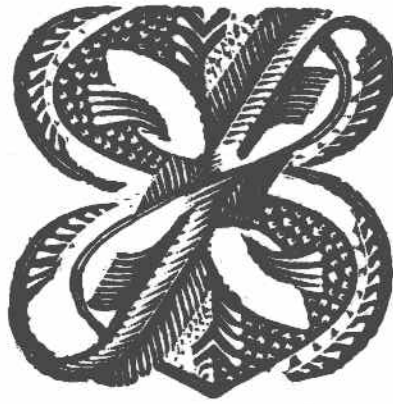


PEER GYNT



HENRIK IBSEN

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Everyman, I will go with thee, and be thy guide,
In thy most need to go by thy side.

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POETRY & THE DRAMA

PEER GYNT
BY HENRIK IBSEN · TRANSLATED
BY R. FARQUHARSON SHARP

HENRIK IBSEN, born at Skien, Norway, on 20th March 1828. Obtained work in connection with theatres in Bergen and Christiania. Left Norway in 1864 and lived abroad—mostly in Germany—returning to Norway in 1901. Died at Christiania on 23rd May 1906.

INTRODUCTION

Peer Gynt was written in 1867, when Ibsen was nearly forty.¹ It followed his other great dramatic poem, *Brand*, by rather less than two years,—for *Brand*, though not published till 1866, was written in 1865. The contrast offered by the audacious high spirits of *Peer Gynt* to the austere gloom of *Brand* was a reflection of a welcome change in their author's worldly circumstances. Ibsen's growing independence of thought and his increasing frankness in insisting upon it (as he had done in his play *Love's Comedy*) had aroused a tempest of criticism in his own country, and in 1864 he had cast off the embarrassing trammels of national and family ties and had gone into voluntary exile in Italy. This had been rendered possible by a small grant of money that had been awarded him by the Norwegian government and substantially supplemented by the kindness of one or two friends. *Brand* was the first outcome of his detachment from real poverty. It to a great extent rehabilitated his reputation at home, and put some money in his pocket; and this success further resulted in the Norwegian government's allotting him a "literary pension" of some ninety pounds a year. This sum, together with what he expected to make by his pen, opened out a prospect of a life of literary activity unhampered by continual anxiety as to his daily bread.

Peer Gynt obviously was written when his temperament was on the rebound and he was beginning to feel assurance that he could be as independent in thought and word as he pleased. It was conceived (as he says in a letter to Björnson) in the mood of a "Korstog-Jubel"—a "Crusader's Song of Triumph." "After *Brand* came *Peer Gynt*, as though of itself," he says in another

¹ Further details respecting Ibsen's life and writings will be found in the introductions to the four preceding volumes of Ibsen's plays in "Everyman's Library."

letter; ¹ "it was written in Southern Italy, in the Island of Ischia and at Sorrento. So far away from one's future readers, one becomes reckless." Again, in a letter written some five years after *Peer Gynt* appeared, he says: "*Peer Gynt* is the very antithesis of *Brand*. . . . It is reckless and formless, written with no thought of the consequences—as I could only dare to write when far from my own country."

In 1880 Ibsen replied to one of his translators, who had asked for information as to the genesis of *Peer Gynt* in its author's brain: "to make the matter intelligible I should have to write a whole book, and for that the time has not yet come. Everything that 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 emancipation and purification." As a matter of fact one of the outstanding features of *Peer Gynt*—the character of Aase, Peer's mother, and the incidents woven round her—was, as we learn from Ibsen's letters, derived directly from his own experiences. "This poem," he wrote to his friend Hansen in 1870, "contains much that is reminiscent of my own youth; for Aase, my mother—with necessary exaggerations—served as model." Again, in a letter written to Brandes in 1882, he says: "My father was a merchant with a large business and wide connections, and he enjoyed dispensing reckless hospitality. In 1836 he failed, and nothing was left to us except a farm. . . . In writing *Peer Gynt* I had the circumstances and memories of my own childhood before me when I described the life in the house of 'the rich John Gynt.'"

With its obvious satire on the typical Norwegian temperament, as well as on what Ibsen considered a ridiculous aspiration for "national self-realisation," it is not surprising that *Peer Gynt* was not at first as popular in Norway as *Brand* had been. Seven editions of *Brand* had appeared before *Peer Gynt* reached its third. In 1876 Ibsen prepared an abridged version of *Peer Gynt* for representation at the Christiania theatre,

¹ I quote from Mary Morison's translation of Ibsen's Correspondence, published in 1905.

where it was performed with Grieg's incidental music; and by degrees it became a stock feature in the repertoires of the chief Scandinavian theatres. The earliest German translation of the poem was published in 1881; the first English in 1892; and the first French in 1896. In Germany and in France performances have been given of abridged versions, and in 1906 Richard Mansfield produced an almost complete version at Chicago. In this country there has not yet been any attempt at a complete public performance, though a selection of scenes, translated by Miss I. M. Pagan, has been performed semi-privately.

Peer Gynt is (as Ibsen was emphatic in asserting) first and foremost a poetic fantasy, and only incidentally a satire. It is a fantasy woven out of the folklore of its author's country and embroidered by his wealth of thought and keen wit. There is a philosophy to be found in it, no doubt; but Ibsen did not set out to write a philosophical poem, but a fantasy. It contains many a shaft of satire, no doubt; but it was not primarily intended as a satirical poem, but as sheer fantasy. This cannot be too emphatically insisted upon, nor too diligently remembered in reading the poem. In a letter to his publisher, soon after *Peer Gynt* had made its appearance, Ibsen wrote: "I learn that the book has created great excitement in Norway. This does not trouble me in the least; but both there and in Denmark they have discovered much more satire in it than was intended by me. Why can they not read the book as a poem? For as such I wrote it. The satirical passages are pretty well isolated. But if the Norwegians of to-day recognise themselves, as it would appear they do, in the character of *Peer Gynt*, that is the good people's own affair."

Peer Gynt has been the prey of many commentators; and of the majority of them the question might well be asked: "Why can you not read it as a fantasy? For as such Ibsen wrote it." Ibsen himself ruefully complained more than once that his critics persisted in reading far more into his work than he had intentionally put there; and *Peer Gynt* has been a sufferer in this respect. The wise reader, approaching the poem for the

first time, will simply abandon himself or herself to the current of fancy—now laughing, now tender, now ironical—that sweeps through it; remembering that it is folklore, and the folklore of a people to whose peasantry Trolls and Witches are even to-day a reality. There are isolated difficulties to be encountered in the reading, no doubt; an attempt has been made to touch on some of them in footnotes to the present translation; but, in the main, if the poem be read with an appreciation of its origin and intention, and with a modicum of common sense, its fantasy need not unduly bewilder nor its philosophy unduly puzzle. Even caprice is permissible in a fantasy; Ibsen, on being asked if he corroborated a suggested explanation of a certain scene in *Peer Gynt*, replied that nothing had been farther from his thoughts than what his commentator suggested, and that he had as a matter of fact “stuck in the scene as a mere caprice.”

In sending his publishers the manuscript of the poem, Ibsen wrote: “It may interest you to know that *Peer Gynt* was a real person, who lived in Gudbrandsdal, probably at the end of last, or the beginning of this, century. His name is still [1867] well known among the peasants there; but of his exploits not much more is known than is to be found in Asbjørnsen’s *Norwegian Fairy Tales*. . . . Thus I have not had very much to build upon, but that has left me so much the more liberty.” In Asbjørnsen’s book *Peer Gynt*’s chief exploits lie in the direction of fighting and conquering Trolls.

It is practically impossible for any translation of *Peer Gynt* to be entirely satisfactory. It must be in verse; a prose version of such a fantasy is unthinkable—even if it were not for the fact that its author declared that he would rather never see it translated than translated into prose. One of the charms of the diction of the original is the ingenious variation of metre for scenes of varying nature; that, translation may attempt to reproduce; but the ingenuity of its rhymes cannot be reproduced, and its verbal brilliance must be dulled, in translation.

The present translator has deliberately avoided two

shackling conditions which, it is permissible to think, have hampered previous translators of the poem; he has not attempted rhymed verse, and he has refused to be fettered by a superstitious regard for purely verbal literalness or for "line for line" rendering. He has made an attempt to follow the metres of the original, in unrhymed verse, keeping as closely to the original's literal meaning as was compatible with intelligibility in another tongue—his aim being to produce a version that might be read with sufficient ease to induce appreciation of this amazing work; and appreciation of *Peer Gynt* is bound to lead to admiration of it.

R. FARQUHARSON SHARP.

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THE 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 and
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 mountain-tops, partly on the coast of Morocco, in the Sahara Desert, in the Cairo Lunatic Asylum, at Sea, etc.)

PEER GYNT

ACT I

SCENE I

(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!

Peer Gynt

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 of Gendin?
Fully half a mile it stretches,
At the top as sheer 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 downwards.

[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.