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## **Peer Gynt and the Cult of Mithras**

*Peer Gynt* is Ibsen's most Norwegian text mainly because it draws on Scandinavian myths and folklore which, some still believe, may work against its reception in other cultures. However, apart from its universal quest/travel motif which facilitates the play's journey abroad, its good reception worldwide may be due to 'appropriation' of its Scandinavian myths and folktales.

This article explores the possibility of reading *Peer Gynt*'s allegedly Scandinavian myths and folklore in the light of some iconographies of the pre-Christian cult of Mithras or Mithraism practised in the West. The article will further illustrate how we may read the play as Ibsen's reversal of these icons and atmospheres to suit his portrayal of a character who, in spite of Mithras's final ascension to the sphere of light, cannot manage to escape the 'darkness' within or without.

To form a more holistic, mental image to go with such a reading of *Peer Gynt*, we will concentrate on Peer's reindeer ride, his venturing into the cave, that is, the Dovre Mountains, his fight with the Boyg, and his encounter with the Fellaah with the bull-god Apis on his shoulders in the Cairo madhouse.

Before entering the main argument, a brief account of Mithraism will be given, knowing that any attempt at finding its 'origin', whether it was basically an oriental, pagan religion or a cult which started in the eastern part of the Roman Empire, would be opening Pandora's Box. As to the genesis of Mithraism as a religious creed, Martin sketches the following map:

The odyssey of Mithras began among the ancient Indo-Aryan peoples. He travelled east to India, where the Vedic literature associat-

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ed Mithras with the supreme deity Varuna, and west to Persia, where the sacred Avestas associated him with the high god Ahuramazda. In both India and Persia, Mithras was an agent of the supreme ordainer of the cosmos and ally of the forces that preserve order. In both cultural incarnations this god of light dispelled darkness and upheld righteousness<sup>1</sup>.

While Franz Cumont (1868-1947), the first scholar on Mithraism, “believed that the cult was, in a strong sense, Iranian, transmitted by hellenised ‘mages’ whose teachings were slowly transformed through the centuries until the cult achieved its final form in the late Hellenistic period”<sup>2</sup>, more recent research has cast doubts about the link between the Persian cult of the Sun worshippers (Mithraists) and its paradigm which appeared among the Romans. Veneration of Mithra (in Persian Mihr or Mehr) began 4000 years ago in Persia; however, Mithraism, in its European sense, came into prominence in the Roman Empire in the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC when it was popular among the Roman soldiers.

Mithraism has been defined as a “mystery religion, i.e., a religion of salvation which promised a better fate in the other life and gave man a hope of being able to mount after his death through the planetary spheres into bliss empyrean”<sup>3</sup>. The crucial element in this process, the cave, is the core of Mithraism. Mithraic temples or mithraea were either natural caves<sup>4</sup> (these are rather rare) or man-made structures (like the Verjuy temple in Maraghe, Iran, which dates back to the Arsacid dynasty, 248 BCE-224 CE)<sup>5</sup>, sometimes partly subterranean, that imitated a natural cavern. In towns, where existing buildings were rented, this was however rarely possible. These temples have a characteristic rectilinear shape, adapted from the design of the banqueting-halls often built beside Hellenistic temples. They consist of a central aisle with a long podium, on which the worshippers reclined for their feasts, running down each side wall. At the far end from the entrance was the cult-niche, where there was

<sup>1</sup> L. H. Martin, *Hellenistic Religions: An Introduction*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1987, p. 114.

<sup>2</sup> M. Volken, “The Development of the Cult of Mithras in the Western Roman Empire”, *EJMS*, 4, 2004, 1-20, p. 1. Online: [http://www.clas.canterbury.ac.nz/ejms/papers/Volume4Papers/volken\\_mithras\\_socio\\_archaeological\\_04.pdf](http://www.clas.canterbury.ac.nz/ejms/papers/Volume4Papers/volken_mithras_socio_archaeological_04.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> R. Pettazzoni, *Essays on the History of Religions*, transl. H. J. Rose, Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1954, p. 180.

<sup>4</sup> Hashem Razi, *Ayeen-e Mitraism (Mithraism: Cult, Myth, Cosmogony and Cosmology)*, Tehran, Behjat Publications, 1371/1993, p. 101.

<sup>5</sup> Afshin Tavakoli, “Verjuy Mithra Temple, the Oldest Surviving Mithraist Temple in Iran”, in *Iran, Daily Newspaper*, n. 2802, May 16<sup>th</sup>, 2004, p. 12.



Figure 1. Mithraeum.

normally a bas-relief or a fresco representing Mithras sacrificing the sacred bull “from whose body sprang all the beneficent things of the earth” (see Fig. 1)<sup>6</sup>.

Many reliefs have a by-scene in which Mithras is shown being born from a rock, i.e. he had no mother. In one relief, he is shown as a baby drinking grape-juice instead of mother’s milk. There was obviously a sacred narrative in which the hero, rather like Herakles, performs amazing tasks on earth, for example causing a stream to flow out of a rock by firing an arrow into it. In Franz Cumont’s account of the myth, ‘Sol’ – the sun-God – finally sends a raven to Mithra telling him to sacrifice the sacred bull. Mithra goes to the wilderness, captures the bull, and in a gesture associated in antiquity with butchers drags him alive towards the cave<sup>7</sup>. The bull manages to run away, but Mithra does not let go of his horns, is carried away by the animal, and eventually overpowers the exhausted beast. Once again, he drags him to the cave, where he subdues him in the manner associated with ancient heroes who overcome animals, by pressing down on his back. He then sacrifices the beast in a deliberately ‘wrong’ way by plunging a long knife into his heart.

Let us look at *Peer Gynt* to see how the play makes sense with reference to the iconography of Mithraism. In this play, Peer travels the world in search of his dreams and ambitions within a topography which ranges from Norway to

<sup>6</sup> *Columbia Encyclopedia*, 2004, Sixth Edition, Columbia University Press.

<sup>7</sup> Razi, *Ayeen-e Mitraism*, cit., pp. 175-235.

the Americas, to Morocco and back to Norway. The play unfolds through some distinct phases of self-discovery. There is a folktale phase which starts with Peer trying to convince his mother he had been in the mountains to hunt reindeer and ends with his escape from the shallowness of a parish life. He then enters the phase of self-exploration where he encounters the Troll King, a journey which looks like the ordeals that former heroes underwent to prove their selfhood. Next is the encounter with the great Boyg or Peer's battle with darkness within and without. As he cannot overcome Boyg, the play turns into recyclings of Peer's failed adventures. In other words, the rest of the play may be read as variations on the same themes, with Peer's visit of the madhouse in Cairo as the most typical one.

As stated above, Peer's tale of confrontation with the animal in the opening scene is of significance in this argument. Cleverly aware of his mother's absent-mindedness, he tells her of his reindeer chase, which, as we soon learn, is actually a wish fulfilment:

I sat firm astride his back,  
Gripped him by the left ear tightly,  
And had almost sunk my knife-blade  
In his neck, behind his skull – (I. i; Archers' translation).

A glance at the image of Peer's attempt at overpowering the reindeer (Fig. 2) put side by side with that of Mithras' sacrifice of the sacred bull (Fig. 3) is crucial for the rest of the argument here.



Figure 2. Reindeer overpowers Peer.



Figure 3. Mithras sacrificing the bull at the entrance of the cave.

In *Peer Gynt* we have what seems to be an altered version of this scenario. Like Mithras, Peer's first confrontation with the beast is outside the cave; however, although he first overpowers the beast, it is the beast that ensnares him in his horns which ends with his passive leap and abysmal fall with the beast. This foreshadows Peer's subsequent failures. This altered version of Mithraism does not end here. Later in the play, he enters the Dovre King's Cave. Here Ibsen is meticulous about the interior of the cave and his stage direction for the Dovergubben scene reads like this:

*The Royal Hall of the King of the Dovre-Trolls. A great assembly of TROLL-COURTIERS, GNOMES, and BROWNIES. THE OLD MAN OF THE DROVE sits on the throne, crowned, and with his sceptre in his hand. His CHILDREN and NEAREST RELATIONS are ranged on both sides. PEER GYNT stands before him. Violent commotion in the hall.*

This is a mock imitation of a natural mithraeum (see Fig. 1). In a mithraeum the worshippers reclined on both sides of the sanctuary, headed by the 'pater', Father. In *Peer Gynt*, the mithraeum is turned into the assembly of the King of Dovre. In this scene Peer, who had formerly failed to overpower the buck stands before the Trolls, a parody of initiation for a young person who wanted to enter the mystery cult of Mithraism. Whereas the initiate in the Cult of Mithras is usually supposed to, eventually, enter the sphere of light, we see Peer here on the verge of losing his humanity and joining the cult of Darkness or Ahriman.

Mithras spills the bull's blood and so produces life (the end of the tail of the sacred bull is represented with wheat-ears emerging from it). Peer fails to do so and the Trolls put a tail on him with a ribbon fastened to it, yet another grotesque representation of Peer whose tail, in contrast with wheat-ears emerging from the tail of the bull of sacrifice in the mithraeum, has a ribbon fastened to it.

In Mithraism as a mystery religion, initiates enter a world of linguistic curiosities and cryptic expressions. When Peer faces the Dovre King in the 'cave', he has to solve the riddle which the King proposes. "Troll, to thyself be – enough!" is one such instance of cryptic language while it also indicates Peer's cognitive and psychological initiation into the Trollish way of life. It also shows that Peer has fallen from the sphere of light, just as he has physically and spatially distanced himself from Solveig, whom he initially associates with the sphere of light: when he first sees her in Aslak's wedding party, he exclaims "Hvor lys!" (What a light!).

Thus, *Peer Gynt* may be seen as the site of everlasting conflict between Light and Darkness. After eating the flesh of the bull and drinking wine with Sol, Mithras mounts Sol's chariot and ascends to the skies, i.e. himself becomes Sol Invictus Mithras, Mithras the unconquerable sun. Peer, however, cannot convince Solveig that he belongs to the sphere of light and, because of this, he runs away from her. We gradually see Peer in the midst of elemental chaos and darkness. Ibsen's logic for having the Boyg scene right after Peer's psycho-physical baptism in the sphere of darkness, that is, the Troll scene, suggests that Peer is now turned into a force of Ahriman.

This is further illustrated in *Peer Gynt* when the image of the sacred bull reappears in the Madhouse scene in Cairo. Mithras, 'narratives' have it, overpowers the bull in the wilderness and carries the sacred beast on his shoulders into the cave. Peer never manages to overcome the beast – he, in fact, never sought the beast within or without. Thus he remains a beast and this is highlighted in the Madhouse scene in Cairo. There, he sees a Fellaah carrying the bull-God, Apis, on his shoulders. We may say that here Peer is looking into his inner self. This scene may also suggest an ossified Peer, a parody of Mithras-Atlas shown carrying the universe on his shoulders. It is true that Peer ran away from the Trolls but one may argue that the Troll motto, "Troll, to thyself be – enough", has kept Peer in a narcissistic state and, thus, the Fellaah with Apis on his shoulders may be read as the reflection of Peer himself fixated in the mirror stage.

Besides, Peer's method of riding the reindeer – he sits astride the back of the beast – suggests that he is a fake Mithras. In many stone reliefs, Mithra is shown sitting on the back of the bull not in an astride position but on one side of the animal with one leg extending towards the hind leg of the flattened bull, nullifying any resistance from the animal, and the other bent at right angles to the other, again giving the impression of strong dominance of Mithra over the bull. This is significant because, as stated in Vermaseren's *Mithra, Ce Dieu Mystérieux*, scholars have found inscriptions that suggest Mithraists believe that, prior to Mithra's second-coming, there will be a false Mithras who is easily recognised from his sitting astride the bull (41-42)<sup>8</sup>.

So far, this reading runs against the presumption that among all Ibsen's plays, *Peer Gynt* may remain far-fetched to 'other' readers not familiar with Scandinavian mythology. However, there remains a question: "To what extent

<sup>8</sup> M. Vermaseren. *Ayeen-e Mithra (Mithra, ce dieu mystérieux, 1960)*, transl. Bozorg Naderzad, Tehran, Dehkhoda Publications, 1354/1966, pp. 41-2.

does *Peer Gynt* have the potential for such a reading if, as Ibsen always demanded, we study it in the context of his whole work?”

As the oriental part of *Peer Gynt* suggests, Ibsen’s travel to Italy must have given him a chance to read more about oriental studies including, among others, Gnosticism. When Ibsen was writing *Peer Gynt*, some significant, general knowledge about the cult of Mithras was available. As early as 1970s, Dane Georg Zoega had discussed the reilefs and other Mithraic monuments and the book was published in German in 1817 edited by G. Welcker. Georg Friedrich Creuzer, a member of the German romantic mythological school of the Schlegels, published his book *Symbolik und Mythologie der alten Völker* (Leipzig-Darmstadt 1810-12, re-edited 1837).

Although it is very unlikely that Ibsen knew any of the above-mentioned works directly, except possibly Zoega’s collection of essays (unfortunately almost entirely without illustration), he must have seen several Mithraic reliefs in the Vatican Museums while he was in Rome in the 1860s and, as he was a good newspaper reader, he may have known something about scholarship in this area from reviews. However, since Ibsen needed Roman history for *Emperor and Galilean*, which addresses the decline of paganism, the rise of Christianity and the fall of the Roman Empire, it is most likely that he knew Ludwig Preller’s *Römische Mythologie* (1 ed., Berlin 1857), a book on the Roman religion of the day with a few pages on Mithras.

Besides, for writing his massive play, *Emperor and Galilean*, Ibsen had done research on late-ancient history. The Julian of history “showed deference to Mithraism as late as 360 [A. D.]”<sup>9</sup> and Ibsen must have read the Julian of history where he declares “we celebrate Mithras”<sup>10</sup>.

We should also bear in mind that Peer, like Julian, is seeking to establish his Peerpolis. Therefore, it is reasonable to think that Ibsen views the possibilities of alternative modes of thought within an institutionalised Christianity in both *Emperor and Galilean* and *Peer Gynt*. However, granting that Ibsen casts an approving eye on Julian’s Mithraic inclinations, there remains a problem with Ibsen’s case mainly because if a motif re-emerges in his later works, it is not a restatement or an affirmation of a past state of mind but the synthesis and/or an encrypted form of it. How, then, should one speculate on these Mithraic aspects in *Peer Gynt*?

<sup>9</sup> E. M. Pickman, *The Mind of Latin Christendom*, London, Oxford University Press, 1937, p. 33.

<sup>10</sup> “Emperor Julian’s Oration to the Sovereign Sun”, online: <http://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/toj/toj03.htm>

Julian is bent on establishing “the third empire”. Yet it is very difficult to say that Ibsen’s *Emperor and Galilean* verifies those social and moral codes which the illuminati of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries advocated. One must be cautious, of course. “Ibsen” observes Bertonneau, “in no wise subscribes to Christianity but neither does he take up a rigidly anti-Christian position, such as Julian increasingly espouses in his story as told in the drama”<sup>11</sup>.

In ‘Images of Freemasonry in Ibsen’s Plays’, I argued that many of Ibsen’s so-called heroes up to the last play have this preoccupation with ‘ascending’ towards the sphere of light. This may imply that Ibsen does confirm the need for change; however, he has no scruples to cast doubts about pure intellectualism<sup>12</sup>. Perhaps this is why parody is so prominent in *Peer Gynt*. Peer’s Reindeer hunt is a reworking of Mithra’s overcoming the sacred bull. Once in the cave, he does not end by overcoming the beast, eating the meat and riding Sol’s chariot to ascend to the sky; instead, he takes cow’s dung as cakes and bullock’s urine as mead. While talking to Anitra near her tent, Peer speaks of a person for whom he, now, expresses regret and pity: “Once I met with such a fellow, / of the flock the very flower; / and even he mistook his goal, / losing sense in blatant sound”. *Peer Gynt* being an antithesis of *Brand* in the sequence of Ibsen dramas, many have read these lines as Peer’s reference to his Gnostic antecedent, Brand. However, one may also read this passage as Ibsen’s reference to an earlier precursor of Brand, Julian and perhaps to the whole bunch of the illuminati or the epoch-makers of Ibsen’s time (including himself, of course, whose epoch-making tendency verged on criticising other epoch-makers).

It may sound an over-generalisation to say that *Emperor and Galilean* indicates a rejection of the illuminati. We know that in the banquet in Stockholm (September 24<sup>th</sup>, 1887) Ibsen, once again, adhered to Julian’s ideals: “the ideals of our time, while disintegrating, are tending towards what in my play ‘Emperor and Galilean’ I indicated by the name of ‘the third kingdom’”<sup>13</sup>.

By way of conclusion, *Peer Gynt* may show the demise of heroic idealism tinged with Gnosticism, yet there is an element in Peer that Ibsen keeps dear to himself and in the play. Ibsen lets Peer mesmerise the reader with his talent for visual images and painting. Ibsen had a strong faith in art as a means for

<sup>11</sup> Th. F. Bertonneau, “Intellectualism and the Gnostic Debacle: Julian the Apostate in the Modern Literary Imagination”, in *Anthropoetics*, 10, n. 1 (Spring/Summer 2004), June 10, 2006. Online: <http://www.anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap1001/julian.htm>

<sup>12</sup> Behzad Ghaderi, “Images of Freemasonry in Ibsen’s Plays”, in *North-West Passage*, n. 2, 2005, pp. 57-81.

<sup>13</sup> H. Ibsen, *Speeches and new letters*, transl. Arne Kildal, New York, Haskell, 1972, p. 57.

creating nobility of character. While Peer seems to be a parody of the cult of Mithras, Ibsen inserts a remarkable element in this character in that he has a strong aesthetic response to his surroundings. In other words, while Peer is degenerating in dreams, Ibsen probes into Peer's mind and involves us in aesthetic pleasure.

Thus, one is tempted to believe that Ibsen does not totally reject illumination, at least not at this stage. On the one hand, the four-fingered man's story related by the priest reminds Peer both of the boy who had chopped off his finger and of the demands of a communal and ascetic life. Besides, Peer himself is eventually reunited with Solveig – albeit not in a community but in their 'camp'. These details confirm that Ibsen, as a citizen of the modern world, distances himself from the ideals of a bygone age. Yet, Ibsen's future plays, especially *An Enemy of the People*, *The Wild Duck*, and *Rosmersholm* – all three replete with Christian symbolism – suggest that Ibsen has to test another option, namely, educating modern man via aesthetic illumination. In other words, while Ibsen showed distrust of the idealistic heroism of characters such as Julian, a corrupted form of which we see in Peer, he later changed his view about bringing nobility. An instance of such an approach occurs in *Rosmersholm* where the pacifist apostate, Rosmer, seeks to change humanity by bestowing on them nobility of thought and taste.