

Feminism with a Good Laugh – Holberg, Irony, and Equal Rights

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Abstract. Ludvig Holberg was a serious feminist throughout his career. Unlike most Enlightenment philosophers, he insisted on extending the enlightened principle of equal rights to women. He was also a gifted ironist, and employed laughter in his quest for equality, which could be one reason why his feminism has not always been taken seriously. An attempt is made to place Holberg's irony in a historical perspective, as compared with romantic irony and Kierkegaard's notion of that intriguing concept.

It is an honour being back in Vilnius today. It is the third time I have the opportunity to present some of my findings at this great department. I am grateful for the opportunity.

It is my intention to introduce you to, and discuss, a unique feature of Scandinavian Enlightenment, Holberg's persuasion about the merits of equal rights for women – and the rhetorical devices he employed in his attempts at persuading others about women's rights, not least his use of irony.

I want to take my point of departure in a close reading of a Holberg text – a rather lengthy one, I am afraid. My excuse for the length and hence the time taken up by reading it is that if you carry nothing else with you as you leave the hall after my presentation then at least you have this piece of paper – which is unique. Not in Holberg's writing (there are several parallels) but unique in the context of the European Enlightenment.

Ludvig Holberg was a true Scandinavian, born in Bergen, Norway 1684; he travelled and learned in Europe – England, France, Italy, Holland – and settled in Copenhagen where he remained and produced a voluminous work until his life ended in 1754. The text that I now quote is from his mature years, age 55:¹

¹ Excerpt from Ludvig Holberg (1684-1754), "Helte Historier" (1739) ('Hero Tales') in: *Samlede Skrifter*, vol. 11, 1931, p. 306. Translated by Melissa Wieser.

Yet, since time immemorial, everyone has chosen to disregard this basic rule with respect to women, and thus deem one half of the earth's inhabitants unfit for difficult and important tasks. I concede that the overwhelming unanimity of all people and all ages seems to be a sort of evidence which is not easily discarded, were it not for the fact that nature, which does nothing in vain, has distributed its gifts evenly among the two sexes. To deny this would be to deny everyday experience.

The following objections can be raised to this position:

(1) nature has distinguished women from men by endowing them with a delicate body and frail limbs;

(2) childbirth, which renders women unsuited to men's work, at least for a few weeks a year;

(3) certain proclivities such as instability, rashness, undue fear, impatience, and other frailties which some have observed more often in one sex than in the other.

(1) As far as the first objection is concerned, it certainly cannot be denied that one sex is of slighter build than the other – as is also the case in a number of animal species – and hence less suited to heavy labour. However, if this argument is furthered too impetuously, a woman might object that since nature has distinguished men from women by powerful and strong limbs, then, by that very distinction, nature has indicated that men are destined for the menial tasks which depend solely on the body's strength, while women are destined for the more subtle professions whose execution depends solely on the mind.

Furthermore – a woman might object – since heads will always be needed to invent and hands to execute, nature has provided that the women should make the plans for construction while men should break lime, cut timber, and carry brick; nature has provided that the former, who have the wits, shall sit in counsel and courts while the latter, who swagger about with their strong arms, should execute the women's verdicts and decisions; that nature has ordained the former to determine how a plot of land can be best prepared, sowed, and planted, while entrusting the latter and stronger with the job of harvesting and threshing the grain.

It does not seem profitable to further too vigorously an argument against which such objections may be raised. It makes more sense to say that if nature has distributed the mental gifts indiscriminately among both sexes, and if suitable heads for important matters are in short supply – as indeed they are in many countries – why then exclude one half of the human race solely on the basis of gender?

(2) The argument derived from the fact of childbirth and its corresponding inconveniences seems to carry greater weight. But the question remains: if a woman had a different upbringing, might she not have a different lying-in? There have been, and still are, women who the day after childbirth begin their usual work again. According to travellers' accounts, it is customary in a certain country for a wife to get up immediately upon childbirth, while her husband lies in her place on the bed to accept congratulations.

But even granting that nature requires a woman to lie in after childbirth as long as is customary, we can conclude nothing more than that she becomes unsuitable for business for six weeks annually, whereas many a witless man remains unsuitable throughout the entire year. This being the case, the state of affairs in the aforementioned country is not so bad. Nor is a husband speaking amiss if he says to his wife, "Please rush back to your desk and let me lie in instead of you, then both tasks will be taken care of."

(3) As for women's proclivities, it may be true that the fragilities enumerated above are found to a greater degree in the female gender. It remains an open question, however, if they are a product of nature or nurture. If a young girl were brought up for men's businesses, if she were entrusted with important matters for which she alone would be held accountable, if she were held liable for each unprofitable word she uttered, if she were praised for bravery and blamed for timidity – would she not be accredited virtues, instead of mistakes and frailties?

In the same manner, if men received the same upbringing as women, many of their accredited virtues might be transformed to faults and weaknesses: idle talk might then be called "men's gossip", losing one's temper "masculine frailty". In the same vein, just as now when a mistake is made, the saying is, "Forgive her, she is a fragile woman", the saying will then be, "Forgive him, he's a fragile man."

This, I say, remains to be tested. Only then can we decide whether or not we are confounding nature with custom and upbringing. [...] My critique is not aimed at appropriating any new rights to

women, but simply at demonstrating that the exclusion of women on the basis of their gender and the arguments generally used for such purpose are not valid.

After a series of examples suggesting, with reference to common sense, that people should do what they are best at, omitted here, the author poses the fundamental question: why is that sound principle disregarded with respect to women?

He suggests 3 reasons. I wish to inspect them one at a time (it is I who have put in the numbers to make it easier for us to survey the structure of his arguments).

(1) Men are strong, women weak. The argument has the obvious corollary: women should be architects, purveyors of intellectual work, while men should do the heavy work. In other words, if you press this argument, it will support unequal rights, in favour of women!

(2) Childbirth – a good argument on the face of it. Women do bear children. But the sociology of giving birth, the entire charade surrounding childbirth, is culture, not nature. – ‘a certain country’-argument (customary for the Enlightenment: Diderot and Tahiti) – a stupid man is of no use throughout the year, a clever woman is of no use only for “six weeks annually”!

(3) Women’s nature: Holberg discusses the proper dividing line between nature and nurture. First paragraph: nature has distributed its gifts *evenly*; now gifts are *not evenly* distributed: women are slanderous, unstable, given to gossip. But we do not know whether these proclivities are given or constructed. Let us examine.

Last paragraph: Holberg is not idolizing women. He is simply implying that while a stupid woman can be as stupid as a stupid man, an intelligent woman can be as intelligent as an intelligent man. Holberg is not arguing for ‘affirmative action’ in favour of the underprivileged gender, but simply for an even playing field.

If there were no parallels in Holberg’s other writings, the text could be a whim. But there are many parallels. The equal rights issue pops up throughout his career as a writer. Yet it has barely been noticed until the end of the 20th century. Why?

In order to understand this mysterious black hole in the reception of Holberg we have to take a detour to the phenomenon of irony. I have deliberately chosen a text by Holberg which is almost devoid of irony – not quite, there is a certain amount of irony in argument (2) about the

man lying-in instead of the woman. Elsewhere Holberg was a master ironist. I will revert to that later. I leave Holberg for a while and turn to the history and forms of irony.

The notion of irony was invented by the ancient Greeks. The *eirone* was a character in Greek comedy, a poor and intelligent fellow who by means of pretension outsmarts the *alazon*, who possesses more wealth than wit. In Quintilian, the rhetorician, irony receives its classical definition: irony is “a figure of speech by which one indicates the opposite of what one says” – with the important addition that for irony to be properly executed the utterance must be *understood* to mean the opposite of what one says – by means of either 1. speaker, 2. text, 3. tone, or 4. context.

During the 16th and 17th centuries the term irony (at least in the English speaking world) degenerated into a loose term for *fun* speech: banter, raillery, mockery, derision, ridicule of every sort.

It is not until the rise of satire during the Enlightenment in the early 18th century that a new and precise meaning of irony came into existence, one outstanding and memorable version of which is Jonathan Swift’s *A Modest Proposal for Preventing the Children of Poor People From Being a Burden to Their Parents or Country, and for Making Them Beneficial to the Publick* (1729).

Swift’s point of departure and premise of reasoning is the ‘melancholy’ sight that meets the stranger in the streets of Dublin “crowded with beggars of the female sex, followed by 3, 4 or 6 children, all in rags and importuning every passenger for an alms”.

These poor kids have only two prospects: they can become thieves or sell themselves as slaves in the West Indies. For a long while Swift withholds the actual content of his proposal; instead, he lists its many advantages: it will provide not only for the offspring of beggars but for all Irish children; it will do away with ‘voluntary abortions’, it will diminish infanticide; and so on.

Only then does he present his proposal, which is to butcher the better part of the one-year-old children and sell the meat which is supposed to be a “most delicious, nourishing, and wholesome food, whether stewed, roasted, baked, or boiled”.

He then goes into details such as “A child will make two dishes at an entertainment for friends; and when the family dines alone, the fore or hind quarter will make a reasonable dish, and seasoned with a little pepper or salt will be very good boiled on the fourth day, especially in winter”.

Swift's *Modest Proposal* is the archetype of enlightenment irony, i.e. irony used as a corrective measure to draw the reader's attention to a social evil which ought to be removed or improved.

If you are opposed to something, you may say so in so many words. You may also say something else and then, as does Swift, take that 'something else' to absurd lengths in the hope that your reader a) gets indignant, and b) gets entertained.

There is, however, the risk that amusement may overrule correction. That is probably what happened to Holberg and his quest for equal rights.

Here is another instance of Holberg's pleading for women's equal rights.

In 1722 he published 'Zille Hans Dotters Gynaicologia eller Forsvars Skrift for Qyinde-Kiønnet' literally translated: 'A Vindication of the Rights of Women' (a title which it took English literature another 80 years to come up with). Holberg uses a woman, Zille, as his mouthpiece. In his presentation of her he makes ample use of irony.

The little Zille pleads with her father for permission to learn Latin and read books. Her father turns her away with the obvious remark that such interests are for her brother to take care of while she ought to look to her mother for the skills in house and kitchen that are appropriate for a woman.

Zille does not give up. She goes on to suggest to her father that the choice between a male or a female name not be made while the individual in question is still a baby, whose faculties and propensities are not yet known, but rather be postponed until that person has become old enough to show his or her talents, in order that the person in question not be excluded from an academic career by virtue of nothing other than being the bearer of a female name! And further, Zille maintains, what is there to suggest that a woman should not be able to sleep as soundly on the judge's bench as any man, or make herself as unintelligible in Latin as well as any man.

This Zille Hansdotter is not of the opinion that everybody is equal in the sense that everybody is capable of doing everything. Far from it. Rather she is of the opinion (shared by Holberg as we have seen) that "there are in this world good and evil, wise and stupid, men as well as women."

At the end of Zille Hansdotter's 'Vindication of the Rights of Women' she sums up the whole argument in the following lines:²

² Ludvig Holberg, *Samlede Skrifter*, vol. 2, 1914, p. 530. My translation.

Jeg Sværdet ey af Skeeden tar,	I shall not unsheathe my sword,
Naar man kun tilstaaer dette:	if only you grant me this much:
Hvis meere os betroet var,	Were we to be entrusted with more
	responsibilities
Vi kunde meer forrette.	we would behave more responsibly.

What Holberg is saying here is (just like in the text you have been reading): you do not have to admire each and every aspect of the so-called feminine psyche; I just want you to consider the possibility that some of the less desirable characteristics of that psyche, which are the ground on which women are excluded, may be caused by that very exclusion.

Summing up: Holberg – sometimes straightforward, more often in ironic form – suggested that ‘nature has distributed its gifts evenly among the sexes’ and that hence it is both unfair and wasteful to exclude half of humankind from the responsible and creative professions.

I shall take a short break from the history of irony and put Holberg’s position on the gender issue in context.

There are various definitions of the Enlightenment but none that does not emphasise equal rights. The philosophers of the Enlightenment were anxious to curb the privileges of clergy and nobility. The urge for equality is inscribed in the most canonical of all Enlightenment texts, the American Declaration of Independence of 1776. “All men are created equal with inalienable rights etc.”

But as Jefferson was penning these words, “All men (meaning: ‘alle mennesker, alle Menschen’) it was getting dark; in came his wife (and a black servant) with a candle each so that he could continue writing: “... are created equal”. Not for one moment did it occur to him that the woman and the Negro might be endowed with those same inalienable rights.

The same goes for the other enlighteners, Kant, Rousseau, Diderot – none of them considered equal rights for women, some ridiculed the very notion. I know of only *one* major Enlightenment thinker who did just that: Ludvig Holberg. A number of Holberg’s main concerns – religious toleration, natural law, empiricism – he shared with European predecessors. In his thinking about gender he was ahead of the entire Enlightenment Hall of Fame. The question arises: why was he not credited for his unique advanced thinking concerning women’s rights?

The answer, I think, is: his irony.

For more than two centuries scholars and commentators did not find that worthy of comment or, if they did, just mentioned it in passing. The most prestigious Danish literary scholar, probably of all times, Vilhelm Andersen, is as good an example as any. He did not suppress the evidence for Holberg's feminism (1934); he simply mentions it and then does not use it as evidence of anything. He refers to Zille Hansdotter, reports her views, labels her a 'blue-stocking', and then praises Holberg's wit in the execution plus his dependence on Latin literature.

I have come upon only one earlier scholar, C. W. Smith, who (in 1868) took Holberg's feminism seriously and then went on to enquire how Holberg might have gotten the crazy idea that gifted girls ought to have the same access to higher education as gifted boys. The only reason Mr Smith can think of is that Holberg was a poor bachelor throughout his life and hence "never had the opportunity to experience in what context a woman's spiritual gifts come into their own most beautifully", i.e. as a man's wife.

Is irony a special Danish phenomenon? I have been asked by one of our hosts to consider. The history of the reception of Holberg's ironical crusade for women's right does not suggest that Danes are particularly talented when it comes to decoding irony. What does speak in favour of a national propensity for irony is the fact that the two masters of Danish literature of the 19th century, Andersen and Kierkegaard, like Holberg of the 18th century, were also masters of irony.

Between Holberg and the two of them a most difficult and peculiar notion had arisen, that of Romantic irony. Enlightened irony is corrective, Romantic irony is – well a number of things, one of them was that the Romantic ironists were fond of breaking the illusion by means of self-reference, that is, by referring to the work within the work.

Hans Christian Andersen was infatuated with Romantic irony when he started his career. His *Journey on Foot* is full to the point of nausea with reference to contemporary Germans and to his own book. Later, in his fairy-tales, he learned how to curb that addiction. He also developed a shrewd and highly personal use of enlightened irony. Listen to this dialogue between the ugly duckling and the cat in *The Ugly Duckling*:

- Can you arch your back? Can you purr? Can you make sparks?
- No.

– Well, in that case, you have no right to have an opinion when sensible people are talking.

That is an instance of irony by means of point-of-view technique. Andersen employs the animals as representatives of a narrow-mindedness which the narrator does not share and the reader understands that he is not to share, but rather subject to a corrective laughter.

Andersen spans the width from Romantic irony to Enlightened irony with more ease than any other Danish writer.

For Kierkegaard irony is not just a figure of speech but a manner of life. He opposes the Romantic writers, only to launch a concept of irony that spans the entire existence:

Anyone who does not understand irony at all, who has no ear for its whispering, lacks the absolute beginning of a personal life. ... He does not know the refreshment and strengthening that come with undressing when the air gets too hot and heavy, and diving into the sea of irony – not in order to stay there, of course, but in order to come out healthy, happy, and buoyant and to dress again.³

To Kierkegaard, irony was just the beginning. But what an enthusiastic beginning!

Still, it does not follow from Holberg's, Andersen's, and Kierkegaard's preference for irony that irony is a specifically Danish phenomenon or attitude. I have recently published a book on irony⁴ and hence talked to and with many people about the concept of irony. It is my impression that those who favour the notion that Danes are particularly prone to irony tend to be Danes. In one of the many books I have studied for my own research I read that the typical ironist is a yankee; that book was written by an American.

I can sum up the question of irony and national identity by reporting an episode at my department in Copenhagen thirty years ago. A play about Hans Christian Andersen, *Från regnormarnas liv* ('Rain Snakes'), had just opened at The Royal Theatre. At our department we had a panel discussion with actors, the director and the author of the play, the Swedish writer P. O. Enquist.

3 Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, Princeton University Press, 1968, 326f.

4 Thomas Bredsdorff, *Ironiens pris, Fire store ironikere og et begreb*, Gyldendal, 2011.

During the question and answer-time a lady from the audience asked Mr Enquist: “Wasn’t it difficult for you as a Swede to deal with such a typically Danish ironist as Andersen?”

Enquist replied: “I see Andersen as intelligent, witty, very fast thinking and ironical – in other words, typically Swedish.”

Thank you for your attention – and congratulations on your twentieth birthday.

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