TEXT AND PERFORMANCE

General Editor: Michael Scott

The series is designed to introduce sixth-form and undergraduate students to the themes, continuing vitality and performance of major dramatic works. The attention given to production aspects is an element of special importance, responding to the invigoration given to literary study by the work of leading contemporary critics.

The prime aim is to present each play as a vital experience in the mind of the reader – achieved by analysis of the text in relation to its themes and theatricality. Emphasis is accordingly placed on the relevance of the works to the modern reader and the world of today. At the same time, traditional views are presented and appraised, forming the basis from which a creative response to the texts can develop.

In each volume, Part One: *Text* discusses certain key themes or problems, the reader being encouraged to gain a stronger perception both of the inherent character of the works under consideration and also of variations in interpreting it. Part Two: *Performance* examines the ways in which these themes or problems are handled in production, how, that is, the plays work on the stage.

A synopsis of each play is given and an outline of its major sources, and a concluding Reading List offers guidance to the student's independent study of the works.

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PEER GYNT and GHOSTS

Text and Performance

ASBJØRN AARSETH

M
MACMILLAN
EDUCATION

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GENERAL EDITOR'S PREFACE

For many years a mutual suspicion existed between the theatre director and the literary critic of drama. Although in the first half of the century there were important exceptions, such was the rule. A radical change of attitude, however, has taken place over the last thirty years. Critics and directors now increasingly recognise the significance of each other's work and acknowledge their growing awareness of interdependence. Both interpret the same text, but do so according to their different situations and functions. Without the director, the designer and the actor, a play's existence is only partial. They revitalise the text with action, enabling the drama to live fully at each performance. The academic critic investigates the script to elucidate its textual problems, understand its conventions and discover how it operates. He may also propose his view of the work, expounding what he considers to be its significance.

Dramatic texts belong therefore to theatre and to literature. The aim of the 'Text and Performance' series is to achieve a fuller recognition of how both enhance our enjoyment of the play. Each volume follows the same basic pattern. Part One provides a critical introduction to the plays under discussion, using the techniques and criteria of the literary critic in examining the manner in which the works operate through language, imagery and action. Part Two takes the enquiry further into the plays' theatricality by focusing on selected productions so as to illustrate points of contrast and comparison in the interpretation of different directors and actors, and to demonstrate how the plays have worked on the stage. In this way the series seeks to provide a lively and informative introduction to major plays in their text and performance.

MICHAEL SCOTT

PLOT SYNOPSES AND SOURCES

PEER GYNT

Act I: Peer, at the age of twenty, has just returned empty-handed from a hunt in the mountains to the neglected farm, where he is faced with his reproachful mother Aase. He tries to soothe her by means of a tall tale about a dangerous ride on a reindeer buck. She blames him for idling and lying, while his former girlfriend, Ingrid, only child to the wealthy farmer at Hæggstad, is about to get married to someone else. Peer goes to Hæggstad, where the wedding celebrations are starting. Among the guests is Solvejg, a fair, young girl to whom Peer is attracted. When she learns his name, she will not dance with him. Disappointed and half drunk, Peer gets hold of the bride and escapes uphill carrying her, while the wedding guests are watching in great anger.

Act II: Peer is soon tired of Ingrid and rejects her. He is now chased by the whole community, except Solvejg and Aase, who want to help him. In the mountains he gets involved with three wanton cowherd girls, and then meets a woman in green who is the daughter of the Troll King, or the Dovre-Master. Inside the mountain Peer negotiates with him about the terms for a marriage. He can accept certain conditions, but refuses to have his eyesight changed into that of a troll. A fight with the trolls ensues, and he is saved by the sound of church bells. In the next scene, in total darkness, Peer is surrounded by something which he cannot pass through. Its answer to his repeated question 'Who are you', is 'Myself'. This indeterminable being suggests that he go round and about, and finally names itself as the great Boyg. It is joined by birds who want to destroy Peer. He appeals to Solvejg for help and is once again saved by church bells and hymn-singing.

Act III: In a wintry scene Peer is felling timber for his hut, and dreams about the splendour of his project. He observes a youth with a sickle deliberately cutting his finger off, a way to avoid army service. In the meantime the father of the Hæggstad bride on the bailiff's ruling has removed all valuables from the Gynt farm, leaving Aase poorer than ever. Solvejg decides to join Peer in his hut. He is called on by the woman in green with a lame-legged son she claims he has fathered; she intends to interfere if he chooses to live with Solvejg. Peer cannot face this situation and leaves, asking Solvejg to be patient while he is away. He visits his mother who is ill in bed, and invents a fairy tale to cheer her up. She dies, and he decides to leave the country.

Act IV: Peer Gynt, a wealthy middle-aged businessman, has landed with his steam-yacht on the coast of Morocco, and is telling his companions about his code of business and his way to success. His aim is to become

world emperor by means of gold. His companions steal the yacht, which explodes shortly afterwards. Left in a difficult position among wild animals and thieves, Peer comes across stolen clothes and jewellery. With this he impresses some Bedouin girls, one of whom is Anitra. She takes advantage of this mindless adorer, and escapes with the jewels. Having to make a fresh start he decides to become a travelling scholar. Meanwhile the middle-aged Solvejg is seen outside the hut, spinning and singing, waiting for her beloved. Peer is in Egypt, observing the statue of Memnon, which can sing, and studying the Sphinx, which is mute. He claims to recognise the Boyg in this figure; accordingly the Sphinx is himself. This theory impresses another scholar, Begriffenfeldt, Director of the lunatic asylum in Cairo, and he brings Peer to his institution. Faced with the weird inhabitants of the mad-house and its crazy director who informs him of the recent death of Absolute Reason, Peer wants to get out. He is crowned with a wreath of straw by the director, pronouncing him Emperor of the Self.

Act V: Once again rich, and now an old man on his way back to Norway, Peer is on board a ship in stormy weather. He is approached by a stranger who wants Peer's corpse in case he is drowned in the storm. Peer refuses with indignation. The ship is wrecked, but he survives. Passing a churchyard, he listens to the funeral oration for the farmer whom he once saw cutting off his finger. At Hæggstad he learns that Ingrid is dead; an auction is being held. Roaming about in the forest looking for things to eat, he starts peeling an onion, looking in vain for its kernel. Approaching the hut on the moor, he hears Solvejg singing inside, and runs away. He is chased by balls of yarn, withered leaves, dewdrops, etc. who claim to represent the deeds he did not perform and the songs he did not sing. The Buttonmoulder appears with his casting-ladle; he has instructions to find Peer and melt him down since he has defied the purpose of his life. Peer asks for a reprieve; he wants to prove that he has always been himself. No witness, however, can testify to this effect. Then Peer intends to prove that he has been a great sinner, thus manifesting his personality in a negative way, which would also free him from nothingness in the casting-ladle. A thin person with a hoof on his one foot hears Peer's confession, but is not impressed; his sins are mostly insignificant. It is now early Whitsunday morning, church bells are ringing, the light from a hut is visible among the trees, and a woman's song is heard. This time Peer knows where he can get a list of his sins. Solvejg, however, welcomes him with a blessing, saying that he has been in her faith, in her hope and in her love all the time. Peer hides his face in her lap and, while the sun is rising, Solvejg sings a cradle song.

SOURCES

Peer (or Per) Gynt was a folk hero in the oral tradition of Gudbrandsdal, Norway. Ibsen's source is a collection of tales about reindeer-hunting,

published in P. Chr. Asbjørnsen: *Norske Huldre-Eventyr og Folkesagn* (Christiania, 1848). The relevant tales are printed in English as an appendix to William and Charles Archer's translation of Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* (London, 1892). Apart from this local tradition, there are a number of instances in the poem where motifs from Norwegian folklore can be recognised. Peer's Egyptian exploits in Act Four are partly based on some of Hegel's ideas on Egyptian art in *Aesthetics*. For the episode with the insane fellah of Cairo, one source is the findings described in A. E. Mariette: *Le Sérapéum de Memphis* (Paris, 1857–66). For the reference to the Memnon myth Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is a probable source.

GHOSTS

Act I: Ten years after the death of her husband, the late Captain and Chamberlain Alving of Rosenvold, Mrs Alving is about to establish a charitable institution, an orphanage, as his memorial. The main building is ready for dedication. Oswald, Mrs Alving's only child, who has been brought up by strangers since he was seven years old, and has for some time lived in Paris as a painter, has just returned home. Regine Engstrand, Mrs Alving's maid, hopes to be asked to accompany the young painter back to Paris. Regine's father, the carpenter Jakob Engstrand, who has completed his work at the orphanage building, intends to return to the nearby town. He plans to invest his earnings in an establishment for sailors, and wants to have his pretty daughter join him in the enterprise. Pastor Manders, an old friend of the Alvings, is arriving for a short stay in connection with the dedication ceremony; there is also some business transaction to attend to, such as the question of insurance, the signature of the deed of conveyance etc.

During the conversation the Pastor is surprised to learn from Mrs Alving that her husband in his last years did not lead the kind of diligent and virtuous life it would seem, but was lazy, addicted to drinking and lascivious. Mrs Alving has managed to keep this a secret and it is for this reason that she has decided to send her boy away so early. Pastor Manders is also told that Regine is the illegitimate daughter of the late Chamberlain; her mother was at one time a maid at Rosenvold and married Engstrand when she got pregnant. A sound from the dining-room reveals that Oswald is making a pass at Regine, just like his father did at Regine's mother. Mrs Alving and the Pastor are both shocked to realise the situation.

Act II: Oswald and Pastor Manders represent opposing views regarding moral standards among young artist families in Paris and elsewhere. While Manders is opposed to liberal and unconventional patterns of cohabitation, Oswald is denouncing debauchery on the part of apparent decent heads of families when they visit certain quarters of Paris, implying that in matters of moral conduct things are not always as they seem on the surface. Mrs

Alving is sharing the rather emancipated views of her son, adhering to a more affirmative attitude towards the joy of life which she earlier would forsake due to a strong sense of duty.

Oswald informs his mother that the reason for his returning home is an imminent health problem; an illness of the brain may break out and render him completely helpless. He is hoping that Regine will nurse him, and when no other solution is at hand, give him the morphine pills which will end his life. Engstrand asks Pastor Manders to come to the construction site where the work is finished, and hold a prayer meeting. Just as Mrs Alving is about to reveal to Oswald and Regine that the late Chamberlain was Regine's father as well as Oswald's, shouts that the Orphanage is on fire are heard outside, and everybody rushes out to help put out the fire.

Act III: With the orphanage burnt down uninsured and Engstrand blaming Pastor Manders for the disaster, the situation is dramatically changed for everybody. Engstrand is able to exert pressure on Manders to support the plans for a sailor's home. Manders is nervous about his reputation being damaged. Regine, informed about her real father, decides to leave Rosenvold where her social ambitions cannot be fulfilled, and join Pastor Manders or possibly Engstrand's dubious institution for sailors. Oswald is told the truth about his father's debaucheries as a result of his curbed zest for life, and understands that his own threatening illness is an inherited disposition. Mrs Alving realises her own guilt in marrying the young lieutenant Alving without really loving him, killing his joy of life, making him turn his energy into profligacy, and then trying to cover up the truth.

The extra strain in connection with the fire and the shocking new insight resulting from Mrs Alving's revelations of things in the past, leads to the final outbreak of Oswald's illness at sunrise, reducing him to a mental wreck and leaving his despairing mother to choose between giving him the mortal pills or nursing him with no hope for improvement.