

**THE COLLECTED WORKS OF
HENRIK IBSEN**

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VOLUME IV

PEER GYNT

A DRAMATIC POEM

TRANSLATED BY

WILLIAM AND CHARLES ARCHER

WITH INTRODUCTION BY

WILLIAM ARCHER



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HENRIK IBSEN

VOLUME IV
PEER GYNT
(1867)

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WILLIAM ARCHER

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INTRODUCTION BY WILLIAM ARCHER

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PEER GYNT.

INTRODUCTION.*

THE publication of *Brand*, in March 1866, brought Ibsen fame (in Scandinavia) and relieved him from the immediate pressure of poverty. Two months later the Storting voted him a yearly "poet-pension" of £90; and with this sum, as he wrote to the Minister who had been mainly instrumental in furthering his claim, he felt "his future assured," so that he could henceforth "devote himself without hindrance to his calling." This first glimpse of worldly prosperity, no doubt, brought with it the lighter mood which distinguishes *Peer Gynt* from its predecessor. To call it the gayest of Ibsen's works is not, perhaps, to say very much. Its satire, indeed, is bitter enough; but it is not the work of an unhappy man. The character of Peer Gynt, and many of his adventures, are conceived with unmistakable gusto. Some passages even bear witness to an exuberance of animal spirits which reminds one of Ben Jonson's saying with regard to Shakespeare—"aliquando sufflaminandus erat."

The summer of 1866 Ibsen spent at Frascati, in the Palazzo Gratosi, where he lived "most

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comfortably and cheaply." He found Frascati and Tusculum "indescribably delightful." From the windows of his study he could see Soracte, "rising isolated and beautiful from the level of the immense plain . . . the battlefield where the chief engagement in the world's history took place." So he writes in a letter to Paul Botten-Hansen, and immediately afterwards proceeds: "I shall soon be setting to work in good earnest. I am still wrestling with my subject, but I know that I shall get the upper hand of the brute before long, and then everything will go smoothly." But was the play here referred to *Peer Gynt*? Perhaps not. From a letter to his publisher, Hegel, written three months later, we learn that at that time he was still turning over several themes in his mind, and that one of them dealt with the period of Christian IV. of Denmark. It is in a letter to Hegel, dated from Rome, January 5, 1867, that we find the first unmistakable reference to *Peer Gynt*: "Now I must tell you that my new work is well under way, and will, if nothing untoward happens, be finished early in the summer. It is to be a long dramatic poem, having as its chief figure one of the Norwegian peasantry's half-mythical, fantastic heroes of recent times. It will bear no resemblance to *Brand*, contain no direct polemics and so forth. I have long had the subject in my thoughts; now the entire plan is worked out and written down, and the first act begun. The thing grows as I work at it, and I am certain that you will be satisfied with it."

Two months later (March 8) the poem has "advanced to the middle of the second act." On

August 8, he sends to Hegel, from Villa Pisani, Casamicciola, Ischia, the complete manuscript of the first three acts, and writes: "I am curious to hear how you like the poem. I am very hopeful myself. It may interest you to know that *Peer Gynt* is a real person, who lived in Gudbrandsdal, probably at the end of last, or beginning of this, century; but of his exploits not much more is known than is to be found in Asbjørnsen's *Norwegian Fairy Tales*, in the section *Pictures from the Mountains*. Thus I have not had very much to build upon; but so much the more liberty has been left me. It would interest me to know what Clemens Petersen thinks of the work." What Clemens Petersen did think we shall presently learn.

On October 18 Ibsen despatched from Sorrento the remainder of his manuscript, and the book was published on November 14. It has often been pointed out (by myself among others) as a very remarkable fact that two such gigantic creations as *Brand* and *Peer Gynt* should have been given to the world in two successive years; but on examination the marvel somewhat dwindles. *Peer Gynt* did not follow so hot-foot upon *Brand* as the bare dates of publication would lead us to suppose. *Brand* was written in the summer of 1865, *Peer Gynt* (as we have seen) in 1867; so that the poet's mind had lain fallow for a whole year (1866) between the two great efforts. It was a long delay in the publication of *Brand* that made its successor seem to tread so close upon its heels.

One or two other references to the origin of *Peer Gynt* may be found in Ibsen's letters. The

most important occurs in an autobiographical communication to Peter Hansen, dated Dresden, October 28, 1870: "After *Brand* came *Peer Gynt*, as though of itself. It was written in Southern Italy, in Ischia and at Sorrento. So far away from one's readers one becomes reckless. This poem contains much that has its origin in the circumstances of my own youth. My own mother—with the necessary exaggerations—served as the model for Åse. (Likewise for Inga in *The Pretenders*)." Twelve years later (1882) Ibsen wrote to George Brandes: "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 near the town. . . . 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 Jon Gynt.'"

Returning to the above-quoted letter to Peter Hansen, we find this further allusion to *Peer Gynt* and its immediate predecessor and successor in the list of Ibsen's works: "Environment has great influence upon the forms in which imagination creates. May I not, like Christoff in *Jakob von Tyboe*,¹ point to *Brand* and *Peer Gynt*, and say: 'See, the wine-cup has done this?' And is there not something in *The League of Youth* [written in Dresden] that suggests 'Knackwurst und Bier'? Not that I would thereby imply any inferiority in the latter play." The transition to prose was no doubt an inevitable step in the evolution of Ibsen's genius; but one wishes he had kept to the "wine-cup" a little longer.

¹ One of Holberg's most famous comedies.

A masterpiece is not a flawless work, but one which has sufficient vitality to live down its faults, until at last we no longer heed, and almost forget, them. *Peer Gynt* had real faults, not a few; and its great merit, as some of us think—its magnificent, reckless profusion of fantasy—could not but be bewildering to its first critics, who had to pronounce upon it before they had (as Ballested¹ would put it) acclimatised themselves to its atmosphere. Its reception, then, was much more dubious than that of *Brand* had been. We find even George Brandes writing of it: "What great and noble powers are wasted on this thankless material! Except in the fourth act, which has no connection with what goes before and after, and is witless in its satire, crude in its irony, and in its latter part scarcely comprehensible, there is almost throughout a wealth of poetry and a depth of thought such as we do not find, perhaps, in any of Ibsen's earlier works. . . . It would be unjust to deny that the book contains great beauties, or that it tells us all, and Norwegians in particular, some important truths; but beauties and truths are of far less value than beauty and truth in the singular, and Ibsen's poem is neither beautiful nor true. Contempt for humanity and self-hatred make a bad foundation on which to build a poetic work. What an unlovely and distorting view of life this is! What acrid pleasure can a poet find in thus sully-ing human nature?"² The friendship between

¹ See *The Lady from the Sea*.

² Brandes: *Ibsen and Björnson*, p. 35. London, Heinemann, 1899. Except in regard to the fourth act, Dr. Brandes has, in the introduction to *Peer Gynt* in the German collected edition, recanted his early condemnation of the poem.

Brandes and Ibsen was at this time just beginning, and—much to Ibsen's credit—it appears to have suffered no check by reason of this outspoken pronouncement.

On the other hand, he resented deeply a criticism by Clemens Petersen, who seems to have been at this time regarded as the æsthetic lawgiver of Copenhagen. Why he should have done so is not very clear; for Petersen professed to prefer *Peer Gynt* to *Brand*, and his criticism on *Brand* Ibsen had apparently accepted without demur. Most of Petersen's article is couched in a very heavy philosophic idiom; but the following extract, though it refers chiefly to *Brand*, may convey some idea of his general objection to both poems:—"When a poet, as Ibsen does in *Brand*, depicts an error, a one-sidedness, which is from first to last presented in an imposing light, it is not sufficient that he should eventually, through a piece of sensational symbolism, let that one-sidedness go to ruin, and it is not sufficient that in the last word of the drama¹ he should utter the name of that with which the one-sidedness should have blended in order to become truth. If he throughout his work shows us this error—in virtue of its strength, if for no other reason—justifying itself as against everything that comes in contact with it, then it is not only in the character depicted that something is lacking, but in the work of art itself. That something is the Ideal, without which the work of art cannot take rank as poetry—the Ideal which here, as so often in art, lies only in the lighting of the picture, but which is nevertheless the saving, the uplifting element. It is to

¹ The last words are "*deus caritatis*."

poetry what devotion is to religion. . . . In *Peer Gynt*, as in *Brand*, the ideal is lacking. But this must be said rather less strongly of *Peer Gynt*. There is more fantasy, more real freedom of spirit, less strain and less violence in this poem than in *Brand*." The critic then speaks of *Peer Gynt* as being "full of riddles which are insoluble, because there is nothing in them at all." Peer's identification of the Sphinx with the Boyg (Act IV. Sc. 12) he characterises as "Tankesvindel"—thought-swindling, or, as we might say, juggling with thought. The general upshot of his considerations is that *Peer Gynt* belongs, with Goldschmidt's *Corsaren*, to the domain of polemical journalism. It "is not poetry, because in the transmutation of reality into art it falls half-way short of the demands both of art and of reality."

Petersen's review is noteworthy, not for its own sake, but for the effect it produced on Ibsen. His letters to Björnson on the subject are the most vivid and spontaneous he ever wrote. Björnson happened to be in Copenhagen when Petersen's article appeared in *Fædrelandet*, and Ibsen seems somehow to have blamed him for not preventing its appearance. "All I reproach you with," he says, "is inaction." But Petersen he accuses of lack of "loyalty," of "an intentional crime against truth and justice." "There is a lie involved in Clemens Petersen's article, not in what he says, but in what he refrains from saying. And he intentionally refrains from saying a great deal. . . . Tell me, now, is Peer Gynt himself not a personality, complete and individual? I know that he is. And the mother; is she not?"

But the most memorable passage in this memorable letter is the following piece of splendid arrogance: "My book is poetry; and if it is not, then it will be. The conception of poetry in our country, in Norway, shall be made to conform to the book." It certainly seems that any definition of poetry which should be so framed as to exclude *Peer Gynt* must have something of what Petersen himself called "Tankesvindel" about it.

Ibsen's burst of indignation relieved his mind, and three weeks later we find him writing, half apologetically, of the "cargo of nonsense" he had "shipped off" to Björnson, immediately on reading Petersen's review. He even sends a friendly "greeting" to the offending critic. But this is his last (published) letter to Björnson for something like fifteen years. How far the reception of *Peer Gynt* may have contributed to the breach between them, I do not know. Björnson's own criticism of the poem, as we shall presently see, was very favourable.

Peer Gynt was not, on its appearance, quite so popular as *Brand*. A second edition was called for in a fortnight; but the third edition did not appear until 1874, by which time the seventh edition of *Brand* was already on the market. Before the end of the century ten editions of *Peer Gynt* had appeared in Copenhagen as against fourteen of *Brand*. The first German translation appeared in 1881, and the present English translation in 1892. A French translation, by Count Prozor, appeared in the *Nouvelle Revue* in 1896, but does not seem to have been published in book form.

After a great deal of discussion as to the stage-

arrangement, *Peer Gynt*, largely abbreviated, was produced, with Edvard Grieg's now famous incidental music, at the Christiania Theatre in February 1876, Henrik Klausen playing the title-part. It was acted thirty-seven times; but a fire which destroyed some of the scenery put a stop to the performances. In 1892, at the same theatre, the first three acts were revived, with Björn Björnson as Peer, and repeated fifty times. In the repertory of the National Theatre, too (opened in 1899), *Peer Gynt* has taken a prominent place. It was first given in 1902, and has up to the present (1906) been performed eighty-four times. In the version which has established itself on the Norwegian stage, all five acts are given, but the fourth and fifth acts are greatly abbreviated. In the season of 1886 the play was produced at the Dagmar Theatre, Copenhagen. August Lindberg's Swedish Company acted it in Gothenburg in 1892, in Stockholm in 1895, and afterwards toured with it in Norway and Sweden. Count Prozor's translation was acted by "L'Œuvre" at the Nouveau Théâtre, Paris, in November, 1896, of which remarkable production a lively account by Mr. Bernard Shaw may be found in the *Saturday Review* of that period. At the Deutsches Volkstheater in Vienna, in May 1902, two performances of *Peer Gynt* were given by the "Akademisch-Litterarische Verein." I can find no record of any other German production of the play. The first production in the English language took place at the Grand Opera House, Chicago, on October 29, 1906, when Mr. Richard Mansfield appeared as Peer Gynt. Mr. Mansfield would seem to have acted the greater part

of the play, but to have omitted the Sæter-Girl scene and the madhouse scene.

We have seen that the name, Peer Gynt, was suggested to Ibsen by a folk-tale in Asbjørnsen and Moe's invaluable collection. It is one of a group of tales entitled *Reindeer-Hunting in the Rondø Hills*;¹ and in the same group occurs the adventure of Gudbrand Glesnø on the Gendin-Edge, which Peer Gynt works up so unblushingly in Act I., Sc. 1. The text of both these tales will be found in the Appendix, and the reader will recognise how very slight are the hints which set the poet's imagination to work. The encounter with the Sæter-Girls (Act II., Sc. 2), and the struggle with the Boyg (Act II., Sc. 7) are foreshadowed in Asbjørnsen, and the concluding remark of Anders Ulsvolden evidently suggested to Ibsen the idea of incarnating Fantasy in Peer Gynt, as in Brand he had given us incarnate Will. But the Peer Gynt of the drama has really nothing in common with the Peer Gynt of the story, and the rest of the characters are not even remotely suggested. Many scattered traits and allusions, however, are borrowed from other legends in the same storehouse of grotesque and marvellous imaginings. Thus the story of the devil in a nutshell (Act I., Sc. 3) figures in Asbjørnsen under the title of *The Boy and the Devil*.² The appearance of the Green-Clad One with her Ugly Brat, who offers Peer Gynt a goblet of beer

¹ *Noraks Huldre-Eventyr og Folkesagn*, Christiania, 1848, p. 47. See also Copenhagen edition, 1896, p. 163.

² *Noraks Folke-og Huldre-Eventyr*, Copenhagen, 1896, p. 42.

(Act III., Sc. 3), is obviously suggested by an incident in *Berthe Tuppenhaug's Stories*.¹ Old Berthe, too, supplies the idea of correcting Peer Gynt's eyesight according to the standard of the hill-trolls (Act II., Sc. 6), as well as the germ of the fantastic thread-ball episode in the last Act (Sc. 6). The castle, "East of the Sun and West of the Moon" (Act III., Sc. 4), gives its title to one of Asbjørnsen's stories,² which may be read in English in Mr. Andrew Lang's *Blue Fairy Book*; and "Soria Moria Castle" is the title of another legend.³ Herr Passarge (in his *Henrik Ibsen*, Leipzig, 1883) goes so far as to trace the idea of Peer Gynt's shrinking from the casting-ladle, even though hell be the alternative (Act V., Sc. 7, &c.), to Asbjørnsen's story of *The Smith whom they Dared not let into Hell*;⁴ but the circumstances are so different, and Ibsen's idea is such an inseparable part of the ethical scheme of the drama, that we can scarcely take it to have been suggested by this (or any other) individual story.⁵ At the same time there is no doubt that *The Folke-Lore of Peer Gynt* might form the subject of a much more extended study than our

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

² *Ibid.*, p. 259.

³ Not included in the Copenhagen edition. See edition, *Christiania*, 1866, p. 115. See also Sir George Webb Dasent's *Popular Tales from the Norse*, Edinburgh, 1869; new ed. 1903, p. 396. More or less representative selections from the storehouse of Asbjørnsen and Moe may also be found in *Tales from the Fjeld*, by G. W. Dasent, London, 1874, and in *Round the Yule Log*, by H. L. Brinksted, London, 1881.

⁴ Copenhagen ed. 1893, p. 148.

⁵ In this story, however, he probably found the suggestion of the "cross-roads" which figure so largely in the fifth act. In Asbjørnsen, they are explicitly stated to be the point where the ways to Heaven and Hell diverge.

space or our knowledge admits of.¹ The whole atmosphere of the first three acts and of the fifth is that of the Norwegian Folk and Fairy Tales. It must be remembered, too, that in the early 'sixties Ibsen was commissioned by the Norwegian Government to visit Romsdal and Søndmøre for the purpose of collecting folk-songs and legends. To these journeys, no doubt, we are mainly indebted for the local colour of *Brand* and *Peer Gynt*.

What are we to say now of the drift, the interpretation of *Peer Gynt*? The first and most essential thing may be said in Ibsen's own words. On February 24, 1868, he wrote from Rome to Frederik Hegel: "I learn that the book has created much 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 tolerably isolated.

¹ Further gleanings of legendary lore concerning Peer Gynt may be found in the Norwegian periodical *Syn og Segn*, 1908, pp. 119-130. The writer, Per Aasmundstad, is of opinion that Peer Gynt's real name was Peer Haagaas (the owner of Haagaas farm) and that Gynt was either a name given him by the huldre-folk, or else a local nickname for humorists of his kind. According to this authority, he probably lived as far back as the seventeenth century. Per Aasmundstad's article is written in the local dialect, with such ruthless phonetic accuracy that I read it with difficulty; but he does not seem to have discovered anything that has a definite bearing on Ibsen's work. From the wording of Ibsen's letters to Hegel, however (p. viii), it would seem that he had some knowledge of the Gynt legend over and above what was to be found in Asbjørnsen. (For access to *Syn og Segn*, and for other obliging assistance, I am indebted to Herr Halvdan Koht, the author of the excellent biographical introduction to Ibsen's Letters.)

But if the Norwegians of the present time recognise themselves, as it would appear they do, in the character of Peer Gynt, that is the good people's own affair." In the last sentence the innocence of intention is, no doubt, a little overdone; but there is still less doubt that Ibsen was absolutely sincere in declaring that he wrote it primarily as a poem, a work of pure imagination, and that as a work of pure imagination it ought primarily to be read. There is undeniably an undercurrent of ethical and satirical meaning in the play; but no one can properly enjoy or value it who is not swept along irresistibly by the surface stream of purely poetic invention and delineation. Peer himself is a character-creation on the heroic scale, as vital a personality as Falstaff or Don Quixote. It is here that the poem (as Clemens Petersen vaguely discerned) has a marked advantage over its predecessor. In spite of the tremendous energy with which he is depicted, Brand remains an abstraction or an attitude, rather than a human being. But Peer Gynt is human in every fibre—too human to be alien to any one of us. We know him, we understand him, we love him—for who does not love a genial, imaginative, philosophic rascal? As for his adventures and vicissitudes, if they do not give us pleasure in and for themselves, quite apart from any symbolic sub-intention—just as the adventures of Sindbad, or Gil Blas, or Tom Jones, or Huckleberry Finn give us pleasure—then assuredly the poem does not affect us as Ibsen intended that it should. Readers who approach it for the first time may therefore be counselled to pay no heed to its ethical or political meanings, and to take it as it