

3. Robert Molesworth's *An Account of Denmark as it was in 1692*: A Political Scandal and its Literary Aftermath

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Introduction

Understandably, the Molesworth incident – Robert Molesworth's (1656-1725) embassy to Denmark 1689-92, his strained relationship with the Danish court, his sudden departure and the scandal following the anonymous publication of his *An Account of Denmark as it was in 1692* (London 1694) – has attracted much attention among Danish historians.¹³⁴ Everybody knows about this smug arch-Whig who came, saw and disliked. The only sad thing is that the Molesworth incident really is not as much about Denmark and the Danes as maybe we would like it to be. *An Account of Denmark* was above all a true international best-seller, appearing in four English, five French, two Dutch and two German editions before 1700.¹³⁵

Looked at from this angle, Molesworth and his book are part and parcel of the genesis of the international, libertarian, deistic subculture that has contributed so significantly to the shaping of the modern world that it is difficult to read him without feeling that this man may be nasty and choleric but basically he is surely right! The first example of this “modern” reading of Molesworth to be articulated by a Dane dates back to 1794 when the, admittedly somewhat eccentric, professor of Danish law and language at Kiel University Holger de Fine Olivarius (1758-1838) published a pamphlet (in English) on Molesworth, the concluding words of which were:

Pity it is, but my author [Molesworth] could have conjoined to his enthusiasm of English liberty, an equal portion of philanthropic sensibility; his volume could then have been very different from what it now appears; but

Be to his faults a little blind,
And to his virtues very kind!¹³⁶

The last Danish author to be genuinely angry with Molesworth's treatment of early absolutist Denmark seems to be Franz v. Jessen who in 1930 published a biography of Thomas Balthazar von Jessen, one of Molesworth's Danish adversaries.¹³⁷

The following contribution will shift attention away from the traditional questions prompted by good old German source criticism and hurt national feeling and the associated questions whether Molesworth was right, just and nice or the contrary. Instead the focus will be on the Molesworth incident as a literary event whose long afterlife ties in with the development of Danish literature and identity.

An Account of Denmark: a hybrid book

As is commonly the case, to understand the publishing success of *An Account* is to look beyond the subject matter itself and the obvious writing skills of its author. What Molesworth did was more than writing deftly on an interesting topic. The key to his success was the striking blend of three genres: The political pamphlet, the topographical-historical description, and the confidential diplomatic report. That Molesworth's *Account* is a political pamphlet is abundantly clear from the preface and the conclusion where the author states his opinions on liberty and government, travelling and education, religion and the clergy. One only has to read a few paragraphs of Molesworth's preface to understand what his intentions were, namely to inoculate his compatriots against all forms of strong monarchical government, especially if supported by ideas of divine right, and to make propaganda for a strictly secular, republican political ideology informed by natural law and a historical vision of original, "Gothic" (Germanic) freedom. Or to use his own words: to exhort people and especially young English gentlemen travelling abroad not to "prefer gilded *Slavery* to course domestick *Liberty*".¹³⁸ The dangerous "gilded *Slavery*" was the courtly and cultural splendours of France and Spain that "dazzle the Eyes of most Travellers, and cast a disguise upon the Slavery of those Parts".¹³⁹ Molesworth's intention was to unmask the slavery of France, Spain and Italy by directing the attention of his fellow countrymen to the plain, "ungilded" version of the same phenomenon, viz. Danish Absolutism, because "in the *Northern Kingdoms* and *Provinces* there appears little or nothing to divert the Mind from contemplating Slavery in its own colours, without any of its Ornaments".¹⁴⁰ In everything he presented himself as a true Eng-

lish patriot defending traditional liberty and sound moral philosophy against modern continental slavery and the encroachments by priests and princes. These Whiggish opinions were by no means original but they were presented with wit and elegance and substantiated by the awful warning of the Danish example. Among the many political tracts of those years, Molesworth's *Account* has the rare honour together with John Locke's *Two Treatises on Government* of becoming a classic, albeit a minor one.¹⁴¹

Secondly, the *Account* was a piece of topographical literature that combined geographical description with a short historical outline and a sketch of the constitutional and political situation of the country or territory in question. Only ten years earlier, on the occasion of the marriage of Princess Anne to Prince George of Denmark in 1683, the English reading public had been presented with two nearly identical booklets, both entitled *The Present State of Denmark*.¹⁴² Neither of these works represents profound scholarship and both are very factual and friendly in their treatment of Denmark. Molesworth must have known these or quite similar works, because *An Account* shares their structure and subject-matter. Only Molesworth's tone is quite different: more critical, more directly political, more confidential and full of ridicule. Actually Molesworth's *Account* can be read as a very funny satire on the whole genre of topographical description.

In fact, it is this different tone as much as the more prominent place of politics in *An Account* that points to the third genre mentioned above, the confidential diplomatic report. Diplomacy and intelligence work have since time immemorial been closely related and it is not the least surprising that William III instructed Molesworth, "as dexterously and with as little noise as you can [to] endeavour to informe yourself of the designes and intentions of that court" and to compose on his return "a perfect and ample narrative".¹⁴³ Similar wordings abound in contemporary British diplomatic instructions.¹⁴⁴ Thousands of such diplomatic reports exist, consisting of sober-minded analysis focussing on power relationships and material interests complemented with blunt character-sketches of the prominent political players and speculations on the prospects for change of policy or government.¹⁴⁵ Normally, however, these reports were not printed and only – if at all – circulated in manuscript. That Molesworth should write a text like the main body of *An Account* was totally normal for an ambassador. That he published it was extraordinary

and gave *An Account* a delightful whiff of scandal and indiscretion which supposedly contributed not a little to the sales success.

The official Danish response?

It is well known how the reading public responded to *An Account*. Within three months no less than 6000 copies had been sold.¹⁴⁶ A couple of domestic political adversaries quickly responded, the first being Jodocus Crull whose *Denmark Vindicated* appeared in 1694 and the second Thomas Rogers whose *The Common-Wealths-Man Unmasqu'd* followed later the same year. From a Danish point of view these works disappoint, because they mostly engage with Molesworth's political and religious views in their English context. Even if Crull also tried to correct factual errors – and expected to be rewarded for it by the Danish legation – his sources were outdated and that made his defence unsatisfactory, if not downright embarrassing. Nevertheless, the Danish Ambassador Mogens Skeel charitably suggested that Crull's efforts deserved praise for their good intentions.¹⁴⁷

But what about the Danish government? It has been claimed that it quickly responded in kind by anonymously publishing *Animadversions on a Pretended Account of Denmark* (London 1694), which was translated and augmented in subsequent Dutch, French and German editions.¹⁴⁸ This is, maybe, an oversimplification which makes the Danish government look a little too much like a modern oil-company responding to critique from Green Peace by immediate volleys of disinformation. Like so much of what in retrospect is labelled propaganda, the *Animadversions* were produced on a semi-private basis. Where Crull failed, the author of the *Animadversions* succeeded in gaining cooperation – and, one must assume, remuneration – from the Danish legation.

The author of *Animadversions* was an Oxford professor and arch-Tory, Dr. William King (1663-1712), who was supplied with factual information by the Danish chaplain in London, Iver Brinck, and Ambassador Mogens Skeel. The *Animadversions* were published anonymously in August 1694, and two years later a couple of expanded French versions appeared as well as editions in Dutch and German. The author of the expanded French versions was a French émigré Huguenot by the name of Jean Payen La Foulereuse (c. 1650- after 1701) who c. 1685-99 intermittently worked – and of course spied – for the Danish legation in London. When he was not in London he worked for the German Chancery (Foreign Office) in Copenhagen, and that is where he trans-

lated and expanded King's work. One of the chapters in the *Animadversions* that La Foulereffe enlarged significantly dealt with the conflict between the Danish King and the Duke of Slesvig-Holstein-Gottorp. Molesworth's mission to Copenhagen had been connected with English-Dutch intervention in favour of the Duke (the so called Altona settlement 1689, a total defeat for the interests of the Danish monarch). The conflict triggered an extensive paper-war, and Molesworth had presented a rather pro-Gottorp version of the dispute in *An Account*.¹⁴⁹ While these different versions of the *Animadversions* were not private enterprises, nor were they official in the strict sense. They operated in that twilight zone which Molesworth himself had entered when he published *An Account* anonymously.

The rhetorical tactics of the *Animadversions* are a mixture of vilification of Molesworth's character and corrections to his text. From a literary point of view this attempt to place Molesworth in an unfavourable light was successful, not least due to the polished pen of its author, William King. The concomitant attempts to put Molesworth's facts and opinions in the "right" perspective, however, must be considered a dismal failure and the most excellent publicity conceivable for *An Account*. Molesworth's factual errors were simply not particularly glaring, but his opinions and biting asides were unacceptable. Therefore the traditional manoeuvre of diplomatic quarrelling which aimed at presenting the facts of the case in the light most favourable to one's own side did not work well.¹⁵⁰

Mogens Skeel: an interpreter of political cultures

What, then, was the official response? On 18 December 1693, just a few days after the publication of *An Account*, the Danish ambassador in London, Mogens Skeel (1650-94), wrote directly to William III and asked for the book to be banned and all the confiscated copies to be publicly burned by the executioner as a prelude to action to be taken against the author and the publisher.¹⁵¹ That was the Danish way to do it. Just a few years before, the Leipzig professor Christian Thomasius (1655-1728) in the December 1688 issue of his journal *Monatsgespräche* had published a critical – and very funny – review of the Danish court Preacher Hector Gottfried Masius' (1653-1709) Latin dissertation *Interesse principum circa religionem evangelicam* (The political advantage of Lutheranism for the princes). The reaction of Christian V was an official



Mogens Skeel (1650-94), engraving by Hubert Schaten after a sketch by Otto de Willars 1696. Skeel's portrait is surrounded by the coats of arms of his 16 noble ancestors (going back to great-great-grandfathers and -mothers) as well as symbols of study (books, globe, telescope) and experience (armour and weapons). No wonder fame descends from above with trumpet and laurel wreath.

complaint to the Elector of Saxony and the public burning of Thomasius' book by the executioner in Copenhagen. Thomasius was not prosecuted, but eventually he lost favour with the Elector of Saxony and left Leipzig for Berlin and the more tolerant Elector of Brandenburg.¹⁵² In 1693-94 the same approach was taken with regard to Molesworth.

On the day after his letter to William III, Skeel wrote to King Christian V, and this letter is extremely interesting for its penetrating and candid analysis.¹⁵³ Skeel said that he had read *An Account* in one sitting, and that the author, whom the public identified as Molesworth, had taken great pains to inform himself of a thousand details concerning Denmark and evidently possessed a good education. Skeel also wrote that he had given much thought to a possible course of action. On this point he was very pessimistic because, as he said, the freedom of the press in Britain was very great, especially during sessions of parliament. Even though authors and publishers were punished if they went too far ("si la sottise va trop loin"), books criticizing the present government were constantly printed without being burned. Even the King read them without taking offence ("Le Roy meme en a leu sans se facher")! Therefore Skeel doubted that there was any hope for justice, and, anyway, he thought that repressive action only would make the book more interesting and sought after. Nevertheless, the seriousness of the case and the success of the book called for action, and, as mentioned, Skeel had already written to William III.

Mogens Skeel is an interesting and sympathetic figure. He was of the old Danish nobility, possessed a good education, diplomatic experience and literary abilities. Furthermore he belonged to the "English party" at the Danish court, the opposition to the dominant "French party". He liked England very much ("parmy tous les pays, qve je connais, il n'y en a point, qve je préfère a l'Angleterre, pour y vivre commodement")¹⁵⁴ and was perfectly suited to make the observation that Molesworth had effectively checkmated the Danish government. Skeel's assessment of the situation was right, of course. William III did not want to pounce on Molesworth and a lawsuit against him got grounded before it had really started.

Molesworth, however, did not confine himself to a critique of the Danish government and the absolutist constitution. In chapters eight (*The Condition, Customs, and Temper of the People*) and sixteen (*The State of Re-*

ligion, of the Clergy and Learning, &c.) he poured scorn on the Danish national character which according to him was in a “most deplorable” condition. It was characterized by laziness, mediocrity and despondency which he interpreted as so many symptoms of the underlying political malaise:

for Slavery, like a sickly Constitution, grows in time so habitual, that it seems no Burden nor Disease; it creates a kind of laziness, and idle despondency, which puts Men beyond hopes and fears: it mortifies Ambition, Emulation, and other troublesome, as well as active qualities, which Liberty and Freedom beget; and instead of them affords only a dull kind of Pleasure of being careless and insensible.¹⁵⁵

In other words: the miserable Danish national character was an omnipresent reminder of the evils of absolutism. Even if Molesworth’s point here is political rather than national it seems that Molesworth through these two chapters put a thorn in the side of Danish national pride which stung long after the initial political uproar had subsided.

The immediate literary aftermath: Thura and Moller

One thing is the immediate success of Molesworth’s *Account*, another is its literary afterlife. Many texts popular in their day quickly sink back to oblivion, only to be resurrected many years later by curious historians. Molesworth’s *Account*, however, achieved a secure foothold not only in the English Whig tradition but, due to the French translations, also in the *respublica litteraria*. Pierre Bayle among others held Molesworth in high esteem on this account and referred to his European fame as a matter of fact.¹⁵⁶ Molesworth’s unflattering portrait of Denmark and the Danes simply became one of those topics no educated Dane traveling abroad could dodge. Thus Molesworth remained a challenge and a whole series of patriotic Danes took up this challenge, a fact which incidentally indicates the ineffectiveness of the semi official reply in the *Animadversions*.

The first of these patriots was the later bishop of Ribe, Laurids Thura (1657-1731), who in 1694 visited Oxford to study. During recreational strolls through the countryside he composed a long patriotic Danish poem in the heroic alexandrine metre, telling the life story of



Laurids Thura (1657-1731), copy by Hans Hansen in Ribe Katedralskole of a now lost painting. After studies in Copenhagen and a spell as teacher and headmaster in his native town of Køge, Thura during 1690-95 studied and travelled extensively abroad as tutor of young noblemen. On his return he pursued an honourable clerical career culminating with the bishopric of Ribe 1713.

Hans Rostgaard (1626-84), a war hero from the Danish-Swedish wars 1657-60. The Latin preface is dated 12 July 1694, only seven months after the publication of *An Account*. In the subsequent Danish prologue, Thura dwells on the mutual love and loyalty between king and subjects in Denmark, of which the fate of Hans Rostgaard is a prime example. Towards the end of the prologue he alludes to Molesworth as follows:

A surly spirit, whose pen, to its own dishonour,
 Has belched venom on all the Danish tribe, (b)
 Must yet acknowledge that a Dane will sooner be a leper
 Than break his oath and to his King be false.¹⁵⁷

Even if Molesworth's name is not mentioned, the footnote (b) refers directly to the "known-but-not-named" author of *An Account*.¹⁵⁸

Thura's response is interesting not least because of its patriotic tone. In order to counter Molesworth's argument he seized on one of the more moderate paragraphs in *An Account* where Molesworth speaks with some sympathy of Christian V whom he describes as "a very mild, and gracious Prince, beloved rather than revered by his people".¹⁵⁹ But where Molesworth concentrates on the good-natured character of the king and in general derives the loyalty of the Danes from the pernicious doctrine of divine right, Thura highlights the intimate connection between loyalty to the king and love of the fatherland. That is, where Molesworth links patriotism and resistance to autocratic rule, Thura on the contrary sees patriotism and devotion to the king as inseparable.

Thura's patriotic response was immediate and emotional, and it was highly esteemed in its day, when it circulated in manuscript until it was eventually printed in 1726. Already in 1699, however, when *An Account* had been translated into French, Dutch and German, and had been reviewed in a couple of international journals,¹⁶⁰ and after it had been unsuccessfully answered by the *Animadversions*, the literary historian and headmaster of the Flensburg grammar school, Johannes Moller (1661-1725), went on the offensive in the vernacular of the republic of letters, that is in cumbersome learned Latin, replete with Graecisms. He did it in an eighty page preface to a collection of bibliographies covering all Danish-Norwegian and Swedish books since the invention of printing.¹⁶¹ Moller lamented the low opinion of Scandinavian learning and literature often found among foreign scholars, and then exclaimed:

But truly, those who sin only out of ignorance will easily obtain pardon from the noble inhabitants of the North. Not so, however, those self-appointed critics – like the Spanish doctor Juan Huarte, author of the *Scrutiny of talents* – who, demented by a proud and selfish chauvinism, have persuaded themselves that *people living in the North are totally deprived of intellect, while those that live between the northern and the torrid zones, like Spaniards and their neighbours, are most prudent*. Those authors I have already briefly castigated in my *Cimbriæ Literatæ Prodromus*. A new writer from

England has been seized by the same madness as those but in a far more dangerous and, as it seems, incurable way, because he for certain private offences against his person has joined blind love for his fatherland to a wild and unrestrained hatred against the northerners [...] This is Molesworth, who for three years around 1690 functioned as ambassador of the British King William III to the Danish court, though because of the violence of his difficult temper not in particularly good style. Because he for this reason was not as highly esteemed by King Christian V and the high courtiers as he himself would have liked, he became resentful and, lusting for revenge, he soon after his departure from Denmark thrust forth an unjust book on the present state of Denmark, directed against Denmark as well as against other monarchic and absolute governments, which in the foreword are subjected to unrestrained satire.¹⁶²

Moller's subsequent critique and refutation of Molesworth concentrated exclusively on chapters eight and sixteen of *An Account*, dealing with religion and learning but also with the national character of the Danes. The essence of these chapters that so enraged Moller, can be summed up in three quotations from *An Account*. Concerning religion Molesworth remarked that:

there are no Factions nor Disputes about Religion, which usually have a great influence on any Government; but all are of one Mind, as to the way of Salvation, and as to the Duty they owe their Sovereign. This cuts off occasion of Rebellion and Mutiny from many, who otherwise would desire it, and seem to have reason enough, because of the heavy pressures they lye under.¹⁶³

On the subject of learning, invention and the university Molesworth's verdict is even more damning:

Denmark has formerly produced very Learned Men, such as the famous Mathematician *Tycho-Brahe*, the *Bartholines* for Physick and Anatomy, *Borichius*, who died lately, and bequeathed a considerable Legacy to the University of *Copenhagen*. But at present, Learning is there at a very low Ebb; yet Latin is more commonly spoken by the Clergy than with us. The Books that come out in print are very few, and those only some dull Treatises of Con-

troverſie againſt the *Papiſts* and *Calviniſts*. The *Belles Lettres*, or Gentle Learning are very much ſtrangers here, and will hardly be introduced till a greater affluence among the Gentry makes way for them. It is ſaid that Neceſſity is the Mother of Invention; which may be true in ſome degree, but I am ſure too much Neceſſity depr eſſes the Spirits, and deſtroys it quite; neither is there any Invention here, or tolerable Imitation of what is brought in to them by ſtrangers.

There is but one University, which is at *Copenhagen*, and that mean enough in all reſpects; neither the Building nor the Revenues being comparable to thoſe of the worſt of our ſingle Colledges.¹⁶⁴

In the grand finale of chapter ſixteen of *An Account*, Molesworth's ſums up his opinion of the national character of the Danes in the following words.

To conclude; I never knew any Country where the Minds of the People were more of one *calibre* and pitch than here; you ſhall meet with none of extraordinary Parts or Qualifications, or ex-

Johannes Moller (1661-1725), engraving by Johann Chriſtoph Syſang. The epigram below the portrait celebrates the learning of the quinteſſential bookworm and polyhiſtor, who “was totally immerſed in books while he lived, and henceforth will be totally conſpicuous in his books”.



cellent in particular Studies and Trades; you see no Enthusiasts, Mad-men, Natural Fools, or fanciful Folks, but a certain equality of Understanding reigns among them: every one keeps the ordinary beaten road of Sence, which in this Country is neither the fairest nor the foulest, without deviating to the right or left: yet I will add this one Remark to their praise, that the Common People do generally write and read.¹⁶⁵

Moller's reply to these three passages, which he cited extensively, consisted first and foremost of a sketch of Danish and Swedish literary and intellectual history from the earliest ages to the present. With a torrent of names and titles he proved that from the earliest times the peoples of the North had been as proficient in every branch of learning and as eloquent in Latin as well as in the vernacular as any other civilized nation. Calling Dutch and German observers to witness he denied that the Danish clergy was bigoted and quarrelsome. Quite on the contrary he described the Danish population in general and the theologians in particular as characterized by moderation, concord and love of peace.¹⁶⁶ This he contrasted with the turbulence and discord of recent English history. In other words: Moller's reply to Molesworth was that he was wrong on all points, at least all the points Moller dealt with!

The final reply: Holberg's *Description of Denmark and Norway*

The most thorough reply to Molesworth, and in many ways the most interesting, came from another Danish scholar and poet who, like Thura, visited England: the professor, playwright and essayist Ludvig Holberg (1684-1754). It was during his stay at Oxford in 1706-8 that Holberg turned away from theology and first conceived the plan of publishing a comparative treatment of the geography, constitutions and history of all the major European states.¹⁶⁷ The grandiose project was only realized in part, first with his Danish *Introduction to the Histories of the Foremost European States* (Copenhagen 1711), essentially an update of Samuel Pufendorf's *Einleitung zu der Historie der Vornehmsten Reiche und Staaten, so itziger Zeit in Europa sich befinden* (1682).¹⁶⁸ Two years later followed part of the planned constitutional and geographical subject matter in his *Supplement to the Historical Introduction* (one of five planned volumes but the only one finished) which dealt with Germany, England and Holland.¹⁶⁹ Eventually Holberg covered both

history, geography and constitutions together but within a geographically more confined space when he published his *Description of Denmark and Norway* in 1729.¹⁷⁰ This work was epoch-making in several ways. It was the first comprehensive history of Denmark in Danish since Arild Huitfeldt's multi volume *History of the Danish Realm* published more than a century earlier (1594-1604). Furthermore it was the first analytical description in Danish of the Danish absolutist constitution. And it was the most comprehensive topographical description of Denmark and Norway between Arent Berntsen's *The Fertile Glory of Denmark and Norway* (1650-56)¹⁷¹ and Erik Pontoppidan's *Natural History of Norway* (1752-53)¹⁷² and *Danish Atlas* (1763-67).¹⁷³ By publishing in Danish Holberg aimed explicitly at a domestic, non-academic public, a public he himself had been instrumental in creating by means of his textbooks and comedies. Furthermore by dealing with political subjects such as the Danish constitution and Danish and Norwegian trade and manufacture Holberg actually created – at least adapted and introduced – a new, secular, natural-law based political language, far removed from the high-flung panegyrics and pious exhortations that hitherto had been the only public “political” genres available. In other words, Holberg's *Description of Denmark and Norway* is pivotal in the development of Danish and Norwegian identity.¹⁷⁴

Holberg's *Description of Denmark and Norway* is unthinkable without Molesworth. He is the only author mentioned by name in the preface and the only one who is regularly singled out for special, usually critical, mention.¹⁷⁵ The entire first chapter (*On the Nature and Character of the Danish Nation*) is an extensive reply to Molesworth's chapters eight and sixteen. Holberg began by rejecting Molesworth's observation that the Danes, especially after the introduction of absolutism, were not as warlike as formerly. In this way Molesworth denied that it had any point for Danes to glory in the rich exploits of their “Gothic” past which to Molesworth was a golden age of freedom. According to Holberg the many lost wars against Sweden in the seventeenth Century were not due to diminishing valour but to bad luck coming in the shape of Swedish generals larger than life, such as Gustavus Adolphus, Torstenson, Banner, Wrangel, Königsmark, Charles Gustavus etc., people to be reckoned “wonders and masterpieces of nature”.¹⁷⁶

Concerning learning and literature he more or less followed the same line as Moller, whose praise of Danish docility he repeated.¹⁷⁷ But

where Moller on all points argued against Molesworth's critique, Holberg chose a more subtle approach, admitted some points, excused others, and tried to turn the rest into a compliment. For example, Molesworth's observation that pretty little literature was published in Danish, Holberg explained by reference to the inclination of the Nordic peoples to speak and understand foreign languages. For this reason they generally preferred to read books in their original form in order to combine language learning and study. In this way the undeniable fact of the small volume of Danish literature is turned into an argument for the wide intellectual horizon of the Danish reading public. Concerning Molesworth's accusation of mediocrity Holberg followed the same tactics:

The *mediocrity* for which Mr. Molesworth blames the nation, namely that the Danes are neither foolish nor highly gifted, a more impartial author might have interpreted as a virtue and the middle way which this nation chooses in many things so that it seldom goes to extremes; for it deliberates on things a little more than a Frenchman, but a little less than an Englishman. It is not as economical as a Dutchman, but somewhat more close-fisted than a Norwegian. It is not as verbose as German, and not as taciturn as a Spaniard. Neither as playful as a Gascon, nor as dignified as a Portuguese, neither as amorous as a Greek, nor as frigid as a Westfrisian. Neither as gay as a Parisian, nor as melancholy as an Italian. For this reason, among all the peoples I know, intercourse with the Danes *incommodes* me the least. Where on the contrary a Frenchman kills me with fuss, a German with long-winded talk, an Englishman *incommodes* me with his self-praise, a Spaniard with his gravity.¹⁷⁸

While Holberg's reply to Molesworth's critique of Danish national character can be seen as a clever middle way in its own right, refuting some points, admitting others and turning the rest into positive statements, this was not possible in political matters. Thura had short-circuited the question by his patriotic protestations, Moller had dodged it completely, but Holberg chose to fight Molesworth's on his home ground: natural law and history. The opening statement of his chapter *On the Government* therefore began with a direct rejection of the corresponding opening statement of Molesworth's preface:

Since the author of the work called *The State of Denmark* as it was in the Year 1692¹⁷⁹ seems to have published the said work especially to contest *sovereign* government in general, I do not consider it totally superfluous to say something about that matter before I embark on the Danish government in particular and to examine the words with which he begins his magnificent preface: *Liberty and health are the greatest blessings mankind is capable of enjoying*. I confess that nearly all human beings by nature are inclined to freedom and *independence*, but from this it does not follow that it is useful for them; if humans were not subjected to *passions*, the *author's* opinion would seem indisputable; but as humans themselves have felt that it was not useful for them to live in freedom they have originally instituted *societies* and set up government, through which the natural freedom has been restricted more or less according to necessity, from which the many forms of government, as for example *democracies*, *aristocracies*, *monarchies*, have come.¹⁸⁰

These words, echoing natural law thinking in the vein of Grotius, Pufendorf, and Thomasiaus rather than that of Thomas Hobbes, form the basis of the next step in Holberg's argument. Instead of health and liberty he defined common security as the primary goal of all organised human society and boldly stated that only an absolutist government could fulfil this purpose.¹⁸¹ According to Holberg all democratic, aristocratic and mixed governments were either unstable and on the brink of civil war or so small and menaced by enemies that internal concord was secured by external pressure and not by merit of the constitution. This he proved with examples from exactly that ancient Greek and Roman history which Molesworth had set up as an ideal in contrast to the degenerate present. The two prime contemporary examples of flourishing republics, Venice and Holland, Holberg also dismissed. In Venice the people live under tyrannical laws in perpetual fear of denunciation, and Holland was simply too young a state to prove anything. As an ironic rejoinder to Molesworth's harsh words about the Danish clergy's enthusiasm for passive obedience and the pernicious alliance of throne and altar, Holberg explained that when the people of Amsterdam or London observed the good ordinances of the authorities this was due to the civility of the inhabitants and to the clergy's constant preaching on the obedience due to the authorities according to the law of God.¹⁸²



*Hic ille est, cujus calamo Sapientia, Jura,
 Historia, atque acres enituerunt Sales.
 Dum patrium emendat, delectat et instruit Orbem,
 Vix alius scripsit plus meliusque simul.*

This is, however, the only point where religion is mentioned in connection with politics. Holberg never touches upon the doctrine of divine right which plays such an important role in *An Account*, and only indirectly engages with the second part of Molesworth's argument from history: the original, free, "Gothic" constitution once prevalent in all of Europe but now only in force in England. Where Molesworth operates with a long "Gothic" history stretching back into the remote past, Holberg shortens Danish constitutional history more or less to what we today call historic time, that is beginning with the high middle ages. This allows him to tell the story of the gradual decline of an originally strong, hereditary monarchy and its eventual restitution under Frederick III in 1660 when dire necessity and deep-felt gratitude moved the population to introduce absolutism.¹⁸³ Necessity (security), history (the ancient constitution of Denmark), as well as the "present, more enlightened condition of the world" all concur and point to the same, self-confident conclusion: absolutism is right in general and particularly so for Denmark.

Was Holberg's reply to Molesworth an unqualified success? The question is difficult to answer, but it is tempting to think that he at least gave the domestic reading public peace of mind. Nevertheless, in the international republic of letters Molesworth's *Account* continued to be a text worth refuting as is demonstrated by the André Roger's semi-official *Lettres sur le Dannemarc* (1757-64).¹⁸⁴ Even if Molesworth is not mentioned by name, he is hinted at in the preface where it is said, that "il n'y a point de descriptions du Dannemarc auxquelles je pusse les [the foreign friends of the author] renvoyer. Elles sont ou infideles, ou incompletes".¹⁸⁵ The English edition of the first volume which was published in 1762 even contained the words "And Different from any Account hitherto published in the English Language" on the title page.

Left: Ludvig Holberg (1684-1754), engraving by Theophilus Laan 1749, incorporating a portrait by Johan Roselius (later ennobled von Rosenheim) and originally produced for the French edition of Holberg's *Moralske tanker* (Moral reflections), but allegedly discarded because not lifelike enough. Judging by other portraits, the engraving seems lifelike enough but maybe it seemed a little too flippant to present Holberg as a pinup in the barrel of the Greek cynic Diogenes. The epigram celebrates Holberg's "poignant wit" and his ability to "write better than almost everybody else while improving his fatherland and delighting and instructing the world".

Molesworth was, however, not at all the chief target of Roger's glowing defence of Denmark. The *Lettres sur le Dannemarc* already belong to the next wave of national, literary self-defence triggered by Montesquieu's *De l'esprit des Loix* (1748). Even if Montesquieu had not attacked Denmark directly, his analytical categories seemed to suggest that the Danish constitution was not merely monarchic but actually despotic and thus unacceptable. This called forth a series of Danish answers, among them also one by the aging Holberg, but that is outside the remit for this paper.¹⁸⁶

Conclusion

Looked at from a rhetorical point of view, Holberg's tactics were not simply to argue against Molesworth and maintain the opposite or at least excuse or explain away the problems. On some points (learning and letters) he did exactly that, but on others (national character) he settled for a compromise. Concerning Molesworth's central argument, politics, his tactics were more sophisticated. He began his chapter on the Danish constitution with a discussion of general principles and ancient history before he moved on to the Danish case. In this discussion he replaced liberty as the fundamental concept with security. This not only provided him with a more favourable yardstick for measuring the accomplishments of Danish absolutism but through this shift of emphasis he dismantled the central nexus in Molesworth's argument, the connection between absolutism and lack of freedom on the one hand and the backwardness of the economy and the failings of Danish national character on the other. The outcome of this was not only an effective, self-assured reply. It also allowed Holberg to incorporate important elements of Molesworth's critique and general outlook, now liberated from their political undertones, into his enlightened, patriotic programme for cultural and economic renewal. This renewal he contributed significantly to himself by means of his textbooks, his comedies, his essays, his work as an university administrator and eventually through the donation of his property to Sorø Academy. Last but not least, he contributed significantly to the creation of a political language based on secular natural law, shorn of all aristocratic and constitutionalist traditions and focused on pragmatic step-by-step reforms. It was a language tolerant but by no means irreligious, one hundred percent loyal to the government and focussed on cultural and economic issues like the development of Danish literature, manufacture, trade and,

later in the century, agricultural reform. Thus transformed one can justly say that Molesworth's republican manifesto was instrumental in shaping the identity of the patriotic and anything but radical mainstream of Danish Enlightenment.