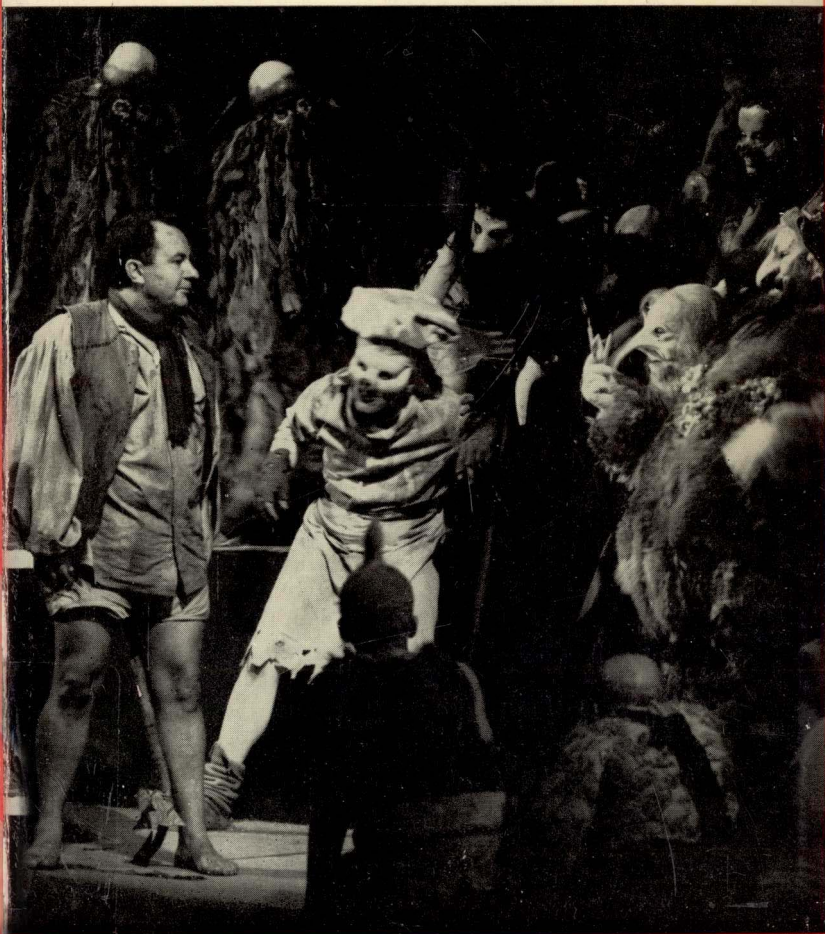


Henrik Ibsen

Peer Gynt

Translated by Michael Meyer



Peer Gynt

Although Ibsen himself once wrote that 'of all my books I regard *Peer Gynt* as the least likely to be understood outside Scandinavia,' it has become the best known of all his works, outside as well as inside its native land. 'The universality of Ibsen,' observed Bernard Shaw, 'makes his plays come home to all nations, and *Peer Gynt* is as good a Frenchman as a Norwegian.' Countless critics and scholars have sought to find symbolic interpretations for each episode in the play. But here again the author was in disagreement. 'Why,' Ibsen wrote in 1868, 'can't people read the thing as a poem? That is what I wrote it as.'

Michael Meyer's translation was commissioned by the Old Vic Theatre Trust and was first performed at the Old Vic Theatre, London, in 1962.

The photograph on the front cover shows Leo McKern as Peer Gynt in a scene from the Old Vic production and is reproduced by courtesy of Crispian Woodgate. The photograph of Ibsen on the back cover is reproduced by courtesy of the Mansell Collection.

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Henrik Ibsen

PEER GYNT

Translated from the Norwegian by
MICHAEL MEYER



EYRE METHUEN
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Henrik Johan Ibsen

- 1828 Born at Skien in south-east Norway on 20th March, the second child of Knud Ibsen, a merchant, and his wife Marichen, *née* Altenburg.
- 1834-5 Father becomes ruined. The family moves to Venstøp, a few miles outside Skien.
- 1844 Ibsen (aged fifteen) becomes assistant to an apothecary at Grimstad, a tiny seaport farther down the coast. Stays there for six years in great poverty.
- 1846 Has an illegitimate son with a servant-girl, Else Sofie Jensdatter.
- 1849 Writes his first play, *Catiline* (in verse).
- 1850 Leaves Grimstad to become a student in Christiania (now Oslo). Writes second play, *The Warrior's Barrow*.
- 1851 Is invited to join Ole Bull's newly formed National Theatre at Bergen. Does so, and stays six years, writing, directing, designing costumes and keeping the accounts.
- 1852 Visits Copenhagen and Dresden to learn about the theatre. Writes *St John's Eve*, a romantic comedy in verse and prose.
- 1853 *St John's Eve* acted at Bergen. Failure.
- 1854 Writes *Lady Inger of Oestraat*, an historical tragedy in prose.
- 1855 *Lady Inger of Oestraat* acted at Bergen. Failure. Writes *The Feast at Solhaug*, another romantic verse-and-prose comedy.
- 1856 *The Feast at Solhaug* acted at Bergen. A small success. Meets Suzannah Thoresen. Writes *Olaf Liljekrans*, a third verse-and-prose comedy.
- 1857 *Olaf Liljekrans* acted at Bergen. Failure. Leaves Bergen to become artistic manager of the Christiania Norwegian Theatre. Writes *The Vikings at Helgeland*, an historical prose tragedy.
- 1858 Marries Suzannah Thoresen. *The Vikings at Helgeland* staged. Small success.
- 1859 His only child, Sigurd, born.
- 1860-1 Years of poverty and despair. Unable to write.

- 1862 Writes *Love's Comedy*, a modern verse satire, his first play for five years. It is rejected by his own theatre, which goes bankrupt.
- 1863 Ibsen gets part-time job as literary adviser to the Danish-controlled Christiania Theatre. Extremely poor. Applies unsuccessfully to Government for financial support. Resorts to moneylenders. Writes *The Pretenders*, another historical prose tragedy. Is granted a travel stipend by the Government; this is augmented by a collection raised by Bjørnson and other friends.
- 1864 *The Pretenders* staged in Christiania. A success. He leaves Norway and settles in Rome. Remains resident abroad for the next twenty-seven years. Begins *Emperor and Galilean*.
- 1865 Writes *Brand*, in verse (as a play for reading, not acting), in Rome and Ariccia.
- 1866 *Brand* published. Immense success; Ibsen becomes famous throughout Scandinavia (but it is not acted for nineteen years).
- 1867 Writes *Peer Gynt*, in verse (also to be read, not acted), in Rome, Ischia and Sorrento. It, too, is a great success; but is not staged for seven years.
- 1868 Moves from Rome and settles in Dresden.
- 1869 Attends opening of Suez Canal as Norwegian delegate. Completes *The League of Youth*, a modern prose comedy.
- 1871 Revises his shorter poems and issues them in a volume. His farewell to verse; for the rest of his life he publishes exclusively in prose.
- 1873 Completes (after nine years) *Emperor and Galilean*, his last historical play. Begins to be known in Germany and England.
- 1874 Returns briefly to Norway for first time in ten years. The students hold a torchlight procession in his honour.
- 1875 Leaves Dresden after seven years and settles in Munich. Begins *The Pillars of Society*, the first of his twelve great modern prose dramas.
- 1876 *Peer Gynt* staged for first time. *The Vikings at Helgeland* is performed in Munich, the first of his plays to be staged outside Scandinavia.

- 1877 Completes *The Pillars of Society*. This makes him famous in Germany, where it is widely acted.
- 1878 Returns for one year to Italy.
- 1879 Writes *A Doll's House* in Rome and Amalfi. It causes an immediate sensation, though a decade elapses before it makes Ibsen internationally famous. Returns to Munich for a year.
- 1880 Resettles in Italy for a further five years. First performance of an Ibsen play in England (*The Pillars of Society* for a single matinée in London).
- 1881 Writes *Ghosts* in Rome and Sorrento. Violently attacked; all theatres reject it, and bookshops return it to the publisher.
- 1882 Writes *An Enemy of the People* in Rome. Cordially received. *Ghosts* receives its first performance (in Chicago).
- 1884 Writes *The Wild Duck* in Rome and Gossensass. It, and all subsequent plays, were regarded as obscure and were greeted with varying degrees of bewilderment.
- 1885 Revisits Norway again, for the first time since 1874. Leaves Rome and resettles in Munich.
- 1886 Writes *Rosmersholm* in Munich.
- 1888 Writes *The Lady from the Sea* in Munich.
- 1889 Meets and becomes infatuated with the eighteen-year-old Emilie Bardach in Gossensass. Does not see her again, but the experience shadows the remainder of his writing. Janet Achurch acts Nora in London, the first major English-speaking production of Ibsen.
- 1890 Writes *Hedda Gabler* in Munich.
- 1891 Returns to settle permanently in Norway.
- 1892 Writes *The Master Builder* in Christiania.
- 1894 Writes *Little Eyolf* in Christiania.
- 1896 Writes *John Gabriel Borkman* in Christiania.
- 1899 Writes *When We Dead Awaken* in Christiania.
- 1901 First stroke. Partly paralysed.
- 1903 Second stroke. Left largely helpless.
- 1906 Dies in Christiania on 23rd May, aged seventy-eight.

Acknowledgements

I gladly express my thanks to Michael Elliott for many valuable suggestions concerning the translation; also to the Old Vic Theatre Company for commissioning it, and to everyone concerned with that memorable production.

I also gratefully acknowledge my debt to the writings of Professor Francis Bull, the greatest of Ibsen scholars, particularly to his monograph on the play (Oslo, 1956) and his introduction in the centenary edition of Ibsen's works (Volume VI, Oslo, 1931). I have incorporated in my notes on pp. 159-164 several of William Archer's perceptive comments.

M. M.

Introduction

Ibsen wrote *Peer Gynt* in 1867 at the age of thirty-nine, partly in Rome, partly on the island of Ischia, and partly in Sorrento. Three years earlier, embittered by poverty and failure, he had left Norway to settle in Italy; but in the spring of 1866, the publication of *Brand* had at last brought him fame and financial security. A short while previously he had been voted the worst-clothed member of the Scandinavian community in Rome; now he began to dress with a touch of dandiness, sporting among other luxuries a velvet jacket. A new tone appears in his letters; suspicion and resentment are replaced by a buoyant confidence. Even his handwriting acquired a new assurance. For the first time in his life, he felt economically secure; more important, perhaps, he felt that his reputation was established. This mood was enhanced by the news, in May 1866, that the Norwegian Government had granted him an annual pension of 400 specie-dollars (£100); to which was added 100 specie-dollars from the Society of Knowledge at Trondhjem, plus, later in the summer, a further grant of 350 specie-dollars from a scholarship travel fund. 'I have such a longing for work, such strength,' he wrote to Michael Birkeland on 4 May 1866, 'that I could kill bears!' That autumn he actually asked his publisher, Frederik Hegel of Gyldendal, not to send him certain royalties before the following summer, since he did not want to have a superfluity of cash in Italy.

For a while, however, he remained uncertain in which direction to apply his energies. Shortly after completing *Brand* he had struggled for some weeks with an historical drama about Magnus Heineson which he had planned before leaving Norway. But this came to nothing, and on 21 May 1866, he wrote to his publisher, Hegel, that he felt more inclined to settle down to the actual writing of *Emperor and Galilean*, the play about the Roman Emperor Julian the Apostate on which he had been researching for two years. On 22 July he wrote to Paul Botten-Hansen: 'Now I shall soon start to write in earnest; I am still wrestling with the material, but soon, I know, I shall have the beast under me, and then the rest will glide forward of its own volition.' But *Emperor and Galilean* still resisted him, and towards the end of August he

laid it aside and set to work revising *Love's Comedy* for a new, Danish edition, removing some of the specifically Norwegian words so as to make the play more palatable to Danish readers. It is possible to discern in this deliberate deletion of Norwegian words the resentment which Ibsen still felt towards his native country, and his contempt for the campaign to purge the Norwegian language of its foreign influences – a campaign which he was shortly to castigate in a more direct and vehement fashion.

Once this work on *Love's Comedy* was finished, Ibsen thought of travelling to Greece (presumably to furnish himself with more material for *Emperor and Galilean*, which partly takes place there), and also to Paris; but both these projects fell through. On 2 November 1866, he wrote to Hegel that he was still uncertain to which of several subjects he would next turn: 'this very division of interest is proof that none of these themes has as yet sufficiently matured in my mind; but I feel confident that this will soon happen, and hope to be able to let you have the completed manuscript during the spring.'

It was around Christmas 1866, or the New Year of 1867, that his plans for *Peer Gynt* began to clarify. On 5 January 1867, he wrote to Hegel: 'At last I am able to tell you that my new work is well under way and will, if nothing untoward happens, be ready early in the summer. It will be a long dramatic poem, having as its principal character a part-legendary, part-fictional character from Norwegian folk lore during *recent* times. It will bear no resemblance to *Brand*, and will contain no direct polemics nor anything of that kind. I have long been pondering the material for this; now the whole plan is worked out and on paper, and I have begun the first act. It grows as I work on it, and I am confident that you will be satisfied with the result.'

In point of fact, the dates inscribed by him on his manuscript show that Ibsen did not begin writing the play until nine days after this letter, on 14 January 1867; he had a tendency, not unique among authors, to tell white lies to his publisher. He completed Act One six weeks later, on 25 February. Six days later, on 3 March, he started on Act Two, which, if we are to believe a further letter to Hegel (27 March 1867), he finished in three weeks. In mid-May he moved from the heat of Rome to the island of Ischia, where he lived for three months in the little town of Casamicciola on the northern side of the island, near the extinct volcano of

Epomeo. The weather was exceptionally hot, even for the natives, but Ibsen seemed to revel in it and worked throughout the day; according to Vilhelm Bergsøe, who was with him at this time, he took no siesta but spent the afternoons correcting what he had written in the mornings. He completed Act Three in as little as two and a half weeks, on 2 July. During this month the sirocco arrived and raised the temperature to above 100 °F, but Ibsen continued to work both afternoon and evening, revising and fair-copying. On 8 August he was able to write to Hegel, still from Ischia:

'I have today sent you, via Consul-General Danchertsen in Naples, the manuscript of the first three acts of my new work, entitled *Peer Gynt*, a dramatic poem. This section will come to around 120 printed pages, and the remainder will add up to about the same. I hope to be able to send you Act Four towards the end of the month, and the rest not long after that. In case it should interest you, *Peer Gynt* was a real person who lived in Gudbrandsdal, probably around the end of the last century or the beginning of this. His name is still famous among the people up there, but not much more is known about his life than what is to be found in Asbjørnsen's *Norwegian Fairy Tales* (in the section entitled *Stories from the Mountains*). So I haven't had much on which to base my poem, but that has meant that I have had all the more freedom with which to work on it.'

One night in mid-August there was a slight earthquake on Ischia, and although the natives treated it lightly Ibsen left the island the next day and settled in Sorrento. Here he remained for two months, writing the last two acts; there was no earthquake to trouble him, but in near-by Naples there was an outbreak of cholera, and at one time he thought his wife had caught it; but this fear proved to be unfounded.

We do not know when he began Act Four, but he completed it on 15 September, and posted the fair copy to Hegel three days later, adding: 'If the printing of the list of characters could be delayed until I have sent you the remainder of the play, I should be grateful, since I might possibly wish to add a few minor characters; but this isn't important.' The next day, 19 September, he began the final act, and completed it in twenty-five days on 14 October. Four days later he posted the fair copy of this to Hegel: 'and may luck attend it!'

Hegel was very quick to publish *Peer Gynt* after the success that had attended *Brand*, and it reached the Scandinavian book-shops on 14 November 1867, less than four weeks after he had received the final section of the manuscript. Ibsen was delighted at the book appearing in time to catch the Christmas sales. 'Let us hope the critics will be kind to us,' he wrote to Hegel on 23 November. 'I think the book will be much read in Norway.'

Peer Gynt, however, gained a mixed reception in Scandinavia. The first omens were good; Hegel sent word that the first edition of 1,250 copies had sold out almost at once, and that a second edition of 2,000 copies was in the press. Bjørnson, that most patriotic of poets, who more than most might have been expected to take offence at the fun poked at Norwegian nationalism, wrote Ibsen a letter full of admiration: 'I love your spleen, I love the courage with which it has armed you. I love your strength, I love your recklessness - oh, it turned all my thoughts to laughter, like the smell of the sea after the closed air of a sick-room.' He also published a review in *Norsk Folkeblad* shortly after the book appeared, praising it hugely.

Ibsen penned a letter of thanks, but before he had posted it he read an attack on the play by Clemens Petersen in the Danish magazine *Fædrelandet*. This was the leading intellectual paper in Scandinavia, having a wide circulation in Norway and Sweden as well as in Denmark, and Petersen had a considerable reputation as a literary pundit; he had written generously, though not uncritically, of *Brand*, and Ibsen had sent him a rather fulsome letter while he was preparing *Peer Gynt*, expressing the hope that Petersen would recognize that in his new work he had 'taken a marked step forward.' Petersen had some good things to say of *Peer Gynt*, but complained of 'a lack of clarity in the conception and of absolute integrity in the execution'; he also declared, somewhat obscurely, that neither *Brand* nor *Peer Gynt* was real poetry because they 'lacked idealism,' objected that the characters in *Peer Gynt* were not fully rounded or alive, and summed the play up as 'an unsuccessful allegory' which frequently degenerated into 'an intellectual swindle.'

This review so enraged Ibsen that he tore up the letter he had written to Bjørnson and composed another. This second letter reveals an emotional, even hysterical side to Ibsen's character such as he rarely allowed to emerge in his letters or conversation. 'Dear

Bjørnson,' he wrote on 9 December 1867, 'What is this curse that at every juncture interposes itself between us? It is as though the Devil came in person to cast his shadow over us . . . An hour ago, I read Hr. Clemens Petersen's review in *Fædrelandet* . . . If I were in Copenhagen and anyone stood as near to me as Clemens Petersen does to you, I would have struck him senseless before allowing him to commit so calculated an offence against Truth and Justice . . . My book is poetry; and if it isn't, it will *become* such. The conception of poetry in our country, in Norway, shall shape itself according to this book . . . He says that the Strange Passenger represents the idea of *Angst*. Were I standing on the gallows and able to save myself by confessing to such an interpretation, the thought would never have occurred to me; I never dreamed of any such thing; I merely slipped the scene in as a caprice. And is not Peer Gynt a character rounded and individual? And the Mother? . . . However, I am glad that this injustice has been flung at me; it is a sign of divine aid and dispensation; anger increases my strength. If there is to be war, then let there be war! If I am not a poet, what have I to lose? I shall try my hand as a photographer. I shall deal with my contemporaries up there, each and all of them, one by one, as I have dealt with these language reformers; I shall not spare the child in its mother's womb, nor any thought nor feeling that may have motivated the actions of any man who shall merit the honour of being my victim . . . Do you know that all my life I have turned my back on my parents, on my whole family, because I could not bear to continue a relationship based on imperfect understanding?'

He did not post the letter at once, but added a postscript the following day: 'I have slept on these words and read them through in cold blood. The mood they express is that of yesterday; I shall send them, nevertheless.' After another and equally hysterical outburst ('Do not underrate my friends and supporters in Norway; the party whose paper has allowed its pages to carry an injustice against me shall realize that I do not stand alone . . . My enemies shall learn that if I cannot build I have at least strength enough to destroy') he ended on a scarcely appeasing note: 'I reproach you merely with inactivity. It was not good of you to permit, by doing nothing, such an attempt to be made in my absence to put my literary reputation under the auctioneer's hammer.'

Bjørnson accepted this abuse calmly, and wrote Ibsen a letter

of splendid generosity and exhortation, begging him to 'be just towards us and have faith in yourself.' This reached Ibsen on Christmas Day, and so mollified him that in his next letter, on 28 December, he actually asked Bjørnson to give Petersen* his regards. But his old feeling of resentment soon returned, and it was to be ten years before he wrote to Bjørnson again.

Another Dane to find fault with *Peer Gynt*, and one whose condemnation must particularly have saddened Ibsen, was his old friend and admirer Georg Brandes. Writing in *Dagbladet*, he admitted that it contained great beauties and certain noble truths, but concluded: 'Beauties and Truths are far less important than Beauty and Truth in the singular, and Ibsen's poem is neither beautiful nor true; the misanthropy and self-hatred on which it is based are a poor foundation on which to build a work of art . . . What wormwood-tainted joy can he find in thus belittling human nature? It is time this campaign came to an end. We have had enough and the thing must stop.' Hans Andersen, too, disliked the play. 'Ibsen is repellent to him,' wrote Edvard Grieg to Bjørnson, 'and *Peer Gynt* the worst that he has read.'

In Norway the book was better received than in Denmark, though there, too, the reception was mixed. *Morgenbladet* and *Aftenbladet* published long reviews which were on the whole laudatory; but the greatness of the play was not generally appreciated, at any rate by the critics. Apart from the anti-Norwegianism, some people were bothered by the ending, which they thought facile, and others by what seemed to them an incongruity between the young, the middle-aged and the elderly Peer. Camilla Collett, the pioneer of women's independence in Norway, was offended by the passivity of Solveig's character, declaring that a more forceful female would have shown Peer the error of his ways much earlier. And Kristofer Janson, the novelist, denounced the attack on the language reformers, of whom he was one. Ibsen, who had a long memory, used him seventeen years later as part-model for the self-pitying Hjalmar Ekdal in *The Wild Duck*.

After his first outburst of fury, Ibsen accepted these criticisms calmly. 'How goes it with *Peer Gynt*?' he wrote to Hegel on

* Petersen suffered swift retribution. Barely a year later, he became involved in a homosexual scandal in a school in which he had been lecturing, and was forced to leave for the United States, where he devoted himself to religious journalism among the Scandinavian-Americans - a dreadfully Ibsenish fate to befall a leading literary critic.