

Rees, Ellen. 2014. *Ibsen's Peer Gynt and the Production of Meaning*. Acta Ibseniana XI. Oslo: Centre for Ibsen Studies. 158 pages. ISBN: 978-82-915-4017-7.

Ibsen's Peer Gynt and the Production of Meaning is the shorter of two books Ellen Rees published in 2014. The longer work, *Cabins in Modern Norwegian Literature: Negotiating Place and Identity*, ranges across texts and genres from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to examine the imaginative and symbolic significance of cabins in Norwegian culture. As a keen participant in the spatial turn in literary studies, Rees has repeatedly directed attention to topographies in a range of Norwegian texts, for example in her 2012 book *Figurative Space in the Novels of Cora Sandel*. Previous articles and parts of *Cabins* take this approach to Ibsen, focusing on *Fruen fra havet* (1888) [*The Lady from the Sea* 1889] and *Når vi døde vågner* (1899) [*When We Dead Awaken* 1900], as does Chapter 4 of the *Peer Gynt* book. This chapter, "Emplacing *Peer Gynt*, *Peer Gynt*, and *Per Gynt*," examines not the internal landscapes of the Ibsen text, but rather tourism- and marketing-based "attempts to insert and inscribe *Peer Gynt* into the physical landscape" in Norway, such as memorial stones and outdoor performances (15). Rees begins the chapter with the story of a memorial stone from the 1930s that reads "Her treffe Per Gynt Bøygen" [Per Gynt met the Bøyg here] (85). With this example of "the tourist surreal" (Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett's term), Rees shows how "the entirely fictional meeting between Peer and the Bøyg is imbued with an impossible historical status [and memorialized] as though it were an actual event" (88). This charming and strange example is indicative of the wide array of objects that Rees examines in this nimble work of cultural analysis.

An initial chapter reads Ibsen's canonical drama through a Deleuzian lens, as an amorphous and experimental text that challenges simplistic models of human identity, frustrates expectations of logical or aesthetic coherence, and engages in multiple relationships of irony to existing texts. This reading of *Peer Gynt*, which one may call deconstructionist for the way it valorizes the amorphous, unresolved, and non-unified elements of the text, serves mostly to set up Rees' investigation of the varied cultural appropriations of the drama in recent decades. In addition to being the "national drama" of modern Norway, *Peer Gynt* for Rees is a fluid and unconventional text that stymies exegetical attempts while opening itself to parody and adaptation. Drawing on Linda Hutcheon's theories of parody and adaptation, Rees offers shrewd accounts of Ibsen's parodic relationship to five previous national dramas from the mid-nineteenth century (in the chapter called "(De)Constructing a 'National Drama'") and also later appropriations of *Peer Gynt* in the comic strips, plays, novels, and children's literature of late modernity ("Rewriting *Peer Gynt*"). Key to Hutcheon's notion of "modern parody" is that its ironic mode does not necessarily suggest negative judgment from a

critical distance, as in much satire (12). Thus, Rees can argue that *Peer Gynt*'s relationship to previous national-romantic dramas is "double-edged," with Ibsen's play both satirizing provincial elements of this genre while also perpetuating its conventions and coming to function "as a national drama in its own right" (34). With the later adaptations, Rees shows how rewriting *Peer Gynt* becomes just as much an encounter with Ibsen's canonicity and fame as with the social criticism and ethics of the dramatic text itself.

The book's skillful handling of cultural documents of many sorts illuminates the production of meaning referred to in its title. This amusing and informative study of *Peer Gynt* in Norwegian culture allows us to witness how meaning "is produced through active engagement with the text, rather than passively revealed or discovered" and also how to view the text "as a generator of potentially endless meaning and interpretation, rather than as a code to be cracked" (133). With examples of parody and adaptation ranging from the trivial to the serious, Rees proves once again the old idea that *how* you read is just as important as *what* you read.

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