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“Akin to Peer Gynt” – Remolding Peer in Adaptation

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Abstract: Ibsen’s *Peer Gynt* holds a unique position in Norwegian culture as a ‘national epic’ that simultaneously satirizes the idea of coherent national and individual identities. This article analyzes the dramatic text’s recent adaptation into a graphic novel, published in Norway in 2014. We argue that this adaptation indicates which aspects of the play seem relevant to modern Norwegian readers. Through close, comparative readings of two key scenes in Ibsen’s text and in the adaptation, we show how the many metaliterary aspects of the former are creatively and irreverently treated in the latter. Moreover, we argue that one of the most striking aspects of *Peer Gynt*, the graphic novel, is its depiction of postmodern, performative identities, and the ‘liquidity’ of modern Western individuals.

Issues of identity never lose their importance. On the contrary, social theorists such as Zygmunt Bauman point out that identity is one of the key issues in our age of “liquid” modernity (Bauman 2000, 31–33). Throughout history, authors have inquired into the processes by which groups and individuals claim uniqueness from others. At the same time, literary works often critically portray identities as constructs, palimpsests built on quotations, retellings and borrowings from multiple sources. Henrik Ibsen’s *Peer Gynt* [1867]¹ is renowned for dealing with social and personal identity issues in a particularly complex manner. This satirical dramatic poem continues to appeal to Norwegian self-understanding (cf. Rees 2014). In other words, and to paraphrase a character from Act Five in the play, Norwegian audiences have for more than 150 years felt “akin to Peer Gynt” (cf. Ibsen 1892, 229). With its subtle mockery of national romanticist identity construction on the one hand, and its probing into an individual’s authenticity on the other, one might reasonably ask which aspects of *Peer Gynt* are most salient today. Based

¹ We will refer to the open-access digital version of *Peer Gynt* in *Henrik Ibsen’s Skrifter*, abbreviated to *HIS*.

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on a comparative analysis of Ibsen's text and its recent adaptation into a graphic novel Ibsen/Moen/Mairowitz (2014), we argue that part of the reason why *Peer Gynt* appeals to postmodern audiences is because it addresses the topical issues of authenticity and performative identities latent in Ibsen's depiction of an individual's life experience.

Our analysis builds on Linda Hutcheon's account of adaptations in her book *A Theory of Adaptation* (2013). In Hutcheon's view, adaptations are by no means inferior to the so-called originals (2013, 4). Adaptations are independent artworks, as well as interpretations of source texts. Moreover, as interpretations they are motivated by the need of the adaptors to spell out important aspects of the source (Hutcheon 2013, 20). As they select, reject or highlight certain features of a text, we argue that adaptations function almost like barometers, revealing what a text means for a particular audience in a particular place and time. In our case, the graphic novel might be regarded as a particular performance of Ibsen's dramatic text that in some sense 'measures' what Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* means in 21st century Norway.

Our 'barometer' is the result of a collaboration between the Norwegian illustrator Geir Moen and the American scriptwriter David Zane Mairowitz. However, the graphic novel *Peer Gynt* also mentions Henrik Ibsen as its first author. Hence, Ibsen's text is alluded to as the authoritative source text – paradoxically so, as the dramatic poem itself dismantles the idea of authority. Ibsen's drama presents a suggestive gallery of fairy tale characters and plots that represent a flexible toolbox of literary devices. Ibsen comments on, deliberately misquotes, amplifies and alters elements from various texts, often avoiding a loyal or authentic rendition. Thus, the layers of citations in Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* have a satirical and metaliterary effect. Given the fact that Ibsen overtly transfers his culture's orally circulating stories into the medium of verse drama, we find it fruitful to look at the two versions of *Peer Gynt* as stages in the long adaptation process of retelling stories familiar to the Norwegian audience at different times. Therefore, we also wish to inquire into the way the two versions of *Peer Gynt*'s story reflect on their own textuality, and the complicated issues of the authority of the author.

Hutcheon importantly underlines that while adaptations are *products*, they are also deliberate *processes*, representing the "creative and interpretive act of appropriation/salvaging" done by individual adaptors (2013, 8). The elements firstly Ibsen, and subsequently Moen and Mairowitz choose to highlight, contract, alter, comment on, amplify, or omit altogether indicate what these different authors see as crucial topics. While Ibsen's *Peer* comes across as a man who loses his identity to stories and thus falls for his own devices, in the 2014 graphic novel *Peer* is rather portrayed as a *performer* of life-stories, a man who seems to live up to the "liquidity" of modern human existence, as described by Bauman (2000).

On the one hand, Ibsen's rich use of intertextuality is a comment on the idea of romantic folklorists generating a coherent national identity based on folk tales. On the other hand, Ibsen's engagement with these texts is deliberate, direct and open, an evocation of what Hutcheon calls "*The Audience's 'Palimpsestuous' Intertextuality*" (2013, 21). By this, Hutcheon means that the audience knows several 'performances' of one and the same text. With respect to the graphic novel, one might reasonably expect it not only to refer to Ibsen's 'pure text', but also to performances, movies, and discussions surrounding the work. In Ibsen's source text, we argue that the two scenes of Peer's 'homecoming' in Acts One and Five are laden with such intertextual references. The first scene, where Peer tells the story of the buck ride, is where he first asserts an identity based on a borrowed story. In the first part of our paper, we will concentrate on this scene in the two texts. Our second close reading deals with the auction at Hæggstad. Here, one expects to encounter the protagonist at two crucial stages of his identity development. However, the multitude of quoted and misquoted stories, fused and appropriated by the protagonist, makes these acts not the starting and the finishing point of Peer's personal maturation, but an indication of the instable and performative nature of his identity. Using approaches from social theory as well as adaptation studies, we argue that the graphic novel adaptation highlights a postmodern, or "liquid", Peer already latent in Ibsen's text.

Ripping out and Putting in

Perhaps at a certain point in history, there was a real Per Gynt, maybe spelling his name with a single 'e' where Ibsen's Danish orthography uses a double 'ee'. The memorial stone dedicated to the supposed historical person Per [sic] Olson Hågå by the village of Sødorp in Gudbrandsdalen seems to suggest as much, as does the existence of such artifacts as the Peer Gynt-cabin in Rondane or the memorial stone by the Atna river declaring "Her trefte Per Gynt Bøygen." However, Ibsen's Peer Gynt cannot be backtracked to one 'original' text, one person, or one story. As a character, Ibsen's Peer alludes to various characters from oral sources, adapted by storytellers as well as folklorists. Moreover, the drama itself seems to insist that Peer's life story is palimpsestuous in its nature. The play's many metaliterary instances keep reminding the reader of the complex intertextuality which Peer's life story is founded upon; Peer's identity is not built on one source, but on a conglomerate of different sources. His story is neither unique nor unchangeable.

In his book *Palimpsestes* (1982), theorist Gérard Genette develops a classification of what we refer to as intertextuality. While we choose not to employ Genette's

full critical vocabulary,² we do want to draw attention to his account of the transformation that happens when a text such as an adaptation borrows elements from a source. According to Genette, transformations often signify a playful desire to “simply rip out a few pages”³ (1982, 13, our translation) in order to see what happens to those elements in another form. Ibsen’s text may, therefore, be considered an irreverent transformation of the folk tales of the legendary Per Gynt as presented in Asbjørnsen’s *Huldre-Eventyr* (1870),⁴ as well as of five nationalist dramas that according to Ellen Rees served as Ibsen’s inspiration (Rees 2014, 37–55). This process is repeated in the graphic novel, which might be said to “rip out” Ibsen’s treatment of the Per Gynt myth from the sacrosanct “national epic” of Norway and place it in a form where visual elements become key interpretative points. As Rees points out, a search for the ‘original’ Peer Gynt continues to haunt Ibsen’s dramatic poem: “one of the most striking trends in *Peer Gynt*’s reception over the past fifty years or so has been what might be called a compulsion to put Peer into his place, quite literally speaking” (2014, 85). Peer, however, is difficult to put in place partly because he is built on, and constructs himself on, an array of different sources.

The trope of creating an authentic identity while dishonestly ‘stealing’ other stories is introduced in Aase’s opening line: “Peer, du lyver!” (HIS 481). After Peer has told the story of his adventurous ride on the buck, Aase interrupts: “O, din Fandens Ræggesmed!/Kors og Kors, hvor du kan lyve!/Remsen, som du kommer med,/minds jeg nu at jeg har kjendt/som en Jente paa de tyve./Gudbrand Glesne er det hændt, –/ikke dig, du –!” (HIS 486). Peer’s story is not his own; it is an old one, known to his mother from her youth. Peer claims it in his attempt to construct a nonexistent originality, but even the presumably limited literary culture of his mother is able to reveal Peer’s act of adaptation.

Moreover, this should be considered a metaliterary element, as it turns the very act of adapting an old story – Ibsen’s main dramatic device before the “titteskapsdrama” – into a central trope of the play. As Jørgen Sejersted points out, “Åse remembers correctly in pointing to the story of Glesne, but she is probably wrong in the assumption that Glesne is the true originator of the story, while Peer is a liar and morally inferior” (2005, 163). Sejersted thus demonstrates how the dialogue on several levels ironically comments on the belief in the existence

² In Genette’s classification, “intertextuality” is merely a subterm of the broader concept of “transtextuality.”

³ “en arracher simplement quelques pages”.

⁴ According to Sverre Mørkhagen, Asbjørnsen’s book *Norske Huldreeventyr* is one of Ibsen’s main sources for *Peer Gynt* (Mørkhagen 1997, 149).

of an original story. It is interesting to study how the graphic novel deals with this scene. Indeed, how does one make one of the most famous lines of Norwegian literature fresh and “enstranging” as the Russian formalists would have said (cf. Shklovsky 1916)?

The graphic novel takes the intertextual interplay a step further. The sources of the Moen and Mairowitz adaptation are now not only the orally transmitted stories about an outstanding man, Gudbrand Glesne, but Ibsen’s text as well. Therefore, the principal references the reader would expect to encounter when opening the comic book are those to Ibsen’s text, or more specifically to Aase’s famous opening lines. However, the graphic novel makes a playful twist, as it instead starts with Peer Gynt’s account of his exploits (Ibsen/Moen/Mairowitz 2014, 5). The book opens with a majestic, full-page panel in full color, with Peer in a heroic posture as he is riding the buck, dagger in hand ready to kill the animal (Figure 1). In what comic book theorist Scott McCloud terms an additive combination of modalities, where the image elaborates on the words (1993, 154), one of the buck’s antlers is drawn directly in front of Peer’s crotch area. It thus mimics a phallus, visually underlining Peer’s implicit verbal self-presentation as the strong and heroic huntsman. When Aase’s exclamation finally appears, three pages later (Ibsen/Moen/Mairowitz 2014, 8), it comes almost as a surprise, jolting not only Peer back into reality, but also revealing that his performance has fooled the reader. Indeed, upon opening page 8, the reader encounters panels devoid of the rich color palette from the panels on pages 5 to 7. The real world of Peer and Aase is rendered by grey tones. In this world Peer is unshaven, dirty, and shaggy, far removed from the image of a Gudbrand Glesne Peer presents himself as.

While the graphic novel maintains Ibsen’s palimpsest of citations, it also accentuates the postmodern *performative* aspects of this scene. Performatives, or performative speech acts, were first defined by language philosopher J. L. Austin (1962) and were later expanded in e. g. gender and queer studies. While performatives in the linguistic sense denote utterances that *do* something by the mere act of being uttered – such as declarations or vows – the term in its expanded sense is etymologically linked to *performances*. The way one speaks, acts, and dresses is seen as performative in the sense of creating one’s social role, but also in the sense of being “signs” whose “utterance” is also a performance of a social role. The expressive acts constituting an identity and the identity being expressed – e. g. the act of telling and the identity of being a teller of tales – thereby become inseparable (Smith 1998, 109). Performatives, then, constitute a type of signifying acts that through being enacted create an identity that is, in principle, malleable and exchangeable. When we use the term “performative” in the following, it is to be understood in this expanded sense: as an effective speech act *and* an identity-constituting performance.



Figure 1: Ibsen/Moen/Mairowitz (2014), 5.

On the one hand, Moen and Mairowitz’ restructuring of the dialogue between Aase and Peer contributes to what Hutcheon argues is part of the pleasure of adaptations: “the comfort of ritual combined with the piquancy of surprise” (2013, 4). On the other hand, this particular change moves Peer’s performance of identity to the foreground. The “ripping out” of Aase’s line means that most readers will at first be confused by its absence. Its delayed introduction thus satisfies the reader’s horizon of expectation – she is waiting for it to appear – while also underlining the importance of the performative utterance. Aase’s assertion *makes* Peer into a liar. Her utterance effects the change of color in the graphic novel panels, in the same way Peer’s stories *make* him into an adventurer. The visual codes of the graphic novel thus enhance the performative aspects of the Peer Gynt story as presented by Ibsen.

Performing Peer at Hæggstad

As Peer returns from his adventures in North Africa in Act Five, he arrives at an ongoing auction in his home village. In this scene, alluding to the biblical tale of the prodigal son, no one recognizes him. Peer Gynt has to ask the villagers who Peer Gynt was, thereby underlining his own failure to attain renown as a famous adventurer. The villagers respond by turning Peer into the protagonist of a series of folk tales:

EN GUT

med et Bjørneskind

Se Katten paa Dovre! Ja, bare Fellen.

Det var den, som jog TrolDET paa Julekvelden.

EN ANDEN

med en Rensdyrskalle

Her er den gjilde Renbukk, som bar

Peer Gynt ved Gjendin over Egg og Skar

EN TREDJE

med en Hammer, raaber til den sørgeklædte

Hej, du Aslak, kjender du Slæggen?

Var det den, du brugte, da Fanden brød Væggen?

EN FJERDE

Tomhændet

Mads Moen, her er Usynlighedskufften!

Med den fløj Peer Gynt og Ingrid i Luften.

(HIS 699)

The first tale, of the cat of Dovre, only evokes Peer Gynt by allusion,⁵ but the theme it has in common with the other source texts is one of true identity and openness versus dishonesty and hiding. In the tale, a family is haunted by a pack of trolls every Christmas Eve. A huntsman comes by with a captured polar bear, which the trolls mistake for a cat. As one of the troll children tries to feed it, it rises and roars, scaring them away for good. The next object, the reindeer skull, is presented as from the deer Peer Gynt allegedly rode on, referring back to how Aase declared Peer to be a liar. Further, the sledgehammer is connected to the story of the devil in the nut: A boy tricks the devil and captures him in an empty nutshell. He then asks a blacksmith to crack it open, who goes on to explode the walls and ceiling of his smithy as the devil escapes. Finally, the invisible cloak strengthens the comical overtones of the dialogue. The fourth person's assertion that he is carrying something invisible is a direct reference to Peer's abduction of Ingrid in the first act. By being juxtaposed with the rest of the tales, this deed, however rooted in the reality of the play, is now evidently considered just as fictitious as the other tales.

Ironically, this is all presented in the eyes of the unacknowledged protagonist. According to Frode Helland, this is an example of the dominating form of irony in the dramatic poem: “den *uintenderte* dramatiske ironien som springer ut av et misforhold mellom det en person sier (og tenker) og det som er tilfellet” (2000, 30). The strong presence of this kind of irony underlines the difference between Peer's expectations and his failure to actually perform a unique, brave, and adventurous identity in a convincing way. In spite of all his efforts to assert the identity he has constructed for himself, Peer is now reduced to an Everyman. As mentioned, the intertextual tales of the ‘cat’ and the devil evoke hiding and role-play – which we choose to view as an allegory for Peer's life strategy. At the beginning of the scene a participant at the auction⁶ states “Aa, Sludder; Blodet er aldrig saa tyndt,/en kjender sig altid i Slægt med Peer Gynt” (HIS 698). Peer is nobody and everybody. He is a man without an individual story, which amounts to not having an identity at all. In the eyes of his fellow villagers, Peer is only a story that may be adapted and changed by anyone. Just as the buck from above clashes with the buck from below, Peer is hurt by his own strategy; after having constructed a fictitious identity, he now finds himself free-floating as it were, a mere story among other stories.

⁵ All of the folk tales referred to in this paragraph are presented in Asbjørnsen's *Norske Huldreeventyr* (1870 [1845/–48]). In Asbjørnsen's version, Peer Gynt is the savior in the tale of the cat of Dovre.

⁶ According to Daniel Haakonsen (1967, 40), this is Mads Moen, dressed in grey because he was Ingrid's husband only pro forma.

As we have seen, the intertextuality of *Peer Gynt* often contains a metaliterary aspect, where the text itself reflects upon the uses and abuses of literature and storytelling. Significantly, Peer repeatedly misquotes literary classics such as: "Mit Rige – mit halve Rige for en Hest!" (HIS 627); "das ewig weibliche ziehet uns an" (HIS 633).⁷ On the character level, the quotes highlight Peer's lack of authenticity, his constant 'stealing' and 'performing' of roles, lines, and identities from other dramatic texts. As Merrill Kaplan remarks with respect to the buck ride story: "If Peer is standing in for the usual people who usurp the teller's role in presenting folklore, then this scene is a compact indictment of that method of presentation as, at best, unconvincing, and, at worst, inauthentic and a lie" (2003, 504). The same satire of national romanticism can be glimpsed in the auction scene, which thus becomes a critique of how Norwegian national identity is a fiction based on heavily edited quotations from other texts.

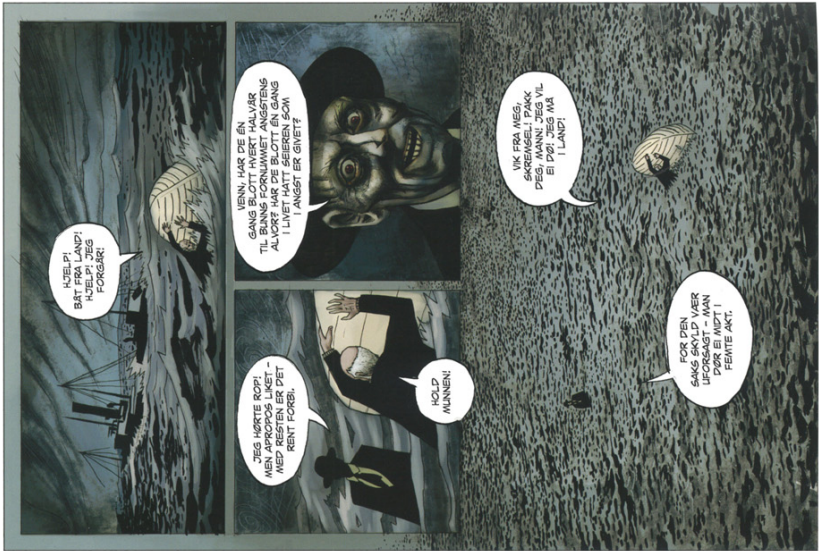
As with any fairy tale-teller, Peer is at this point no longer in charge of his own story. Here, allusions to the fairy tale genre are important on a formal level as well. As Marina Warner has emphasized: "fairy tales on the page invoke live voices, telling stories aloud. A memory of a living narrator reverberates in the genre, even when the story is manifestly a highly wrought literary text" (2014, 53). Ibsen's genre of the *dramatic poem* performs the same function: *Peer Gynt* is a text expressly *intended* for silent reading that simultaneously *produces* the impression of oral storytelling in many, disparate, voices. Formally and peritextually, then, the text underlines the problematization of how identity can be fabricated through stories. By reproducing these folk tales in the dramatic form, Ibsen mimics exactly the absence of 'authority' visible in Peer's failure to control his story.

The graphic novel further transforms the source text of Ibsen's play, bringing the question of 'authority' to the forefront. When translating this scene into the new medium, Moen and Mairowitz remove the dis-authoring of the protagonist altogether. Peer becomes the center of the last stunt he will perform for his fellow villagers. The panels on page 104–5 (Figure 3) show Peer Gynt pulling a castle, the mythical horse Grane, and his imagined empire ["keiserdom"] from his jacket. In the panels representing the scene of the auction at Hæggstad, Peer plays a role once again, this time that of a peddler, a traveling vendor of stories. This role is as 'inauthentic' as the one of the brave reindeer-rider, because the narratives he recounts in exchange for "a button" or local news include not only episodes of his own, but also his interpretations of the stories of others.

⁷ The first quote is adapted from Shakespeare's *Richard III* [c. 1593], the other from Goethe's *Faust* [part 2, 1832].



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Figure 2: Ibsen/Moen/Mairowitz (2014), 102–103.

The graphic novel renders the auction scene using fully five consecutive pages (Ibsen/Moen/Mairowitz 2014, 103–107). With a frame in which the protagonist solemnly walks through the void of the Bølg, the shipwreck scene transitions into the one of Peer's homecoming at the Hæggstad auction (Figure 2). The Bølg's aura is dispersed by a passing boy. The boy, dressed in a striped shirt, runs past him holding a spoon, shouting: "Her skal I se, hva stas jeg har kjøpt! I den har Peer Gynt sine sølvknapper støpt" (Ibsen/Moen/Mairowitz 2014, 103–105).⁸ The boy, evoking his name and a story associated with one of Peer's mythical belongings, functions as the magic charm that draws Peer out of the enchanted world of the Bølg. The comic book puts the spoon, and the metaphoric narrative of molding connected to it, at the center of Peer's impending existential introspection.

Here, the graphic novel establishes a visual and textual link with the panels from the third act depicting the scene of the dying mother Aase (Ibsen/Moen/Mairowitz 2014, 52). When we read these two panels as a thematic and structural unity, the multilayered symbolism of the spoon and its story comes forth. The spoon functions as a "madeleine" for both the dying mother and the dying son, but not only because it triggers the painful introspection of the two characters. In fact, unlike in Ibsen's drama, the graphic novel directly proposes that the spoon can fuse not only different temporalities, but also different spaces. In both scenes, the invocation of the famed spoon results in Peer Gynt physically emerging at the given locations. Finally, the comic book further extends the 'molding' properties of the spoon indicated in Ibsen's text by visually suggesting that different characters and their stories fuse together in the act of handing down the spoon.

In the graphic novel, the boy in the striped shirt who is excited to have acquired Peer Gynt's mythical object is depicted as considerably younger than the corresponding character in Ibsen's text. Ibsen singles out the character as "EN TYVEAARIG" (HIS 697). Thus, he stands out from the other minor characters who equally utter a single line but remain without any characteristics, only being numbered as "EN ANDEN," "EN TREDJE," etc. At the beginning of the dramatic poem, Peer Gynt himself is in his twenties. The transfer of the spoon between the aged protagonist and the young man symbolizes the merging of the two characters, and thus the perpetuation of the Gyntian self. In Ibsen this identification is conveyed through the analogy in age and the metaphoric 'molding' properties of the spoon. The graphic novel amplifies this possibility in the source text, making the molding spoon the central symbol of the result and process of the reshaping and merging of different stories and different identities.

⁸ The spelling is slightly modified from the source text: "Her skal I se, hvad Stas jeg har kjøbt!/I den har Peer Gynt sine Sølvknapper støbt" (HIS 697).

The comic book amplifies the role of the boy with the spoon, making the relation between his character and Peer Gynt more apparent than in Ibsen's dramatic poem. The indicated doubling of the protagonist is visualized by the insistent co-presence of Peer Gynt and the boy, as one can see in the bottom left frame in Figure 3 (Ibsen/Moen/Mairowitz 2014, 104). The uncanniness of the scene is reinforced by the rotation of the reader's viewpoint between the panels, but also by the inclusion of a new character emerging from the shadows in the background. Upon closer inspection, one can recognize the contours of the Knappestøber who will play an important role later in the story. Effecting an important change compared to Ibsen's text, the graphic novel introduces the character already in the auction scene, advancing the central metaphor of molding.

The fusion of worlds, characters and their respective background stories is furthered by the division of the panel presenting the overview of Peer's peddler-act into three horizontal segments. The galloping white horse Grane, which Peer releases from his coat, holds the graphic weight of the scene. This metatextual reference appears in the middle section as the central motif of the scene. The boy with the spoon is in the foreground, in the panel's first segment, while the Knappestøber is depicted in the background, on top. Using the visual divide of the panel into thirds, the graphic novel reinforces the idea that the boy in the striped shirt is on his way to becoming Peer Gynt. With a future and a present Peer Gynt depicted in the same panel, the dark silhouette with a large melting spoon in the top segment of the frame can be interpreted as a third stage in the evolution of the same character. Above the aged and the future button molders looms a "Master" Knappestøber. This third character, which potentially turns the duo of Peer Gynt and the boy into a trio, announces that the important conflict of Peer's past and present is in need of remolding.

The auction scene in the graphic novel thus clearly exemplifies the mediatic differences between an unperformed 'pure text' drama and the graphic novel as a primarily visual medium (cf. McCloud 1993, 9). The dialogue in the graphic novel is heavily abbreviated compared with Ibsen's text. Nonetheless, the lines uttered by the protagonist in this scene include some references to Norwegian oral tradition. One important line is uttered as Peer reveals the mythic horse Grane from underneath his jacket: "Grane, min hest – hvem byder? Den traver kan flyve så fort, så fort, som Peer Gynt kunne lyve" (Ibsen/Moen/Mairowitz 2014, 104). The choice of including the mythical horse also underlines the pervasive trope of riding in the drama. However, Moen and Mairowitz' version makes no mention whatsoever of the folk tales associated with role playing, tricksters and changing identities. The graphic novel shows, rather than tells, allowing the reader to co-construct meaning from visual cues (cf. McCloud 1993, 205). It is also significant that the line "en kjender sig altid i Slægt med Peer Gynt" ["one cannot but feel one's akin

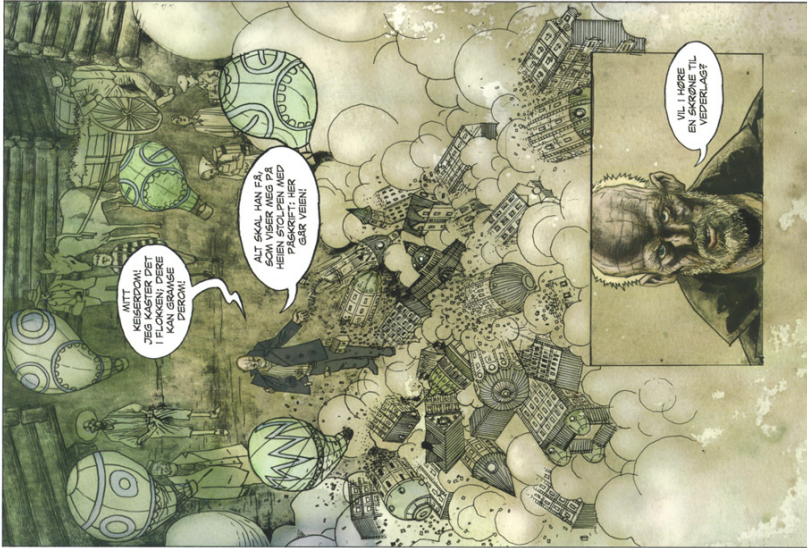


Figure 3: Ibsen/Moen/Mairowitz (2014), 104–105.

to Peer Gynt” (Ibsen 1892, 229)] is never uttered in this scene. Rather, several visual clues are deployed in order to indicate the ‘fluid’ identity of Peer. On the surface level, the graphic novel shows Peer as a teller of tall tales, referring back to the famous beginning of the play. Indeed, while Ibsen’s source text, by appealing to what Pierre Bayard (2007) calls the “inner library” of contemporary readers, easily lends itself to the interpretation of the auction scene suggested by us above, the graphic novel turns the problem of identity into a riddle in the text, focusing on the ‘smoke and mirrors’ aspects of Peer’s performance.

Peer’s Final Public Performance

The performative aspects are strengthened in Peer’s last story before leaving the auction scene altogether. This absurd story describes an array of entertainers he witnessed in San Francisco: “En kunde gnide paa Fiol med Tæerne;/en anden kunde danse spansk Halling paa Knæerne;/en tredje, hørte jeg, gjorde Vers/mens hans Hjerneskal blev boret igjennem paatvers” (HIS 703). The devil, “Fanden”, finally appears, performing the trick of grunting like a pig – by hiding a real pig under his cape. However, the performance is unsuccessful, as the audience finds the grunt “ytterst outreret,” a pleonasm pointing to the exaggerated realism the devil aims for.

Kaplan interprets this scene as Ibsen’s critique of his contemporaries, the popularizers of folklore. She views this as an example of:

the audience rejecting as inauthentic a performer who appropriates the voice of another while concealing his existence. Wholly aside from issues of honesty, authenticity, or being true to oneself, Peer (and Ibsen) seem to say this technique fails to produce a verisimilar effect on stage and should be avoided (2003, 506).

Kaplan acknowledges the critique of performative identity construction in *Peer Gynt*, tying it to the attempt of Ibsen’s contemporary performers to base performances on the voices of others. The graphic novel also gives emphasis to the performative aspects of this scene, but rather than acting as a commentary on factors outside the text, the emphasis on the performative deepens the protagonist’s character. That is, it complicates his quest for identity and authenticity.

What Kaplan does not comment upon, however, is that this apparently takes place the day before Peer returns to Solvejg, at Pentecost. After he leaves the auction, the stage directions indicate that we are at “Pinseaften,” before their “Pinsemorgens-Møde” (HIS, 704, 744). Hence, it is his last performance before finding shelter in Solvejg’s faithful waiting. Interestingly, the story is not taken

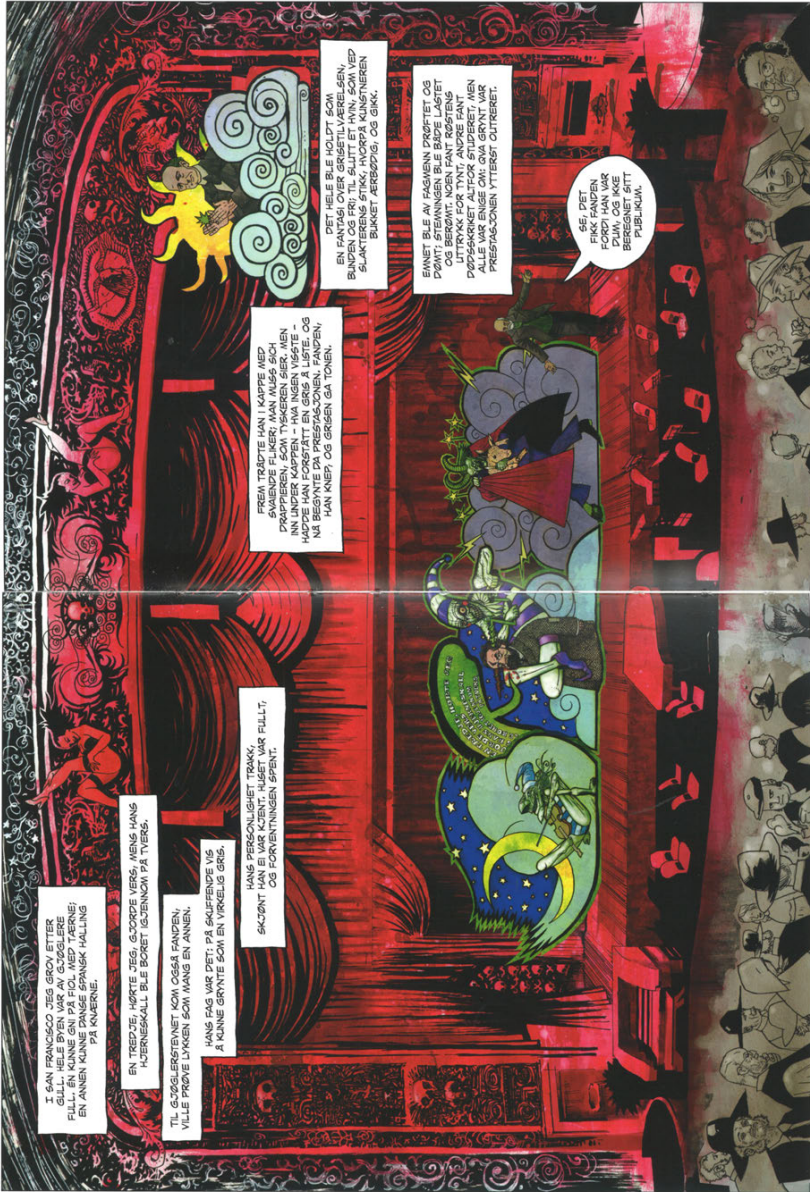
from the fairy tale tradition; it is an adaptation of the 98th *Fabula* of the Roman author Phaedrus [c. 15 BC – AD 50] (cf. Aarseth, in Ibsen 1993, 243). The philologist Hans Eitrem argues for the following interpretation of the tale of the devil and the pig:

Fanden [...] er jo ingen anden end Peer paa auktionen. Det som hans publikum tog for vrøvl og brændevinshumor var et fortvilet skrig fra en sjæl som begyndte at se sin tomheds afgrund; men ingen ante hvor skjærende naturligt skriget var. Men Peer er jo ingen anden end digteren som har sine tvil om sit publikum (Eitrem 1906, 597).

Eitrem's interpretation emphasizes the metaliterarity of the event, but more importantly, he regards it as an allegory of Peer's insight into his lack of a fixed identity. His telling of this story might thus be seen as a way of ironically performing the impossibility of identity performance. The fact that this is yet another borrowed story, this time from a learned sphere unknown to the villagers, adds another layer of desperation to Peer's act. Perhaps the realization that he has made himself unrecognizable to the villagers also reveals the futility of his attempts at inauthentic performance, allegorically represented in the tale of the devil. At the same time, however, both he and Solvejg rely upon a fantasy – but one of their own creation. As shown above, the graphic novel visually demonstrates how fantasy and reality merge with Peer's return to Solvejg.

The graphic novel interprets the last part of Peer's peddler act with a spectacular double spread on pages 106 and 107 (Figure 4). One single frame, presenting a 'scene within a scene', takes up both pages in the comic book. One flip of the page turns the Norwegian village square into an elaborate theatre stage. As underlined by McCloud, the unexpected transformation of a setting is a device by which comics ensure the reader takes time to examine a panel closely (1993, 99–103). In this scene, we see Peer Gynt, the trickster and recycler of stories, depicted at the right end of a fantastic stage, gesturing with open hands to the auditorium. Three brightly colored tableaux illustrating the highlights of recounted stories are placed center stage. With visual references to episodes from Peer's lived life surrounding the performance, the reader is invited to link all of his stories into one continuum.

As Kaplan notes, Peer's comment on the stories being told at the auction is "an echo of his earlier audiences' objection to his appropriation" (2003, 506). While this particular episode in Ibsen's text mimics many voices – Peer's previously told stories, the disparate voices of oral storytellers, Ibsen's subtle commentary to his contemporaries – it also foregrounds the question of the authorship of the text. The graphic novel safeguards the polyphony of voices, adding visual references to the known authors who stage themselves as contributors to Peer's performance.



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Figure 4: Ibsen/Moen/Maiowitz (2014), 106–107.

Among many metafictional references are the (auto)portraits of the three authors of the comic book. Their presence is signaled to the reader by the use of a less iconic drawing-style (cf. McCloud 1993, 43), but also by their placement. Two of these 'second-degree' authors, Moen and Mairowitz, are represented in the bottom corners of the frame. The panel follows the conventions in visual arts, reserving the bottom corners for the signatures of the authors. Creating a triangle with the other two, the third author of the graphic novel is portrayed with an even higher degree of figurativeness. The comparatively realistically drawn failed poet at the center of the stage – with his cranium penetrated by a nightmarish goblin – reveals the portrait of a young Ibsen.

These complex layers of references to historical, fictional and anonymous authors in both versions of *Peer Gynt* direct the reader's attention to the question of the authorship of a story, including Peer's own. With so many authors who either stage themselves or are being indirectly evoked, Peer himself seems to blend in, losing autonomy over his own story. While asserting himself publicly, the graphic novel Peer engages in a vain struggle to re-forge his status into one of genuine autonomy.

In the auction scene as depicted in the graphic novel, we have noted the clear absence of the many folk tales dealing with masking and role-playing. Hence, unlike Aase's dislocated opening line, these tales never appear. Instead, the stage is quite literally handed over to Peer, presenting his life and experiences as a master teller of tales, uninterrupted. This marks a striking contrast to the dramatic poem where Peer oscillates between his authority as a teller and the degrading risk of being arrested for disturbing the peace and quiet: "Du bærer dig ad, min Mand, saa næsten/jeg tror din Vej gaar bent i Arresten," the Sheriff threatens (HIS 701). The dominant two-page spread of Peer on the stage in San Francisco further indicates a reworking of Ibsen's Peer into a man who, although perhaps not fully in charge of his destiny, is at least more in charge of his story.

When allowing Peer to metaphorically liberate himself from his travel-trophies of self-performed identities such as his kingdom, both Ibsen's text and the graphic novel open up for the possibility, or hope, that Peer has finally become himself. As mentioned, the scene at Hæggstad takes place at Pentecost, at which point in the story Peer Gynt has apparently given up on the theft of stories as a life strategy. Coupled with the imminent sacred moment of meeting with Solvejg, one might interpret this moment as Peer's first step toward an existential epiphany, the moment where he will be 're-embedded' into his identity, to paraphrase Bauman (2000, 32). Both texts give the reader hope that Peer will fall back into his authentic self in the bosom of Solvejg, where Peer identifies with the "den fantasisbårne unggutten Solveig elsket" (Haakonsen 1967, 163). However, both Ibsen's and Moen and Mairowitz' *Peer Gynt* reject such a romantic possibility of Peer's

self-assertion. As Helland observes, Solvejg is a structural parallel to Peer; they both inhabit a fantasy: “For hennes valg av Peer har bare et helt efemært grunnlag i Peers person; denne kjenner hun kun gjennom Aases fantastiske fortellinger” (Helland 2000, 41). In other words, Peer Gynt makes a perfect material for molding, as there is no identity, no authenticity for him to assert. Consequently, at the end of Ibsen’s text, Solvejg’s song competes for supremacy with the Button-Molder’s voice. The graphic novel leaves no room for doubt, as the Button-Molder utters the final words indicating that Peer’s self-seeking journey is not yet over.

Performative Molding

As Rees duly notes, *Peer Gynt* “goes right to the heart of living in the moment of the ‘post’” (2014, 9). Indeed, according to Hutcheon, the answer to why adaptors chose to adapt works of classical literature often lies in a need or desire to appropriate a text (2013, 20). As we have suggested, Peer’s life quest, as interpreted by the 2014 graphic novel bears many similarities to life quests undertaken by postmodern individuals living in the West, as Bauman analyzes them. In his book *Identity*, the sociologist even refers to Peer Gynt, stating: “Peer Gynt, the play published in 1867, ought to be read and reflected upon these days by everyone baffled and disturbed by the elusiveness of identity – and this means, indeed, everybody. All present-day troubles are, prophetically, foreseen and explored here” (2004, 90). Hence, we read this particular adaptation as a way of bringing to the forefront aspects already latent in Ibsen’s source text.

Bauman contrasts modern social organization with the predestined classes of earlier times, using the metaphor of the *liquid* to account for how modern society has abandoned its solid, predestined classes for the necessity of creating a personal identity: “Modernity replaces the *determination* of social standing with a compulsive and obligatory *self-determination*” (2001, 145). One’s place in society is no longer predestined, but in need of creation: “There are more – painfully more – possibilities than any individual life, however long, adventurous and industrious, can attempt to explore, let alone to adopt” (Bauman 2000, 61). In modernity, according to Bauman, identity is always on the move, and for better or worse, one always has the possibility to explore new roles and identities.

Interestingly, Bauman connects this to what he sees as an explosion in problems concerning identity in the later years of the 20th century (2001, 145): “In our fluid world, committing oneself to a single identity for life, or even for less than a whole life but for a very long time to come, is a risky business. Identities are for wearing and showing, not for storing and keeping” (2004, 89). Thus, he suggests

that the postmodern, "liquid" form of identity is *performative*. This predicament constitutes the "where" and "when" of the graphic novel *Peer Gynt*, in Hutcheon's terminology (2013, 141).

We would argue that coupling the concept of performativity to Bauman's analysis of modernity is particularly relevant to understanding the *Knappetøber*. Indeed, what do he and his spoon evoke, if not the idea of 'melting' an individual in order to cast him in a normative shape? This speaks to a Rousseauian idea of perfectibility (Bauman 2001, 143), which also involved 'melting' the human into a 'liquid,' but with the goal of casting a new and solid individual. Rousseau suggested that perfectibility, or the ability to constantly change, was the one constant part of human nature. Through this ability, individual man was drawn to fulfil his natural identity – indeed, a successful society was one in which man had the opportunity to do so (cf. Bollenbeck 2007, 75). As Bauman makes clear, this is quite distinct from the liquidity of modernity. Bauman elaborates on perfectibility thus:

Solids may be melted, but they are melted in order to mould new solids better shaped and better fitted for human happiness than the old ones – but also more solid and so more 'certain' than the old solids managed to be. Melting the solids was to be but the preliminary, site-clearing stage of the modern undertaking to make the world more suitable for human habitation (2001, 143).

While *Peer* seeks a free-floating identity, realized through a series of fleeting, performative acts, the *Knappetøber* is a normative agent threatening to force *Peer* into the shape which neither his mother nor the rest of society were able to squeeze him in spite of all their coercive attempts.

Helland sees this as an example of irony, commenting upon *Peer's* eavesdropping on the wedding guests who complain about *Peer* being a "Drog" ["good for nought" (Ibsen 1892, 25)]: "Kun et lite øyeblikk forholder han seg til det sagte, før han så opphever ubehaget gjennom skillet mellom ord og gjerning. Ordene er tross alt bare ord; de kan ikke 'rakke' livet av ham" (Helland 2000, 11). While this is true, another ironic aspect of *Peer's* relationship to language is his constant attempt to forge an identity through frequent performative misquoting of stories and literary works, and his performance of the role as adventurer, sage, or emperor. This seems to be *Peer's* predicament: Living in danger of being melted into a new and more solid form. As a true pre-postmodern, however, *Peer* does not want to be recast into another, solid shape, but to stay floating.

By refusing to be recast, and thereby lose his individuality and fall into the same mold as everyone else, we consider *Peer* a postmodern individual *avant la lettre*, encapsulated in *Peer's* proud performative proclamation of himself as a "Verdensborger af Gemyt" (HIS 607). Thus, he embodies the postmodern condition Bauman describes as feeling everywhere "chez soi", but never being fully and

truly at home (2004, 14). This aspect is enhanced in the performative depiction of Peer in the graphic novel. A performance is fleeting, volatile, and disappears as soon as it is over. The same goes for a performative utterance. Peer is only a liar as long as he is called out as such by Aase. By placing her on the roof and leaving for the wedding at Hæggstad, Peer also has the liberty to create and recreate himself, never staying put in one position. It is therefore no coincidence that his identity crisis at the homecoming also takes place at Hæggstad.

The figure of the Knappestøber comes across as a strikingly postmodern metaphor for identity. While enhancing this particular aspect of *Peer Gynt*, and thus arguably reducing one of the complexities of Ibsen's play, the graphic novel introduces new visual cues that expand its interpretative possibilities. Just as Ibsen's text is a fanciful reworking of its folkloristic source material that focuses on certain aspects of the oral tales, Moen and Maiowitz' adaptation is a reworking of *Peer Gynt* as a source text. Both works thus demonstrate the creative potential of Genette's "ripping out" and "putting in" of texts. However, they also suggest a third possibility – that of the molding and blending of all texts, including life-stories. If we are to take Mads Moen's quote from Act Five as representative of the 19th century reader of *Peer Gynt*, and compare it to how our contemporary reader feels "akin to Peer Gynt", we might conclude as follows: We are no longer akin to Peer Gynt because of the stories we share and re-tell as ours, but because of his strategy to perform different life-stories in order to postpone a concluding, finite form.

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