# Caesar and Octavian in Ludvig Holberg's epigram 2.60 and across the Holberg corpus

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*One of the greatest figures of Dano-Norwegian enlightenment and classicism, Ludvig Holberg (1684-1754), today famous especially for his comedies in Danish, produced works in other languages as well, not least Neo-Latin. His seven books of Latin epigrams are a great example of classicizing Latin poems, drawing on classical examples for style and expression but featuring classical figures too, most frequently Julius Caesar. This article considers an ambiguous use of the name Caesar, comparing it to other representations of Julius Caesar and his adopted son in Holberg's works on Roman history and his treatments of the proscriptions carried out by Sulla and the second triumvirate.*

Holberg published a total of 939 Latin epigrams. One of today's leading Holberg scholars, Peter Zeeberg, places them among Holberg's most important works in Latin, together with the novel *Niels Klim* and the three autobiographic letters. Mogens Leisner-Jensen finds they "constituent le témoignage le plus éclatant de la maîtrise qu'il avait de cette langue vivante et l'habilité grammaticale et métrique qui était la sienna", calling them "les meilleures strophes que nous avons de sa main".[1] Yet this is not reflected in their popular, nor in their scholarly reception, despite the effort of Frederik Julius Billeskov Jansen whose higher doctoral dissertation in two volumes, *Holberg som Epigrammatiker og Essayist* (1938-39), is still the most thorough treatment of the epigrams.[2] Recently, giant steps have been taken to make central works of Holberg available in open-access scholarly editions by the project *Ludvig Holbergs Skrifter*, a collaboration between The University of Bergen and The Society of Danish Language and Literature. In this context, Zeeberg has published the Latin text of the seven books of epigrams, as well as metrical translations into Danish of the majority of poems (791 of

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[1] Leisner-Jensen 1986, 178.

[2] Billeskov Jansen 1938, 11 notes this, but so do Leisner-Jensen 1986, 177 and more recently Zeeberg [no date], "Latinsk litteratur".

939).[3] Previous Danish translations of the epigrams exist, but I know of no English translation.[4]

Holberg first published five books of epigrams as part of his *Opuscula quædam Latina* in 1737. In 1743, he published a sixth book of epigrams as part of *Opusculorum latinorum pars altera*, and in 1749 the edition *Ludovici Holbergii… Epigrammatum libri septem*. In the 1749-edition Holberg reprinted the first five books originally published in 1737, inserted a new book 6, and turned book 6 of the 1743-edition into book 7.[5] In this form, the collection was reprinted once in Trondheim in 1863. The earliest datable references in the epigrams are the death of vice admiral Peder Wessel Tordenskjold in 1720 and King Frederik IV's founding of the Cavalry Schools in 1721, thus showing that Holberg was writing epigrams from at least around that time.[6]

## Caesar in Holberg's epigrams

In the epigrams, Holberg moves freely between contemporary everyday life and the Greco-Roman as well as other past, idealized worlds (especially also the Judaic).[7] While admiring the great people of these pasts, as did the humanists in whose footsteps Petersen & Andersen announce that he follows, [8] Holberg is not afraid to place them in contexts which the reader would not necessarily find match their *dignitas*, be it to make us laugh or to make a moral point.[9] Of the Greco-Roman figures Caesar seems to be a favourite. The name occurs in ten poems: 1.26, 2.33, 2.60, 2.150, 3.76, 4.92, 4.104, 4.105, 4.178, 5.35.[10] In nine of them, there can be little doubt that the name

[3] Version 1.0 of *Ludvig Holbergs Skrifter* was published in 2015, http://holbergsskrifter.dk. A selection of the epigrams was published in book form in 2018 (Holberg 2018). I use the digital editions of Holberg's texts in their original languages in the following as available in May 2023. References are to page numbers of the original publications of Holberg's works, which are found in the editions of LHS, along with links to digital facsimiles.

[4] Zeeberg [no date], "Litteraturliste" gives a survey. For an English introduction to Holberg and his works, see e.g. Billeskov Jansen 1979 and Rossel 1994.

[5] Roggen 2004, 334 n4; Zeeberg [no date], "Holbergs tekst".

[6] Billeskov Jansen 1938, 34; Zeeberg [no date].

[7] See Damsholt 1994 for a general assessment of Holberg's use of and attitude towards Greco-Roman antiquity.

[8] Petersen & Andersen 1934, 127: "Et udtryk for dette Tilbagetog til Latin-Humanismen er de op imod ni Hundrede *latinske Epigrammer* i Martials Stil…, som Holberg lod trykke … 1737-43" (The nine books of epigrams Holberg published 1737-43 is an expression of his reversion to Latin humanism).

[9] This is consistent with the concept of roles (*rollebegreb*) Sandstrøm identifies in Holberg's works form 1722. Sandstrøm [no date].

[10] Of other historical persons of the Graeco-Roman world I have found the following names in the following amount of poems in Holberg 1749: *Cicero*/*Cicerones*: 8, Alexander

refers to Gaius Julius Caesar (*c.* 100-44 BC) – he is alluded to in his role as general (1.26), member of the so-called first triumvirate (2.150), the subject of Lucan's epic (2.33, 4.105), author while general (3.76), dictator/statesman and victim of Brutus' murder (4.92), as well as a combination of the previous (4.104), and for his famous ability to apply several of his talents simultaneously (5.35). In epigram 2.60, it is less clear than in the previously mentioned poems whether the name Caesar refers to the dictator or his successor, the later Augustus (63 BC – 14 AD):

*De cæca honorum cupidine. Ad Pœtum.*
Quæ mala non peperit laudis titulique cupido?
Quid violentius hâc pectora, Pœte, movet?
Iræ ingens furor est, furit & lasciva libido,
Sæpius at vaga sunt, quæque perire solent.
Nominis at nunquam satiatur dira cupido,
Constanter furit hæc, nec nisi morte perit.
Indole mansuetus Cæsar proscribit amicos
Ac Patriam secum perdere, Pœte, studet
Turcarum Proceres læti pereunt, modo regnent,
Cum laqueo titulos stultè avidèque petunt.
Hæc taceo: monstrant exempla domestica, cives,
Ob titulus solitos dilapidare bona.
Pauperiem hi tolerant, modo dextra manus tribuatur.
Quid dextræ hoc studio, quæso, sinistrius est?

(On blind desire for honours. For Pœtus. What evils are not borne out of desire for praise and a title? What moves the heart more forcibly than this, Pœtus? Anger involves strong rage and sexual desire exultation, yet most often these feelings are impulsive and they usually disappear. The dreadful desire for a name, however, is never satiated. It burns constantly and only stops in death. Caesar, who had a mild character, proscribed his friends and worked towards losing his fatherland along with himself. Turkish chiefs will happily die as long as they can rule; they chase titles – and the noose – greedily and foolishly. But enough of that – we have local examples of it too, citizens who have grown used to throwing away good things for the sake of titles. They tolerate poverty as long as they are attributed a spot on the right side. What, I ask, is more wrong than this striving towards what is right?)[11]

the Great: 4, Vergil: 4. Furthermore all of the following are mentioned in one poem each: Aesopus, Apuleius, Aulus Gellius, Brutus, Cato, Crassus, Curius, Curtius Rufus, Marcus Curtius, Fabius, Horace, Juvenal, Livy, Lucan, Numa, Persius, Plautus, Pliny the Younger, Pompey, Quintilian, Sallust, Scipio Africanus, Sulla, and Terence.

[11] Unless otherwise indicated translations are my own.

Most of the notions presented in the couplet l. 7-8 seem to align with how we know Julius Caesar – being clement yet taking lives in pursuing an ambition that ultimately cost his life. However, it is well-known that he did not make use of proscriptions while his successor, who took his name, did. The verb *proscribere* and its derivations have more meanings than the technical term, and it could make sense to take *proscribit* as meaning 'cursed' or something similar here. However, searching the corpus of Holberg's texts published at <www.holbergsskrifter.dk> shows both that the word is otherwise used as a technical term in Holberg's treatments of ancient Rome and that the term does not otherwise occur in contexts naming or treating Julius Caesar. Spurred by the apparent ambiguity of epigram 2.60 and with the poem as its reference point, this study examines the use of the name and figure of Caesar and his successor, as well as Holberg's understanding of Roman proscriptions in the epigram as well as the wider contexts of Holberg's corpus.

The following falls in four parts. The first examines how Holberg represents Julius Caesar and his flaws in various works, the second his treatment of the proscriptions of Sulla and the second triumvirate, the third how Octavian, or Octavius Caesar as Holberg often calls him,[12] is represented, and before attempting to gather these pieces in the last section, the fourth part discusses how we might understand the notion of "putting life and *patria* at stake" in relation to Julius Caesar and his heir respectively.

[12] I use 'Caesar' or 'Julius Caesar' of Gaius Julius Caesar (*c*. 100-44 BC). His successor, born Gaius Octavius (63 BC-14 AD), I occasionally call 'young Caesar' but mostly 'Octavian' when treating the period following Caesar's death and prior to 27 BC when he took the cognomen Augustus. The name Octavian is convenient in this particular context while not ideal. When Gaius Octavius was adopted by Caesar in his will, he made the unusual decision to take his adoptive father's full name: Gaius Julius Caesar. He simply called himself 'Caesar' and never used the name 'Octavian' – Cooley even calls it a *misnomer*, demonstrating how the tendency in current scholarship is to follow the man's own practice and refer to him as 'Caesar' or 'young Caesar'. Cooley 2022; Schmitthenner 1973, 65-72. Plutarch *Brutus* 22.3 remarks on his adaption of this name (Schmitthenner 1973, 67 note 2); Appian *Bellum Civile* 3.11.38 says he called himself 'Caesar son of Caesar' (ibid., 68 note 1), and Schmitthenner underlines that Cassius Dio in 46.47.4-7 is relying on the adoptive naming practice as described in the *lex curiata* when stating that Octavius took the name Gaius Julius Caesar Octavianus (ibid. note 2). Schmitthenner further notes that the use of 'Octavian' to distinguish this Caesar from his adoptive parent begins with Tacitus, *Annales* 13.6 and that there are no examples of this in Suetonius, Plutarch, Velleius Paterculus, or Nikolaos – ibid., 69. Schmitthenner further states that the designation 'Octavius Caesar' was not used by the man himself either but is used by Appian (*BC* 4.8.31ff.) and gains popularity after antiquity – ibid. 70. To avoid any confusion, I use the term 'second triumvirate' rather than just 'the triumvirate' while aware that terming the political alliance between Caesar, Pompey, and Crassus a triumvirate is problematic.

## Julius Caesar and his flaws

The title of epigram 2.60 corresponds to what Holberg defines as Julius Caesar's primary vice in the work Adskillige store Heltes og berømmelige Mænds, sær Orientalske og Indianske sammenlignede Historier og Bedrifter efter Plutarchi Maade (Comparative histories and deeds of several great heroes and reputed men, especially oriental and Indian, in the style of Plutarch, 1739 – hereafter Heltehistorier). There Holberg compares Caesar with Sulla:

> Yet the inexcusable flaw was the exceeding ambition that drove him to sacrifice everything, including himself. On account of this, it is said that he called Sulla a fool for resigning his dictatorship and often made use of the saying that if one is to transgress what is lawful and right, it must be to get in charge: "If wrong may e'er be right, for a throne's sake/ Were wrong most right—be God in all else feared.")[13]

Holberg's evaluation revolves around the quality he terms *Skiønsomhed*,[14] the ability to reflect and evaluate. This he finds Sulla possessed and most evidently displayed by withdrawing from his life-long dictatorship.[15] Caesar's efficiency and ability to multitask, for which he is traditionally praised,[16] to Holberg becomes prove of the absence of *Skiønsomhed* in him.[17] Holberg is generally interested in Caesar's ambition and the extent to which he finds this can be excused varies, even within the text of the biography in *Heltehistorier*. The quotation above nonetheless shows that he finds Caesar's death is causally linked to this vice or flaw. Consequently, the statement of epigram 2.60.7-8 in its entirety and the theme of the epigram as presented in the title logically correlates with the way Holberg presents Julius Caesar in *Heltehistorier*.

Epigram 2.60 does not take up much space in the scholarly literature, but Billeskov Jansen's dissertation briefly discusses it, including its use of

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[13] Holberg 1739 vol. 2, 436: "Men den Feil, som ingen Farve kand sættes paa, var den overvættes Ærgierrighed, som drev ham til at opofre alting tillige med sig selv. Der siges derfor, at han kaldede Syllam en Taabe, efterdi han nedlagde sit Dictatur, og at han pleyede at bruge dette Mundheld: skal man overtræde Rett og Billighed, saa skal det være for at komme til Regimente: 'Si violandum est jus, regnandi gratia/ violandum est: aliis in rebus pietatem colas'."

The quotation is a Latin translation of Euripides, *Phoenician Women* 524-25 (the English translation of the verses is by Rolfe and found in Suetonius, *Divus Iulius* 30.10 (Suetonius 1998 in the bibliography). The Latin version is found in Cicero, *De Officiis* 3.82 where it is claimed to be Caesar's motto. For a relevant discussion of this see Hankins 2019, 110-12.

[14] Holberg 1739 vol. 2, 284.

[15] Cf. Holberg 1739 vol. 2, 436.

[16] At least since Pliny, *Naturalis Historia* 7.25.

[17] Holberg 1739 vol. 2, 301.

Caesar, in a chapter on Holberg's psychology. Billeskov Jansen finds it is an expression of curiosity about the psychology of desire and highlights how Holberg here, rather than mock blind desire for titles and status as he often does, presents a comparative examination, setting it against other affects. He attributes the conclusion to Holberg independently but suggests inspiration for the choice of Caesar as the historic example to Suetonius' biography, which he rightly points out to be a plentiful source of Caesar's sexual desire as well as his desire for power and the importance he attributed to his *dignitas*.[18] The assumption is backed with the characterization of Caesar presented in the prologue of Holberg's *Introduction til de Europæiske Rigers Historie* (Introduction to the history of the European Countries, 1711 – hereafter *Introduction*), which he finds to be "a rather polished summary of Suetonius' depiction".[19] Like in epigram 2.60, Holberg is interested in Caesar's ambition and also here determines it to be his gravest vice:

> "There was nothing of vice in [Caesar], except the one ambition [Ambition] to rule over his countrymen, that which is easily excused considering the times, and his devotion to venerean matters, in which he however never over-indulged." (Holberg 1913-63 vol. 1, 57, cf. *Heltehistorier*, Holberg 1913-63 vol. 11, 443).[20]

Billeskov Jansen likewise rightly points to "Democritus og Heraclitus" for a parallel. In this work, one of four 'skiemte-Digte' (jesting poems) published in 1722, Holberg compares humans and animals. The relevant passage argues that there are no tyrants among animals, even though they have no laws, and that ambition is found in humans alone:

> There is no place for ambition among tigers and lions, but passion of that sort turns Caesar into a robber; one sees Roman blood flow like a river, he sacrifices everything, his family, himself, only to rule, to be addressed 'master.' He happily rushed towards his own end, despite being pious, courteous, and good-natured; it is as if he denies his nature out of sick imperiousness. We can easily anger a dog, but followingly the dog quickly calms down again. Yet a provoked friend would have his eye knocked out, would readily lose one – who would have thought – as long as he can rob the person he hates of two. One sees how animals appreciate good deeds while humans reward beneficiaries with evil.

[18] Billeskov Jansen 1938, 195. Billeskov Jansen further, in the same place mentions Johannes Cluverus' Historiarum totius mundi epitome (1631) as a source of inspiration.

[19] Billeskov Jansen 1938, 195.

[20] Billeskov Jansen 1938, 195; Holberg 1711 I, 106: "Der fantis intet lasteligt hos ham, uden alleene én Ambition at regiære over sine Lands-Mænd, hvilcken, naar vi betragter Tiiderne, kand lettelig tilgifvis, Item, at hand var hengiven til Veneriske Sager, hvoraf hand dog aldrig giorde noget formeget."

> Dogs often sacrifice their lives for their patrons while human beings are frequently so hard-headed that they would rather sacrifice their life and, more so, honour than owe anyone a debt of gratitude.[21]

We evidently have the same logic here as in epigram 2.60.7-8: that Caesar is willing to risk everything, his own life as well as the lives of people close to him, as well as the society and state in which he lives, for his ambition. Holberg, however, does not use the term 'proscriptions' there, and he talks of sacrificing family (epigram 2.60 has *amici*). Since "Democritus og Heraclitus" does not mention proscriptions, it is unproblematic to understand Caesar there to be the dictator and the decisions implied the risk it was to cross the Rubicon, the erasure of his son-in-law Pompey, all done to concentrate power in his own person, which cost him his life. The dynamics of a psychological structure like Caesar's seems to have fascinated Holberg, but as initially stated I would think it fair to say that similar complexity applies to Augustus in many respects, and Holberg found it in Sulla too.

## Proscriptions

Whereas a vice relates to a person's psychology, it finds expressions through their deeds. The use of proscriptions, that is, declaring named citizens outlaws and confiscating their possessions, is an infamous Roman practice. Like any classicist, Holberg uses 'proscriptions' as a technical term in his Latin as well as Danish works treating aspects of Roman history. The word appears in his treatment of the second triumvirate in *Introduction*, and just as we would expect, we find it in *Heltehistorier*'s biography of Sulla but not in Caesar's biography. I have not been able to locate any mentions of proscriptions in early editions of Holberg's vastly successful textbook on world history, *Synopsis historiæ universalis* (1733, hereafter *Synopsis*), while the term is used in editions published after his death in the section about Commodus.[22] I have not found it in *Moralske Tanker* either (Moral Thoughts, 1744, a

[21] Holberg 1722, "Democritus og Heraclitus", ll.109-126 = A4r: "Ærgiærighed ej Sted hos Tigre har og Løver;/ Men saadan Passion giør Cæsar til en Røver:/ For saadant Romer-Bloed man flyde seer, som Elv,/ Han ofrer alting op, sin Stad, sin Slegt, sig selv,/ Kun for at hærske, for at blive Herre stiilet;/ Han til sin Undergang med Glæde haver iilet,/ Skiønt from, beleven, god han af Naturen er,/ Af hærske-syge dog Naturen som forsvær./ Vi irre let en Hund, til Fred ham strax dog bøje,/ Men en fortørnet Ven sig lader udslaae Øje/ Han gierne mister et, hvo skulde saadant troe,/ Naar den han hader han kun skille kand ved toe./ Man seer jo Beester paa Velgierninger at skiønne,/ Men Mennesker med ont Velgiørere belønne;/ En Hund for sin Patron tilsætter ofte Liv;/ Eet Menneske tit er dog saa haardnacked, stiv:/ At det opofrer Liv, og det, som meer er, Ære,/ Før end taknemmelig mod andre det vil være."

[22] Holberg 1770, 57; ibid. 1771, 74-75. This work is not published on <www.holbergsskrifter.dk>.

collection of essays on moral matters written in Danish but each introduced by a Latin motto in the shape of an epigram).

In *Heltehistorier* Holberg explicitly seeks to redeem Sulla, necessarily making the proscriptions a key issue to tackle. While showing how Sulla went overboard, Holberg makes the claim that resorting to proscriptions was not completely unjustified:

> It is said that a wealthy citizen by the name of Quintus Aurelius, who had always behaved peacefully, seeing his name among the proscribed or condemned, yelled: "Alas, my delightful farm in Alba robs me of my life" … But these cruel executions left a mark on Sulla's reputation that would never be washed away and is the reason he has been reckoned by many to be among the mighty and blood-thirsty tyrants. The deed is in itself horrendous and all one can say to mitigate the harsh verdicts passed on him is that he seems to have performed this harshness against the nature of his own being: and since his intention was to correct a republic that was corrupt to the core, and which had for a long time, under anxious and ambitious leaders, trod everything holy under foot and turned the city into a robbers' den, he would have achieved nothing by a moderate cleansing performed in the manner one would have expected from a man who had so far displayed moderation.[23]

It is clear here that proscriptions are understood to imply executions. Holberg further pursues the possible reasons for Sulla's choice to make use of them. He uses a metaphor of illness and bloodletting, then compares Sulla to a school master "who considers exemplary corporal punishment necessary but does not know how to moderate himself, hitting so hard that not only the skin tears but damage is caused to the bones as well."[24] Key to the explanations are Sulla's good intentions.

Comparing the corrupt state to a *Røverkule* (den of thieves) and Sulla to a school master might even make the readers think of Christ cleansing the

[23] Holberg 1739 vol. 2, 351-52: "Der fortælles, at en riig Borger ved Navn Qvintus Aurelius, som stedse havde ført sig fredsommelig op, da han saae sit Navn blant de proscriberedes eller fordømtes Tall, raabte han: Ach! min skiønne Gaard udi Alba skiller mig ved Livet…Men disse gruelige Executioner satt en Plet paa Syllæ Reputation, som aldrig kunde aftoes; og er det derfor, at han af mange bliver regnet blant de store og blodgierige Tyranner. Gierningen i sig selv er afskyelig; og alt hvad man kand sige til at formilde de haarde Domme, som ere fældede over ham, er, at han synes mod sit Naturell at have øvet denne Haardhed: og, saasom hans Forsætt var at corrigere en udi Grund fordervet Republique, der i lang Tiid under uroelige og ærgierige Anførere havde traaed alt hvad som helligt var under Fødder, og giort Staden til en Røverkule, saa havde han ved en maadelig Revselse, og saadan, som man kunde vente af en Mand, der hidindtil havde øvet Moderation, intet udvirket."

[24] Holberg 1739 vol. 2, 352.

temple to subsequently teach there.[25] The logic is certainly similar although the parallel would be unexpected and provocative. The conclusion again states the proscriptions to have left "an unerasable stain on his name and reputation",[26] but also insists that Sulla, in deciding to make use of proscriptions. was driven by "a state principle rather than natural thirst of blood".[27] This is clearly a redeeming factor in Holberg's book. The majority of those Sulla proscribed Holberg furthermore exclaims to have been "thoroughly evil people" and unworthy of sympathy since they were supporters of Marius and hostile towards the Senate, to the extent that they themselves would have easily been incited to murder the lot of senators.[28] Holberg admits that things got out of hand, but maintains that when they did, it was against Sulla's intentions,[29] and the general conclusion about Sulla in the biography remains that the good outweighs the bad.[30]

In the appendix on sources for *Heltehistorier*, Kristoffer Schmidt states Plutarch to be the primary source of Sulla's biography,[31] and whereas other sources are by no means excluded, Cicero's comparison of Sulla and Caesar in *De Officiis* 1.43 is not treated as one. Here, the dictators' unlawful procuration of resources from Roman citizens are presented together, indicating them to have been of an identical sort. [32] Cicero, however, is not using the term *proscribere* and presumably quite consciously so – it would be going too far, weaken his argument. He also does not talk of killings but "pecuniarum translatio a iustis dominis ad alionos" (transfer of money from rightful owners to others).[33]

As mentioned, Holberg treats the proscriptions of the second triumvirate in *Introduction*:

> Hearing about the newly formed triumvirate, people in Rome were immediately horrified since they were well aware that it meant a severe threat against their lives and freedom. In this they were not mistaken; the first thing the triumvirs did was to take vengeance on their enemies in Rome, of whom a large part was proscribed or outlawed. Among them were 130 senators including the famous Cicero, against whom

[25] Especially Mark 11:15-17 and Luke 19:45-47.

[26] Holberg 1739 vol. 2, 368: "og de blodige Executionerhan øvede for og udi sit Dictatur have paa hans Navn og Rygte satt en Plett, som aldrig kand aftoes."

[27] Holberg 1739 vol. 2, 369: "et Stats-Principio end af en naturlig Blodgierighed".

[28] Holberg 1739 vol. 2, 353: "hoved-onde Mennesker".

[29] Holberg 1739 vol. 2, 351.

[30] Holberg 1739 vol. 2, 368.

[31] Schmidt [no date], [unpaginated]. This is also not suggested in Kragelund's treatment of influences from Cicero's *De Officiis* in Kragelund 1978, 35-52.

[32] I thank the anonymous peer reviewer for this suggestion.

[33] Cicero, *De Officiis* 1.43.

> Antony harboured immortal hatred because of the immense harm Cicero's eloquent orations had caused him.[34]

Unlike in epigram 2.60, the focus here is rather the enmity than friendship between proscribers and proscribed. Of the people proscribed by the triumvirs, Cicero is probably most frequently remarked upon, not just by Holberg, and it is likewise traditionally accepted that Octavian was less determined about adding him to the lists than Antony. The explicit focus on Antony's personal and emotional motivation for proscribing Cicero forms a contrast to Sulla's dignified ideals. If we look to some of Holberg's possible sources, the account of Cicero's proscription in Plutarch's biography of Cicero highlights the complex relationship between Cicero and Octavian. This is not termed a friendship but according to Plutarch, Octavian called Cicero 'father' (45.2) and tried hard to keep his name off the lists.[35] Showcasing the closeness between them, Plutarch gives a relatively kind account of Octavian' role in Cicero's death. Both here and in Plutarch's biography of Mark Antony, Cicero's death sentence is presented to have been part of a deal, according to which each of the triumvirs gave up a person they would have liked to save for personal reasons, on the request of one of the others. This occasions a negative evaluation of the moral of all the triumvirs, and in Antony's case it centres around friendship especially:

> But at last, their wrath against those whom they hated led them to abandon both the honour due to their kinsmen and the goodwill due to their friends, and Caesar gave up Cicero to Antony, while Antony gave up to him Lucius Caesar, who was Antony's uncle on the mother's side. Lepidus also was permitted to put to death Paulus his brother; although some say that Lepidus gave up Paulus to Antony and Caesar, who demanded his death. Nothing, in my opinion, could be more savage or cruel than this exchange. For by this barter of murder for murder they put to death those whom they surrendered just as truly as those whom they seized; but their injustice was greater towards their friends, whom they slew without so much as hating them.[36]

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[34] Holberg 1711, 1108: "Saa snart de i Rom finge at høre om dette ny-oprettede Triumvirat, bleve de gandske bestyrtzede, saasom de vel viste at deris Lif og Frihed ville derofver staa i høy Fare, og derudi foer de ikke vilde; thi det første de Triumviri toge sig fore, var, at hefne dem ofver deris Fiender udi Rom, af hvilke een stoor Deel bleve proscriberede, eller giort Fredløse, hvor iblant 130 Raads-Herrer, og dend berømmelige Cicero, til hvilcken Antonius hafde et udødeligt Had, effterdi hand med sine veltalende Orationerhavde giort ham saa stoor Afbreck."

[35] Plut., *Cic.* 45-46.

[36] Plut. Ant. 19.2: "τέλος δὲ τῇ πρὸς τοὺς μισουμένους ὀργῇ καὶ συγγενῶν τιμὴν καὶ φίλων εὔνοιαν προέμενοι, Κικέρωνος μὲν Ἀντωνίῳ Καῖσαρ ἐξέστη, τούτῳ δὲ Ἀντώνιος Λευκίου Καίσαρος, ὃς ἦν θεῖος αὐτῷ πρὸς μητρός· ἐδόθη δὲ καὶ Λεπίδῳ Παῦλον ἀνελεῖν τὸν ἀδελφόν·

Appian likewise notes how friends and brothers were not spared in the proscriptions of the second triumvirate.[37] According to Suetonius, Octavian, while initially minded to prevent proscriptions, carried them out more ruthlessly than his fellow triumvirs. The example used to showcase his cruelty is not Cicero but Octavian's former guardian Gaius Toranius.[38] Cassius Dio also reflects on how friends as well as enemies of the triumvirs were proscribed and how this is one of several reasons why the proscriptions of the triumvirs were worse than Sulla's.[39] In Dio's account, Antony and Lepidus trade friends for enemies when negotiating the lists,[40] but Dio claims Octavian (whom he calls Caesar here) had no direct part in the proscriptions and saved as many lives as he could.[41]

Holberg's description of proscriptions in epigram 2.60.7 consequently resembles the way Octavian' role in the proscriptions of the second triumvirate is presented in Plutarch and Appian and/or the tradition following them.[42] To the extent one can say that to avenge ('hefne') is a personal matter and 'enemies' the logical antonym of 'friends', epigram 2.60.7 is at least not inconsistent with the way the proscriptions are rendered in *Introduction*. What we should note, however, is that he seems to refrain from discussing Octavian's role. In treating the moral problems of the proscriptions of the second triumvirate, Holberg tunes in on Antony.[43]

## Octavian in Holberg's works

Unless implied in 2.60, Octavian/Augustus, does not feature in Holberg's seven books of epigrams, not even indirectly. Holberg treats Augustus and his reign in *Introduction* and mentions that he called himself Caesar following his posthumous adoption. 'Cæsar Augustus' occurs once in a headline,[44] but Holberg uses the names Octavius or Augustus in the running text. Augustus' regime is presented as peaceful, and his death used as an occasion to

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οἱ δέ φασιν ἐκστῆναι τοῦ Παύλου τὸν Λέπιδον ἐκείνοις ἀποθανεῖν αὐτὸν αἰτησαμένοις. οὐδὲν ὠμότερον οὐδὲ ἀγριώτερον τῆς διαμείψεως ταύτης δοκῶ γενέσθαι. φόνων γὰρ ἀντικαταλλασσόμενοι φόνους ὁμοίως μὲν οἷς ἐλάμβανον ἀνῄρουν οὓς ἐδίδοσαν, ἀδικώτεροι δὲ περὶ τοὺς φίλους ἦσαν, οὓς ἀπεκτίννυσαν μηδὲ μισοῦντες." Translation by Bernadotte Perrin (Plutarch 1920 in the bibliography).

[37] Appian, *Bellum civile* 1.5.1

[38] Suetonius, *Divus Augustus* 27.1.

[39] Cassius Dio 47.4-5.

[40] Cassius Dio 47.6.

[41] Cassius Dio 47.7.

[42] Holberg owned copies of all of the above (Bruun 1869; Schmidt [no date]) and they are among the ancient historians he highlights in Holberg 1744, vol. 2 = epigram 3.91 – Damsholt 1994, 49.

[43] On the focus on Antony see also Billeskov Jansen 1938, 195.

[44] Holberg 1711, 1112.

emphasize how long he reigned and how prosperous he made Rome. Holberg even relates a popular anecdote and quote:

> … once while Augustus was signing several death sentences, Maecenas threw a note into his lap on which the following words were written: Surge tandem Carnifex! It is time to stop, hangman. As soon as Augustus had read this, he got up and would not sign anymore sentences.[45]

This indirect portrayal seems to point towards what Holberg later, in *Heltehistorier*, argues is a central quality in good leaders: the ability "to act differently than their education prescribed"[46] – is this even *Skiønsomhed*.

In *Synopsis*, earlier editions use 'Octavius' for the later Augustus when treating the time before his adaptation of that name, which is then used on its own.[47] Later editions expand, using 'Octavius Caesar' in the first instance.[48] They give the version 'Augustus Octavius Caesar' once and followingly use 'Octavius Augustus'[49] or just 'Augustus'.[50] The description of Augustus' reign is short, elegant, and memorable:[51]

> Under this peaceful ruler the true prince of peace and saviour of all the world Jesus Christ was born. Having ruled successfully for almost 57 years, Augustus finally died.

Augustus' character, while in focus, is described through the general state of the realm during his reign. It does not get much more flattering than being paired with Christ, although there is no doubt about Augustus' place in the hierarchy, and while there is presumably a pedagogical point of brevity and clarity in not introducing complicating matters such as all the bloodshed preceding the Pax Augusta, the parallelization of Augustus and Christ runs deeper, reflects a historiographic principle of synthesis.[52] Karen Skovgaard-

[45] Holberg 1711, 1114-15: "…da hand engang sad og dømte adskillige fra Livet, kastede Mœcenas ham en Seddel udi Skiødet, hvorpaa stod skrefvne disse Ord: Surge tandem Carnifex! Holdt op engang du Bøddel. Saa snart Augustus dette havde læst, reyste hand sig strax op, og vilde ikke fleere Domme undertegne." The anecdote is preserved in Cedrenus and Cassius Dio 55.7.2 but the quote circulated in this and similar Latin forms.

[46] Schmidt 2014, 315, on Petrus Alexiovitz (1679-1725, Peter the Great, *r.* 1721-25), the perfect ruler according to *Heltehistorier.*

[47] Holberg 1733, 56; 60 (consulted in the second edition); ibid. 1749, 42; 44.

[48] Holberg 1770, 49; 1771, 65.

[49] Holberg 1770, 50.

[50] Holberg 1770, 68.

[51] Holberg 1733, 60: "Sub hoc pacifice Imperatore verus ille pacis Princeps & orbis universi Redemptor Jesus Christus nascitur… Postqvam 57 fere annos feliciter regnaverat Augustus, tandem obit."

[52] On this see Skovgaard-Petersen 2012, 228 and passim.

Petersen underlines the importance Holberg attributes to showing "that the history of the world forms a connected whole" in *Synopsis*.[53]

*Moralske Tanker* likewise gives a relative and positive account of 'Keiser Augustus' in the one place he is mentioned, but here noting how Augustus' reign seemed greater because he was followed by Tiberius.[54] In this work, the designation 'Octavius' does not occur, but 'Cæsar' does 13 times, all implying Gaius Julius Caesar, except for a quotation from Horace, *Satire* 1.3.4-6 in essay 1.84, in which Caesar stands for Octavian.

The introduction to *Herodiani Historie* (1746), which Torben Damsholt calls Holberg's "purest essay in modern philosophical historiography" and Holberg himself translated into French and published as an independent essay (1752), has 'C. Octavius' once (the French text has 'Octave') and otherwise 'Augustus'/'Auguste' (20 and 21 occurrences respectively).[55] The proscriptions are not treated, but Holberg blames Caesar's murderers for not thinking clearly, arguing that Rome's development had made monarchical government a necessity, and his general evaluation of Augustus' reign is positive.[56] Nothing suggests this reflects a milder view of Caesar's way to power.

Holberg's biography of Cleopatra in *Heltindehistorier* (*Histories of Heroines*, 1745) stands out from the pattern. Here, Holberg alternates between 'Caesar Octavius', 'Octavius', and 'Caesar' in designating the later Augustus. He likewise alternates between 'Julius Caesar' and 'Caesar' for his adoptive father, but the context makes their identity obvious in each case. In his depiction of the struggles between Antonius, Cleopatra, and Octavian, Holberg rejects that the latter intended to parade Cleopatra in a triumph, depicting him as merciful yet duly cautious in his dealings with her after Actium[57] (despite not detecting that she was planning to take her own life).[58] This work is unconcerned with the proscriptions of the second triumvirate.

There is a tradition dating back to antiquity of seeing a division in Augustus' character before and after 27 BC when he took that name and sat undisturbedly on the throne.[59] We saw that Holberg thought of Sulla's and Caesar's courses of life in this manner, that there was a difference in their ways before and after their assumption of power, but there are no indications

[53] Ibid., 222: "…at verdens historie faktisk udgør et sammenhængende hele…".
[54] Holberg 1744 vol. 1, 383, i.e. Epigram 2.96.
[55] Damsholt 1994, 47; Holberg 1746, 92; 1752, 143.
[56] Holberg 1746, 94-96; Holberg 1752, 147-150.
[57] Holberg 1745, vol. 1, 234.
[58] Holberg 1745, vol. 1, 231.
[59] E.g. Seneca, *De Clementia* 1.9–11; Hallett 1977. Judith Hallett notes that the origin of the later image even predates 27 BC (Hallett 1977, 158-60).

in the material we have covered that Holberg considers a conflict between the character of the young Caesar and mature Augustus.

## Life at stake

While epigram 2.60 gives little information about the historical person it evokes, it does say that this Caesar was so caught up in his ambition that he put his own life as well as his *patria* at stake. While risking one's life is not necessarily the same as causing one's own death, this last section examines how Holberg presents the end of Julius Caesar's and Augustus' lives.

We saw above that Holberg gives a positive estimation of Augustus as a regent in *Introduction* and how his death is only mentioned as the end of his remarkably long and peaceful reign. Following the same logic as *Moralske Tanker*, mentioned above, more nuances about his death are added when the text moves on to introduce Tiberius:

> Augustus was succeeded by his stepson Tiberius since his rightful heirs were deceased. His mother was Livia, who is believed to have killed her master Augustus as well as his rightful heirs so that her son could rule.[60]

Transmitting the idea, traceable back to Tacitus and Cassius Dio, that Livia caused the death of Augustus as well as his intended heirs certainly suggests a less idyllic end to Augustus' life than the passage about his reign. It is, however, not implied that there would be a causal relationship between young Caesar's proscriptions in the civil wars and the death of the old, well-established ruler. The focus on Augustus' exceptionally long reign in *Introduction* furthermore does not fit logically with the point Holberg is making in epigram 2.60, that ambition only ends with death. Livia's possible implication in Augustus' death rather reflects negatively onto Tiberius.[61]

Now I turn to the death of Julius Caesar. In epigram 4.92 Holberg reproaches Brutus for Caesar's murder, stating that Rome was not subdued by Caesar but suffered its own vices and that Caesar's murder rather than liberate Rome made her problems more pronounced. There is no implication that Caesar, dying as he did, was reaping what he had sown catering for his personal ambition. As already mentioned, the introduction to *Herodiani Historie* (1746) presents the same viewpoint, explicitly criticizing Brutus, Cassius, and Cato for not realizing the need for monarchical government.[62] Epigram 4.104 is a short praise of Julius Caesar as an author as well as

[60] Holberg 1711, 1116: "Effter Augustum fuldte hans Stif-Søn Tiberius, efftersom hans rette Arvinger vare ved Døden afgangne. Hans Moder var Livia, hvilcken mand meener omkom baade sin Herre Augustum, saa og de rette Arvinger, at hendes Søn maatte regiære."

[61] Cf. note 54.

[62] Cf. above.

someone whose life is a worthy subject of literature – Billeskov Jansen highlights its positivity.[63] On the contrary, as we have seen, *Heltehistorier* dwells on the ambiguity of Caesar's unflattering personal ambition and on his ways being too rushed, whereas the reforms he carried out were positive in many ways. Holberg underlines that Caesar's murder is under no circumstances justifiable, but in the concluding comparison of him with Sulla nonetheless presents Caesar's death as indication that Sulla's way of managing power was better: Sulla resigned and died of natural causes.[64]

While we can find both the death of Caesar and Augustus represented as killings in Holberg's works, neither Caesar nor his heir is presented as being exiled from his fatherland, or risking this. "Patriam secum perdere … studet" in 2.60.8 would rather refer to the risk involved in pursuing, in Caesar's case, the title of dictator for life, or, in Octavian's case, his role as heir to Caesar's position and avenger of his. The logic is similar to the famous motto of Cesare Borgia: *aut Caesar aut nihil* – everything is at stake, the only thing that matters to Caesar is to become what a Caesar is. In order for Holberg's phrase to apply to Octavian, we must understand the use of dramatic present as a way of dwelling on the risk implied when he accepted his inheritance, underlining how his success was not a given. The willingness to risk everything, not only for himself but also risk everyone around him is the key problem, and while more explicitly discussed in relation to Caesar in *Heltehistorier,* could theoretically apply to his heir as well.

## In conclusion

During the course of this journey around Holberg's works, we have seen how Holberg seems to be consistent with how he believes the world to work – the synthetic principle of history: Augustus's reign was peaceful and remarkable and was so to a long extent because of Augustus, yet the real reason for this are connected to matters greater than him and Rome. In his text book, Holberg's presentation of Augustus' reign is short as an epigram, elegant and while not relying on the same means – such as irony, ambiguity, and surprising turns – far from unrefined in its clarity. Even in wordier contexts, however, the image remains the same: not much is to debate about Augustus' character, even the bloodshed of the proscriptions are not so much discussed in relation to him. Is the logic merely that Antony was worse? Or is it the synthetic view of history that exempts Augustus from Holberg's curious investigations?

[63] Billeskov Jansen 1938, 134.
[64] Holberg 1739 vol. 2, 436.

We have furthermore clearly seen Holberg's curiosity about how people work – their moral compasses, logic, and values – especially when in conflict with his own. In the biographies of Sulla and Caesar, we see that Holberg not only dwells on and examines but insists on the ability of a person, a ruler, to do bad while standing on a sound moral foundation – and the contrary: do good while having as his core driver a terrible moral vice, and how that corresponds to the complex he is deliberating in epigram 2.60. The epigrams in general are full of observations about all sorts of people – how they reason, how they act – all sorts of manners. The ambiguity when it comes to the identity of the Caesar in epigram 2.60 may very well be only what I said initially, apparent. Examining this occurrence against treatments of Caesar and Octavian/Augustus respectively, however, show a remarkable difference in how Caesar's depiction is flexible, varies according to the context, whereas his successor seems to appeal less to Holberg's curiosity.

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[65] In references to this, I have provided the titles of relevant subsections.