

Oriental Peer, Occidental Sinbad: Narratological Convergences in *Peer Gynt* and the Sinbad Cycle

Farzaneh Doosti¹

Assistant Professor, Department of English Language and Literature,
Central Tehran Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran
farzanehdoosti@gmail.com

Mohammad Tolouei

MA in Dramatic Literature, Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Tharan,
Tehran, Iran
mohammadtoloueib@gmail.com

Abstract

This article compares Henrik Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* with the Sinbad the Sailor cycle, focusing on structural and narratological parallels rather than claims of direct influence. Moving beyond the 'contextual contamination' of Eastern motifs in European literature, we identify fundamental structural homologies – most notably the topoi of departure, disguise, and the figure of the 'divided subject,' whose identity remains fragmented across multiple narrative roles. From these foundations, the study shifts to the performative mechanics of the play, exploring three distinct analytical stages: first, Diegetic Agency, where Peer's identity is constructed through a performative contract akin to an Oriental oral storyteller; second, Diegesis as Exchange, which frames narration as a form of labor, comparing Peer to the Persian *ma'rakagīr*; and third, Diegetic Mimesis, which analyzes how Ibsen employs reportage as a substitute for scenic enactment. By synthesizing these elements, we argue that *Peer Gynt* functions as a dramatic model where reality is constructed, negotiated, and deferred through the act of storytelling, ultimately reconfiguring the theater as a space of mediated presence.

Keywords: *Peer Gynt*, Ibsen, Sinbad the Sailor, narratology, performative labor, structural homology, divided subject, diegesis.

¹ Corresponding author

1. Introduction

Unlike Ibsen's later socially realist plays, *Peer Gynt* is often read at first glance as a romantic Nordic fantasy grounded in folklore. The play loosely reworks the Norwegian fairy tale of "Per Gynt", which Ibsen believed to have some basis in fact. Ibsen also drew on Peter Christen Asbjørnsen's *Huldre-Eventyr og Folkesagn* (1845), a major collection of Norwegian folk tales and legends. Whereas Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson admired the play's "satire on Norwegian egotism, narrowness, and self-sufficiency," Raymond Williams argued that *Peer Gynt* explores a new kind of dramatic action that was beyond the capacities of the theatre of its time through "a sequence of images in language and visual composition" (Williams, 1993: 76). Although this new "dramatic action" is often associated with the emergence of modernism in theatre, the play's pronounced romanticism and exoticism also suggest other possible lines of inspiration. Unlike its companion piece *Brand*, whose imaginative horizon remains largely confined to Norway, *Peer Gynt* unfolds across a far more cosmopolitan landscape. Written immediately after Ibsen's "liberating voyage abroad to Egypt and elsewhere," the play presents a range of Orientalist scenes, from enterprises on the coast of Morocco to sending heathen images to China, trading slaves, and travelling to Egypt past the Colossi of Memnon and the Sphinx. The question, then, is how such novelty or "stylistic variety" should be understood.

In the present paper, we argue that Ibsen's interest in the Orient extends beyond superficial exoticism manifested through scattered references or colonial manipulation of the East. Rather than functioning merely as an object of Orientalist fantasy, the East in *Peer Gynt* also operates as an enabling imaginative and intertextual framework. In particular, this article proposes that *Peer Gynt* exhibits significant structural and thematic affinities with the Sinbad cycle of *The Thousand and One Nights* (hereafter the *Nights*). What follows therefore examines a set of intertextual correspondences—whether conscious or unconscious—between *Peer Gynt* and the Sinbad tales situated within the broader narrative world of the *Nights*.

2. Toward Contextual Contamination

Comparing *Peer Gynt* – which, according to the consensus of many Ibsen scholars, is a nationalist work only intelligible primarily in the light of Scandinavian folklore – with the tales of Sinbad requires careful justification. The Sinbad cycle, shaped by the motifs of maritime adventure, travel, and the accumulation of wealth across the commercial routes of the Islamic territories, appears at first glance to

belong to a very different cultural and narrative sphere. Consequently, a comparison between these two bodies of narrative demands a convincing evidentiary basis.

2-1. Oriental Peer

Direct documentary evidence for such a connection is almost nonexistent. One might cautiously speculate that, since the Sinbad tales were translated into Spanish as early as 1253 A.D., Ibsen could have encountered some version of the story either during his stay in Italy or through its circulation within Scandinavian intellectual circles. Such conjectures, however, remain difficult to substantiate.

In recent decades, several scholars have attempted to trace Oriental – particularly Persian – elements in Ibsen's work. Joan Templeton, for instance, suggests a Manichean backbone to Peer's theory of women (Templeton, 1997: 90-107). Behzad Ghaderi, in the foreword to his Persian translation of *Peer Gynt* and elsewhere (Ghaderi and Ghorbaninejad, 2006), interprets Peer's "reindeer hunt" as a distorted version of Mithra's killing of the bull and reads his infatuation with Solveig² and their final union as a parody of Mithra's ascension to the Sun. More far-fetched comparative attempts have also sought to demonstrate that Ibsen may have known Attar's *Conference of the Birds* (Madani-Sarbarani, 2009: 52-55), or that *Emperor and Galilean* reveals a comprehensive knowledge of Mithraism (Jafarnejad, 2007). Farindokht Zahedi (2009) similarly argues that Iranian mythology could have reached Ibsen through Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Likewise, in "Aase and Peer Gynt" Albert M. Sturtevant hints at a loose connection between Ibsen and the *Nights* by comparing the relationship between Aase and Peer to that of mother and son in Oehlenschläger's version of *Aladdin* (1805), thereby implying the logical possibility that Ibsen was acquainted with the narrative world of the *Nights*.

Despite these scholarly efforts, the absence of direct proof requires that the argument be approached from a broader historical perspective—namely the profound impact that the translations of the *Nights* exerted on European literary culture during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In this context, Antoine Galland's translation played a decisive role:

In 1692 Galland became assistant to Barthélemy d'Herbelot on his great work, *the Bibliothèque orientale* ... (there is no evidence that this story cycle ever formed part of the original Arab version of the *Nights*. Galland published the Sinbad stories in 1701, and later

² Solveig is a female given name of Old Norse origin that connotes 'the way to the Sun' (Sol = sun, sun colored; veig = way).

the same year, inspired by the success of this translation, he began work on a translation of the *Nights*, having had the manuscript sent to him from Syria.

(Irwin, 1995: 15-16)

The impact of the *Nights* on European literature has been so profound that scholars have frequently compared it to the influence of the Testaments – another monumental Eastern text – on Western letters. Irwin observes that the Bible is so deeply ingrained in Western culture that individuals often possess a thorough knowledge of its narratives and moral imperatives, even without having directly engaged with the text (Irwin, 1995: 279). A comparable phenomenon exists regarding the *Nights*; many who have never consulted the primary text remain intimately familiar with the stories of Ali Baba or Sinbad through cultural osmosis.

The *Nights* provided a vital source of inspiration for European authors; the public's voracious appetite for the text catalyzed the emergence of numerous parodies and mock-Oriental tales that sought to emulate its specific atmosphere. Emerging during the mid-Enlightenment, the work offered readers an exotic escape – a refuge from the perceived rigid boundaries of Enlightenment rationality into a world of unbridled fantasy. This shift in literary taste toward the phantasmagoric coincided with a broader intellectual revolt against the Enlightenment, manifesting in the growth of movements such as Swedenborgianism, Martinism, and Illuminatism, all of which sought alternatives to the era's strictly scientific and rationalist paradigms. For instance, European Freemasons actively fabricated new mythologies to counter the perceived limitations and superstitions of established institutional religion.³ As Irwin remarks, the encounter with Eastern narrative traditions exerted a liberating effect on late eighteenth-century writers who sought to transcend the confines of rationalism in order to explore the supernatural (Irwin, 1995: 279).

Ibsen wrote *Peer Gynt* at a historical moment when the earlier European fascination with Oriental tales had already begun to wane. By the 1860s the literary aura that had once surrounded the Orient – particularly during the eighteenth-century reception of the *Nights* – had lost much of its novelty. Although Egyptian archaeology had sparked a wave of scholarly enthusiasm in France during the 1850s, the large-scale decipherment of ancient Egyptian culture following Napoleon's Egyptian campaign gradually transformed many of the Orient's earlier "mysteries" into objects of historical knowledge. As a result, elements that had once appeared wondrous increasingly

³ For a lengthy introduction to freemasonry in Ibsen see Behzad Ghaderi's "Images of Freemasonry in Ibsen's Plays" (2004).

became familiar and demystified within European cultural discourse. Ibsen subtly alludes to this process in *Peer Gynt*, where even the legendary voice of the statue of Memnon fails to inspire genuine astonishment:

Statue sang. I heard the sound of it clearly,
though I couldn't quite catch the words of it, really.
The whole thing, of course, was a trick of the mind. —
Nothing else for today of significant kind.

(Ibsen, 2007: 80)

By the early nineteenth century, moreover, a vast body of Arabic and Persian literature had already been translated into English, German, and French and had become accessible to the European reading public. Consequently, European writers no longer depended on the *Nights* as their primary or exclusive source of Oriental inspiration (Irwin, 1995: 308). Rather, motifs, narrative patterns, and imaginative geographies associated with the Orient had already permeated European literature so extensively that they circulated almost as a shared narrative reservoir. In this sense, the *Nights* had effectively assumed the status of an *architext* – an underlying narrative matrix informing a wide range of later works. *Peer Gynt* emerged within precisely this cultural moment.

In comparison with other famous *Nights* cycles such as Aladdin, Ali Baba, or The Ebony Horse, the tales of Sinbad display relatively little direct affinity with European folk traditions. Their textual genealogy has long been debated, for the tales “appear in manuscripts of the *Nights*, but only in ones written after Galland had produced his translation, which leaves open the possibility that the Arab version was actually based on Galland's French story. Indeed, some eighteenth-century readers and critics went so far as to accuse Galland of having made up all the *Nights* stories himself” (Irwin, 1995: 17). The question of “authenticity,” however, becomes conceptually incongruous in the case of an authorless, accretive corpus such as the *Nights*. As Borges observes, “Galland was as righteous in ‘fabricating’ the tale of ‘Aladdin and the Magic Lamp’ as the Eastern storytellers were in creating their stories” (Borges, 1998: 155). Galland's adaptation in imitation of European folktales may indeed explain the western reception of these narratives among readers already habituated to their conventions. As J. Beattie commented:

Whether the tales be really Arabick, or invented by Mons. Galland, I have never been able to learn with certainty. If they be Oriental, they are translated with unwarrantable latitude; for the whole tenor of the style is in the French mode: and the Caliph of Bagdat, and the Emperor of China, are addressed in the same terms of ceremony which are usual at the court of France.

(qtd. in Irwin, 1995: 17)

2-2. Occidental Sinbad

By contrast, the Sinbad cycle possesses a distinctively Islamic narrative backbone. Its repeated motif of travel resonates with the cultural practices of the middle Islamic period, in which the wonder of voyage narratives served both to stimulate curiosity about the world and to valorize mobility as a dimension of faith. Following the territorial expansion of Islam from the Indus to Iberia, merchants and missionaries further disseminated the religion across the maritime networks extending from Zanzibar to Indonesia. The wealth accumulated through these mercantile journeys underpinned the prosperity of Abbasid Baghdad and Samarra and their legendary affluence.

Nevertheless, even these ostensibly “genuine” Oriental tales reveal numerous analogues within Western literature. In Sinbad’s first voyage, his mistaken landing on the back of a gigantic fish evokes the voyage of Saint Brendan, who similarly celebrates Easter Mass upon the body of a living island (Sattari, 1989; 2003). The cannibal ghoul of the third voyage clearly recalls Polyphemus, the man-eating giant encountered by Odysseus; indeed, in one variant the ghoul’s name “Eli-Faniou” appears, according to Grünbaum, to be a distortion of *Polyphemus* (Sattari, 2003: 24). During the fourth voyage, Sinbad’s burial beside his dead wife and subsequent escape by the help of a wild animal has likewise been identified with the story of Aristomenes the Messenian, whose rescue from a pit by a fox is noted by Burton (2000) in the footnote to his translation: “[t]his tale is evidently taken from the escape of Aristomenes ... The Arabs in an early day were eager students of Greek literature.” The episode also echoes *The Odyssey*: while a plant drives Sinbad’s companions to madness, Circe’s enchantment “fattened” Odysseus’ men; and in the earlier Lotus Eaters episode, they too are deprived of reason by a magical fruit. Likewise, Sinbad’s encounter with the twisted-legged Old Man of the river during his fifth journey parallels the figure of Triton, whose coiled conch shell controls the sea.

The morphology of the Sinbad tales displays notable structural congruence with European sea-adventure narratives; however, the common travel motif in the Sinbad cycle and *Peer Gynt* transcends mere reliance on the travelogues of either the Islamic or Western traditions. Instead, both function as narratives of departure, where the act of leaving the homeland serves as a primary site of ontological instability. In this sense, the two texts become sites of *contextual contamination* – a phenomenon in which the binary opposition between ‘Oriental’ and ‘Occidental’ narrative topoi is systematically

collapsed. Borrowing the Derridean notion of “contamination” (Derrida, 1980: 55–81), we recognize that the “purity” of either tradition is a critical fiction; the texts do not merely inhabit the same world, they inhabit each other. Consequently, we must abandon the traditional “French School” obsession with identifying “direct influence” or elusive etymological lineages. By discarding the search for specific textual genealogy, we are free to prioritize the deeper structural affinities that bind *Peer* and Sinbad as participants in a shared, albeit contaminated, narrative economy.

3. Structural Homologies

3-1. Topoi of Departure, Disguise, and the Divine

Perhaps this comparative analysis should have encompassed the *Nights* in its entirety, as many archetypal plot schemes present in *Peer Gynt* are also traceable across the broader corpus. For instance, both protagonists undergo the transformative, albeit traumatic, experience of shipwreck – a recurring motif in Sinbad’s voyages, and a pivotal, singular transition in *Peer Gynt* that marks his final return to Norway. Similarly, Peer’s appropriation of Bedouin attire, which leads to his mistaken identity as a prophet, echoes the recurrent trope of the disguised traveler ubiquitous in the *Nights*.

Peer’s encounter with monkeys in Act IV (scene iv) further illustrates a shared narrative grammar. Sinbad encounters apes twice – first on the “Mountain of Monkeys” during his third voyage, and again in the “City of Apes” during his fifth. Interestingly, in both texts, the simian encounter is juxtaposed with the threat of the irrational Other. Sinbad’s interaction with the “hairy folk... among whom no man ever fell and came forth alive” (Burton, 2000: 121) is frequently framed by meetings with hostile, aberrant societies – the “brethren of the devils” (seventh voyage) – who systematically challenge his identity and survival. Peer’s parallel scene in the fourth act, where he is trapped in a tree warding off a swarm of monkeys with a broken branch, serves as a site for his existential meditation on human nature:

What are we men? Just a speck of dust.
And one can adapt a bit if one must. —
Here comes another wave, hundreds at least.
Beat it! Shoo! They’re mad, make me shudder.
If only I had a false tail as a rudder, —
just something to make me resemble a beast — .
Now what? All that crashing, right over my head — .
(looks up) The old ‘un — his fist full of filthy crap — !
(Act IV: 64)

This moment of bestial confrontation serves as a prelude to Peer’s subsequent adventures among Bedouin tribes and his eventual incarceration in a Cairo madhouse. There, realizing the patients are

trapped in absolute, narcissistic isolation, Peer invokes the “Keeper of all fools” – the Divine. This pattern of invoking transcendent intervention is a critical structural bridge. Peer is saved by divine or spiritual agents on three distinct occasions: calling upon his mother (a terrestrial agent of grace), appealing to Solveig’s faith during the Great Bøyg episode, and finally his prayer for sanity in the madhouse.

Sinbad’s survival strategy is structurally isomorphic. His only path through the lands of the “brothers of the devil” is the invocation of Allah, for these demonic entities, much like Ibsen’s trolls, “know not how to mention the name of Allah Almighty, neither worship they Him” (Burton, 2000: 143). In both traditions, salvation is reserved for the faithful, while those who reject the divine are consigned to a state of bestiality.

Furthermore, both protagonists face demonic manifestations that serve to test their resolve. Sinbad is enslaved by the “Old Man of the Sea,” a parasite who rides his shoulders until Sinbad is driven to the brink of death. Often we find Sinbad the Sailor entrapped by the savages, cannibals, or tribes with inhuman traditions and very often in order to save his life he cannot but involve in tricks, politics and immoral acts; in one occasion he even kills a woman who is buried alive with her dead husband (fourth voyage) and takes her rations.

Similarly, Peer encounters the Strange Passenger at sea – who seeks to claim his corpse to locate the origin of dreams – and the Lamé Man at the crossroads of his life. In each instance, the protagonist’s struggle with these manifestations is not merely physical; it is a desperate attempt to preserve the integrity of the “self” against the encroachment of evil, thereby forestalling the inevitable conclusion of their journey in favor of continued adventure. At their core, both texts sustain an exclusionary logic where humanity is a privilege reserved for the “faithful.” The remainder, by rejecting this divine hierarchy, are effectively cast out and dehumanized, labeled as the “Satanic” other, and degraded to bestiality.

3-2. Poetics of Exile and the Pursuit of Happiness

Thematic parallels between Peer and Sinbad’s narratives are evident at a deeper symbolic level. Both young men, obsessed with their paternal legacy, are compelled to leave home in pursuit of restoring their lost honor or identity. At the outset, Sinbad the Sailor recounts to Sinbad the Porter the motivations underlying his perilous voyages:

My father was a merchant, one of the notables of
my native place, a moneyed man and ample of
means, who died whilst I was yet a child, leaving
me much wealth in money and lands and

farmhouses. When I grew up, I laid hands on the whole and ate of the best and drank freely and wore rich clothes and lived lavishly, companioning and consorting with youths of my own age, and considering that this course of life would continue forever and ken no change. Thus did I for a long time, but at last I awoke from my heedlessness and, returning to my senses, I found my wealth had become unwealth and my condition ill-conditioned, and all I once hent had left my hand.

(Burton, 2000: 114)

Similarly, Peer is the scion of the once highly esteemed “Jon Gynt,” who squandered his fortune on feasts and excess, forcing Peer into a life of wandering as a traveling salesman, leaving behind his impoverished wife and child. Aase, Peer’s mother, aims to restore her son’s honor and his father’s legacy, yet in Act I she laments his apparent uselessness:

You’re no use to me, you drone!
You just hug the fire and sprawl
poking in the coal and ashes,
bothering the good-folk’s lasses,
scare them from the village hall, —
make a mock of your own mother
brawling with some lout or other —

(Ibsen, 2007: lines 195-200)

In Sinbad’s case, he conceals the true motives behind his departure, opting instead to echo Solomon’s maxim – “The day of death is better than the day of birth, a live dog is better than a dead lion, and the grave is better than want” – implying a scandal or calamity as the real cause. In contrast, Peer’s exile is explicitly linked to his act of kidnapping the bride, driven by an unwavering need to remain true to himself.

Both protagonists embark on extended journeys seeking happiness. Peer’s relentless quest for “impossible felicity” reflects the Romantic ideals of authentic selfhood and inner fulfillment, possibly critiquing the capitalist ethos of 19th-century Europe. Conversely, Sinbad’s initial pursuit is material accumulation, treating merchandise as an end in itself—an aspiration both pragmatic and social.

Yet, regardless of their initial motivations – whether rooted in capitalism or its critique – both Peer and Sinbad evolve into astute merchants of wealth. Ironically, on returning home after a lifetime of wandering, Peer finds himself an unrecognizable stranger amid a sale of his own past, symbolizing perhaps that all his material pursuits amounted to life’s futility:

YOUTH 1 (*with a casting ladle*)

Look what I've bought — it was too good to miss!
Peer Gynt used to cast silver buttons in this.
YOUTH 2 How's this, then, a shilling for a money-bag!
YOUTH 3 Is that all? Half-a-crown for a peddler's swag!
(Act V: 99)

This moment of comic alienation underscores the disillusionment with material success. Peer, now aware of his life's failures, seeks ultimate salvation in the pure love of Solveig, who waits faithfully in "home":

PEER Then say what you see!
Where was I, as myself, as the whole man, the real?
Where was I, with my forehead stamped with God's seal?
SOLVEIG In my faith, in my hope, in my charity.

.....
PEER (*a gleam of light comes over him; he cries out*)
My mother; wife; woman free of all sin, you! —
O hide me, hide me within you!

(Act V: 119)

Peer's final moment of regret and reconciliation can be read as a metaphorical return to the maternal homeland — a burial in the soil that embodies maternal comfort. This archetype echoes Sinbad's journeys, which, in their essence, symbolize a voyage away from Mother Earth (Tellus Mater) and an eventual reunion after enduring separation and hardship (Eliade, 1993: 237–255).

Despite Sinbad's narrations of incredible adventures, his true happiness lies not in riches but in returning to his beloved Baghdad and family. Burton's account of Sinbad's disillusionment reveals a similar yearning: after recounting his misadventures to Haroun al-Rashid, Sinbad confesses, "By Allah the Omnipotent, O my lord, I have taken a loathing to wayfare, and when I hear the words 'Voyage' or 'Travel,' my limbs tremble" and the caliph agrees, acknowledging that Sinbad's past exploits only serve as testament to his aversion — an ironical mirror to Peer's spiritual redirection.

An adept storyteller and braggart that Sinbad is like his double Peer, he also seems to be exaggerating about the real amount of his riches; he calls Sinbad the Porter in to tell him of his adventures and generously shares his wealth with him by giving a hundred coins of "red gold" — that is an alloy of gold and copper worth much less than pure gold.

Within this narrative topography, female figures play a pivotal role in shaping the protagonists' visions of self, happiness, and meaning. Peer's romantic journey — from the impulsive appropriation of Ingrid to fleeting liaisons with other women — culminates in a recognition of his true love, Solveig. His realization that her love is pure and divine contrasts sharply with the transient, often superficial, relationships he indulges in. Similarly, Sinbad's encounters with women — prizes for his deeds — are devoid of genuine love, often fleeting and driven by

necessity. His fourth voyage, during which his prize-wife falls ill and dies, parodies mythic themes of heroism, echoing the tragic journeys of Orpheus and Eurydice, yet ultimately emphasizing the futility of worldly pursuits. It is only in his final voyage that Sinbad acquires a wife aligned with his spiritual yearning – a pious believer who advises him to forsake wealth and return to Baghdad, seeking peace in simplicity and family – a conclusion akin to the maternal return of Peer in his final moments.

3.3. Doubling and the Diegetics of a Divided Subject

Sinbad the Sailor never encourages his counterpart, Sinbad the Porter, to imitate his path to wealth or adventure. Rather, the porter appears fully content to listen to the sailor's narratives and to partake vicariously in the prosperity and pleasures they recount. The frame concludes with a gesture of communal closure:

And they ceased not from friendship and fellowship,
abiding in all cheer and pleasures and solace of life till
there came to them the Destroyer of delights and the
Sunderer of Societies, and the Shatterer of palaces and
the Caterer for Cemeteries; to wit, the Cup of Death,
and glory be to the Living One who dieth not!

(Burton, 2000: 144)

The two Sinbads inhabit the same city and historical moment. The wealthy voyager has traversed distant seas and endured repeated ordeals of exile and survival, while his impoverished namesake has spent his life in Baghdad performing menial labor and has never left the city. Yet chance brings them together in the very place from which the sailor repeatedly departs and to which he invariably returns. The porter becomes the listener through whom the sailor's adventures acquire narrative meaning. As Bruno Bettelheim suggests, the two figures can be read as complementary aspects of a single divided subject: one driven toward fantasy, risk, and imaginative escape, the other anchored in the pragmatic routines of everyday existence (Bettelheim, 1975: 225). The sailor's voyages externalize desires that remain unrealized in the porter's life, while the porter provides the necessary ground for the sailor's experiences to be narrated and understood. These two Sinbads function as two sides of a single person: one side seeks a rupture from the monotony of daily life through far-off lands of wonder, while the other side anchors him in the world of reality (Sattari, 1989: 246).

In this sense, the relationship between the two Sinbads is less a psychological conflict than a structural division within the narrative itself. One figure embodies centrifugal movement – departure, adventure, and excess – while the other represents centripetal return, domesticity, and narrative reception. Their nightly gatherings stage a

momentary reconciliation between these poles: the sailor recounts his adventures, and the porter absorbs them as shared experience. Yet this equilibrium is temporary. Each evening the two must separate, only to reunite again the following day for another episode of narration. Once the seventh voyage concludes, the structural necessity of this pairing disappears, and the narrative moves on as Scheherazade resumes the larger cycle of stories.

A comparable duality emerges in *Peer Gynt*, although here the division is internalized within the protagonist himself. The conflict between imaginative self-projection and the resistance of reality becomes dramatically visible in Act II, Scene VII, when Peer confronts the enigmatic figure of the Bøyg. In the darkness Peer struggles against an adversary that repeatedly identifies itself simply as “myself”:

PEER Who are you? Answer!
VOICE (in the darkness) Myself.
PEER Stand aside!
VOICE Go round about, Peer! For the fells here are wide.
PEER (tries another route but runs into something)
Who are you?
VOICE Myself. Can you say the like?

(Act II: 37)

Unlike the two Sinbads, whose relationship is mediated through storytelling, Peer’s confrontation with the Bøyg takes the form of direct struggle. The Bøyg refuses open combat and instead embodies an impassable, formless resistance:

PEER (*yells*) Strike then!
VOICE Strike? The Bøyg’s not insane.
PEER Strike — !
VOICE But the Bøyg doesn’t strike.
PEER Fight! Again!
VOICE The mighty Bøyg can win without brawling.

(Act II: 38)

The conflict unfolds not between two separate entities but within the divided structure of Peer’s own subjectivity. The Bøyg does not attack; instead, it represents a force immune to direct confrontation, absorbing resistance and compelling Peer to “go round about.” Where the *Sinbad* narrative distributes its duality across two characters, Ibsen internalizes this opposition within a single dramatic figure.

This stalemate mirrors a Manichean cosmology: a recursive, unresolved struggle where neither force can achieve total victory, ensuring the battle – and the narrative – never reaches a final synthesis. Just as the *Sinbad* cycle depends on the repeated mediation of storytelling, the crisis in *Peer Gynt* is perpetually interrupted by the intervention of women, most notably Solveig: “He was too strong. There were women behind him.” (*Peer Gynt*, Act II: 39).

This appearance disrupts the confrontation and restores the possibility of narrative continuation. Similarly, the structural balance within the *Nights* depends on Scheherazade, whose narration continually postpones closure. In both works, female figures function as mediating agents who arrest destructive confrontation and reopen the narrative horizon.

These structural correspondences do not necessarily indicate direct textual influence. Rather, they reveal a shared narrative logic in which the divided subject is sustained through mechanisms of mediation – storytelling, repetition, and deferred resolution. While many readings reduce *Peer Gynt* to an allegorical fairy tale, such approaches overlook its formal complexity. As a work of verse drama, *Peer Gynt* systematically incorporates narrative techniques that blur the boundary between theatrical action and diegesis. The play thus moves toward a mode of “diegetic performance” that departs from dominant European dramatic conventions. In this respect, Peer resembles not an Aristotelian protagonist, but an Oriental performer whose identity is constituted through narration—an affinity that aligns him precisely with the storytelling paradigm embodied by Scheherazade. The affinity between Peer and the Scheherazade prototype is most rigorously articulated through what Gérard Genette defines as “narrative metalepsis” – a deliberate transgression of the ontological boundary between the diegetic world of the story and the narrative space of its telling. In the Sinbad cycle, the boundary is porous; the porter enters the sailor’s story, and the sailor inhabits the porter’s Baghdad. They exist in a state of mutual, metaleptic contamination.

In *Peer Gynt*, Ibsen performs a similar metaleptic encroachment: Peer does not merely *imitate* a heroic adventurer; he *narrates* himself into existence. When he lies to his mother, Aase, about his ride on the buck, he is actively constructing a diegetic reality that supersedes the ‘objective’ stage world. By consistently positioning Peer as an orator who attempts to impose his own narrative order upon the dramatic space, Ibsen forces the spectator to witness the collapse of classical mimesis. Peer is not a dramatic subject reflecting on his life; he is an unreliable narrator trapped within the constraints of his own unfolding story – a condition that aligns his dramatic existence more closely with the oral performativity of the *Nights* than with the coherent, teleological structure of the European *Bildungsdrama*.

4. Diegetic Performance as an Oriental Device

The comparison proposed in this paper does not rest upon claims of direct cultural transmission or genetic influence. Rather, the “Oriental” functions here as a heuristic category – a descriptive shorthand for a specific mode of storytelling in which narration

supersedes scenic action, performance foregrounds mediation, and identity is synthesized through improvisation. Our analysis operates on the level of narrative logic and performative structure, positing that *Peer Gynt* and the *Nights* converge through a shared mode of representation.

Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* diverges from Aristotelian teleology, approximating what may be retrospectively defined as a diegetic mode of representation (Plato, *Republic* III; Halliwell, 2002). Within this framework, the distance between the character enacted on stage and the actor as a narrative agent becomes intentionally unstable.⁴ While Ibsen's technique likely resonates with Nordic oral traditions, the kinship between Peer and the Scheherazade prototype remains structurally undeniable. Scheherazade functions here not as a foundational source, but as a paradigmatic agent of narrative survival, whose authority derives from the strategic deferral of closure – a logic mirrored in Peer's relentless postponement of judgment through his own improvisatory narratives.

In *Republic* III (392c–398b), Plato distinguishes between *diegesis* (narration) and *mimesis* (imitation) to regulate the ethical effects of poetry. Plato expresses profound skepticism toward dramatic impersonation, arguing that it risks fragmenting the speaker's moral unity, whereas narration maintains a necessary reflective distance between the speaker and the action. While Plato privileges unmixed narration, his taxonomy nonetheless isolates the core of modern narratology: the problem of “mediation”. As Gérard Genette argues, *diegesis* designates a mode of representation structured by narrative mediation, in direct opposition to drama, which traditionally operates at a “zero degree” of mediation (*Narrative Discourse Revisited*, 1988).⁵ Read through this narratological lens, *Peer Gynt* dramatizes an intermediate representational mode in which enactment is perpetually undermined by narration. Peer oscillates between “showing” and “telling,” foregrounding the artifice of performance itself.

Ibsen systematically dismantles the Aristotelian framework in favor of a mock-epic style that integrates folkloric narrativity into the dramatic setup. His intentional anti-Aristotelianism is evident in his rejection of the “language of the Gods.” As Ibsen remarked regarding *Emperor and Galilean*, “What I sought to depict were human beings, and therefore, I would not let them talk the 'language of the Gods'”

⁴ In this respect Ibsen's play is precedent to Brecht's distancing or alienation techniques which is quite interestingly based on Chinese acting models. See Brecht's essay on “Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting” (published in an English translation in 1936).

⁵ Genette's use of *diegesis* is descriptive rather than evaluative and is not intended to reproduce Plato's ethical hierarchy of representational modes

(Fjelde, 1968: 42). This departure from classical conventions naturally invited censure. Ibsen had once revealed his desire for creating a verse drama with no intention for staging it, writing to Björnson that “[m]y book is poetry, and if it is not poetry, then it will be” (Forster, 1999: 7). While his contemporary critics admired his poetic and imaginative abilities in early plays and dramatic verses, Julius Olson overlooks *Peer* for producing “an entire absence of any definite frame-work representing either past or present” (McLellan 1981: 486). Yet, this perceived anomaly is, in fact, the play’s structural core: the domination of diegetic passages within a mimetic framework.

Peer is defined less by action than by his capacity for storytelling. In Act I, his account of the ride on the buck is not merely a lie; it is a desperate attempt to colonize Aase’s reality with his own diegetic invention:

First a band of mist we shattered,
then a cloud of gulls we scattered,
sent them every which way streaking
rousing echoes with their shrieking.
Down we went, no pause to ponder.
Something white though gleamed down yonder,
like a reindeer hide a bit.—
Ma, it was our own reflection
in the fell-tarn’s still complexion
up towards the surface scurried
with the same wild speed that hurried
our mad fall towards the lake.

(Ibsen 2007 - Act I: 8)

Behzad Ghaderi identifies this sequence as the definitive dissolution of Aristotelian *mimesis* in the play. Once narration replaces causality as the governing principle, the drama shifts into a parade of poetic and narrative recursions (Ghaderi, 2004: 36). This diegetic drift recurs throughout the text: Aase’s exchange with Solveig (Act II, Scene ii) functions as an excuse for Aase to assume the role of a narrator; Peer’s boastful fabrications in Act IV (Scene i) reveal his identity as a “self-projected” subject; and the Priest’s anecdote about the man who severed his own finger (Act V) serves as an independent narrative-within-narrative, suspending the play’s temporal flow.

These instances demonstrate that Ibsen substitutes dramatic “action” with lengthy diegetic reports, transforming the stage into a site of mediated performance. This brings *Peer* into sharp alignment with the figure of the *Gosān* – the poet-musician of Parthian and Armenian tradition – or the Persian *naqqāl*. As Mary Boyce observes, the art of the *Gosān* did not rely on textual fidelity but on the capacity to adapt inherited narratives to the immediate context of performance (Boyce, 2002). This aligns with Richard Bauman’s (1977) conception of “verbal art as performance,” where the act of telling is

foregrounded as a culturally marked event rather than a transparent representation of action.

Peer, much like the *naqqāl* standing before a static tapestry, provides access to invisible events through the sole agency of his voice and gesture. He is not a dramatic protagonist reflecting on his life; he is an improvisatory performer whose identity is constituted only in the act of narration. The comparison, therefore, is not one of influence, but of functional convergence: both Ibsen's play and the Eastern narrative tradition utilize diegetic performance to displace the constraints of the scenic present, sustaining the subject through the infinite deferral of the story.

4-1. Diegetic Agency: Peer as Narrator-Performer

Peer's stories are consistently fake, fabricated, and distorted. He is introduced as a dreamer and tale-teller, a liar and braggart – “Lies, all lies, Peer!” – and the play immediately establishes him as someone who cannot distinguish between reality and imagination. Raised on his mother's tall tales, Peer inhabits a world in which imagination displaces the real; his “reality” is a product of his own fabulation. Having become a master of make-believe, he uses body, voice, and gesture to compel belief in his narratives.

In the opening scene, he offers multiple versions of his encounter with Aslak, adapting the tale to Aase's expectations. When she accuses him of lying, he theatrically acknowledges the fabrication:

AASE Have you been lying?

 Have you?

PEER Yes, I have — for once:

 dry your tears, don't look for trouble; —

 (*clenches fist*)

 Look — these tongs, they clamped the dunce,

 held the smith down bent up double;

 this right fist here was my hammer —

(Act I, scene i; 11)

Aase simultaneously resists and colludes. She pretends outrage but ultimately accepts the “performance,” even while recognizing its fictionality. When she protests that she has heard this story before, Peer's reply foregrounds the logic of repetition and variation at the heart of oral storytelling:

PEER Yes, me too.

 Things can happen more than once.

AASE Yes, and lies get changed, you dunce,

 get dolled up and magnified,

 fitted with a new-found hide

 so the carcass won't show through.

 That's exactly what you've done,

(Act I, scene i: 10-11)

This exchange encapsulates the basic contract of oral performance: a tacit agreement between storyteller and listener to suspend disbelief and participate in a shared fiction. Aase's complaint – "lies get changed... get dolled up and magnified" – is not only a maternal reproach; it is an almost metapoetic description of the storyteller's craft.

Within this framework, Peer's role converges with that of the *naqqāl* or *gosān*. In oral traditions, the *gosān* does not merely recite a fixed text but improvises around inherited material, constantly adjusting the narrative in response to audience feedback. The value of the performance lies less in textual fidelity than in the teller's ability to animate and adapt the tale (Boyce, 2002; Bauman, 1977). Peer operates in precisely this fashion: his power derives from his capacity to summon folkloric legends, recast them in a quasi-realist idiom, and insert himself as their heroic actant. He is "a master of the play" not because he acts decisively in the world, but because he commands the diegetic space where stories are produced, altered, and believed.

Nor is Peer the only *gosān*-like performer in the play. In the madhouse scene (Act IV), the Fellaḥ offers a grotesquely incongruous narrative of King Apis, only to reveal himself as the king he has just been narrating (Act IV: 85–86). The scene stages a similar collapse between narration and identity: the storyteller becomes the very subject of the tale. In this sense, *Peer Gynt* is "a drama of narration": a play that persistently foregrounds storytelling as the primary mode through which characters construct, inhabit, and distort their worlds.

4-2. Diegesis as Exchange: Storytelling and Payment

You lovely ladies, you sparky young gentry, —
will you hear a tall story by way of pay?

(*Peer Gynt*; Act V, 101)

If Peer is a *naqqāl*, he is also an entertainer in a more literal, economic sense. A revealing comparative horizon here is provided by Persian performance traditions preserved in *maqāma* literature and Safavid-era street entertainments. These often feature a clever braggart or improvising storyteller who earns his living by amusing spectators with inventive lies, exaggerations, and playful manipulations of everyday language. Performers – sometimes called *ma'rakagīr* – appear in shifting guises, from cavalier to beggar, and address their audiences in a direct, often teasing manner. Their success hinges on improvisation, humor, and audience involvement: spectators are drawn into the fiction and only gradually become aware of the storyteller's deliberate fabrications (Jafari, 1998).

Peer Gynt shares several structural features with this mode of performance. Like a *ma'arakagīr*, Peer relies on charisma, improvisation, and audience response to animate his tales. In the early acts he is dismissed as a liar, yet in later scenes his stories hold the attention even of those who once distrusted him. His narratives range from encounters with troll princesses to absurd feats like imprisoning the devil in a nutshell; proverbs and “great men’s sayings” are opportunistically reframed to serve his immediate needs. The content of these tales is less important than the fact of telling: Peer’s identity and social presence are anchored in his capacity to entertain.

This economy of storytelling becomes explicit in Act V, scene iii, where Peer self-consciously reflects on audience perception and payment:

So that’s what he got for being so dense
and for not sizing up his audience.

(Act V: 101)

His repeated references to gold – offered or requested, sometimes ironically – as remuneration for stories underscore the extent to which narration itself has become a kind of currency. Storytelling is both theme and structure; it organizes social relations, determines status, and mediates exchanges.

Structurally, then, Peer is not a passive character within a pre-given plot, but an active performer whose artistry lies in shaping narrative, improvising situations, and negotiating attention. This aligns directly with the diegetic mode discussed above: what appears as “character development” is, in fact, a succession of performances in which Peer tests, revises, and sells different versions of himself. The play thereby exposes the entanglement of storytelling, entertainment, and value – how narrative labor can both mask and monetize the instability of the self.

4-3. Diegetic Mimesis: Reportage and the Production of Presence

A final dimension of Ibsen’s diegetic strategy is the use of reportage – a form of verbal representation in which the character narrates events that the audience cannot directly witness. Unlike retrospective accounts, reportage often employs the present tense to convey immediacy, encouraging the audience to blend observation with imagination. Peer frequently assumes the role of flamboyant and unreliable narrator, forcing the audience to negotiate between what is seen and what is told.

In Act I, scene ii, a small hill obstructs the audience’s view of Hægstad. Peer fills this visual gap by narrating what he claims to see: “No. Wedding guests swarming like gnats down the track” (Act I, scene ii: 15). The stage withholds the scene, and Peer’s description

stands in for it. A more intense iteration occurs in Act III, scene i, where Peer, hidden behind a tree, narrates a young boy's self-harm:

(ducks behind the tree and peeps out)

A lad! Just the one. Looking terrified...

He's gazing around. What's he trying to hide
in his jerkin? A hook. He's peering, he's placing
his hand down flat on the fence-post top.

Now what's he up to? Why's he standing and bracing — ?

Ugh! He's given his finger the chop!

His finger's right off! The blood's pouring out. —

(Act III, scene i: 42)

Because the act is not shown directly, the audience must reconstruct it through Peer's emphatically present-tense narration. This exemplifies a hybrid form – *diegetic mimesis* – in which dramatic immediacy is achieved not by showing the action but by reporting it with such vividness that it functions as a quasi-scenic event.

A similarly mediated structure appears at Aase's deathbed, where Peer comforts his mother by improvising a journey to Soria-Moria Castle. The scene is theatrically static, yet narratively dynamic, as Peer's words transport her and the audience into an imagined elsewhere. This configuration recalls Persian *naqqālī*, where the *pardeh-khān* (tapestry reader) stands before a fixed image and, through voice and gesture, makes distant events present to the imagination (Bauman, 1977; Boyce, 2002). By consistently privileging narration over enacted action, Ibsen displaces classical mimesis with a mode where distance, mediation, and storytelling are foregrounded. Diegesis is not a retreat from drama but its reconfiguration: a theater of survival where storytelling becomes the primary means of representation.

5. Conclusion

This article has not sought to establish a linear, genetic influence of Eastern narrative traditions – such as the *Nights* – on Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*. Instead, it has proposed a comparative framework grounded in shared narrative logics, performative structures, and thematic affinities that emerge only when the constraints of direct influence are set aside. By prioritizing diegesis over classical scenic mimesis, the play aligns itself with transcultural traditions in which identity, meaning, and survival are sustained through, rather than apart from, the act of narration.

Peer's compulsive storytelling, his protean selfhood, and his radical reliance on audience reception recall not only the Nordic folkloric milieu but also the performative ethos of the *naqqāl*, the *gosān*, and Scheherazade – figures for whom narration constitutes a vital strategy

of endurance. When viewed through this lens, *Peer Gynt* is liberated from its status as an eccentric, self-contained national epic. It reveals itself as a pioneering drama of narrative consciousness, one that anticipates the modernist preoccupation with the instability of the self. By foregrounding the mechanics of storytelling, Ibsen reconfigures the theater into a space where reality is constantly deferred, multiplied, and reimagined. Ultimately, the play resonates across cultural boundaries precisely because it recognizes that the human subject is not a static entity, but a narrative-in-process: a story that must be told, re-told, and performed to exist at all.

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