

## Tears, remorse and reparation in Henrik Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*

### A reading inspired by Melanie Klein

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For more than 100 years, Henrik Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* has been interpreted in the light of Søren Kierkegaard. With a problematic self as an essence of the play, one has emphasized a Kierkegaardian *choice*, necessary for Peer to become an integrated person. This paper challenges these interpretations by focusing on *mourning* as a way to develop the self in *Peer Gynt*. The reading reveals a striking correspondence, concerning structure and dynamics, between Peer's way of dealing with feelings like sadness, guilt and remorse and Klein's model of paranoid-schizoid and depressive position. Peer is facing painful feelings throughout the play. He identifies them quite easily, but is not able to tolerate the pain and avoids them with omnipotent fantasies, manic manoeuvres and denial. Hence, no reparation through mourning takes place, his development is arrested and he is unable to form a genuine love relationship with Solveig. The reading demonstrates an impressively profound complexity in Ibsen's representation of Peer's character, and a striking richness in detail in how it corresponds to Klein's anthropology.

**Keywords:** Henrik Ibsen; Peer Gynt; tears; reparation; mourning; Melanie Klein

<p>Anger? Saa skulde der kanske gaa Aar, før jeg vandt mig igjennem. Det Liv blev magert. Slaa sønder, hvad skjært er, og vent og fagert, og klinke det ihob af Stumper og Skaar? (Ibsen, 1867/2009, p. 582, 583)</p>	<p>Remorse? And maybe 'twould take whole years Ere I fought my way through. 'Twere a meagre life, that. To shatter what's radiant, and lovely, and pure, And clinch it together in fragments and shards?</p>
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	(Archer's translation, 1909, p.106)
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This quotation from *Peer Gynt* (1867/2007) points to the core of what Melanie Klein calls *reparation* (1937). Reparation is a long-lasting process, where love is made possible by de-idealization and integration. In this process, mourning is a central factor, sometimes expressed by Klein as “remorse” (1935). In this paper, I will try to show how Ibsen has *structured* feelings like sadness, remorse and guilt, in a way that corresponds to how similar phenomena are structured in Klein’s idea of the “depressive position”. This implies how the feelings *operate* in the psyche, what *function* is adhered to them, and not least, that these feelings make a recurrent *pressure* on the person involved. The pressure is due to a central point in Klein’s world of ideas: that a combination of guilt and grief is necessary in developing the personality. When such a process is avoided, by mechanisms of defence, one is left with disintegration and desolation. My intention is to show that this may be the case with Peer Gynt, as Ibsen has dramatized his life.

In Ibsen research, *Peer Gynt* is considered a work where “the integrity of the self is radically threatened” (Østerud, 2000, p. 75). A main ambition in much research has been to identify the key, dramatized by Ibsen, to facilitate further self-integration. In searching for this key, many researchers have pointed to an existential *choice*, as described by the Danish philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard (1843/1992). This choice has the capacity to gather the personality, and establish a *core*, from which one becomes able to love and realize inborn capacities. In this tradition of interpretation, Peer Gynt does *not* become a whole person because he is not willing to *choose* Solveig, in the meaning, to *stay* with her, and thereby open the gate to an integration of his own self (Haakonsen, 1967; Groven Myhren, 1979; Shapiro, 1990). As a consequence, Haakonsen claims that Peer has halted at the threshold of adult life (1967). I adhere to his conclusion with a Kleinian specification, that Peer has halted at the threshold of *the depressive position*. Let me give a short summary of the play, before presenting theory, method and interpretation.

Ibsen’s *Peer Gynt* is considered Norway’s national epos (Bloom, 1994). Peer is a young peasant who is a drunkard, troublemaker and a ladies’ man. At a wedding, he meets the young, innocent Solveig, who initially develops an ambivalent relation to him because of the reputation connected with his name. Straight after she has refused to dance with him, Peer abducts and seduces the bride, who has an eye for him. As a sentence for his crime, Peer is declared an outlaw, and his mother loses all her property. Now, Peer is wandering in the

mountains, is seduced by three saeter-girls and lured into the Dovre-hall by The Green Woman.

After being threatened by the Dovre-king with an irreversible incision in his left eye, he escapes the hall. As an outlaw, he is building a hut in the woods, when Solveig comes to stay with him. Peer accepts her with joy, but then the Green Woman claims to come in between them every day. Peer can't see any option but escaping a dilemma he cannot solve. Soon after, he visits his dying mother, and then leaves the country for many years. Abroad, he develops a more cynical attitude, and returns to Norway as an old, rich and lonely man. In the last part of the work, Peer is confronted with fragments of his life-history. This is staged by allegoric figures and phenomena of nature serving as aspects of his own self.

In this process of self-confrontation, he is approaching the hut where Solveig has been waiting for him all these years. The work ends with Peer begging to be embraced by her, in a way that resembles a mother-and-infant union.

### **Theory and method**

In trying to understand what might roughly be called a "track of tears" in Ibsen's play, I restrict my theoretical choice to Klein's ideas. This because of their explanatory power to the psychological elements in *Peer Gynt*. I treat her ideas not only as developmental psychology, or a perspective on pathology, but as a contribution to a more general *anthropology*, to which I am convinced that Ibsen had intuitive access. The relevance of Klein's ideas has recently been underscored by Kristeva's (2001) biography, where Klein, in her eyes "wasted little time in becoming the most original innovator, male or female, in the psychoanalytic arena" (2001, p.11). Thus, I consider Klein an excellent observer in the field of early experience, even though she is controversial.

Klein develops her ideas in dialogue with Freud's texts, not least his *Trauer und Melancholie* from 1917. There, Freud discriminates between mourning and melancholia. While the first is a process of *repairing* a loss, the latter is a *painful, intolerable state* where no processing takes place. This distinction is crucial to Klein, and to my interpretation. Klein describes a healing effect of guilt and mourning, long before she collects the phenomena under the concept of "the depressive position" (1935). Maybe this name is an unfortunate choice, because of its connotation to melancholia and depression, rather than to the *processing aspects* of sadness and grief.

Beside the processes in the depressive position, Klein observed splitting, fragmentation and greed, together with primitive defences like denial, omnipotence and

mania, used to avoid painful and intolerable feelings. Eventually, she collected these phenomena under the name of “paranoid schizoid position” (1946). In Bion’s development of Klein’s concepts, he emphasized a tendency to oscillate between the two positions throughout life, an observation that is highly relevant to my interpretation of *Peer Gynt*.

In addition to Freud, Klein is largely influenced by Karl Abraham, and his view on early development. She adopted his use of “cannibalistic” to denote oral-sadistic phantasies and his emphasis on guilt to overcome primitive aggression. In this influence, we can trace an early origin to Klein’s positions. Furthermore, Klein was preoccupied with the priority of the internal world, and emphasized projection and introjection as the way the mental apparatus develops. She extended Freud’s concept of “unconscious phantasy” and made it analogous to psychic reality. In understanding Peer’s relationship to women, my focus is on introjective and projective aspects, interacting with unconscious phantasies, even if this is not always made explicit.

No one has, to my knowledge, read *Peer Gynt* in light of Klein, except for Aalen & Zachrisson (2013). Gerland (1996) mentions Klein, but does not pursue her ideas. Anthi (1981) mentions Peer’s sadness in connection with a postulated narcissistic void, but does not have painful feelings at the centre. In fact, Hammer (2009) is closest to my interpretation. In light of Freud and Lacan, he interprets the inhibition of the tears in healing the *wound* in Peer’s chest (2009). However, a systematic examination of tears and guilt, their function in the play and the protagonist’s way to handle them, has not been attempted before.

For my method, I adhere to Andre Green’s recommendations, to trust the chosen theory and let it release its interpretative power (Green, in Dines Johansen (1977, p. 193)). I have done what Green further recommends, to combine a free-floating attention with a specific searching (*ibid*, p. 194). I have read *Peer Gynt*, and listened to a sound version, several times before restricting my interest to specific phenomena. In that way, I have tried to avoid what Kittang (2002) warns against; namely putting a raster of interpretation upon the text. Rather, I intend to follow his advice, to let the theory “illuminate the text from beneath” (1984, p.7).

My intention is to *light up* thematic aspects of *Peer Gynt*, and with the help of Klein, release a meaning hidden in the text. To do that, I perform a close reading according to *New Criticisms*, where the work alone is seen as an independent unit of meaning (*Encyclopædia Britannica*). The distinction between pain as an intolerable feeling state, that has to be escaped, and pain being worked upon by processes of mourning and remorse, might be

interpreted in light of many theorists. With the conglomerate of connected phenomena, it is in my opinion best understood with Klein as guide.

### “It burns right through you”

Let us examine Peer Gynt’s first meeting with painful feelings, and how he experiences them. After the famous scene with the buck ride, he is on the way to a wedding. He has a feeling that people talk about him in a disparaging way. Peer describes this feeling, as “it burns right through you/tvers igjennem en brænder”. He considers turning back home, and giving up his intention to win the bride, the initial reason for attending the wedding as an uninvited guest.

First Peer experiences his painful feelings and considers the circumstances in a realistic way. According to Klein, the ability to tolerate emotional pain is associated with a sense of reality. However, to Peer, this sense is not lasting; soon he denies reality and escapes into an omnipotent day-dream of being lifted up and admired as an emperor. Later, he proceeds to the wedding, where his painful feelings of being attacked and disparaged go on:

Øjekast; sylhvasse Tanker og Smil. Det gnissler, som Sagbladet under en Fil! (p. 511 )	Mocking looks; needle-keen whispers and smiles. They grate like a sawblade under the file! (p. 33 )
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Peer feels the downgrading both as burning and as screeching<sup>iii</sup>. As emotional qualities, they seem unbearable and the word Peer chooses echoes an emotional *wound*. The wound is in my opinion a central feature in Peer’s psychodynamic make-up, activated but not created, in meeting fellow villagers. In her book on Klein, Kristeva (2001, p. 83) writes about the pain connected to the paranoid schizoid position as: “everything wounds, gets wounded, and allows itself to be attacked according to the principles of retributive justice”. Thus, it seems reasonable that Peer expresses a pain, qualified and intensified by a paranoid part of his personality.

In the last act, we will see how Ibsen creates a connection between “Ice-spears, sharp-wounding/Isbrodd, som saarer” and *tears* that have lost their force to heal the wound in Peer’s chest. Seemingly, the wound has been a part of Peer’s personality during life. Let us first follow Peer’s encounters with painful phenomena further, and trace how he deals with feelings of a more depressive character. To understand what it is to *repair*, I will give a short summary of how I understand the bride abduction.

The bride abduction is a very central scene in Ibsen's play, with consequences for the rest of Peer's life. According to the idea of "over-determination" in all Ibsen's work (Kittang, 2002, p.16/17), it may be motivated by many interconnected sources, where escaping the wound may be one. It may also be seen as an oedipal triangle, where Peer succeeds in seducing the symbolized mother. This may partly be based on an incestuous element in Peer's relation to mother Åse, pointed to by several interpretations, for instance, Reich (1920), Hammer (2009).

However, my intention is to bring forth motives of a pre-oedipal and dyadic kind. Such elements have been mentioned but not elaborated on as motives. For instance, does Anthi (1981, p. 167) talk about a "primitive oral aggressive colouring" in Peer's relation to Solveig, expressed in a phantasy directly before the bride abduction. I have elaborated on that thought further, and demonstrated how Peer's unconscious motive to seduce the bride may be understood as a greedy *attack* on the idealized, but frustrating mother object, represented by Solveig's ambivalence during the wedding. This interpretation is partly based on the *content* of a werewolf phantasy Peer expresses towards Solveig, after her final rejection:

<p><i>(dæmpet, men hvasst og skræmmende)</i>          (...)          Jeg tapper dit Blod i en Kopp;          og din vesle Syster, hende æder jeg opp;          ja, for du skal vide, jeg er Varulv om Natten;          –          jeg skal bide dig over Lænder og Rygg – –  <i>(skaar med engang om og beder som i Angst)</i>          Dans med mig, Solvejg!          (p. 523)</p>	<p><i>[In a low but sharp and threatening tone]</i>          (...)          I'll drain out your blood in a cup,          And your little sister, I'll eat her up;          Ay, you must know I'm a were-wolf at night;-          I'll bite you all over the loins and the back –  <i>[Suddenly changes his tone, and entreats her as if in dread:]</i> Dance with me, lass! (p 45)</p>
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To interpret the bride robbery as effect of greed, is also based on the *consequences* of the abduction, where mother Åse is deprived of everything and is left dying. Her situation resembles the way Klein describes the phantasied greedy attack, where "greed aims primarily

at completely scooping out, sucking dry and devouring the breast” (1957, p.181). For a closer reading of this point, see Aalen & Zachrisson (2013). Henceforth the focus is on repairing forces.

**“Sigh for his debt of sin”**

After the bride abduction, Peer has become an outlaw, and Solveig’s family is searching for Peer together with mother Åse. Solveig’s father asks Åse if her son is able to: “sigh for his debt of sin? / kan for sin Syndegjæld sukke?”, and in that way open up the possibility to repair the damage caused by the abduction. This connotes an understanding of the abduction as a *sin*, but is also a pointer to a psychodynamic conception that Ibsen in my opinion develops throughout the play. A premise for this interpretation is that Peer is acting out an intolerable inner state of *frustration* through the bride abduction; a state that attacks the one he is dependent on, and seen as an intra-psychic process, has to be repaired.

To sigh for one’s debt of sin means to be in a state of guilt-burdened grief, and being able to express it<sup>iv</sup>. It is not a question of a transient feeling, but a lasting state, of which one is conscious and working on. Mother Åse responds that Peer has no such capacity; instead, he has the capacity in a magical and omnipotent way to deny that kind of painful mourning.

<p>AASE <i>ivrig</i>          Nej, men han kan ride i Luften paa Bukke!          (p. 535)</p>	<p>ÅSE. [Eagerly]          No, but he can ride through the air on a buck, though! (p. 57)</p>
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For the first time in the play, we meet the thought that a way to repair what is injured by the bride abduction is to express a combination of mourning and guilt, together with a magic and omnipotent avoidance of this possibility. Although debt of sin is a Christian conception, to sigh for it is not just a question of confessing a misdeed. Rather it is a process of mourning the deed committed, with a healing effect of the damage (the sin). This healing effect, performed by a process of mourning is a central element in the very realization of self in *Peer Gynt*, and I will trace how Ibsen develops this thought further.

**“The eyes full of laughter, the throat of tears”**

After leaving Ingrid, Peer is wandering in the mountains. Here, Peer himself experiences depressive aspects for the first time, along with defences against the unpleasant feelings.

Just before the Dovre-king daughter lures Peer into the mountain, three sæter-girls seduce Peer. While he is preparing to have sex with them, one of the girls notices a distinct *emotional* quality beneath his omnipotent desire:

ANDEN JENTE kysser ham Han gnistrer og sprutter som glohede Jernet. TREDJE JENTE ligesaa Som Barneøjne fra svarteste Tjernet. PEER GYNT danser i Flokken Hugen sturen og Tanken kaad. I Øjet Latter; i Halsen Graad! (p. 540,541)	SECOND GIRL. [Kissing him.] He sparkles and glisters like white-heated iron. THIRD GIRL [Doing likewise.] Like a baby's eyes from the blackest tarn. PEER. [Dancing in the midst of them.] Heavy of heart and wanton of mind. The eyes full of laughter, the throat of tears! (p. 62)
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Here we notice how the third girl identifies Peer's desire with baby's eyes from the blackest tarn *at the precise moment* when she kisses him. That means; she is close enough to the omnipotent desire to identify its underlying dead and undeveloped character. The eyes that stare up from a black tarn may serve as a metaphor for an abandoned and in psychological sense dead child that resides at the bottom of Peer's personality. This child infiltrates Peer's desire with sadness and an urge to weep. This combination of phenomena points forward to the last act, where Peer is facing an inner emptiness of a dead character, together with tears that have lost their power to heal the wound in his breast. Moreover, after facing this psychic reality in act five, he eventually regresses to an infant and turns to Solveig as a mother.

Now, we notice that Peer is able to *recognize* such contradictory feelings with no delay. However, he has no tools to deal with the unpleasant emotion. Hence, although he is in touch with single depressive phenomena, I will say that the depressive position as a *process* is not within reach yet. Instead, Peer chooses omnipotent sexual outlet, an action that may be said to serve as a manic defence against the underlying sadness. Thereby, he oppresses feelings which, if allowed, might have a healing effect on the damage made on his personality by the fantasied attack on the mother object.

It is worth noting that Peer *identifies* painful feelings very easily. However, he is not able to *tolerate* them. This recurring point in *Peer Gynt* may be due to two interconnected psychodynamic sources. First, we find an inability to tolerate frustration. This is partly due to the mother's inability to deal with destructive feelings. We do not know much of Åse as a



mother, but we do know that she is turning and twisting when burdened with unpleasant and painful feelings and especially feelings of anxiety and guilt. One might guess that this indicates a lack in her ability to help her son as a child, to develop a tolerance to frustration.

The second source to Peer's easy access to underlying painful feelings may be a lack of a contact barrier controlling the traffic between conscious and unconscious, and between internal and external reality. According to Bion (1962), defective contact barrier is a central factor in the paranoid schizoid position. It seems like a lack of barrier elucidates many aspects in *Peer Gynt*, most obvious in scenes where Peer is struggling to maintain contact with reality.

Peer avoids sadness by denial and omnipotent fantasies. These forceful mechanisms might remove the unpleasant feelings, but not affect the basic conditions of the psyche. When Peer is touching depressive phenomena, a *pinning* for the object that has been under attack by the werewolf phantasy, seems accessible to him. According to Klein (1940, p. 348), this kind of longing assumes a painful character, a *pinning*, when the mother representation is injured by aggression, which I assume is the case for Peer.

Such an interpretation assumes further, that Solveig represents the mother object, the source of life, in a psychic sense. This is based in the way Peer idealizes her, by keeping the frustration she generates away from his perception of her, and in the motherly qualification he exposes to her throughout the play. Hence, for Peer to become a whole person, she has to be restored in his mind through a process of painful mourning. However, Peer is not able to understand or tolerate the feelings that accompany this inner state. He avoids them with omnipotent defences, defences that counteract self-development by arresting the personality in an immature position.

In Ibsen research, "The eyes full of laughter, the throat of tears", has been interpreted as one of many contradictory phenomena in the play, named as the literary figure "grotesque" (Brynhildsvoll, 2002, p. 167). This figure grasps the *opposite* state of connected elements, but not the *dynamic* between them, which is better understood in light of Klein.

### **"The bitter and searing lye of tears"**

Until now, Ibsen has outlined how to transform pain through *tears* in two ways. One is to "sigh for the debt of sin", and the other is a pressure made on the personality by a "throat of tears". In both cases, Ibsen lets his protagonist avoid these possibilities with manic and omnipotent manoeuvres. I will now follow the "track of tears" a step further in Ibsen's work. Until now, Peer has resisted the mourning process, in which *tears* is necessary in making concern and love attainable. This other-directed character of the depressive position is the

reason for Meltzer (1978) to credit Klein for adding an ethic element to psychoanalytic theory.

When the mountain princess lures Peer into the mountain, her father, the Dovre-king, wants Peer to become a troll. In doing this, he turns to drastic remedies in trying to obstruct Peer's ability to weep. In line with the logic of the hall, where ugly seems nice and wrong seems right, he argues in a way that turns the function of *tears* upside down. The cut in the eye is at the same time the main step in changing Peer into a troll; a step that Peer resists:

DOVREGUBBEN I venstre Øjet jeg risper dig lidt, saa ser du skjævt; (....) Tænk efter, hvor megen Fortræd og Plage du kan fri dig for mellem Aar og Dage. Kom dog ihug, at Synet er Kilden till Graadens argende beske Lud. (p. 555)	THE OLD MAN. In your left eye, first, I'll scratch you a bit, till you see awry; (...) Just think how much worry and mortification You'll thus escape from, year out, year in. You must remember, your eyes are the fountain Of the bitter and searing lye of tears. (p. 77)
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The Dovre-king's regarding; "the eyes as a fountain of the lye of tears" reveals that it is the very ability to be *purified by tears* that is under attack. The tears represent lye that develops humanity, and therefore has to be avoided by destroying its source — the vision. The Dovre-king demonstrates that tears are central forces in *threatening* the locked-up character of the Dovre hall. As Templeton has pointed out; the hall's existence is dominated by evil characterized by *greed* (1997, p. 95). In many ways, this is analogous to the *forces* of the paranoid schizoid position, where the painful mourning necessary to break the sorcery and imprisonment, is beyond reach. Hence, the Dovre-king tries, permanently, to counteract a personality development performed by tears.

In the middle ages, a flood of tears pouring out as an expression of repenting, was a central figure in the conception of salvation (Hawly & Pattern, 2005). This "gift of tears" was

seen as an expression of inward suffering, which in the middle ages took over for an outward confession. It seems reasonable that Ibsen is inspired by such an idea. However I think that it is possible to sort out the emotional aspects of this process, without doing harm to the Christian ones.

What now happens in the hall alludes back to the scene with the sæter-girls, where the tears were unshed, and also to Peer's forthcoming confrontation with The Lean Person (Den Magre), who turns to a strong lye in trying to resume arrested self-development. In this way, Ibsen establishes a connection between tears, chastening and self-development. As psychodynamic elements, this resembles the steps in Klein's view on personality development.

In his meeting with the sæter-girls, Peer recognizes an urge to weep, even though he avoided the underlying reality with omnipotent defences. In The Dovre-hall, the King tries to imperil the very ability to weep. Peer has to break out of the hall to secure the *gift of tears*. Even though he never realizes it, he keeps the door to the depressive position ajar.

However, he is not able to break out without help; nearly dying, he cries for his mother and is saved by chiming church-bells. Soon after that, in struggling with The Boyg, he makes an appeal to the innocent and idealized aspects of Solveig (Your clasp-book! Hurl it straight into his eyes!/ Spændebogen! Kyl ham den bent i Øjet!), which releases a response that saves him. Both in Peer's appeals and in the responses, we can observe a combination of motherly and Christian qualities. There have been numerous interpretations of the Christian qualities, so I restrict my analysis to how Ibsen elaborates the mother-like qualities. With Klein's model in mind, Peer's appeal to his mother, and to the *force* in the idealized part of Solveig, may be interpreted as an activation of partly introjected good objects. They may have the power to save him from psychosis, although powerless in integrating his personality further.

#### **“Remorse? And maybe ’twould take whole years”**

Peer has been confronted with tears in different ways. He has avoided them by manic and omnipotent manoeuvres, but he nevertheless rescues the “gift of tears” as a sign of humanity. Thereby he resisted definitively being caught in the locked-up existence in the Dovre-hall — the paranoid schizoid position in Klein's model.

In Peer's next meeting with Solveig, Ibsen adds an element of guilt to the painful mourning, by letting his protagonist associate to the word “remorse” as the only way to a genuine love relationship.

To understand the function remorse plays, we have to see what is preceding Peer's associations to the word "remorse". In his outlaw position, Peer is building a hut in the woods. He strives to keep frightening elements outside the walls, and is working on a big locker against "goblin-thoughts / Nissebukktanker", when Solveig comes to stay with him. Peer accepts her with jubilation, but insists on keeping her at arm's length. This may indicate that Peer is in contact with forces of desire that are not consistent with love; we have seen this expressed in his promiscuous affairs with the bride, the sæter-girls and the Green Woman.

Peer thinks he does not need a locker against bewitching phenomena now as Solveig has arrived. But the protection she represents is fragile and, in her idealized state, for Peer she is carrying the dark side as a potential. So, instead of offering protection, the opposite happens: When Peer leaves to chop wood, the witch from the Dovre-hall arrives. She represents Peer's split-off, devastating desire. She claims to come in between Peer and Solveig, and it is not possible to chase her away:

Ho-Ho, Peer Gynt, Jeg kan staa for Slag!	Ho-Ho, Peer Gynt, I've no fear for blows!
Jeg kommer igjen hver evige Dag.	Be sure I'll return every day of the year.
(...)	(...)
Hun og jeg, vi skal bytte og skifte dig.	She there and I – we will take you by turns.
Far vel, kjære Gutten min, i morgen kan du gifte dig! (p. 581)	Farewell, dear my lad, you can marry tomorrow! (p. 104)

In the sentence "we will take you by turns/ vi skal bytte og skifte dig ", Ibsen demonstrates the interchangeable and mutually exclusive character of split phenomena. Whatever takes place between Solveig and Peer, the Green Woman will be present and demand to take part. This expresses how split phenomena act, and supports my interpretation that Solveig and the Green Woman represent two parts of a split whole in Peer's mind. They are mutually exclusive and mutually dependent and are thereby given a consistent unstable character. It is not possible for Peer to get rid of the Green Woman, which is underlined by the fact, that she says "I've no fear for blows".

As Peer recognizes that he cannot receive Solveig without making: "these subconscious fears come alive" (Shapiro, 1990, p. 75), he has the thought that *remorse* may

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represent a way “straight through” the bewitching existence and to a genuine love relationship with Solveig. In recognizing this, Peer seems to be at the *threshold* of the depressive position, a threshold he never manages to proceed:

<p>Anger? Saa skulde der kanske gaa Aar, før jeg vandt mig igjennem. Det Liv blev magert.</p> <p>Slaa sønder, hvad skjært er, og vent og fagert, og klink det ihob af Stumper og Skaar? (p. 582,583 )</p>	<p>Remorse? And maybe 'twould take whole years Ere I fought my way through. 'Twere a meagre life, that.</p> <p>To shatter what's radiant, and lovely, and pure, And clinch it together in fragments and shards? (p. 106)</p>
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We must notice the sequence in what happens, and in the way Peer associates, to grasp how remorse has a core function in *dissolving* the split in the mother object. His thought about remorse is followed by an idea of smashing what is “radiant, lovely and pure”. A bit earlier, Peer has used the same wording (in Norwegian) to describe Solveig. Hence, the text indicates that what has to be smashed, is the idealization Peer projects on Solveig.

Further, Peer recognizes that this process will take *time* (whole years). The track Peer's associations follow, points to Klein's idea about *reparation* (1935). First, Peer associates to remorse, then to the dissolution of the idealized object which has to be put together in a new way. Finally, he recognizes that this will take a long time without much satisfaction. This sequence has been considered an obscure point in *Peer Gynt*, or a point where Peer does not understand what request is laid upon him (Shapiro, 1990 p. 76). In my opinion, Peer understands exactly what request is laid upon him, but he is not able to tolerate the process. In my interpretation, these sequences submit to a broader meaning, not earlier emphasized in Ibsen research.

Let us examine how similar phenomena are described in Klein's idea of the depressive position. She writes that the ability to value the love object, at first, is burdened with many dangers: The good object has a tendency to activate the bad object, as we have seen in *Peer Gynt*, when the Green Woman comes in between Peer and Solveig. This activation makes the good inaccessible for a while. The remorse plays a role in reactivating the good object in a

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realistic way, which at the same time is a healing process: “ ... to pick out the good bits and do away with the bad ones” (Klein, 1935, p. 269). Because the object is idealized, and the split-off part correspondingly bad, reparation is a long-lasting process.

Because the splitting is created by frustration and aggression in the paranoid schizoid position, the reparation is accompanied by guilt and mourning, sometimes by Klein (1935) referred to as remorse. These feelings are ethical in the sense that the person recognizes his responsibility for the disintegration, which represents an opening to an ability to love. This process is long lasting, but Peer does not have tolerance for a remorseful dilemma *over time*, so his privileged moment of insight slips out. He leaves with a new “roundabout”.

**“I must bear it alone”**

Even if feelings and fantasies enter into the new love-relationship in disguised ways, Klein (1937, p. 325) underlines that it always contains fresh elements, derived from the new situation . I consider Solveig’s offer to *share the burden* as such a fresh element:

PEER GYNT <i>halvhøjt</i> Udenom! (....) Her er mørkt, og jeg har noget tungt at hente. SOLVEJG Bi; jeg skal hjælpe; vi Byrden skal dele. PEER GYNT Nej, staa der du staar! Jeg faar bære det hele. (p. 583,584)	PEER. [ <i>Half aloud</i> ] Roundabout! (....) It is dark, and I’ve got something heavy to fetch. SOLVEIG. Wait; I will help you; the burden we’ll share. PEER. No, stay where you are! I must bear it alone. (p. 107, 108)
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Compared to Peer’s mother, who is not able to carry anything that has to do with guilt, Solveig offers to share the burden of remorse that Peer is not able to sort out himself. However, the process of remorse and reparation has to be carried out by the person in

question, and cannot be dealt with by mutual sharing. Peer, however, does not contain what is necessary to fulfil the work, and cannot see any possibility but to leave.

**“It was my fault”**

Peer has experienced tears and sadness and avoided the pain by manic and omnipotent denial of emotional reality. He has touched an insight into the process of remorse and reparation, but ends up with leaving Solveig, who, in his mind, figures as the idealized part of his mother representation. Now, Peer is going to meet his real mother who is impoverished and dying as an effect of Peer’s bride robbery.

For the first time, Peer is facing the real consequences of his misdeed, both in a legal and a psychological sense. In a legal sense, mother Åse has lost her property as punishment for her son’s bride abduction. However, my focus is on the psychodynamic elements in their encounter, expressed in Peer’s emotional reactions and avoidance of guilt. He is facing the devastating consequences of his greedy desire, expressed in the werewolf phantasy, acted out through the bride robbery, and finally hitting mother Åse with full force.

Klein (1946, p. 325) describes the split built into situations like this: “As a defence against depressive anxiety, the ego makes a split between an uninjured live object and an injured dying or dead object”. Peer has left the “uninjured live object”, namely Solveig, and is now facing the *dying* object, his mother. His first response is an expression of *guilt*, a feeling he immediately wards off:

<p>AASE</p> <p>Ja, ja.</p> <p><i>(ser uroligt om i Stuen)</i></p> <p>Her ser du det lille de levned. Det er dem ligt.</p> <p>PEER GYNT <i>med et Vrid</i></p> <p>Nu igjen!</p> <p><i>(haardt)</i></p> <p>Jeg ved, jeg har Skylden.</p> <p>Hvad gavner, jeg mindes derom?</p> <p>(p. 586)</p>	<p>ÅSE</p> <p>Ay, ay.</p> <p><i>[Looks restlessly round the room.]</i></p> <p>Here you see the little They’ve left us! It’s like them, just.</p> <p>PEER. <i>[with a writhe]</i></p> <p>Again!</p> <p><i>[Harshly.]</i></p> <p>Well, I know it was my fault. What’s the use of reminding me?</p> <p>(p. 110)</p>
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Even if Peer for the first time admits guilt for his mother's miserable situation, he is not able to process or benefit from this recognition. As we have seen; Peer identifies painful feelings easily, but wards them off.

When Peer left Solveig, he left a heavy burden, and hoped to feel free at his mother's house. Therefore, I understand the uttering "again!" as referring to the feeling of *remorse* outside the hut where Solveig is seated. Then, he was able to reflect upon the feeling for a moment. Now, he wards off the guilt with repelling bodily responses. We can compare this reaction with Klein's (1957, p. 194) observation: "If guilt is experienced by an ego not yet capable of bearing it, guilt is felt as persecution ( ... ) the more integrated and stronger ego has a greater capacity to bear the pain of guilt."

In Klein's model, guilt is associated with a pain that is unbearable for an ego arrested in the paranoid schizoid position. As I have assumed, the pain that belongs to this position is perceived as a *wound*. Guilt implies accusation, and accusation activates a feeling of being attacked, which in turn opens the wound. It is therefore obvious that Peer has to ward off this "attack", stemming from an awry and crooked reality founded *inside* him:

<p>PEER GYNT (...) Nu, Moer, vil vi sammen snakke; men bare om løst og fast, – og glemme det vrange og skakke, og alt, som er saart og hvasst. – (p. 587)</p>	<p>PEER (...) Now, mother, we'll chat together; But only of this and that,— Forget what's awry and crooked, And all that is sharp and sore.— (p. 110,111)</p>
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Nothing in the situation or dialog between Åse and Peer gives rise to "sharp and sore" emotions. Therefore, it seems reasonable to suggest that the feelings Peer wards off, make up a part of his own self, an "awry and crooked" part corresponding to the existence of the Dovre hall. This emotional self-experience is in my opinion *activated* by guilt. Klein notes that guilt is experienced like persecution, either from inside as here, or from outside, or from both as we saw in connection with the wedding in the first act. When Peer is now facing pure guilt for the first time, he recognizes the realistic connection between his mother's impoverishment and his



own actions. However, he is unable to deal with the activated emotions, because of their deeper psychodynamic roots, and he therefore wards them off without delay.

The importance of this point is underlined by the fact that the very wording of the four lines is repeated somewhat later in the dialog between mother and son. Furthermore, when Åse later asks for gravity, Peer responds with a manic fantasy, completely out of touch with her wishes. Engulfed in that fantasy, he does not notice when she passes away.

Manic defences deny reality. Peer cannot accept the need for extensive and detailed reparation because he has to deny the *cause* for the reparation, the injury he has inflicted on his mother. This gives rise to grief and guilt. It may seem as if Peer knows he is driving Åse to the wrong place (Ay, broad is the way/ Her er brede Vejen.), as Chamberlain (1982, p. 46) has pointed out. Therefore, Peer is trying to make half-hearted reparation, which makes him feel better and helps him to deny the gravity of the situation. Thereby, he can remove his guilt, but he lets his mother down at her moment of death.

### **Facing psychic reality**

On his way home from the exile in the fourth act, Peer has attained a “somewhat harder expression /et haardere Udtryk”. This may be an effect of a lifelong warding off of painful feelings, demonstrated by his cynical behaviour in act four, and in his killing of the cook in the opening of act five. Now, he is confronted with psychic reality, which in my interpretation is at the centre of act five. Step by step, Peer faces the emotional state he has denied and escaped from all his life.

Back in Norway, Peer’s uttering “Earnest shunned, remorse dreaded / Flugt for Alvor, Sky for Anger” is immediately followed by a child’s weeping, and his grave listening. This tight connection between remorse and a weeping child reinforces the impression that *remorse* in this work represents an infantile process, analogous to the depressive position. Now, Peer is repeatedly confronted with his undeveloped and infantile character, represented by elements of nature. In Peer’s dialogues with these phenomena, it is obvious that they symbolize parts of his own self. This strengthens my impression that these painful phenomena express an arrested development in a psychological sense. For instance, do the thoughts, alias “thread-balls” ask for “Pusselanker”, which according to Ibsen means infant’s feet, a designation used by wet nurses.<sup>vi</sup> This can be seen as a foreshadowing of the last scene, where Solveig tells Peer that he has “been resting at his mother’s breast All the life-day long/ hvilet ved sin Moders Bryst hele Livsdagen lang .

**Commented [MA3]:** «with» is clearer than «by» here, and if it is correct english, please let it be like this. Thank you

In accordance with the intention of this paper, I will concentrate on *one* of the phenomena Peer is confronted by, namely the *tears*, and the central function Ibsen has assigned to them in repairing and developing the self.

**“Ice-spears, sharp-wounding, We could have melted”**

In the form of dew-drops, the tears accuse Peer of having lost their ability to melt hurting “ice-spears” and assist in a process of healing the wound in his breast. I have argued that the wound is activated by real and fantasied attacks on the self, for the first time experienced at the wedding, and later in connection with guilt. A lifetime has gone since he could identify his ”throat (full) of tears”, which he warded off by omnipotent seduction of the sæter-girls. Later on, he left the Dovre-hall with the ability to weep intact, but he never made use of it. Now this possibility has gone:

<p>DUGGDRAABER <i>drysser fra Grenene</i>  Vi er Taarer, der ej blev fældte.  Isbrodd, som saarer, kunde vi smelte.</p> <p>Nu sidder Brodden i Bringen lodden; –  Saaret er lukket; vor Magt er slukket.</p> <p>PEER GYNT  Takk; – jeg græd i Rondesvalen, –  fik dog lige fuldt paa Halen!  (p. 709)</p>	<p>DEWDROPS. [<i>Dripping from the branches.</i>]  We are tears Unshed for ever.  Ice-spears, sharp-wounding, We could have melted.  Now the barb rankles In the shaggy bosom;-  The wound is closed over; Our power is ended.</p> <p>PEER.  Thanks; -I wept in Rondë-cloisters,-  None the less my tail-part smarted!  (p. 232)</p>
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The important point here is that Ibsen establishes a *connection* between the two different kinds of psychic pain I have identified: A ”sharp-wounding” one, corresponding to the emotions in the paranoid schizoid position, and *mourning*, corresponding to the depressive position. The tears are the manifestation of the process of mourning, necessary to heal the wound. Mourning means accepting and processing the pain and thereby taking a step forward

in personality development. If the wound is rooted in Peer’s psychic reality, as I assume, it forces him to avoid the pain and go “roundabout“. We do not have the word “unshed” in Norwegian, but it represents an exact description of Peer’s situation. The tears have moved half the way out, but then remained unshed, keeping him at the threshold of the depressive position.

Peer’s reply that he cried for physical pain with poor consolation discloses that he does not understand the *function* of the tears. Neither does he recognize the validity of *accusing* him, whether it comes from the dew-drops, the thread-balls or from other crumbled phenomena Ibsen makes use of to let Peer face his undeveloped character. Repeatedly, he wards off the guilt that arises in him, a guilt that still is intolerable:

<p>Kjæltringstreger! Tør I skrive mig tillbogs det <i>negative</i>? (<i>haster afsted</i>) (p. 710)</p>	<p>Rascal-tricks! How dare you debit What is <i>negative</i> against me? [Hastens away.] ( p. 233)</p>
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In psychoanalysis, mental growth presupposes an ability to “withdraw projections” (Gullestad & Killingmo, 2005, p. 131). That means; to establish oneself as the source of unpleasant feelings and effects, and to recognize that this source, experienced as *external* by Peer, may be founded inside one’s own self. To admit that one may be the cause of the “negative”, arises guilt, and in the paranoid schizoid position, guilt has to be warded off at any price with fatal consequences for self-development.

**“Neither sulphur nor potash avails in the least”**

The question remains whether it is possible to resume arrested development through *tears*, or if their “power is ended” as the dew-drops just claimed. As we remember, The Dovre-king tried to end this power by removing Peer’s ability to weep. He defined tears as lye associated with humanity, which therefore had to be removed in the process of changing Peer into a troll.

After a long-lasting dialogue with The Button-moulder (Knappetøberen), who claims that Peer has lost connection to the source of self (the loop gave away/ Hæmpen glap), Peer is confronted with another allegoric figure, namely The Lean Person. With him, the question of

developing Peer's personality with help of *lye* is put on the agenda again. The Lean Person tells Peer that there are two ways of developing a personality: A negative and a positive. As with photography, the negative version is the first step in a process, while the positive is the final one. When a person has developed in a negative way, and been *arrested* on that stage, The Lean Person has some remedies to fulfil the process of developing the personality. These remedies resemble those, which the Dovre-king talked of, when trying to *stop* such a process and to arrest Peer in the "negative state" forever.

In Kleinian terms, we may say that the negative portrait is an expression of the self in a paranoid-schizoid position, arrested with "negative" features like greed, envy and splitting. Together, these features make up an un-developed self, a self that actively opposes the depressive position to emerge. In contrast, a fully developed portrait represents a self that has overcome the challenges of the depressive position, and attained an ability to realize inborn capacities. Now, it seems as if Peer is getting a new chance and we have to notice that the remedy is very strong *lye*:

<p>Jeg damper, jeg dypper, jeg brænder, jeg rensrer,          med Svovl og med lignende Ingredienser,          till Billedet kommer, som Pladen skulde give, –          nemlig det, der kaldes det positive.          Men har man, som De, visket halvt sig ud, –          saa nytter hverken Svovl eller Kali-Lud.          ( p. 738)</p>	<p>I steam it, I dip it, I burn it, I scour it,          With sulphur and other ingredients like that,          Till the image appears which the plate was designed for,-          That, namely, which people call positive.          But for one who, like you, has smudged himself out,          Neither sulphur nor potash<sup>vii</sup> avails in the least. (p. 262, 263)</p>
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If we assume a connection between the "lye of tears" which The Dovre-king wanted to save Peer from, and the lye (the potash) that The Lean Person is speaking of, we may think that both are talking about *tears* as a tool in developing the self. Therefore, The Lean Person is looking for Peer Gynt, whose name he has on a paper, in order to develop his personality by means of *tears*. However, he does not know that Peer is the person in front of him. The Lean Person perceives this person as "smudged out", and therefore impossible to develop, even

with the strongest lye, which in my interpretation means: a really deep and long-lasting mourning process.

Consequently, The Lean Person speaks about two different “Peers”, a point that may indicate a doubt in Ibsen’s play, about how late in life, and under what conditions, it is possible to fulfil the development of an arrested self, at least by means of a painful mourning, which both the Dovre-king and The Lean Person is considering, and which resembles work in the depressive position.

This ambiguity is reflected in other aspects of the last act as well. The dew-drops and the balls point to a weathering or crumbling of abilities. This ambiguity in Ibsen’s play may have its counterpart in a discussion in psychoanalysis, where Klein represents an optimistic attitude. Quoting Freud’s passage on archaeology, she seems to support his point that: ”All of the essentials are preserved ... . It depends only upon analytic technique whether we shall succeed in bringing what is concealed completely to light” (Freud, 1937 in Klein, 1957, p. 178). With reference to The Lean Person, we may note that Ibsen demonstrates a more complex attitude to this question.

#### **“Like a wild, an unending lament”**

When Peer in the fifth act eventually get close to Solveig’s cabin, he is approaching the object he has attacked in phantasy<sup>viii</sup> and actually rejected when leaving her. Now he is in closer contact with his psychic reality. That means that he is in a better position to face his inner emptiness, and the connected feelings: his *longing for* the object of his love. I have argued that the sadness in Peer’s chest, the tears in his throat and the staring eyes from a dead child, represent a need to regain the original object of desire, the mother object.

According to Klein (1940, p. 348), the depressive position arises when one is able to tolerate the painful longing. Klein sometimes chooses the word “pining”, to underline that a yearning may be tainted with painful emotions (*ibid*). Peer is now in a state of utter desolation, chasing toward Solveig’s cabin in despair. By degrees, stillness comes over him. Peer’s desolation has much in common with a poignant description Klein’s colleague, Reviere (1936) has given to a state where the inner condition is recognized, but with no ability to overcome it:

”...all one’s loved ones within are dead and destroyed, all goodness is dispersed, lost, in fragment, wasted and scattered to the winds; nothing is left within but utter desolation. Love brings sorrow, and

sorrow brings guilt; the intolerable tension mounts, there is no escape, one is utterly alone, there is no one to share or help.” (p. 313).

However, Peer is able to identify the emptiness as something *within*, which is a main step forward. He acknowledges the lack of connection, the loop that gave away in The Button-moulder’s words: the self that according to The Lean Person is smudged half the way out.

Peer is approaching Solveig’s hut, and the need to go inside prevails over the urge to escape, although he holds back for a moment. Going inside entails “an unending lament”:

<p>Nej! – Som en vild uendelig Klage er det at gaa ind, gaa hjem og tilbage. (<i>gaar nogle Skridt, men standser igjen</i>) Udenom, sa’e Bøjgen! (<i>hører Sang i Stuen</i>) Nej; denne Gang tvers igjennem, var Vejen aldrig saa trang!  (p 743)</p>	<p>No! — like a wild, an unending lament, Is the thought: to come back, to go in, to go home.  <i>[Takes a few steps on, but stops again.]</i>  Round about, said the Boyg!  <i>[Hears singing in the hut.]</i>  Ah no; this time at least right through, though the path may be never so strait! (p 263)</p>
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Peer’s “unending lament” bears an emotional meaning which is very close to “pining”. As I see it, the process Peer goes through on Solveig’s doorstep, resembles the feelings that in Klein’s view initiate a mourning process. However, we do not know what this emotional state will bring, because the play is soon ending. In the following dialogue, Solveig tells Peer that he has been “resting at his mother’s breast all the life-day long”. Although containing religious aspects, the mother-like qualities in Solveig’s way of welcoming Peer are striking. At the deepest level, Peer’s struggling with all kinds of painful feelings, has in Klein’s view separation from the breast as its focus of rotation. Peer has never separated from the breast, according to Solveig. Her words strengthen the validity of my interpretation.

When Peer now moves in with Solveig, a new situation arises. First, one may ask why the Green Woman does not interfere, as she did in their last meetings in the woods, I will point to two main changes among a number of relevant elements: the change in Solveig’s offer, and the pronounced asymmetry between the two. In act three, Solveig offered to *share*

the heavy burden with Peer, in a *mutual* effort. If we assume that the burden was the painful remorse that Peer had to accept as the way straight through to Solveig, a mutual sharing was not possible. In Klein's view, remorse and reparation are processes of internalization and integration. This way was opened when Solveig moved **into Peer**. But he had to tolerate the ambivalence and overcome the split, which he could not manage.

**Commented [MA4]:** They are not moving together, but Peer moves in to the hut, which just means a move. I hope this is ok.

Now the situation is changed; Peer is moving into the hut where Solveig is waiting. And the main point is the asymmetry that has arisen between them, expressed in his merged identification of her; the three, reciprocally exclusive, images: "My mother; my wife; oh, thou innocent woman! / Min Moder; min Hustru; uskyldig Kvinde!", we are back at the beginning of life, back at a point where mother does not offer to *share* a burden, but to *carry it all*.

What Solveig offers in the last scene may in terms of Bion be interpreted as a *container*. Thus, she may offer a more primal development, where an ability to *mourn* by degrees is made possible. However, The Button-moulder is waiting in the background, so the threat of annihilation is not overcome — at least not inside the frame of Ibsen's work.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have analysed how Ibsen presents Peer Gynt's encounters with painful feelings, especially sadness, remorse and guilt. *Sadness* appears first when Peer, sexually excited by the saeter-girls, feels an urge to weep. This sadness seems to infiltrate the excitement; and the saeter-girls *identify* the wanton Peer with a dead child.

The crucial function of tears in the development of the self is stressed in turn by the Dovre-king, the dew-drops (the unshed tears) and the Lean Person. The Dovre-king wants to *remove* the capacity to weep. The Lean Person asks if it is too late for Peer to be developed by tears, and the dew-drops announce that their powers have ended. Peer has obviously spoiled his possibilities to use the "gift of tears". Now, this capacity has faded away.

Tears are part of grief irrespective of the presence of guilt. In *Peer Gynt*, it seems like the guilt-laden grief, *remorse*, has the power to repair splitting, while grief without guilt may repair psychic wounds. We first hear about *remorse* in the sense of *reparation* when Solveig's father asks if Peer is able to "sigh for his debt of sin". Ibsen develops the thought further, when Peer somewhat later is able to recognize the repairing function of remorse. This insight, however, is not lasting because of his lack of tolerance to painful processes.

Peer's inability to tolerate guilt and remorse is demonstrated in the way he deals with the feelings. For a moment, he realizes the significance of remorse to reparation, and de-idealization as necessary in relating to a whole love object. However, he cannot *work* on his guilt, and in front of his dying mother, he escapes guilt through a magic and omnipotent phantasy. Because Peer is unable to tolerate the painful feelings, no reparation takes place. As an effect, Peer is never fully "developed". In the final scene, Peer is united with Solveig, but it is Solveig as a mother object.

In *Peer Gynt*, Ibsen unfolds a rich vocabulary of words for grief and guilt: sighing, sadness, tears, remorse and lament. And he uses it to present a complex and nuanced conception of self-development. We may especially note how his conception challenges *dichotomous* thinking, by dramatizing combined forms and intermediate positions, which often receive only sparse attention.

My reading of *Peer Gynt* revealed a striking correspondence (concerning both structure and dynamics) between Peer Gynt's character and Klein's model of personality development. Such a result may arouse objections, that the model determines the interpretation of the text. However, I started with revealing a structure in Ibsen's work, which gradually led me to Klein as the best way to understand the meaning.

#### **Notes on contributor**

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<sup>i</sup> My translation from the Norwegian: “jegets integritet (er) radikalt truet”.

<sup>ii</sup> My translation from the Norwegian: “illuminere’ (...) tekstar fra undersida”.

<sup>iii</sup> “Gnissler” means “hviner” (*ordnett.no*).

<sup>iv</sup> The Norwegian «sukke» in this connection means: «befibde sig (leve) i en af sorg, bekymring osv. præget tilstand, dels: give (følelsesfuldt) udtryk for sorg, bevæget sindsstemning.» *Ordbog over det danske Sprog (ODS)*, betydning 2. *ODS* treats Danish language from 1700 to 1950, and is a central source in tracing Ibsen’s choice of words.

<sup>v</sup> The Norwegian “anger” is usually translated with “repentance” in *Peer Gynt*. I will argue that “remorse” represents a better translation with respect to Peer’s associations to the word. In addition, “remorse” is the first proposal in dictionaries. Therefore, I have taken the liberty to change Archer’s translation at this point.

<sup>vi</sup> In a letter to his first German translator, Ibsen has explained that “Pusselanker” means infant’s feet. From the comments to the 2007 edition to *Peer Gynt*.

<sup>vii</sup> “Potash” is the same as “Kali-Lud”, which is a special kind of “lye”.

<sup>viii</sup> According to Strachey, I use the spelling “phantasy” when referring to technical psychological phenomena, and “fantasy” when referring to imagination or visionary notion. (*Dictionary of Kleinian thought*, p.5)