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A Play by
HENRIK IBSEN

PEER GYNT

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Introduction by Raymond R. Canon

COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

PEER GYNT



HENRIK IBSEN



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PEER GYNT



HENRIK IBSEN

Introduction

There are times in the history of literature where music composed in connection with a certain literary work becomes even better known than the work itself. How true this is in the case of "Peer Gynt," where the haunting melodies of Grieg are undoubtedly known to a wider audience than the dramatic work of Ibsen. And yet an acquaintance of the music cannot help but be put to good use when one comes to read the play, for Grieg and Ibsen were both Norwegian, and of approximately the same age; indeed it was Ibsen who asked Grieg to write the incidental music for the play. It was through this music that Grieg became famous, and rightly so, for the music reflects to a remarkable degree the milieu and sentiments in Ibsen's play.

But music alone will not help us, for Ibsen is a profound and extremely personal writer. He once stated that "Everything I have written has the closest possible connection with what I have lived through, even if it has not been my own personal experience; in every new poem or play, I have aimed at my own spiritual emanci-

pation and purification—for a man shares the responsibility and guilt of the society to which he belongs.”

The world into which Ibsen was born in 1828 was middle class, and many of his forefathers were seamen. He kept mainly to himself as a boy and developed interests in the theater, drawing, and painting. At sixteen, he was sent by his family to a small coastal town to become an apothecary's apprentice. Here he spent six years, gradually cutting himself off from his family until he corresponded only with his little sister Hedvig. His interest in the theater was instrumental in his obtaining the post of stage manager in Oslo and Bergen. His salary was meager, and it was a desperate struggle to live. He had turned to writing even before his departure for Oslo, and his first play, “Catiline,” appeared shortly after his arrival there. This play, which has distinct traces of Shakespeare in it, reveals the profound turbulence in Ibsen's mind, a turbulence which was to mark so many of his later works.

The theater in Bergen where he worked was devoting itself at this time to works of an indigenous nature, so Ibsen turned from classical sources, delving, instead, into his country's past history for stories of heroism and magic. It is these two themes which play the greatest rôle in the remainder of his early works, and, in fact, continue to flavor the greater works which came later.

In 1858, Ibsen was married to Susannah Thoreson, who was to become a tower of strength to him in his later years, although she must have experienced many lonely moments in her married life. Surely one of her most difficult times was when Ibsen was making up his mind to leave Norway. That such a problem ever came up at all is surprising in view of Ibsen's professed interest in Norway's past, and his intense pride in his country. However, he was filled with shame at Norway's refusal to help Denmark in her struggle against the Prussian take-over.

of Schleswig-Holstein. This refusal was the greatest disappointment in his life, and that, coupled with his dismay in not seeing his theatrical works achieve the success he felt was due, drove him to leave his native land. His wife accompanied him, and after passing through Berlin, where he witnessed the festivities celebrating the Prussian triumph in Denmark, he continued his journey southward, and finally settled in Rome. It was to be many years before he would see Norway again.

But strangely enough, it was abroad that all his great plays were written; plays, as it has already been pointed out, that were Norwegian to the core. It must be remembered that Norway had largely escaped the evils of feudalism, and that Norwegians, isolated in their narrow valleys and fiords, had lived a life unchanged for centuries. The industrial advances of the nineteenth century brought with them a change in the way of life, changes that were even more profound in Norway than in much of the rest of Europe. It was the younger generation that represented this change, and so we have a clash in the country, in effect, between two ways of life.

The Norwegian is generally a tenacious person, holding fast to his way of life and his opinions. However, continued pressure may lead to a spark which will ignite an explosion—reckless and unheeding in nature. Such is frequently the national character and such are frequently the plays of Ibsen. No amount of isolation from Norway could change his character, nor his appreciation of the social struggle that was taking place in his homeland.

Peer Gynt was written shortly after Ibsen's arrival in Rome, and it is therefore one of the first of his better-known works. Like an earlier play "Brand," it was called a dramatic poem and was not written specifically for the stage. "Brand" had been a success, and the protagonist, as G. B. Shaw points out, "died a saint, having caused more intense suffering by his saintliness than the most

talented sinner could possibly have done with twice the opportunities."

The two works are complementary, and while the background is almost entirely Norwegian, the characters are as universal as Don Quixote and Sancho Panza. But while Brand talked down to the people, Peer Gynt is on the same level as everybody else, and often much lower. Peer is supposed to depict the Norwegian character as seen by Ibsen, but he is more likely based on an adventurer of the same name who lived toward the end of the eighteenth century, and whose exploits, fancied or otherwise, are recorded in a book on Norwegian fairy tales.

In spite of the fact that Ibsen may have wished to endow his hero with negative qualities, the result is not wholly detrimental to Peer. He is seen to have considerable potential, although never possessing the self-discipline necessary to develop this potential and bring it to flower. What he lacks in solid accomplishment, he more than makes up in imagination. In fact, it is his wishful thinking that leads him to one imbroglio after another, until he is no longer capable of distinguishing truth from fiction. And to be honest, he does not really care. He has no concern for the morrow, and if he has to face the consequences of all his actions, it is only by a miracle that he escapes the worst of them.

It is when Solveig enters the story that we become aware of a possible repetition of the Faust theme as related by Goethe. After leaving her family to join Peer in the mountains, she does, for a while, succeed in bringing out some of the best in him. But Peer's past catches up with him, he cannot bring himself to face Solveig, and so he leaves her. Like Ibsen himself, he spends a great deal of his life in foreign lands, he becomes successful after a fashion, but without the steadying hand of Solveig, he lapses back into his licentious

ways. But even while we watch Peer wallow about in degradation, we cannot help but laugh at him, and so the play has, as some critics have correctly pointed out, all the makings of a tragicomedy.

Like Goethe's Faust, Peer, too, is saved in the end, although we are apt to wonder why. Throughout all the years Peer has been absent, Solveig has waited for him. It is in front of her (and his) home that he is finally moved to utter the cry, "Where was I as myself, as the whole man, the true man?" To which, Solveig replies, "In my faith, in my hope, in my love."

With this, Peer dies, having been saved by what many have considered as a too apparent *deus ex machina*. But this method of salvation in the pursuit of self-realization is not one to be recommended, nor did Ibsen consider it as such, for he returned to tackle the problem in later plays.

In the years that followed, Ibsen turned out a series of fine plays, some of which have come to occupy a leading place in world literature. Plays such as *Hedda Gabler*, *The Wild Duck*, *Ghosts*, or *A Doll's House* are known the world over. And all these were written far from Norway. It was only when Ibsen had achieved lasting fame that he returned home—after an absence of twenty-seven years. He continued to write, however, and had the satisfaction of seeing several more of his plays given public performances in Norway before he took ill in 1900, at the age of 72. From this illness he never recovered, and death came on May 23, 1906.

There are many dramatists who reveal themselves in one play and whose further efforts in that field are simply repetition and reiteration. Ibsen is far from being one of these. He posed far more questions than he answered; he seemed to undermine some of the very ideals he was fighting for. But Ibsen the dramatist does provide us with a real insight into Ibsen the man. He was driven, even as

the protagonists of his plays were driven, and if they did not always gain the answers they were seeking, they at least followed the urge toward self-realization, and made us fully aware of its triumphs and pitfalls.

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PEER GYNT
(1867)

CHARACTERS

AASE, widow of John Gynt, a peasant.

PEER GYNT, her son.

Two Old Women with corn-sacks.

ASLAK, a blacksmith.

Wedding Guests, a Steward at the Wedding, a Fiddler, etc.

A Stranger and his Wife.

SOLVEIG and little HELGA, their daughters.

The Owner of Hægstad Farm.

INGRID, his daughter.

The Bridegroom and his Parents.

Three Cowherd Girls. A Woman in Green.

The TROLL KING. Several Trolls of his Court.

Troll Boys and Girls. Two Witches. Hobgoblins, Brownies, Elves, etc.

An Ugly Urchin. A Voice in the Gloom. Birds' Cries.

KARI, a cotter's wife.

MR. COTTON

MONSIEUR BALLON

HERR VON EBERKOPF

HERR TRUMPETERSTRAALE

} *tourists.*

A Thief and a Receiver of Stolen Goods.

ANITRA, daughter of a Bedouin Chief.

Arabs, Female Slaves, Dancing Girls, etc.

The Statue of Memnon (with song). The Sphinx at Gizeh (dumb).

PROFESSOR BEGRIFFENFELDT, Ph.D., in charge of the Lunatic Asylum at Cairo.

Lunatics with their Keepers.

HUHU, a language-reformer from the Malabar coast.

HUSSEIN, an Eastern Secretary of State.

A Fellah, carrying a royal mummy.

A Norwegian Skipper and his Crew.

A Strange Passenger.

A Priest.

A Funeral Party.

A Button-Moulder.

A Thin Man.

The action, which begins in the early years of the century and ends somewhere about our own day [1867], takes place partly in the Gudbrandsdal and on the surrounding mountaintops, partly on the coast of Morocco, in the Sahara Desert, in the Cairo Lunatic Asylum, at Sea, etc.

ACT I

SCENE 1

SCENE. *The wooded mountain-side near AASE's farm, with a stream rushing past. On the farther bank stands an old mill. It is a hot summer's day. PEER GYNT, a sturdy youth of twenty, comes down the path, followed by his mother AASE, who is short and slight. She is scolding him angrily.*

AASE: Peer, you're lying!

PEER GYNT [*without stopping*]: No, I'm not!

AASE: Well, then, will you swear it's true?

PEER GYNT: Swear? Why should I?

AASE: Ah, you daren't! Your whole tale's a pack of lies!

PEER GYNT: Every blessed word is true!

AASE [*facing him*]: I wonder you can face your mother! First of all, just when the work is at busiest, off you go to prowl about the hills for weeks after reindeer in the snow; come back with your clothes in rags, game-bag empty—and no gun! Then you have the cheek to think you can make your mother swallow such a pack of lies as this about your hunting!—Tell me, then, where you found this precious buck?

PEER GYNT: West of Gendin.

AASE [*with a scornful laugh*]: I dare say!

PEER GYNT: I was leeward of the blast, and behind a clump of trees he was scraping in the snow for some moss——

AASE [*as before*]: Oh, yes, no doubt!

PEER GYNT: I stood and listened, held my breath, heard the scraping of his hoof, saw the antlers of his horns; then

upon my belly crawled carefully between the rocks; peeped from cover of the stones— Such a buck, so sleek and fat, I suppose was never seen!

AASE: I expect not!

PEER GYNT: Then I fired! Down the buck came on the ground! But the moment he had fallen I was up astride his back, on his left ear got my grip and was just in act of thrusting with my knife into his gullet just behind his head—when, hi! with a scream the ugly beggar scrambled up upon his feet. From my hand his sudden back-throw jerked my hunting-knife and scabbard, pinned me to his loins and held me by the legs between his antlers like a pair of mighty pincers; then he rushed with bounds gigantic right along the ridge of Gendin!

AASE [*involuntarily*]: Christ in Heaven——!

PEER GYNT: Have you ever been upon the ridge at Gendin? Fully half a mile it stretches, at the top as short and narrow as a scythe-blade. Looking downward—past the slopes and past the glaciers, past the grey ravines and gullies—either side you see the water wrapped in dark and gloomy slumber half a mile at least beneath you! Right along it he and I clove our passage through the air. Never rode I such a steed! Far ahead the peaks were sparkling as we rushed along. Beneath us in the void the dusky eagles fell away like motes in sunshine; you could see the ice-floes breaking on the banks, yet hear no murmur. But the sprites that turn us dizzy danced and sang and circled round us—I could hear and seemed to see them!

AASE [*swaying as if giddy*]: Heaven help us!

PEER GYNT: On a sudden, on the precipice's edge, from the hole where it lay hidden almost at the reindeer's feet, up a ptarmigan rose, cackling, flapping with its wings in terror. Then the reindeer, madly swerving, gave a bound sky-high that sent us plunging o'er the edge and down-

wards. [AASE totters and grasps a tree-trunk. PEER GYNT continues.] Gloomy precipice behind us!—Fathomless abyss below us! First through clouds of mist we hurtled, then a flock of gulls we scattered wheeling through the air and screaming. Downward still and ever downwards! But beneath us something glistened whitish, like a reindeer's belly. Mother, 'twas our own reflection mirrored in the lake beneath us, rushing up, it seemed, to meet us just as swiftly and as madly as we downwards rushed towards it.

AASE [*gasping for breath*]: Peer! God help me——! Tell me quickly!

PEER GYNT: Buck from air and buck from water met with mighty splash together, scattering the foam around us. Then at last we somehow managed to the northern shore to struggle; Buck, he swam and dragged me after—so I got home——

AASE: But where's the reindeer?

PEER GYNT: I expect he's where I left him—— [*Snaps his fingers, turns on his heel and adds*]: If you find him, you may keep him!

AASE: And your neck you haven't broken? Nor your legs? Nor smashed your backbone? Praise and thanks to God be given for His goodness that has saved you! There's a rent across your breeches, it is true; but that is scarcely worth a mention when one thinks what the harm might well have been from a leap like that of yours—— [*She suddenly pauses, stares at him with open mouth, seems to struggle for speech and at last breaks out.*] Oh, you lying little devil!—Christ above us, what a liar! All that rigmarole you told me is the tale of Gudbrand Glesnë that I heard when I was twenty. 'Twas to him that all this happened, not to you, you——

PEER GYNT: Yes, it did; history repeats itself.

AASE: Lies, I know, can be so furbished and disguised

in gorgeous wrappings that their skinny carcasses not a soul would recognize. That's what you've been doing now, with your wonderful adventures—eagles' wings, and all that nonsense—making up a pack of lies, tales of breathless risk and danger, till one can no longer tell what one knows and what one doesn't.

PEER GYNT: If a man said that to me, I would beat him to a jelly.

AASE [*in tears*]: Would to God that I were dead and buried in the cold black earth! Prayers and tears have no effect. You're a hopeless ne'er-do-well!

PEER GYNT [*in tears*]: Dearest pretty little mother, every word you say is true; so be gay and happy—

AASE: Pshaw! Don't talk nonsense. How could I be happy, if I wanted to, with such a pig as you for son? Don't you think it's pretty hard for a poor weak widow never to feel anything but shame? [*Weeps again.*] How much is there left of all that your grandfather enjoyed in his days of comfort? Where are the well-filled money-bags left by good old Rasmus Gynt? 'Twas your father emptied them, pouring money out like sand—buying land in all directions—gilded coach to ride about in. Where's the stuff so freely wasted at the famous winter banquet, when each guest sent glass and bottle crash against the wall behind him?

PEER GYNT: Where are the snows of yesteryear?

AASE: Hold your tongue when I am speaking! See the farm-house—scarce a window but is smashed and stuffed with dish-clout; scarce a hedge or fence is standing; no protection for the cattle from the wind and wet; the meadows and the fields all lying fallow; every month distraint on something—

PEER GYNT: That's enough of dismal wailing! Often when our luck's been drooping it has grown as strong as ever.

AASE: Where it grew, the soil is poisoned. Peer, you certainly don't lack good opinion of yourself. You are just as brisk and bumptious, just as pert, as when the Parson who had come from Copenhagen asked you what your Christian name was, telling you that where he came from lots of men of highest station would be glad to be as clever; and your father was so grateful for his amiable praises that a horse and sledge he gave him. Ah, me! All went well in those days. Parsons, Captains and such people, dropping in to see us daily—filling up with drink and victuals until they were nearly bursting. But it's when your fortunes alter that you get to know your neighbours. Since the day when "rich John Gynt" took the road with pedlar's pack, not a soul has e'er been near us. [*Wipes her eyes with her apron.*] You're a stout and strapping fellow—you should be a staff supporting your old mother in her troubles. You should work the farm for profit and look after all the little that your father left behind him. [*Weeps again.*] Heaven knows, it's precious little use you've been to me, you rascal. When you are at home, you're loafing by the fire, or grubbing idly in the ashes and the embers; when you're in the town you frighten all the girls you meet at dances, so that I'm ashamed to own you—fighting with the lowest tramps——

PEER GYNT [*moving away from her*]: Let me be!

AASE [*following him*]: Can you deny you were foremost in the brawling in that dog-fight of a scrimmage down at Lundë? Who but you cracked the blacksmith Aslak's arm? Or at any rate disjointed one of his ten fingers for him?

PEER GYNT: Who has stuffed you up with that?

AASE [*hotly*]: Why, the cotter heard his howls!

PEER GYNT [*rubbing his elbow*]: Yes—but it was I that howled.

AASE: What!

PEER GYNT: Yes, mother, I got thrashed.

AASE: What?

PEER GYNT: Well, he's a lusty chap.

AASE: Who is?

PEER GYNT: Aslak—as I felt!

AASE: Shame! I'd like to spit upon you! To let such a scurvy swiller, such a worthless drunken rascal, beat you! [*Weeps again.*] Often I've endured shame and scorn on your account, but that this disgrace should happen is the very worst of all. If he is a lusty fellow, need that mean you're a weakling?

PEER GYNT [*with a laugh*]: Well, it doesn't seem to matter if I beat, or if I'm beaten—either way you start your wailing. You may cheer up——

AASE: Are you lying now again?

PEER GYNT: Yes, just this once; so you may as well stop crying. [*Clenches his left hand.*] See, 'twas with this pair of pincers that I bent the blacksmith double, while my right hand was my hammer——

AASE: Oh, you brawler! You will bring me to my grave by your behaviour!

PEER GYNT: Nonsense! You're worth something better—better twenty thousand times! Little, homely, dainty mother, just believe what I am saying. All the town shall do you honour; only wait till I have done something—something really great!

AASE [*contemptuously*]: You!

PEER GYNT: Who knows what lies before him!

AASE: If you ever knew enough to mend your breeches when they're torn, 'tis the most that I could hope for!

PEER GYNT [*hotly*]: I'll be a King, an Emperor!

AASE: Oh, God help me! Now he's losing what was left him of his wits!

PEER GYNT: Yes, I shall! Just give me time!