters. It becomes crucial then to carefully interpret such signs before jumping to conclusions. Aristophanic low comedy is upended in *Hedda Gabler*, for the lofty person (Løvborg) is not simultaneously comical, as has been the case with the previous examples, but a highly respected individual.

Ibsen thus succeeds in showing that he does not belong to any literary style or convention, not even to Aristophanic comedy. Once more, he counteracts his modified ideas which he had utilized from other writers, showing that he works independent of any school of thought. Ibsen's methodology could therefore be seen as *his* way of counteracting, arguing and opposing sets of ideas to achieve synthesis, yet at the same time leaving the impression that an absolute synthesis is never possible. This is also what distinguishes Ibsen from Holberg because the former always seems to "be on the verge of interpretive synthesis", but right before reaching a sense of harmony, he would topple his previous ideas to introduce new ones (Rosengarten 463). While Holberg is more straightforward with his social criticism; his comedies are clearly spelled out for the audience in such a way that there is no doubt as to what he aims at.

The reader can also laugh at Erasmus' behaviour for like Tesman and Dr. Stockmann, he is not taken seriously. The crucial point is, however, at what or whose expense the audience is laughing at and whether there is a social message which can be drawn from underneath comical portrayals. It may be difficult to distinguish the seriousness of a presented issue when it is disguised in comedy. Yet, it would be deplorable if one were to overlook the particular signs which can lead to a deeper level of consciousness regarding one's social reality.

Erasmus' exaggerated approach where he arrogantly tries to instruct the townspeople overshadows his actual purpose. Tragically, he ends up being miserable, and having been tormented by the mass, he is forced to give in to the dominant belief, as Kierkegaard also once stated about this comedy: "I cry whenever I see or read *Erasmus Montanus*; he is right and suffers under the tyranny of the mass" (Undheim).³ The townspeople in Erasmus' case may appear ignorant. However, like Tesman, they introduce a new approach to coexist in life, namely through *via media*. Even if the lieutenant's last speech resembles the rhetorical speeches in Ibsen's plays, his stance in society is also parallel to Tesman's, who represents the nobility of mind in the body of the "simple" burgher. Indeed, both sides have their flaws; Erasmus without proper knowledge of how to be a pragmatic man possessing useful knowledge, and the townspeople who insist on being ignorant. It would also be impossible to expect a flawless human being in search of dialectic "synthesis".

³ My translation from Danish: "Jeg græder, naar jeg seer eller læser *Erasmus Montanus*; han har Ret og ligger under for Massen." (Undheim)

While Erasmus seems to repeat the grand scale of approach to knowledge, the lieutenant, especially, offers a local and moderate way of adapting to one's social environment where, according to him, "a learned man ought particularly to be distinguished from others in that he is more temperate, modest, and considerate, in his speech than the uneducated" (Holberg 37). The lieutenant here implies that, Holberg, who is supposed to act rationally as he is an educated man, should be able to know how to communicate and apply his learned knowledge. The situation of the townspeople, on the other hand, can be understood to some extent for they do not have the burden of knowledge carrying on their backs. As a result, their behaviour may be excused for, although their lack of searching for knowledge is indefensible. But Erasmus' stance can be criticized even harsher because his duty is to convey what he knows properly. Failing to do this, he symbolizes a tragic person, utterly detached and alienated from society. Consequently, his way of communicating backfires on him, and after the final confrontation, he realizes what he needs to do. Hence, what seemed to be Erasmus' useful knowledge, is corrected with the lieutenant's interference, who is the epitome of being a person *via media*.⁴ The existing social hierarchy is thus shaken to its core in Holberg's play when ironically the learned man is unable to fulfil his civic duty while the "unlearned" instructs him to the middle path. One should therefore be able to reflect on what/who is being laughed at and *why* to attain a broad understanding of social reality, which both Holberg and Ibsen strived to achieve. The individual should not merely gain an idea about social constructs by scratching the surface of the handled issues in the plays. On the contrary, it should be a part of one's experience to ponder what truly lies behind the surface of pretension and comical farce.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, comparative research on Holberg-Ibsen has been conducted to unravel how comedy works to challenge socio-cultural and political constructs. Both Scandinavian playwrights use similar comical techniques, though with literary variations, while going against the grain of the elitist approach to drama/comedy. Holberg and Ibsen seek to address not only the aristocracy but also the bourgeoisie on the stage of *commedia dell'arte*. Both succeed in breaking down the fourth wall to include the audience in their process of introspection and critical insights. For them, comedy can mirror societal relations which in most cases manifest themselves in extremities. Holberg's and Ibsen's reworked concept of *via media* is therefore a way to express how ideas and relations can be modified when they are in conflict with one another. Instead of being led by ideals and ideologies, Holberg and Ibsen promoted practicality in life whilst being in a constant state of change.

During this everchanging process, the literary themes of irony, satire, and hyperbole are needed to reproduce ideas for the sake of regeneration. At least, this is what Holberg and Ibsen asserted with their plays as both endeavoured to unveil and upend the existing social order(s).

⁴ The Lieutenant has studied "old Latin authors, and [...] natural law and moral problems" (Holberg 34). He expresses that studying is a continuous life process and is able to pragmatically apply his knowledge in social contexts.

Rejecting the idea of the absolute, both playwrights sought to oppose the practice of reflecting entirely in black-and-white terms, hence demonstrating that a *both/and* perspective enables the rise of counterargument. The thematic elements in their plays are not only limited to their era but can be considered timeless, which makes Holberg and Ibsen remarkable reformists in terms of rendering social issues by means of dramatic literature.

This research has attempted to interpret their multi-layered plays in combination with different comical features such as Aristophanes' low comedy and *commedia dell'arte* while displaying how both experiment with the idea of incongruity and oppositions. However, there is no final answer to the question of what the best form of ruling or being is, and what kind of perspective one should have on life. Rather, Holberg and Ibsen leave it open for the audience to draw his/her conclusions based on their experiences of the plays. Even the idea of conclusion is complex for what seems to be the ending can in fact be regarded as the rebirth of "something new" (Bentley 565).

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