

A
Commentary
on
Henrik Ibsen's Peer Gynt

A
Commentary, critical and explanatory
on the Norwegian text of
Henrik Ibsen's Peer Gynt
its language, literary associations and folklore

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Nu kommer Raden
till Gyntiana, mit unge Land!



THE HAGUE, MARTINUS NIJHOFF, 9 LANGE VOORHOUT }
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PREFATORY AND INTRODUCTORY

When a man like Georg Brandes, than whom few have better qualifications to understand Ibsen, writes that Peer Gynt is "difficult to understand in its later parts", the foreign student of the play is likely to read this with a sigh of relief. At the same time many a reader will have been inclined so far as he himself is concerned, to make the sentiment his, omitting the four last words. For, if there is any play of the Master's that requires for its understanding a special knowledge of the milieu and the circumstances that gave rise to it, it is this child of the poet's most exuberant fancy, written at one of the rare periods of his life and practically the first when everything smiled upon him, when, owing to the success of "Brand", some dissonants notwithstanding (n. to l. 3179) he must have felt like the literary lion of the day, when his way seemed made and his life's dream to become a great poet was in a fair way to be realised. The allusions to contemporary events and currents, literary and ethic, certainly not less and perhaps much more frequent than even in Brand, the apparently inextricable interweaving of the play with the folklore of Norway, bewilder the student on first and no doubt even later readings and we do not wonder that, when the first translation of the drama was announced to Ibsen, he himself expressed a mild doubt as to whether it would be possible to bring that undertaking to the desired end. It was in the early part of 1880 that Ludvig Passarge had told the poet of his plan and in reply Ibsen (*Breve*, II, 79) wrote of his great surprise "when finding that you consider this work fit to be translated and published in German". He has his doubts whether this will in the end prove feasible. For, "among all my books, it is Peer Gynt that I look upon as least likely to be understood

(der mindst egner sig) outside Scandinavia". For in order to understand it, the reader must possess, Ibsen adds: "a very intimate knowledge of Norwegian nature and the life of the Norwegian people (et meget nøjagtigt kendskab til den norske natur og det norske folkeliv), the student must be familiar with Norwegian literature and Norwegian mentality (vor folkelige tænkemåde) . . . and "no doubt", you, Mr. Passarge, . . . possess all this, but . . . do your readers? And when a couple of years after this letter, he wrote once more to Passarge, who appears to have asked the poet to send him an explanation of all such passages as were likely to present difficulties to the foreign student of the play — surely, no little order! — Ibsen answers that this he cannot undertake: much as he should like it, he does not see his way to give an explanation of the many allusions that might require comment for German readers, — Passarge, as a German must know better than he as a Norwegian what the German looks upon as a difficulty. Hence it is no use asking Prof. Dietrichson either, or any Norwegian for that matter; when in Norway, Passarge will be able to get all the information he wants. So Ibsen vouchsafes two explanations (to the adj. våset and the subst. pusselanker; cf. notes to l.l. 4488 and 4016) and that is all!

Any one who has even tried to penetrate into the dramatic poem at all, will have found how very clearly Ibsen has here foreseen the difficulties that beset the unfortunate student that, without any special knowledge of all this and without a big library, tries to master its intricacies. There is the Norwegian folklore then in the first place, with which the play, more especially the earlier part of it, is soaked through if the expression may pass. And apart from the actual allusions to men and things that the play is full of, there is the much more subtle, much more elusive substratum of Ibsen's own ideas, conceptions, ideals, his longings and his disappointment that must be clear to the student in order to enable him to understand the play in all its bearings. "It is of no little moment to him that wishes to understand Ibsen and especially his relation to Norway, to try and get to the bottom of all his associations with Norwegian spiritual life", Eitrem has written (*Maal og Minne*,

1910 p. 37). And this is not only of some moment, but absolutely necessary. On the whole, Ibsen shared with his brethren-authors an inclination towards a certain bewildering, mystic chiaroscuro and he seems even at times to have felt a mischievous sort of pleasure in leaving his utterances as obscure as they were. J. Paulsen in his *Samliv med Ibsen* (p. 74) tells us how Ibsen refused to explain a poem as he was asked to do. "A poem that is worth anything explains itself!" And, quoting Goethe, Ibsen is said to have added that "no doubt some day or other a commentator will come and tell me what I meant by it." And the cases where he tries to mystify his commentators or at least unintentionally does so, are legion. Think of his *Strange Passenger* being "only a caprice" and remember Eitrem's paper in the *Samtiden* of 1906 (n. to l. 2995) where quite a number of what Eitrem looks upon as Ibsen's *conscious* mystifications of his public will be found discussed. And yet that same Ibsen at one time earnestly meditated a sort of running commentary on the "inner and outer history of his plays". "What if I were to write a little book", he writes in the May of that same year to Hegel the publisher, "on the outer and inner conditions under which my literary products saw the light" (om de ydre og indre forhold, hvorunder hvert enkelt af samtlige mine literære arbejder er blevet til), in which he would give a plain account of the genesis of his work, (at) fortælle jævnt om de omstændigheder og vilkår, hvorunder jeg har digtet" and what follows bears out in a remarkable way what was observed just now about his somewhat unfortunate propensities to the 'oscuro'. For not only does he add that he will not venture to give an *interpretation* of his works (på nogen fortolkning af mine bøger vil jeg naturligvis ikke inklude mig) because it is better that public and critics should be allowed to *riot* about according to their own sweet pleasure in this respect (får lov til at tumle sig efter eget behag på det felt) but he winds up openly by saying that he "wishes to leave open a wide range for all sort of guesses". (*Breve II, 80, 81*). Very much in the same way, Goethe wrote to Schiller that he was trying to re-write some tragical prose-scenes of his *Faust* in verse "da denn die Idee wie durch einen Flor erscheint, die un-

mittelbare Wirkung des . . . Stoffes aber gedämpft wird" (Witkowski, Goethes Faust, II, p. 278). We can only regret that Ibsen admitted Hegel's scruples (ib. p. 84: betænkeligheder) and gave up the plan, for precisely this account of the "indre forhold" would have been of the utmost interest to the student, especially the foreign student who, not being to the manner born, must laboriously gather such knowledge in bits and scraps as his more fortunate Norwegian colleague has imbibed so to speak with the mother milk,—a consideration that holds of course of much more than of these "indre forhold". This explains not only satisfactorily why on the whole a commentary is necessary, but we have here reached the very point that accounts for the apparent foolhardiness of the present writer, a foreign student too, taking upon himself to write such a running commentary on this most Norwegian of Norwegian works. When, some little time after the idea of undertaking this work had taken a more definite shape in my mind, I heard that two accomplished Norwegian scholars each of them independently of the other, had been collecting materials for a commentary of this play, I must confess, apart from this impression of my extreme boldness in tackling the work at all, to a feeling of considerable disappointment at the idea that my labours might thus prove in vain. But reason soon asserted itself and gave me the hope that there might be room for my work by the side of the others, considering that the point of view, the starting point must needs be totally different in their case and mine. The present work, containing as it inevitably does, very little that your average Norwegian is not thoroughly conversant or at least acquainted with, may for all that supply the almost proverbial want for those students to whom it is in the first place if not exclusively designed, *viz.* the non-Scandinavian ones. And such a commentary I make bold to say, only a non-Scandinavian can write. This must have been at the bottom of Ibsen's mind when he wrote to Passarge (Breve II, 80) that no Norwegian could help him with any information which he, Passarge himself, had not expressly asked for, — indeed: no one but a foreigner can appreciate which difficulties your non-Scandinavian student meets with and will want

explained. And as to the broader issues, the part of the commentary that will necessarily be touched on by my successors too, I can only say that my work may prove not wholly in vain for them either, when remembering that generally speaking, nothing is so useful as the making of a mistake, provided the master be there to point them out and correct them. It is therefore my earnest wish that Ibsenians will not have to wait too long for the works in question, which however, so far as I know, have not yet advanced beyond the stage of conception.

This commentary then is destined to incite and, it is hoped, enable foreign lovers of the drama to become students of it without the aid of a voluminous library which the fewest may be supposed to have at their disposal. The author does not wish to conceal from his readers as little as he does from himself, the grave defects his work must necessarily suffer from. For entirely apart from the question of his competency for the work, a consideration which it is not for him to enter upon, he should be allowed to explain the scrappiness of the material by the fact that no systematic study has been possible under the circumstances. A labour of love in the midst of the work of desolation in a world gone mad, composed under the frequent booming of the distant guns, it was entirely written under the enforced leisure from professorial work by the enervating circumstances of the hour, when for the most part correspondence was, when not absolutely impossible, at least extremely difficult, when books could only be procured very exceptionally, when reviews and periodicals were only accessible during a stay in my happily not very distant fatherland, and when the writer was dependent on the haphazard aid that devoted friends in Scandinavia continued, whenever possible, to encourage and cheer him up with. And when at last the work had to be written out for the press and corrected, the author was exiled from his adopted fatherland by the authority of the Occupant and thus cut off from his library and thereby from the means of verifying quotations and re-adjusting others. And it should in this connection be added that if the work will prove useful at all and not too full of gaps, this is owing to a very great extent to these very collaborators who when helping in my need, proved

friends indeed. I would mention in the first place Hr. Overlærer Stavnem of Stavanger and Docent Brynildsen at Horten for their never failing help and courtesy when applied to for information. This holds good to a much greater extent even of Hr. Bibliotekar Anders Krogvig whose valuable help has had to be acknowledged in many notes. More still perhaps I owe to Hr. Cand. mag. C. L. Christensen of Copenhagen and certainly to my old and tried friend Dr. August Western of Fredrikstad who both of them have read through practically the whole of the work and who as many a note will testify have enriched the book with much useful information; that by Dr. Western will prove especially copious, interesting and suggestive. It should however be distinctly understood that no one but the author is responsible for the text as it stands although he may perhaps in justice to himself be allowed to add that the work was given its final shape and that the proof-reading had to be done under circumstances of extreme mental fatigue which it is hoped will cause the Benevolus Lector to excuse not only some of these little slips that he is usually asked to correct himself but also more in general, to some extent at least, the deficiency in form the work is likely to exhibit.

Although Ibsen has continually been the object of literary investigation, not only in his own country, but also, perhaps we should say: especially, at the hands of foreigners, the present writer's attempt would seem, curiously enough, to be the first on any larger scale to study a play also from the non-literary point of view; Prof. Olsen's American ed. of *Brand* is the nearest approach to it, although it is here left far behind in extent. The consequence of all this is the extreme disproportion in the notes, some running to a truly uncharitable length. For, Norwegian Philology being little studied outside the Scandinavian countries except at some American Universities, it follows that even if circumstances had allowed me to make use of German and other periodicals, for the publication of some of the larger notes, I should have found but little space in them at my disposal. Hence an appalling number of notes had to be inflicted on the student, that in the corresponding case of a work on English, French or German philology would have been

thrashed out in some *Zeitschrift*, a *Modern Language Review* or similar periodicals. Moreover many notes would have been absolutely uncalled for (such as the one on *Bedemandsstil*; n. to l. 4491) if Norwegian lexicology had advanced beyond a petition to the Storting (*Maal og Minne*, 1915, p. 221) and could boast of a *Littré*, Grimm, a *New Engl. Dict.* or an *Ordbok för Svenska Språket*, — for Dahlerup has not got further than one specimen part and a paper in the *Zeitschrift für Deutsche Wortforschung*.

Whilst it was not always possible, nor even advisable, to hold back my own views of controversial points, it has never been my aim at all cost to decide them. On the contrary, on the plan of a *Variorum* edition, quotations are given from sometimes *inter se* contradictory views. If the reader will only hold himself prepared for such conflicting statements, the plan may be acceptable and even work well, he should look upon them only in the light of *pabulum reflectionis* and — “try his own conclusions.” And seeing that of course *Norwegian* books and especially papers in the various Scandinavian periodicals will be less accessible to foreign readers than those that have appeared outside Scandinavia, the former have been extracted to a larger extent than the latter.

The commentary is one on the *Norwegian* text of the play in the first place only; it is meant to do duty also for the student of the realia and to be helpful for the study of any text. Hence a translation had to be added at the head of each note and necessarily one in the language in which the commentary is written. The one chosen is that of the *Archers*, not only because it was the first in the field but because its aim is literalness of reproduction and consequently invited less criticism than the freer one of Mr. Ellis Roberts. Absence of criticism should however not be thought to imply approval of it in every detail.

With very few exceptions words and expressions have only been commented on when they or their application could not be found in the dictionaries, — Brynildsen's splendid second edition was here naturally the test.

There is one chapter that the present writer has purposely abstained from entering upon and that is the domain of rhythm. The student desirous of knowing more about it should look up

the Archers' Introduction and a passage in that to the *Efterl. Skr.* (I. p. LV). Ibsen when he wrote the drama was as in the case of Brand "i en rim-og ritmerus (*Eitrem, Samtiden, 1908* p. 577); yet — one might like to say: hence — as the student will have remarked, some lines do not scan (as *Eitrem* has truly remarked of Brand too) but in order to decide such questions the ear of one to the manner born is an absolute necessity and hence the foreign critic's patent duty here is abstention.

Some readers, it is to be feared, will think that a full commentary such as this, cannot but make the student overlook the beauties of the wood for the very number of trees he is made to study. The criticism would no doubt be damning if he should fall into the error of *b e g i n n i n g* with a study of the trees. The Archers give the readers of their translation the excellent bit of advice "to skip the introduction, to ignore the footnotes and heedless of the ethical and political intentions (of the poem), to take it as it comes, simply as a dramatic romance or phantasmagoria of purely human humour and pathos." Then when the pure poetry in it has been enjoyed in a general way, perhaps somewhat vaguely, "at a second reading, with the aid of such side-lights as we can afford him, he will probably find many of the obscurities vanish". And this is exactly the attitude I hope those will take up that should wish to use this book. If they would kindly not set to a minute study of my commentary until the beauties of the play have penetrated them as the spring atmosphere of his new-born happiness had dizzied the author of *Peer Gynt*, if they will postpone the details until a later reading of the text has excited enough of their interest to allow them to wade through some facts and some no doubt at first sight deterrent disquisitions, then it is the present writer's earnest belief, as it is his hope, that when thus "sent to (his) account . . . with all (his) imperfections on his head", he will not meet with Hamlet's comment on this, but that his readers even if of this work with its many faults, they cannot say that they "love it still", — that they may yet find it contribute to some extent to a better understanding and a greater appreciation of Ibsen's "Central masterpiece".

„BERKENOORD", NIJMEGEN, April 1917.

TO BE OBSERVED.

1. The line-numbering in the following commentary is that of an edition at one time contemplated (cf. Textual Criticism, §§ 9 and 143) but now abandoned. They are kept here as an easy means of reference from one part of the commentary to another; it should be remembered that the play is not divided into scenes except in some translations. And as each page of this commentary will contain cross-references to nearly all the various editions, they will serve at the same time as a sort of index to these editions.
2. The text of Peer Gynt I quote here is that of the first edition, unless otherwise stated.
3. The translation given at the head of each note, although not always approved of in all details, is that by Messrs. Archer, unless otherwise indicated.
4. An index and a full list of abbreviations will be found at the end of the work.
5. The references at the foot of the pages of the commentary to the various editions quoted, are those to the text of the first note beginning on the page in question.
6. (Add.) refers to the Addenda at the end of the work.

* * *

The compiler of the present work will feel much obliged to Ibsen-students for calling his attention to any note or paper on the matter he may have overlooked and to reviewers of this work and other writers on the subject for a copy of their criticism.
