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# Ibsen's Peer Gynt: Explication and Reception

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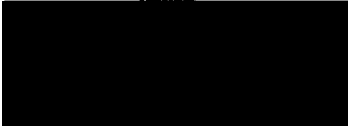
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## THESIS APPROVAL


The abstract and thesis of Caralee Kristine Angell for the Master of Arts in German were presented July 11, 1997, and accepted by the thesis committee and the department.

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## ABSTRACT

An abstract of the thesis of Caralee Kristine Angell for the Master of Arts in German presented July 11, 1997.

Title: Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*: Explication and Reception.

This thesis examines the content and reception of Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*. Chapter I begins with a summary of Ibsen's life and influences, placing Ibsen and his plays into a historical context. Chapter II is a detailed explication of *Peer Gynt*, which illustrates the correlation between Ibsen's biography and Peer's life, the extensive use of Nordic folklore and the philosophy of Kierkegaard, Goethe, and Hegel. These issues and ideas are examined in order to create a theory of Ibsen's intended message to the public. In chapter III the immediate reception of *Peer Gynt* in Scandinavia is discussed, as well as the extended reception of *Peer Gynt* in Germany. This demonstrates the difference in the critics' reception, in relation to their time period, culture, and translation. The nationalistic German Dietrich Eckart is an extreme example of how a trusted translator of *Peer Gynt* produced a falsified translation of the dramatic poem, which he used to promote an ideal specific to

his time period and culture, thus illustrating how a falsified translation can affect the interpretation and criticism of a text.

The thesis concludes by demonstrating how important translation is as a factor in the critical reception of a text.

IBSEN'S *PEER* GYNT: EXPLICATION AND RECEPTION

by

CARALEE KRISTINE ANGELL

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS  
in  
GERMAN

Portland State University  
1997

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## Introduction

The Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen's plays span the late Romantic and Naturalistic periods. Ibsen led a tumultuous life, leaving Norway at the age of thirty-six with no intent of a quick return to his homeland. He remained abroad frequenting different cities for most of his adult life, returning to Norway only in 1891, fifteen years before his death. His plays reflect this lack of a stable residency, which embody Norwegian and European themes, and in which Ibsen expressed his distaste for the weak spirit of humanity. Ibsen's biography is important in the analysis of his plays. It is helpful in understanding the structure of *Peer Gynt*, which reflects the events in Ibsen's own life.

The dramatic poem, *Peer Gynt*, was written in 1867, shortly after Ibsen arrived in Italy. Ibsen's hero in *Peer Gynt* is a picaresque individual who is consumed with idealism. His aspirations include unreachable goals. The famous line from the play: "to yourself be enough," states the standard to which he adheres, the basis of his earthly existence. Peer calls this state of being the Gyntian Self, which classifies his idealism as that of a self centered, egotistical individual, one interested in promoting his own sense of greatness at any cost. Kierkegaard and Goethe's definition of the selfish individual are the qualities that build Peer's character. In Kierkegaard's terminology, Peer represents the aesthetic man, what

Goethe calls the Faustian individual; both represent the selfish persona of one seeking only individual satisfaction.

The critics in Scandinavia responded to *Peer Gynt* with mixed reviews, some criticized Ibsen's light hearted attempt to condemn the laziness of humanity. The critics in German speaking countries were immersed in a different field of criticism, because they responded to a translation of Ibsen's dramatic poem rather than to the original published copy of *Peer Gynt*. The translated version of *Peer Gynt*, which was performed most frequently in Germany, was the one completed in 1911 by Dietrich Eckart, a radical German nationalist. Eckart took *Peer Gynt* and reshaped the drama to fit the protocol of a nationalistic, heroic drama, changing the ideal of the selfish hero to a nationalistic one on a quest for pure and righteous knowledge.

The two aspects which are a consideration in analyzing and critiquing dramatic works are the thematical element and the dramatic element. The thematical element consists of the symbolic meanings, while the dramatic element is the philosophical structure of the play:

Themes are subjectively perceived outside the drama, while dramatic elements are detected objectively from within the structure of the drama; themes are consequential, but dramatic elements are essential.  
(Shapiro xvi)

Under no circumstances should the dramatic elements be changed in the dramatic productions, although this is acceptable if the symbolic meanings of the play should change with a new generation and their perception of the different themes. But regardless of the time period or new modes of criticism, dedication to the philosophical elements should be expected from the translator, director, and producer.

Dietrich Eckart did not respect these guidelines for the production of the drama. His interpretation and translation of *Peer Gynt* stray so far away from Ibsen's original intent that it changed the meaning of the play altogether, as Eckart incorporated themes of racism, materialism, and spiritualism into *Peer Gynt* in his attempt to show the German folk the epitome of the *Völkisches Ideal*.

In order for the reader to completely understand *Peer Gynt*, one must take a look at Ibsen's bibliography. The events in *Peer Gynt*'s life correlate with the events in Ibsen's life, which gives a personal touch to *Peer Gynt*. The themes in *Peer Gynt* are issues with which Ibsen struggled; he longed for a strong sense of Scandinavian nationalism, but was often severely disappointed as his fellow countrymen rejected this notion. Ibsen's other plays also reflect his personal opinions of society. Ibsen combined his personal theories with the nineteenth century philosophies of Kierkegaard, Hegel, and Goethe, as well as other minor influences from Scandinavian philosophers, to stabilize his theories and opinions.

The next step in the analysis of Ibsen's play, *Peer Gynt*, is to establish the groundwork for explication. Ibsen used folklore and philosophy to better explain to the public his themes and criticisms of society. The folklore is of Norwegian background, which gives Norwegians a personal connection to *Peer Gynt*. The philosophies of Kierkegaard, Hegel and Goethe help further Ibsen's portrayal of the picaresque individual.

One can examine the reception of *Peer Gynt* in Scandinavia and Germany on two levels. The reception in Scandinavia includes a variety of critics with positive and negative reviews. The reception in Germany is based on the reception to the translation of the play, and not the original published copy of the play. The case in Germany is extreme, due to Eckart's "free translation." My own interpretation as an English reader of *Peer Gynt* is based on a translation as well. The difference is that the critical reception of Rolf Fjeld's translation has been consistently positive. This makes it impossible to compare with the harsh criticism of Eckart's translation.

## Chapter I: Biographical Information

Henrik was born in 1828 in Skien, Norway, to a wealthy businessman who had lost his fortune during Ibsen's childhood. As a result, the family moved to Vestøp, Norway in 1835, where Henrik spent the rest of his childhood years. He moved to Grimstad in 1844, where he worked as a pharmacist, although his dream was to educate himself at the university. Ibsen began to write poems, which gave him a forum for developing his own ideas, which he expressed in his first play, *Catiline*. At this time a servant girl ten years his senior bore him an illegitimate child, a scandal which brought him shame for the rest of his life. In 1850 he left for Christiania, a small city of thirty thousand, to take the matriculation exams for the university. He failed the exams in Greek and math, but never expressed any desire to retake them. In 1851 he edited a newspaper at the Student Union called *Samfundsbladet*; then he moved to Bergen with Ole Bull, the Bergen Theater director, to serve as a dramatic author and stage manager for the Bergen Theater.

During this time he traveled to Germany and Denmark with the intent of learning more about the theater. A few of his plays were performed to mixed reviews at the Bergen Theater. In 1857 He left again for Christiania, this time to take a position as stage instructor and artistic director. In 1862, he took a trip north to collect folklore; financial support was provided by the Norwegian

Academic College. In the same year *Love's Comedy* was published, against which the Norwegians reacted very strongly. A frustrated Ibsen left Norway for Italy in 1864, for various reasons: the rejection of his plays, public criticism of his performance as stage instructor at the Christiania Theater, and because of his massive debts. He viewed this as his escape from Norway, where he felt stifled and threatened. He wrote to his mother-in-law, Magdalene Thoreson, in 1868, anticipating that he would someday have to move back to Norway:

I can hardly imagine how it will be possible to live out of Italy—and in Christiania of all places! But it will have to be done. I feel, however, that one must isolate one's self up there—at least I must, if I do not want to make an enemy of every person. (*Corr.* 155)

Although he did not want to return, Ibsen eventually traveled back to Norway in 1891, after twenty-seven years of living abroad. He still never felt at home in Norway and even considered transferring citizenship from Norway to Italy.

The time period during which Ibsen grew up was filled with political revolt; the revolutions of 1848 and 1864 left lasting impressions on Ibsen. Europe was involved in an economic and class revolution which found the middle-class and nobility revolting against monarchical rule. This especially concerned Ibsen when Prussia and Austria attacked Denmark in 1864. He felt the Scandinavian countries should unite politically as Germany and Italy

had and assist Denmark against the Prussian attack. This anger concerning the lack of Scandinavian nationalism prompted him to write poems expressing his disgust with the government. His succeeding plays embodied these themes as well. Scandinavianism had been the great political ideal of Ibsen and indeed of most of the Norwegian intelligentsia in the 1850s. According to Tysdal, Ibsen turned with great vehemence against what he thought of as base treachery: that his country had refused to fight for a friend in need, a friend they had sworn to help. Ibsen's anger against his countrymen became a liberating force (400). In Grimstad he held weekly meetings, where he discussed his political theories with those townsmen who were also interested in the tumultuous political situation. He then left for Christiania in 1850. There his experiences with the government caused him to turn inward. As a result, his method of protesting social and political issues changed from a vocal to a written form of protest.

Ibsen's plays divide into three major periods: the beginning plays, the plays written in Italy, and the later plays written in Norway. His first attempts at writing included poems, as well as the plays *Catiline*, *The Feast at Solhaug*, and *The Vikings in Helgeland*. Ibsen was clearly developing his style and sense of rhythm with these plays which show his talent, but are not as impressive or popular as his later plays. At this point in his development as a writer and nationalist, Ibsen realized that nationalism was no longer a priority for the Norwegians or for humanity in general, so his

writing style then changed to incorporate themes of social and political criticism.

The progression of Ibsen's intellect as his themes change with maturity portrays his accurate depiction of the social and political positions of his fellow Norwegian citizens, even though he disapproves of the choices they make. The two issues which plagued Ibsen his entire life were the potential nonexistence of the Norwegian character and the prevalent social and political issues of his time. Ibsen was a member of the Conservative party in Norway and he was interested more in social than in political problems, but political difficulties directly affected the social situation, so he dealt with them in his plays (Brandes 76). Although Ibsen had contempt for mankind, he considered it to be only pitifully bad, not actively wicked (Brandes 48, 9).

There were two points in Ibsen's career during which his writing peaked. The first period includes *Brand* (1866) and *Peer Gynt* (1876); the second gave us *A Doll's House* (1879), *Ghosts* (1881), and *The Wild Duck* (1884). These plays were written in Italy. When he moved to Italy, he gained perspective and freedom. It seems as if Italy was a place where Ibsen could work and think easily and was able to criticize the Norwegians without the fear that they would openly reject him. He made yearly plans to visit Norway, but never traveled that far north. Even though he rejected Norway as a place of residence, the characters in his plays were always of Norwegian descent. Ibsen clearly was familiar with the Norwegian

culture and temperament very well. He remarked once to a German friend who had mentioned that the play *Rosmersholm* had foreign qualities:

Yes! You are quite correct. I understand. People up in our country are actually different from you, and anyone who wants to understand me fully must understand Norway first. The mighty but harsh nature that surrounds people in the north, their lonely, secluded lives—farms are often miles apart—compel them to be indifferent to others, and to think only of their own concerns. (qtd. in Koht 207)

With this outburst Ibsen admitted his steadfast love for Norway. He was also attempting to show modern Europe the hardships of life in Norway. His love for Norway was pivotal in the development of his plays, but isolation from Norway was his only option; it gave him critical distance that he used in his polemic analysis of the social order in Norway. He always had a spiteful attitude towards his countrymen; even in isolation he could not forget or forgive their rejection of him:

My countrymen, who poured in draughts unsparing  
The wholesome, bitter tonic-drink wherethrough,  
Though sick to death, I nerved myself anew  
To face the fight of life with steadfast daring—  
My countrymen, I send you greeting!—you,  
Who lent me Fear's wing'd sandals for my faring,

Who lent me Exile's staff and Sorrow's pack—  
 Lo! from afar I send you greeting back. (qtd. in Brandes  
 44)

In Italy, he felt he could write freely and critically about his homeland, while avoiding being socially ostracized by his countrymen.

During Ibsen's first trip to Italy in 1864 he addressed the importance of following the call of moral law as opposed to human will and inclination. *Love's Comedy*, *Brand*, and *Peer Gynt* are representative of this theme. *Brand* is a play about an individual with an unwavering adherence to duty and ethical law who follows his calling until it ends in death. But even though Brand demonstrates consistency in his upright lifestyle, he is rejected by his fellow men. Similarly, *Peer Gynt* involves an individual who refuses to live according to moral law and is governed instead by inclination as he searches for true freedom, unfettered by societal rules.

During Ibsen's second stay in Italy in 1878, he matured to a different moral standard. His developing moral consciousness is reflected in the dramas from this time. At this point responsibility (be it ethical or aesthetic) to social morality shifts to responsibility to the self through a combination of social rules, religion, and above all, the individual's conscience. In *A Doll's House* Nora does not allow social responsibility to determine the choices she makes. Instead, she uses her conscience to determine what her duty and responsibility is to society, which gives her personal independence

and freedom. Her liberation is a result of her religious ethic and duty to herself.

The plays *Master Builder*, *John Gabriel Borkmann*, and *When We Dead Awaken* represent yet progressive development in Ibsen's thinking. In them, Ibsen emphasizes the roles that men and women are assigned by their society. Men are depicted as the cornerstone of society, responsible for upholding good social values. Through their honest work ethic they strive to attain prestige, glory, and fame. In this framework, women are mere decoration, a device by which men may attain more power and status.

It was no secret that Norwegian apathy and lack of individualism disgusted Ibsen. He noticed these character traits most clearly when he was able to contrast them with typical characteristics of the Italians. Ibsen viewed the Italians as an ignorant people, but nonetheless praiseworthy because of their high moral standards. The distance Ibsen had achieved now that he was hundreds of miles away from Norway enabled him to interpret and assess the Norwegian character and its shortcomings. His introverted lifestyle was a major asset to Ibsen in his writing. He was productive precisely due to his isolation from his native society, but his artistic distance created personal loneliness. Because he felt duty to fulfill his calling in life, he sacrificed companionship:

To live—is to war with fiends  
That infest the brain and the heart:  
To write—is to summon one's self,

And play the judge's part. (*Corr.*, 334)

In a letter to Brandes Ibsen discussed his isolation:

When a man stands, as you do, in an intimately personal relationship to his life—work, he cannot really expect to keep his 'friends.' But I believe that it is better for you that you go without leaving friends at home. Friends are an expensive luxury . . . the costliness of keeping friends does not lie in what one does for them, but in what one, out of consideration for them, refrains from doing. (*Corr.* 183)

The change in society should not occur only via political revolution, but also through a revolution in the soul of man, which is a step toward individualism. As per Ibsen's observation, the individual functions best alone and achieves most by himself. All else hinders his development. Ibsen also struggled with the accepted pessimism in Europe. The things on which the general public placed importance were worthless. According to Brandes, his anger at humanity comes from a pessimism of indignation, pessimism of a moral nature, the culprit being the conventions of society as they are associated with duty (52, 3). Ibsen believed that revolution should spark a change in the soul of man, only thereby could society change and advance (Brandes 56), so the individual must change before society could. Ibsen asserted that the most important goal of mankind was to accept and understand one's self: "So to conduct one's life and to realize one's self—this seems to me the highest

attainment possible to a human being. It is the task of one and all of us, but most of us bungle it" (*Corr.* 359). Ibsen believed reform of the individual was a necessary prerequisite for the reform of society.

These views he expressed in his dramas, which follow Shapiro's definition of the typical dramatical structure. A drama is a tripodal formulation which includes the structure, the material, and the internal sections. The structure of the drama includes the genre, the material includes the action and characters, the internal includes the language and thought, which is the philosophical background. If the philosophy is ignored, the basic interpretation of the play will be incomplete, resulting in a misinterpretation of the play altogether (xvi). The philosophy in *Peer Gynt* originates not only with the Scandinavian writers, Holberg, Øehlenschläger, and Kierkegaard, but with Germans as well, namely Hegel and Goethe.

Ibsen was directly influenced by Danish writers: Holberg, Øehlenschläger, Heiberg and Kierkegaard (Downs 24). Øehlenschläger, leader of the romantic movement in Denmark, had a remarkable influence on Ibsen, both in terms of rhyme scheme and subject matter dealing mainly with Scandinavian history and legends (Downs 24-26). Øehlenschläger's influence is seen in *Peer Gynt*, which is similar to the Dane's *Aladdin*, which glorifies the good for nothing genius (Downs 26). Heiberg brought Hegelian philosophy to Denmark, and influenced Ibsen with his essay "On the Vaudeville," which contains the theory of "dramaturgical investigation," a synthesis of the lyrical (or narrowly poetic and self-

revelatory) and the epic (or narrative and objective) elements of literature (Downs 29). His influence on Ibsen extends to combining lyrical and epic elements in literature. Kierkegaard's influence is seen in Ibsen's characters through the portrayal of the aesthetic, ethical, and moral man. The aesthetic stage is typically romantic: a reflective approach to reality. The ethical stage: seriousness and consistency of moral choices, is similar to Kant's ethics of duty. The religious stage is choosing faith over aesthetic pleasure and reason's call of duty (Gaarder 294-295). The influence of Kierkegaard is evident from an analysis of Kierkegaard's view of tragedy. The tragic hero is the one individual who is capable of advancing through the world's stage. He is able to create meaning for the history of the world. Kierkegaard asserted that the idea of the individual becoming a superhuman was only a supernatural state, normally unattainable. Ibsen takes this one step further, believing man to have this capacity inside himself, attainable through human individuality (Brandes 62). Ibsen avoids admitting Kierkegaard had any impact on him, but his influence is obvious. In a letter to Peter Hansen in 1870, Ibsen confirmed this: "It is a great mistake to suppose that I have depicted the life and career of Søren Kierkegaard (I have read very little of S. K., and have understood even less)" (*Corr.* 199).

In Hegel's view, truth is subjective, based on the progress of history which is determined by individuals who are capable of reasonable logic. The "absolute spirit," an individual with the highest form of self-realization, is the one capable of introducing

changes in society, thus altering the progression of history. Ibsen was this instigator of society. After careful review of the Hegelian aesthetics, paying careful attention to the role of the poet, Ibsen considered it his duty to enlighten the masses through Art.

In relation to Faust, Goethe's influence can be seen in the idealism of Peer as an individual, the Faustian, and his treatment of women, including their expected role, which glorifies them as the *ewig Weibliche*.

These philosophies were important as they aided Ibsen in the development of the thematic issues which are seen in his plays. They also serve as a structure for his view of the role of drama, and his part as educator of the masses.

Ibsen's heritage and personal background affected him greatly. These are the themes which provide the basis for *Peer Gynt*, but other themes of social and political problems also appear in his plays. Ibsen's plays from his periods in Italy were the most successful. The social and political issues during this time were the issues he addressed in his plays. His philosophical influences from Kierkegaard and Hegel, among others, also serve to stabilize his themes and validate his own ideas of nationalism, morality, and duty to self.

## Chapter II: Explication of *Peer Gynt*

Life—a war with demons  
 waged in the caverns of our hearts and minds.  
 Poetry—that is to hold  
 doomsday judgment over ourselves. (Ibsen, qtd. in Koht  
 18)

*Peer Gynt* portrays an individual from youth to old age. Peer is depicted to be everything the Norwegians wanted to avoid but ended up being (Hornby 55). Ibsen used Peer to satirize the Norwegians, but generalized this character so it applied not only to the Norwegian but to every individual. Peer is a successful definition for the individual because of the variety of people and circumstances on which Ibsen used to build the character of Peer. He was an egotistic individualist living in his own idealistic world, immersed in myth and inclination. Ibsen used Nordic folklore and the philosophy of existentialism and essentialism to establish the principles and guidelines for the Gyntian Self. The dramatic poem is in rhymed verse, which has octosyllabic, decasyllabic, iambic, trochaic, dactylic, anapaestic and amphibrachic meter (Meyer 268). Ibsen began *Peer Gynt* on January 14, 1867, and he finished it on October 14, 1867. It took him an unusually long time to write; most of his other plays were completed within four months, while *Peer Gynt* took eight months, as Ibsen carefully structured the scene for his picaresque hero.

The first three acts are an ordered sequence of events presenting Peer as an individual whom society considers an outcast. Acts one to three take place in Norway and focus on Peer's relationship with his mother and Solveig. They also show Peer involved with creatures of folklore. This part of the play establishes Peer as a reckless and irresponsible character. Act four is a mixture of different adventures in the eastern Mediterranean region; Peer is again presented as living for himself. His aspirations of international success and power fail, as he cannot maintain his ideal of the Gyntian Empire. The fifth act describes Peer as he returns to Norway. He is confronted by the Button-molder who confirms that Peer's whole life was a failure. He gained nothing. The separate acts are joined here as Peer finally recognizes his unworthiness and failure; this he is able to confess to Solveig.

The life of Peer correlates to some extent with Ibsen's life. In the first three acts, Peer is an idealist with big plans for the future. After Ibsen completed his first few plays, he felt this same sense of idealism. Because of his flagrant actions, Peer was banned from society. Ibsen too felt he was excommunicated from Norwegian society. Peer ran away at the end of the third act to foreign lands only to return in the fifth act, judged a failure for his unfruitful life. Ibsen also left the country, and was fearful of the judgment he would also have to face upon his return to Norway. Although he was not condemned or judged when he returned to Norway, the possibility that this could happen weighed heavily on him.

Ibsen used personal acquaintances as models for the characters in *Peer Gynt*. Peer Gynt is a figure of Norwegian folklore which made the character, Peer, a dedicated Norwegian. Ibsen presented Peer as the typical Norwegian character who constantly seeks to avoid the hardships of daily life. For a more specific definition of this character, Ibsen referred to his own life for proof of such an existence. In his own eyes, he was guilty of “going around,” which he did when he left the servant girl alone with their child and when he deserted Norway for Italy. His family life was also a model for the play; his father was an extravagant spender while he was rich and then a dreamer as he lost his fortune and contemplated how he could regain it. Ibsen wrote to Brandes in 1882: “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’” (*Corr.* 361). Aase has many of the same characteristics Ibsen's mother had, and the child Peer supposedly fathered with the Green woman from the troll world represents Ibsen's own past with the illegitimate child. An old friend of Ibsen's, Ole Bull, provided him with an example of a utopian society. Ibsen called this the Gyntian Empire. Ole Bull left for America with hopes of founding an elite Scandinavian society. Unfortunately, he failed and returned bankrupt to Norway. Another model for Peer was F. G. Lerche, an attorney who was well known for blatantly lying and calling it the truth. A. O. Vinie was also a model for Peer; he had varied mood swings and liked to quote

himself. These people provided personal models for Ibsen as he tailored the story of *Peer Gynt*, which reflect many personal incidents in Ibsen's own life.

The individual in the play, Peer, calls himself the Gyntian Self, which Peer describes in the fourth act:

The Gyntian self—it's an army corps  
Of wishes, appetites, desires.  
The Gyntian self is a mighty sea  
Of whim, demand, proclivity—  
In short, whatever moves my soul  
And makes me live to my own will. (4.1.102)

Peer is an adventurer, a self centered human who is interested in furthering his own well-being and happiness, "a breaker of the social and moral orders, and a violator of the fundamental law of self-knowledge" (Edwards 28). Ibsen questions the moral existence of man through Peer by determining the extent to which the Christian values will affect Peer's judgment. Peer's imagination controls the characteristics of the Gyntian Self; he strives for the impossible and only succeeds in ruining himself. The Troll king defined this motto:

Among men, under the shining sky,  
They say 'Man to yourself be true!'  
While here, under our mountain roof,  
We say: 'Troll, to yourself be enough.' (2.6.55)

Peer adopts this motto after his encounter with the Trolls. This policy combined with another motto: "go round about," which he adopts after his run in with the Boyg, are his ethics, the values and morals which govern his existence. Peer is a truly selfish individual, which is not profitable for him. He loses his friends, society shuns him, and upon return to his homeland Peer is confronted with the error of his ways. He has neither learned nor gained anything. He is an empty shell who has lived a life fit for neither heaven nor hell. The folklore aspect originates with Peer and his mother, who used to entertain themselves by telling stories, but that could not save Peer from judgment.

Ibsen frequently uses folklore and proverbs, which the audience could understand, in *Peer Gynt*. This showed the flaws of the hero. According to Stith Thompson, folklore includes "all forms of prose narrative, written or oral, which have come to be handed down through the years" (Russell 3). Schiller's interpretation of folklore stresses its importance as it can guide one through life: "Tiefere Bedeutung / Liegt in dem Märchen meiner Kinderjahre / Als in der Wahrheit, die das Leben lehrt" (qtd. in Russell 3). The theme of folklore is present in *Peer Gynt* in three levels: the character of Peer is taken directly from Nordic legend, the tall tales that Peer is so famous for telling (also Nordic legends), and the mythical creatures of folklore that Peer encounters.

The effect of language in the form of folklore and proverbs always seems to be ethical: they are used to teach a lesson and warn

of certain situations. They are sayings about common sense situations, especially useful for people lacking originality; they are convenient to use without necessarily coining new terminology. Proverbs have many uses in literature, one is to show the personality of a certain character, which varies depending on his language. The proverb is an important device because common people can directly relate to it.

In Norway the use of the proverb originated from the Norse sagas and Norwegian folklore. According to Anstensen, the proverbial categories particular to the Norwegian language are the general proverb and the pious proverb (6, 10). The general proverb tends to be called the "Hermestev" and mainly refers to "popular ethics, opinions and views of life" (Anstensen 6). Another type of the general proverb became popular during the period of National Romanticism, which was especially pointed at depicting the life led by peasants. This type of proverb is mainly associated with Norwegian folklore and was used often by Ibsen as he satirized "the idyllic peasant world depicted by Bjørnson [his contemporary]" (Anstensen 7). The pious proverb originates from religion and uses the Bible as its main source of sayings, which Ibsen occasionally uses with the intent of satire.

Ibsen started collecting folktales in July 1862 through a grant from the Norwegian Academic College in Gudbrandsdal, Norway. Ibsen wrote to his publisher, Hegel, in August 1867:

It may interest you to know that Peer Gynt is a real person, who lived in Gudbrandsdal, probably at the end of the last, or the beginning of this, century. His name is still 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-tale Book, 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. (*Corr.* 137)

According to Russell, the legendary Peer Gynt was an excellent hunter who one night encountered something which called itself 'the great Boyg of Etnedal,' which he killed. He also killed a bear and fox belonging to the trolls. On the road to revenge, a troll stuck his nose through the window of Peer's hut and Peer poured hot soup on it. The troll came back later to put cold water down the chimney. Peer found another hut, in which three girls were entertaining four hill-trolls. He and his dogs killed two of the trolls and then he took the girls back to their village. These motifs appear in Ibsen's play, including other folktales in Asbjørnsen and Moe's Norwegian Popular Fairy Tales (*Norske Folkeeventyr*). The Soria Moria castle, where Peer drives his mother upon her death bed and the Boy and the Devil, which he tells of himself and Alask the smith are also folklore tales. The Button-molder comes from Ibsen's childhood, one of his favorite hobbies was casting metal buttons. The eye operation comes from Asbjørnsen's Gudbrandsdal legend, the

Old Man of the Dovre name in Norwegian is Dovregubbe, which means Dovregaffer. This comes from Hans Andersen's story *The Elf Hill*, which is a mockery of the Norwegian uncouthness (17).

The stories that Peer tells are folk legends, myths which were common to the Nordic folk. In the first act, Peer attends Ingrid's wedding at Hegstad. He gladly accepts the role of entertainer and captivates his audience with a story about his control over the devil:

A GIRL. Can you conjure, Peer?

PEER GYNT. I can call up the devil.

A MAN. My grandmother, before I was born, did that!

PEER GYNT. Liar! What I do, no one can equal. Once I  
conjured him inside a nut. Through a wormhole, that  
is.

SEVERAL. Obviously!

PEER GYNT. He wept and swore and tried bribing me  
With

all kinds of things—

ONE OF THE CROWD. But he had to remain?

PEER GYNT. Oh yes. I'd closed up the hole with a pin.

You should've heard him buzzing and booming—

A GIRL. Imagine!

PEER GYNT. It was like a bumblebee humming.

THE GIRL. You still have him trapped in the nut?

PEER GYNT. Oh, no,

The devil's made off on his own by now.

It's his fault the smith has it in for me. (1.3.31)

Peer has enthralled the audience with this piece of folklore, which he claims has happened to him. He shows indignation when he is confronted by a man in the crowd who says the story is one he has heard before:

MORE VOICES. That's a good one.

OTHER VOICES. It's nearly his best!

PEER GYNT. You think I'm inventing it?

A MAN. No, I agree.

With you there; my grandfather told me most  
Of this—

PEER GYNT. Liar! It happened to me!

THE MAN. Yes, everything has. (1.3.32)

The man simply responds in a sarcastic manner, not willing to argue this obvious point with Peer who tells these tales as they are a part of his heritage, they allow him to entertain and avoid the dullness of daily life.

There are also instances in the play where he meets the figures of folklore: the Trolls and the Boyg. The Troll world and the Boyg illuminate Peer's lack of self-respect as they inadvertently teach him the motto he adopts: to be merely enough to himself and to "go round about," which merely illustrates again the themes of individualism and irresponsibility.

The trolls in *Peer Gynt* represent not only the folklore of the Norwegian people, but they represent the main theme of the play

which embodies “the struggle between the divine purpose and our undermining passions and egocentricities, between man’s deeper self and his animal, or troll, self” (Meyer 272). Every man fights certain inclinations and desires, which are considered taboo in normal society. The trolls embodies this darker side of man. Ibsen anticipated this dramatic self analysis to be popular only in Norway, as it is written based on the Norwegian character and culture. He was wrong. “Peer’s character has been accepted everywhere as a national prototype” (Meyer 273). Due to the universality of Peer’s character, Ibsen’s play has gained popularity, as it adapts easily to other nationalities and cultures.

The philosophy in *Peer Gynt* also support Ibsen’s themes of individualism, although their use is more structured than a mere explanation of the action. The essential and existential philosophies of Hegel and Kierkegaard show a dialectic which plays itself out in the duration of the play. It is an interesting conclusion to which Ibsen arrives; he incorporates the philosophy of Kierkegaard and eliminates the existence of “Absolute Reason.” The philosophy of Goethe is addressed, to some extent, in Goethe’s definition of the Faustian individual who is one who strives to attain idealistic goals. The Faustian is never satisfied, pushed by the demonic element, a psychological drive which obsesses the individual to the point of constantly searching for perfection.

Hegel and Kierkegaard represent two different schools of philosophy, but each is applicable to *Peer Gynt*. Hegel is from the

school of essentialism while Kierkegaard is an existentialist. Peer represents the Kierkegaardian aesthetic; he is a very impulsive character, reacting to all situations based on pure inclination. Peer also falls into the Hegelian category of "immediate consciousness," where the individual lives in his own reality, unaware of any other spheres. Peer's character also fits into Hegel's "structure of desire." He is so involved with himself, he simply proceeds from one situation to another, negating different elements or beings that cross his path. He lives only to satiate his own desires, trampling the existence of others to gain his own fulfillment. The bride, Ingrid, whom he abducts on her wedding day, and the innocent Solveig, of whom he demands eternal patience, are subject to his immediate whims and lustful desires.

The first two acts are fairly straightforward. Peer's actions are a direct response to his inclination and free will, but in the third act Peer is suddenly confronted with the mystical world of Nordic folklore. He first encounters the Woman in Green, then the Troll kingdom, then the Boyg. Here he is forced to choose, as stated in the Kierkegaardian dialectic in *Either/Or II*:

There is only one situation in which either/or has absolute significance, namely, when truth, righteousness and holiness are lined up on one side, and lust and base propensities and obscure passions and perdition on the other; yet it is always important to choose rightly, even

as between things which one may innocently choose.

(Kierkegaard 161)

Peer has to choose to either commit his life to that of the Underground "to yourself be enough," or to commit to the human world, "be true to yourself."

In the fourth act chaos breaks out, "Absolute Reason" ceases to exist. Begriffenfeld, the doctor from Berlin, announces at the Cairo asylum; "Absolute Reason / died last night at eleven o'clock" (4.13.140). This ends the Hegelian influence and Peer stands ready to be judged by a Kierkegaardian interpretation. He has overcome rational subjectivity and faces mystical subjectivity.

The fifth act is an examination of the worthiness of Peer Gynt's identity. The Strange Passenger confronts Peer, which could be a tie to *Angst*, something Kierkegaard viewed as a "sovereign specific in the therapeutics of the soul" (Downs 90). He also encounters the Button-molder. Both of these figures threaten Peer with an existentialist solution for his behavior. He is victim to himself and now under the law of existentialism. Peer must assume ultimate responsibility for his actions, of which all reflect the decisions he made according to free will alone. Unfortunately for Peer this judgment on his soul is impartial and will be effective regardless of his knowledge of right and wrong. The ultimate confrontation is when Peer crawls on all fours like an animal. He comes across an onion and proceeds to peel the onion, searching for the kernel:

These layers just go endlessly on!  
 Shouldn't it give up its kernel soon?  
 Damned if it does! To the innermost filler.  
 It's nothing but layers—smaller and smaller—  
 Nature is witty. (5.5.177)

This famous onion scene is representative of Peer's life. He is guilty of having only worthless layers of self, but if they should be pulled away, there would be nothing left. This emptiness is Peer's reward for living the aesthetic life, according to Kierkegaard. Peer lived day by day only for instant gratification; he made no transformation into the ethical or religious world.

Peer's constant attempts at greatness by living the aesthetic life are typical of the Faustian individual, as defined by Goethe. The Faustian is one driven by the demonic element to attain idealistic goals; he strives toward them with all his might. Peer strives to attain power and status: the ultimate goal for him would be establishment of the Gyntian Empire, where he would be emperor. His actions emphasize this especially in the fourth act. He becomes a wealthy businessman at the expense of others. His main business adventure involves sending idols to China in the spring and missionaries in the fall:

In the spring I sent out idols still—  
 But added missionaries in the fall,  
 Providing them with every need  
 Like stockings, Bibles, rum, and rice. (4.1.97)

He does eventually become emperor, but this empire is a madhouse in Cairo, where he is crowned “Emperor of Self” with a straw crown by Begriffenfeld, who cries: “Hah! Look at him enthroned in the filth- / Out of himself-! Crown him there! / Hail, all hail the Emperor of Self” (4.13.149). This is very fitting for Peer, the epitome of the Gyntian Self.

The *ewig Weibliche*, as defined by Goethe, also plays an important part of the dramatic poem. Women save Peer from uncertain death more than once. As he battles the Trolls, he cries to his mother for help: “Help Mother, I’ll die” (2.6.63). The bells are rung, saving Peer from being eaten alive by the Troll children. The next instance, where Peer meets the Boyg, he realizes he can find no way around, so he calls to Solveig: “If you want to save me now, do it quick! / Don’t lower your gaze, tender and shy— / The prayer book! Fling it straight in his eye” (2.8.66-7). The Boyg is overcome claiming: “He was too strong. There were women behind him” (2.8.67). The last time a woman saves Peer involves Solveig’s welcome of Peer’s return home, only to be confronted by the Button-molder. When Peer recognizes she may be able to save him again, he cries; “My mother, my wife! You innocent woman—! / O, hide me, hide me within” (5.10.209). Solveig does rescue him from the ominous meltdown, a penance his worthless soul earned, and she cradles him in her arms; “Sleep my dear, my dearest boy, / Here in my arms! I’ll watch over thee” (5.10.209). The *ewig Weibliche* saves the Faustian, a theme first used by Goethe in *Faust*,

an effective theme of forgiveness and redemption for the unworthy. As a result of Peer's choices, which include living as a self serving individual with the Troll motto "to thyself be enough," Peer faces moral authority in the fifth act, which he had successfully avoided until this point.

Peer eventually reaps the rewards for his actions. He rejected the reality of society's moral law, but the repercussions of their decision come to haunt him. In Peer's attempts to gain popularity and success while avoiding the demands of society, he draws into himself, subjecting himself to the evil of his subconscious. This is not the exact situation in which Goethe's Faust finds himself, as he agrees to sign a contract with Mephisto, the devil figure, but it is a sufficient equivalent. This inner devil, which allows Peer to remove guilt from his moral conscience, is an escape mechanism which Peer uses to deal with reality.

Peer often finds himself in awkward situations, in which he reverts to storytelling to avoid a confrontation with the situation. In the opening scene Peer is responsible for hunting for food, while his mother is left alone to tend the farm. Peer returns home empty-handed, but cannot admit to his mother why he has no fresh kill for her. Instead he tells her this fantastic story:

So bang! I shoot

He hits the dirt,

Whump, like a mallet.

But in that instant as the brute

Lies still, I'm there astride his back,  
 seize him by the left ear tight,  
 And poise to dive my knife in right  
 Below the jawbone for his gullet—  
 When hi! the scum lets out a shriek,  
 Scrambles bolt up on his feet  
 And, with this one head backward flip,  
 Knocks the knife and scabbard out of reach  
 Clamps me neatly at the hip,  
 Rams his horns down on my legs  
 To pin me like a pair of tongs—  
 And then with dizzy leaps he springs  
 Along the brink of Gjendin ridge. (1. 1.4-5)

Instead of admitting his lack of hunting ability, Peer reverts to lies. He finds it easier to lie than to speak the truth, thus revealing his absence of moral consciousness.

Peer's disregard for moral law is not only detrimental to himself but to other characters as well, namely the female characters. As Peer snatches Ingrid away from her wedding party on her wedding day, Peer is satisfying his physical desires but destroying her reputation and her future as a virgin bride. Again, he has no regard for her situation; he is incapable of feeling guilt or remorse. His quest is now to find Solveig who is his new attraction. In her own profession of love for Peer, Solveig leaves society and family to be with Peer, isolated in his mountain hut. Peer leaves her

just as he had left Ingrid, but of Solveig he demanded she wait for him until he returns: "Be patient, my sweet; / Far or near-you must wait" (3.3.81). She waits her entire life for Peer, while he has completely forgotten about her.

Peer's sense of moral consciousness serves only to drive him toward self-destruction. The Button-molder approaches him in the fifth act, after he has finally returned to Norway, again empty handed. It is now time for Peer to finally take responsibility for himself, instead of going "round about." The Button-molder's job is to remelt Peer's soul, as his life is worth neither saving nor condemning. Peer avoids the immediate meltdown of his soul by begging for time to find witnesses to prove his existence, be it bad or good. He comes across the Troll king and the Thin man (who is personified as the devil of European literature), both of whom are able to confirm that he has neither a positive or negative identity (Aarseth 47). The figure of authority threatens again to melt down his soul, but just in time he runs to Solveig, who is able to save him from the judgment of the Button-molder. Although Peer lived a selfish life absent of moral law, he was redeemed. This realization of his mortality, which came only from the Button-molder, was the event which forced him to reject the Troll motto "to thyself be enough," and the "go round about" motto he used in defeating the Boyg. He is finally able to confront his lack of discipline. He approaches Solveig's hut with determination:

Forward and back, it's just as far.

Out or in, it's a return, go in where you went.  
 Roundabout said the Boyg!  
 No! This time  
 Straight through, no matter how steep the climb!  
 Lay judgment on a sinner's head. (5.10.207)

This he cries to Solveig who claims Peer has done no wrong; she has no list of sins to give the Button-molder: "You've made my whole life a beautiful song" (5.10.207). Solveig accepts Peer, the social outcast, who left his home on a fruitless adventure, with no remorse or anger, only joy at his return.

*Peer Gynt* is a personal rendition of Ibsen's life, in which the character Peer's life strongly resembles Ibsen's own life. The models for Peer and other characters in the play are personal ones chosen by Ibsen. But there are also greater issues in *Peer Gynt* that span the social and political issues of the time. They serve to incorporate themes such as selfishness of the individual, nationalism, and moral authority. Ibsen uses folklore and philosophy to show these issues, which made them easy for every individual to understand.

### Chapter III: Reception of *Peer Gynt* in Scandinavia and Germany

*Peer Gynt* was not popular in Scandinavia until thirteen years after its publication (Byron xv). When it was produced in the Christiania theater in 1876, the Norwegians loved it for its gaiety and close ties to the proverbs and folklore of Norway; the musical score written by Grieg was also instrumental in its success. The reception of the critics at the time of publication varies from good to bad. The attitude Ibsen had towards the critic's reception was entertaining and important to the development of further reception of the play. The immediate reception in Germany began a few years later, and changes as the progression of history affects the translations and reception. Even the reasons for producing *Peer Gynt* in Germany changed due to the intent of the translations.

The musical score was provided by Edvard Grieg ( 1843-1907) who, at the request of Ibsen in January, 1874, agreed to write the music for *Peer Gynt*, although he was not excited about the task. The score was very popular and in 1888, the most popular pieces from the score were combined in an orchestral suite, followed in 1891 by a second combination of songs from the original score. The first suite was titled Suite No. 1, Op. 46 and contained Morning Mood, Aase's Death, Anitra's Dance, and In the Hall of the Mountain King. The second suite was titled Suite No. 2, Op. 55 which contained The Abduction of the Bride, Ingrid's Lament, Arabian Dance, Peer Gynt's Return Home, and Solveig's Song. In Germany,

Werner Egk would also write a musical score performed as an opera to the story of *Peer Gynt* (1938) but Ibsen's text was not used; another was written to accompany the score.

*Peer Gynt* was published in 1867, and later staged in February, 1876 in Christiania with Edvard Grieg's music and Henrik Klausen as Peer. For the premier, the length of the script was shortened considerably and there were 37 performances. In 1892 it was restaged at the same theater with Bjørn Bjørnson as Peer; this time there were 50 performances. *Peer Gynt* was first produced in Copenhagen in 1886 at the Dagmar Theatre. The first performance in Gothenburg, Sweden, was in 1892 and later in 1895 in Stockholm. The first edition of 1,250 copies sold quickly in Norway, but the second edition of 2,000 copies did not sell out until 1874, due to the harsh criticism it received from critics such as Clemens Peterson, Camilla Collett and Georg Brandes.

There are varied responses to Ibsen's dramatic poem, ranging from positive to negative. The Norwegian author Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson wrote a review in a periodical which he published, *Norsk Folkeblad*, and praised Ibsen's dramatic poem *with vigor*. He considered it: "a 'satire on Norwegian selfishness, narrowchestedness, conceitedness' executed in such a fashion that 'I have not only time after time had to burst into laughter, even howls of laughter, but have also in my mind (as here publicly) had to thank the person who has accomplished this.'" (qtd. in Beyer 58) Bjørnson then wrote to Ibsen from Copenhagen:

My dearest Ibsen! I can't think of any other book that has more made me want to take the author by the hand and thank him for what he has given me .... I don't speak of anything these days but your poem; you're always in my thoughts—so I must tell you myself what I feel. The loyalty I see in you (and how loyal this book is!) has captivated me, heart and soul. I love your loyalty to our great aims, from the Danish cause to those less tangible, high ideals. I love your anger, the way it has fortified courage. I love your strength, I love your recklessness—Ah! Wasn't it the taste of seaspray after the stuffiness of a sickroom! My thoughts turn joyous, ripe for action, recklessly honest. I saw trivial things as trivial; greatness gleamed, enflamed my longing. I felt as if I had been too long speaking French in a salon, and now yearned for Norwegian, even the release of swearing. (qtd. in Koht 240)

Ibsen was delighted with this response from Bjørnson, and proceeded immediately to write him back, *gratefully accepting the praise*. But before he could even send the letter, he came across copy of Clemens Petersen's review in the Copenhagen newspaper *Fædrelandet*.

Peterson was an influential critic. He belonged to the Danish intelligentsia, and the Danish newspaper for which he wrote was widely read in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. Ibsen had hoped

Peterson would write a favorable review of *Peer Gynt* and even wrote him a letter encouraging him to do so: "I hope that in my new work (*Peer Gynt*) you will find I have taken a step forward" (Koht 241).

Unfortunately, Peterson did not find *Peer Gynt* a good representation of poetry, plot or artistic quality, although he did praise it to some extent:

There is more humor, more true spiritual freedom, less vehemence, less straining than in *Brand*. It fits more naturally the poet's spirit, and thus makes a saner, more balanced, and thereby more poetic expression. Neither *Brand* or *Peer Gynt* is really poetry . . . . The ideal is missing. (qtd. in Koht 241 )

Peterson attacked the link between art and reality, claiming the play lacked "strict and clear logic in the development and complete reliability in the design" (qtd. in Beyer 61).

As can be expected, Ibsen was furious with the review. He was hypersensitive to other people's reactions to his writings, and this review sent him into a rage. He started another letter to Bjørnson in which he accused him of allowing Peterson to rip him to shreds without standing up for him:

What kind of damned nonsense is this that keeps cropping up and coming between us? It is as if the devil himself threw his shadow between us. If I were in Copenhagen and know someone as closely as you know Peterson (Bjørnson and Peterson were old friends), I

would have beat him senseless before I let him  
 perpetrate such a deliberate crime against truth and  
 justice . . . . My book is poetry. If it is not now, then it  
 shall be . . . . I am glad just the same for the injustice  
 done to me . . . for anger will make my powers grow.  
 (qtd. in Koht 242)

Bjørnson did not view this letter as an attack on his character, and responded to Ibsen mentioning that he had indeed had many discussions with Peterson about *Peer Gynt* and had, in fact, defended Ibsen's play.

Georg Brandes, also Danish, criticized the play based on the assumption that ugly is not beautiful, asserting that Ibsen's drama was a demoralization of human nature and an unsuccessful attempt at literature:

Ibsen's work is neither beautiful or true. The contempt are a poor foundation on which to build poetic works of literature. How ugly, how distorted Ibsen's view of life is, what bitter pleasure he can find in besmirching human nature. (qtd. in Beyer 62)

Although Brandes rejected *Peer Gynt* as literature, he praised the ability Ibsen had for creating language. Brandes also applauded the richness of the poetry.

Peterson and Brandes, the Danish critics, clearly chose the same avenue in criticizing *Peer Gynt*. They rejected his efforts in creating a balance between aesthetic and reality. The critics in

Norway and Sweden followed Bjørnson's praise of *Peer Gynt*, even though they recognized the awkwardness of the fourth act which Brandes and Peterson emphasized in their critique.

An unnamed Norwegian critic responded to *Peer Gynt* in the *Morgenbladet* commenting on the style, symbols, and folklore, and mentioned that the fourth act was a random act which did not help the advancement of the play. He also mentioned the conclusion was weak but that the play had elements which were delightful: "the tremendous depth' in the description of this life story, the wealth of poetic images, vignettes and portrayals, and 'above all the often burlesque use of the well known folktale of the hunter Peer Gynt'" (Beyer 60). Frederik Bætzmann, a Norwegian critic for the *Aftenbladet*, commented that the play seemed disconnected due to the fourth act, but the review in general praised Ibsen's use of language and ideas.

*Peer Gynt* was also received well in Sweden, as noted in the *Svensk literaturtidskrift*, by Carl Rupert Nyblom, who had respect and admiration for the Norwegian playwright. He did comment on the inconsistency of unity in the play, but praised the characters and poetic superiority. On the other hand, Carl Emil Egeberg, editor of *Vikingen* made fun of Ibsen's dramatic poem, stating that: "Ibsen, the idealist, has made a fortune through a Danish publisher and has become famous in Denmark by castigating and mocking his own people in his books" (qtd. in Beyer 66). Camilla Collett, an outspoken feminist, was disgusted with the soft spoken attitude of

Solveig. Collett believed Solveig should have been more assertive toward the flighty Peer. According to Meyer, Ibsen understood the power of the unconscious, the truth behind dreams and nightmares, the higher reality of what most of his contemporaries dismissed as unreality; and *Peer Gynt* may be regarded as the first prolonged exploration, whether deliberate or unconscious, of this field (272).

Taine remarked, in opposition to all such poetical moralizing:

Man is not an abortion or a monster, nor is it the mission of poetry to revolt or defame men. Our inborn human imperfection is part of the order of things, like the constant deformity of the petal in a plant; what we consider a malformation is a form; what seems to us the subversion of a law is the fulfillment of a law. (qtd. in Brandes 36)

The immediate criticism of *Peer Gynt* was mixed in its reviews, but in general it can be concluded that the amount of controversy, even though somewhat harsh with obvious misinterpretations of Ibsen's intent, shows that the play hit some nerves and forced the reader and public to a heated response. The critics were in the middle of the nineteenth century issues and dilemmas, where idealism was being overtaken, providing valid evidence for the criticism of *Peer Gynt* in Scandinavia.

*Peer Gynt* was popular in German speaking countries due to the connections to Goethe's *Faust* and its enchanting music. It was first staged in 1902 but it did not gain popularity until the

translation from Dietrich Eckart was published in 1911. The criticism and popularity of *Peer Gynt* differs depending on the time of reception and varies based on the translation and the views of the individual critics of that particular translation. It is not the popularity of the piece that one can rate, but the popularity of the translation, because that is the object of the criticism and reception.

*Peer Gynt* was first performed in Vienna in 1902 at the *Deutsches Volkstheater*. In 1903 it was performed at the *Theater des Westens in Berlin*, and then in Munich in 1905 at the *Prinz-Regenten Theater*.

Among the early critics of Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* are Hermann Bahr, Julius Bab, Albert Wagner, Albert Dresdner, Achim von Winterfeld, E. Normann, and Otto Weininger. They praised Ibsen's play, which then gained popularity.

*Peer Gynt* was the most popular of Ibsen's plays in Germany between 1912 and 1933. "The literature on *Peer Gynt* during these years far exceeds that on any other Ibsen play . . . . In 1916- 17, out of 578 of the performances of Ibsen in German theaters, 119 of them were of *Peer Gynt*" (George, *A Question* 70). This is comparable to the popularity of *Peer Gynt* during the regime of Adolf Hitler and the Third Reich. Between 1933 and 1944 it was performed 1,183 times, second only to one other foreign drama, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (Unglert 90).

Hermann Bahr was one of the primary individuals who realized the importance of Ibsen in Germany. He was not necessarily a

literary critic, rather a theater critic. He categorized *Peer Gynt* as a *Problemdichtung*, not a drama of realism. His analysis of the play is simple, it is a dramatic form which is presented as exploiting the reality of the world through ideas. He praises Ibsen as being on the top of the literary development, able to synthesize the romantic and naturalistic periods: "Das stellt ihn an die Spitze der litterarischen Entwicklung: dadurch wurde er ein Vorkämpfer der Synthese von Romantik und Naturalismus, und darin liegt seine Bedeutung" (George, *Henrik Ibsen* 52). The next wave of critics echoed his complimentary criticism of *Peer Gynt*, and praised the positive aspects of Ibsen's play.

A new wave of German critics in the early 1900's viewed *Peer Gynt* as a new romantic piece of literature. Julius Bab wrote in *Der Mensch auf der Bühne*:

Ich glaube, daß ich heute in der jüngeren Generation  
deutscher Kritiker auf sehr wenig Widerspruch stoße,  
wenn ich Peer Gynt als Ibsens sicherste  
Unsterblichkeit, seine eigentliche Großtat bezeichne.  
(George, *Henrik Ibsen* 58)

Albert Wagner, and Albert Dresdner praised him as well, claiming he was at the highest point of his writing form with *Peer Gynt*. Achim von Winterfeld said it the best when he asserted that *Peer Gynt* was: "unnachahmliche Kunst . . . in *Peer Gynt* habe Ibsen das Größte geschaffen, was ihm zu schaffen möglich war" (George,

*Henrik Ibsen* 59). Ibsen was held in high regard by these critics. They appreciated his style and applauded his accomplishment.

The first translation of *Peer Gynt* was completed in 1881 by Ludwig Passarge. Paul Schlenther and Christian Morgenstern were also prominent translators, but the one translator who created the most controversy was Dietrich Eckart.

Eckart was born March 23, 1868, died on December 23, 1923. He was one of the first fighters for National Socialism, and it was hard for him to accept the failed attempt by Hitler to take power in Munich in 1923. In the second part of *Mein Kampf*, in which Hitler writes about this attempted coup, he mentions Eckart as a very dedicated man to the cause of National Socialism. Eckart grounded the first National Socialistic newspaper, and was one of the first members of the German Workers Party. He believed it was his role to enlighten the public: "Ich finde, daß viele unter uns blind sind. Mein Wunsch ist es, sie sehend zu machen, damit sie die Welt richtig anschauen, damit sie eine richtige Weltanschauung bekommen" (Grün 21). This Eckart did in his plays, but his most success came from his translation of *Peer Gynt*.

Dietrich Eckart adapted *Peer Gynt* in 1911, which was said by Grün to be the high point of the development of his life's philosophy (Weltanschauung) (68). This adaptation of *Peer Gynt* supported the purpose of the Nazis through Peer instead of valuing the plight of Peer as the plight of every individual, as George states:

This version was first performed on February 18, 1914, and over the next two years it was performed over 100 times at the *Königliche Schauspielhaus* in Berlin. Eckart later joined the Nazis and his adaptation of *Peer Gynt* brought out the religious-mystical, and 'Expressionist' elements of the play, as well as Eckart's own racist feelings . . . presenting the Jews as the epitome of materialism. (*A Question* 70)

During the Third Reich the theaters were instructed to use Eckart's translation when performing *Peer Gynt*. It had become a propaganda play for the Nazis to use in promoting their ideals for the German race. Bergliot Ibsen, Ibsen's daughter-in-law, was outraged at this misuse of the dramatic poem, and was backed by the Scandinavian Press. She wrote Goebbels requesting him to cease the production of *Peer Gynt* in Eckart's translation:

Im Dritten Reich mußten die Bühnen nach entsprechenden Anweisungen 'Peer Gynt' in dieser Fassung aufführen. Manchmal gereiten solche Aufführungen zu einer direkten NS-Propagandaveranstaltung, wie im April 1936 im Berliner Theater des Volkes. Es kam damals sogar zu einer Intervention von Bergliot Ibsen. Sie schrieb an Goebbels und bat ihn 'Peer Gynt' nicht mehr in Eckarts Nachdichtung aufzuführen. Auch die skandinavische Presse war empört. (Drewniak 269)

According to Rotermund, Eckart found many similarities between *Peer Gynt* and his own life:

Die Selbstdeutung des Dichters, der glaubte, in Ibsens *Peer Gynt* widerspiegele sich sein eigenes Leben, und der darum den Namen des 'nordischen Faust' statt des eigenen Namens oben links in die Ecke. (158)

Eckart was an Expressionist, and he drew out the expressionistic elements in *Peer Gynt*. He also emphasized the Faustian characteristics in Peer, thus making Peer closer to a Germanic figure, supporting his nationalistic intent. Eckart built the drama based on the materialistic and spiritualistic elements. The materialist element was portrayed as reality, while Eckart portrayed the spiritual element as a search through which the soul fought with reality to find a true existence, as George writes:

Das materielle Element habe den Anschein der Realität, tatsächlich sei es ein Traum, ein 'Interludium.' Das Leben sei eine Reise der Seele durch die Versuchungen des irdischen Daseins, eine Reise, während derer die Seele im Kampf mit der oberflächlichen Realität der Materie und mit der Anmaßung des Intellekts reife.

(*Henrik Ibsen* 86)

Eckart claimed that the theme of *Peer Gynt* was not the dialectic of the ego and altruism, but the acceptance of material existence and insight into Nature:

Das eigentliche Thema in *Peer Gynt* sei nicht die Dialektik von Egoismus und Altruismus, sondern die Dialektik beiden dieser Anschauungen bedingenden Prinzipien: Akzeption der materiellen Existenz und Einsicht in ihre rein zeitliche oberflächliche Natur.

(George, *Henrik Ibsen* 86)

Eckart's Peer is not an idealistic dreamer, but an individual with Faustian elements, searching for the ultimate truth. He is on a mission towards this goal, and the obstacles which are in his way, the Trolls and the Boyg, are merely symbols of the material world, objects to be overcome.

The Trolls, as interpreted by Eckart, seek to take Peer's vision away from him, thereby giving him possession of the material world: "'d.h. den ins Göttliche gerichteten Blick,' um auf diese Weise Peer für ihre eigene, rein materielle Welt zu gewinnen" (George, *Henrik Ibsen* 87). Eckart contrasts the motto of the Trolls *sei dir selbst genug* to the motto of Man *sei du selbst*, along these lines of spiritual and material. Society should avoid the Trolls motto, as it is of the material world. To accept this motto is to be of the world and not of the higher aesthetic realm. Eckart did not change the scenes with the Herd girls and Anitra, as they represent materialism and the filthiness of the lower, inferior races, a hint of racism. The madhouse represents people who have accepted this worldly realism and almost succeed in convincing Peer to do so as

well, but he is saved by Begriffenfeld who acts here as Peer's conscience.

As Peer comes home in the fifth act and meets Solveig, who is an embodiment of Peer's soul: "Solveig ist ja nur die Verkörperung seiner [Peer's] Seele" (George, *Henrik Ibsen* 88), and in order to free his soul from material bondage he must die a human death:

Damit seine Seele frei werden könne, müsse Peer schließlich sterben, und im Tod, da seine Seele ursprüngliche, unverdorbene Gestalt wieder annimmt, verwandelt sich sein Gesicht in das eines jungen Mannes, das Solveigs in das eines jungen Mädchens.  
(George, *Henrik Ibsen* 88)

Peer's identity has been changed, he is no longer "going roundabout," rather he is on a mission to find the truth. He is not portrayed as a liar, but one who lies, because a Germanic hero would never lie; "Er ist 'nie Lügner, er ist stets Schwärmer, Träumer, Denker' denn ein Lügner würde nicht in das Bild des germanischen Helden, des nordischen Menschen passen" (Uecker 172). Eckart also changed the allegorical figures in the fifth from harsh confrontations of Peer's inadequacy as human and failure to live to his potential to playful figures with children's voices:

aus den allegorischen Figuren des V. Aktes (Die Knüäel, die verwelkten Blätter, das Sausen in der Luft, die Tautropfen, die gebrochenen Strohhalme) säuselnde Kinderstimmung werden . . . volkstümelige

Vereinfachung, wahrscheinlich aber doch nur Kitsch.

(Uecker 166)

With the qualities of the Faustian individual, Peer was more like the German hero and thereby belonged to the Germanic race: “‘Der Peer Gynt gehört seinem innersten wesen nach zum deutschen Volk,’ deswegen trage Peer auch ‘allgemein gültige Züge des nordischen Menschen’” (Uecker 172). *Peer Gynt* served as a nationalistic drama, useful for serving the Nazis in their aspirations of the Aryan hero, who was on the ultimate search for pure truth: an individual who searched the world for enlightenment, but turned homeward to find his true joy and everlasting peace.

The critics rejected Eckart's translation of Ibsen on the grounds that it was an unrealistic and inaccurate presentation of the dramatic poem, while the better translation was from Christian Morgenstern: “die zeitgenössische Kritik habe Eckarts ‘Freie Übertragung’ des Peer Gynt als Verballhornung zurückgewiesen, die von Ibsen ‘autorisierte Übersetzung’ stamme von Christian Morgenstern” (Rotermund 158).

Jacobsohn's analysis of the 1914 production of *Peer Gynt* in Germany using Eckart's translation provides fair criticism of Eckart's attempt to turn *Peer Gynt* into a nationalistic play, fitting for production in the later Nazi regime. Jacobsohn states that this particular translation of *Peer Gynt* makes many changes, easily comparable with Christian Morgenstern's translation, which is considered a more accurate translation (Jacobsohn 129). In the first

line of the play, Aase accuses Peer of lying, which Morgenstern correctly translates as a direct accusation “Du lügst,” which in Eckart’s translation is “Höre auf! Ich habe genug! Was du sagst ist Lug und Trug!” It is a small change in script, but a larger change in meaning. Eckart even changes the number of characters in the play. In the asylum he adds a character who says: “Ich kenne nur eines, Und dieses ist meines: Das Schach, das Schach, das Schach zu spielen Und siegt von und keiner, Dann ists um so feiner: Wir teilen egal Und kriegen und kriegen den Preis noch einmal” (qtd. in Jacobsohn 129). Ibsen also uses many swear words, that Eckart tones down in his attempt at turning Ibsen’s dramatic poem into a rhymed fairy tale. Jacobsohn states:

Aus Ibsens schroffem, zerklüftetem, beillegendem  
abgründig vieldeutigem, blutendem und blutig  
reißendem Höhenwerk ist ein sanftes, zuckrig-  
schmalziges, überdeutliches, glatt und plattes,  
musikalisch anfgeschwemmtes Märchenvolksstück in  
Knallbonbonreimen geworden . . . übersetzt kann er  
[Grieg], Gott sei gelobt, nicht werden. (129)

It is hard for the non-Norwegian to understand Ibsen completely, because his country is his writing material. On the other hand, it could be hard for the native Norwegian to understand him fully, as his writing has a unique flair which contains the style and culture of Europe. *Peer Gynt* illustrates the life of an individual who has the cultural background of Norway, but otherwise the

description of these Norwegian characteristics are suited for every culture. It is important to understand that Ibsen directed his criticism at Norway, which is the background for the play. Ibsen had no intentions for this play to be used as support for a racist regime, but Eckart's free translation is a direct illustration of the power of translators, and how it can be misused.

The controversial reviews of the Scandinavian critics show Ibsen's success in Scandinavia. Bjørnson, Peterson and Brandes provide most valuable criticism, even if Ibsen rejected it. The changes *Peer Gynt* undertook as it was later translated into German by Eckart are monstrous. His translation is an extreme example of what can happen if the translator does not attempt to stay true to the text. His translation was used by the Nazis to further nationalism in the German *Volk*, but because of critics such as Rotermund, Uecker and George, the public is aware of these changes.

## Conclusion

*Peer Gynt* is a critique of humanity that Ibsen wrote based on the general characteristics of the Norwegian. This play is a criticism of the bourgeoisie, in which Ibsen used Peer, the picaresque hero, as an example of the flawed individual. In *Peer Gynt*, Ibsen incorporated different aspects of the Norwegian culture as well as European themes to support his criticism of humanity. He used Norwegian folklore to establish his play as a piece of Norwegian literature. The philosophy Ibsen incorporated into the play is a mixture of Scandinavian and European philosophers, while in other aspects, such as the theme of the devil as an influence on the character's morality is a theme of European literature, it is not specific to Norway.

The issue of folklore is a definite link to Norway and is a piece of their heritage with which the Norwegians were very familiar. The main character, Peer, was taken from a hero of folklore. The tall tales told by Peer were also pieces of folklore, of which the Norwegians were aware. The Trolls and the Boyg serve as another avenue Ibsen used to build the story of Peer and show his weaknesses.

The philosophy of *Peer Gynt* is taken mainly from Kierkegaard, but it also embodies the philosophy of Hegel and Goethe. Peer is an example of the Kierkegaardian aesthetic, he seeks to satisfy his own desires as his inclinations direct him. In

Hegelian terms he is a slave to the “structure of desire,” using the other characters to satisfy his own longings and needs, as does the Faustian individual which Goethe defined. Peer reaps the rewards for his actions, he is condemned for his worthlessness by the devil figures, and at this point he does realize that he has no sense of self. The influence of the devil on the hero is a common motif in European literature. Peer ignores the boundaries of the moral law of society, thus showing his lack of moral consciousness. The Button-molder eventually confronts him, threatening unavoidable consequences for his careless actions. Ibsen allows Solveig to save Peer in this instance, but his fate is left up to the reader, in that Ibsen does not provide a concrete solution.

The model that Ibsen used for his drama reminds one of Schiller's formulation as expressed in *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*. Schiller believed that the ideal society should be introduced to the public through art, before people could be expected to use it in daily life: “The living clockwork of the state must be repaired while it is still in motion, and here it is a case of changing the wheels as they revolve” (30). Schiller does address the natural instincts of mankind: “The natural character of man, which, selfish and insolent as it is, aims far more at the destruction than at the preservation of society” (30). The characteristics needed to further the advancement of society can be found in the artist, the cultured individual, who has incorporated a balance of the sensual and moral impulses into his character. It is this individual who is capable of

introducing change to the society as Schiller suggests: "Live with your century, but do not be its creature; render to your contemporaries what they need, not what they praise" (32)

As a medium, drama is one method for introducing the author's idea of the perfect society. Drama is then a form of instruction, a model for society. The author is the artist, the cultured individual who is responsible for raising the standards of society (the natural man) through art, in this case, drama.

Ibsen, as an artist, was able to depict the flaws of the individual which he introduced to the public through *Peer Gynt*. He directs this criticism at the bourgeoisie. It was an honest endeavor to show them the deleterious effects their egotistical actions would have on themselves and on others: "According to Ibsen, *Peer Gynt* personifies the idea that the ego creates no true self, and true self is the goal (only the true self [the cultured individual] is a human being); ego is the greatest obstacle to a true self" (Lukács 113). Ibsen acted as the cultured man who portrayed the flawed individual, the natural man, through conceptually easy ideas of folklore and philosophy, which the public could understand. He tried to give the public a framework through which they could recognize their faults and better themselves. In order for Ibsen to accomplish this portrayal of the faults and weaknesses of humanity, he had to detach himself from society. According to Lukács, "the artist must stand outside life in order to portray and observe it . . . .

The artist can have sensations, not feelings . . . otherwise his art would lose its perspective” (105).

Ibsen used drama as a critical and didactical approach toward enlightenment of the public. It seems as if Ibsen enjoyed this task of judging society: “I do but ask; my call is not to answer” (Ibsen, qtd. in Koht 19), but his pleasure in fulfilling his task is immaterial. The issue at hand is to assess whether or not his plays had an impact on society. This element of success can be determined in the critical reception of his plays.

Critical reception involves many variables, which one must consider in any evaluation of reception. As George states:

The answer for any particular work or author or period will obviously vary according to the degree of the author's craft, the visibility of the implied reader, the literary sensitivity of the particular reader, the homogeneity of the society in which the book appropriated, the paradigmatic richness of the text, the unanticipated connotations supplied by history, and so on. (*The Question* 57)

The reception of *Peer Gynt* in Scandinavia is not affected by the variable of a translated text, therefore the reception can be analyzed by the critics' response. *Peer Gynt* received controversial reviews in Norway, Denmark and Sweden, including pro and con, proving that it was an intriguing assessment of character which provoked further thought. In this case, Ibsen was successful. Outside

of Scandinavia, his success with *Peer Gynt* is debatable, due to the foreign reception which is dependent on the variable of translation.

In Germany, the reception of *Peer Gynt* has gone through stages, in which the translation has directly affected the critical reception. An extreme example of the flawed translation is seen with reference to Eckart's free rendition of *Peer Gynt*. Eckart took *Peer Gynt* and reshaped it into a drama that the Nazis would use as a propaganda piece. Peer was no longer an example of the worthless and flighty individual, but a portrayal of the determined individual on the search for ultimate truth. Eckart changed the dramatic, philosophical element of the play to fit his own philosophy and Weltanschauung. The critical reviews which have determined Ibsen's success cannot be accurately measured in Germany, due to this falsified translation of *Peer Gynt* by Eckart.

Ibsen was successful in his portrayal of the egotistical Gyntian self. The critical reception in Scandinavia is proof of this, the original meanings and philosophical influences of the play have been preserved. But, due to Eckart's translation of *Peer Gynt* into German, it cannot be asserted that *Peer Gynt* is an effective depiction of the flaws of the egoist. This can be determined by the critical reception of these productions, which were prominent in the Third Reich. The tool to determine the success of the play is the reception of the play, and if the translation of the play is flawed, the criticism of the author's intent will not be accurate. Ibsen completed his task, which was an attempt to enlighten the society

through drama. He was successful in Scandinavia, but his success in foreign countries can only be measured if the translation is an accurate reproduction of the original text.

One can measure this through the critical reception of those who are trusted critics. There are translations of *Peer Gynt* which are considered fair and accurate translations, Eckart's version is not the only alternative for those who wish to read *Peer Gynt* in German. The critics have accepted the English translation of *Peer Gynt* by Rolf Fjelde, which is the one I read in my analysis of Ibsen's play. Although I read *Peer Gynt* in a translation, I was able to grasp the lighthearted gaiety of *Peer Gynt* that every Norwegian would understand.

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