Pursuing models for literary characters is obviously part of the research needed to achieve a complete understanding of a work of fiction. Sometimes the author is helpful with this, and sometimes vague concerning the sources used. Edgar Allan Poe in “The Philosophy of Composition” expressed his feelings about this:

I have often thought how interesting a magazine paper might be written by any author who would - that is to say, who could - detail, step by step, the processes by which any one of his compositions attained its ultimate point of completion.

In *Peer Gynt*, which has probably been one of Henrik Ibsen’s most cross-examined and analyzed plays, the model is assumed to be clear; the Gudbrandsdal hunter and story-teller Per Gynt from P. Chr. Asbjørnson’s *Norske Huldreenventyr og Folkesagn*, first printed in 1845. It is this Per who meets the Bøyg and later, four trolls, one of them called Trond i Valfjellet (my favorite). Asbjørnson also introduces us to two other hunters from the Gudbrandsdalen area: Gudbrand Glesne, who has the involuntary reindeer ride, and Jens Klomsrud, who encounters 14 green-clad “virgins”, i.e. *hulder*.

But even though Ibsen used the fictitious experiences of Asbjørnson’s 18th century Gudbrandsdal hunters in his *Peer Gynt*, these stalwart men had none of the characteristics of his main character. They were popular local figures, and the troll stories they spun from their hunting expeditions were happily received for what they were; tall tales told purely for entertainment.

Therefore, one must look outside the Gudbrandsdal-area for Ibsen’s *Peer Gynt*-model. And I believe I have found, not one, but two models he used to fuse his main character together: one literary, and one historical.

We shall look at the literary model first, and to do that we go to Ludvig Holberg (1684-1750) who was the rallying-point of The Learned Holland society. In *Peer Gynt*, Ibsen uses quotations from at least three of Holberg’s 32 comedies: *Ulysses von Ithacia*, *Jeppe Pâ Bjerget*, *Den Stundesløse*, and, what is not well known, information from the opening scene of *Melampe*, a play rarely staged. There, two farmers are talking as a military drummer marches past. Here are the pertinent lines (in my translation):

2. Farmer: It’s best we step aside. When the enemy has attacked our country, they’ll throw a musket on every should they find.

1. Farmer: Before they draft me, I’ll cut my thumb off. Both my father and grandfather did it to avoid becoming soldiers.

2. Farmer: So you have a fine family tradition to keep up. If you could
trace your ancestors back 16 generations, nobody could deny you your noble heritage, and your right to show a hand without a thumb on your coat of arms. Also, your name, instead of Hans Jacobsen, would be Johan Thumbless.

1. Farmer: My ancestors were damn well no cowards! They were just not afraid of a simple thumb. My grandfather would have been man enough to chop his whole hand off to avoid military service.

As I said in my paper during the Ibsen Conference at Yale in 1989, “If Ibsen’s plays are a sandy beach, Holberg’s footprints can be seen all over it.” And the vestige I seek here for a model of Ibsen’s Peer, is in Holberg’s play *Erasmus Montanus*, where we also meet a Peer; Peer the Deacon.

Erasmus Montanus, the Latinized form of Rasmus Berg, is a prosperous farmer’s son in a feudal society, who has been sent to study at the University of Copenhagen. There he becomes very proficient in Latin, and learns to debate in syllogisms on any subject matter, even if it is nonsensical.

Now the farming community where he is from, happens to have a church deacon who wants to be acknowledged as a scholar, especially in Latin. But the fact is, he was a failure in school, never remembering more Latin than a few conjugations, declinations and some scattered words of Hebrew. These he scatters among his congregation, who is convinced he is fluent in these languages. And, because he has a booming voice and is able to hold a note longer than many otherdeacons, he is considered a man of great learning. Moreover, he spends his days nursing his alcoholism by visiting the local farms, where, honored by his visit, he is always offered a drink or two.

Peer the Deacon is a liar and drunkard with visions of grandeur, who suppresses reality by bluffing others. *Han er ikke seg selv, han er seg selv nok*: He is not himself, he is **full of** himself, like Peer Gynt and the trolls.

When Erasmus Montanus shows up, he immediately challenges Peer to a debate in Latin. Having heard that the deacon was such a highly learned man, he wanted to find out if this indeed were true. And sure enough, every question Erasmus asks him is countered by diverse Latin conjugations and declinations. This frustrates the young student so much, it appears he is unable to answer. Result: Peer manages to bluff his way through this first encounter.

But during the second encounter, and speaking Danish, Erasmus manages to prove through the use of syllogisms that Peer is a rooster. When he is no longer able to respond to the pure logical challenges, Peer breaks into tears. He has been made a fool of, the worst fear of a bluffer is to be exposed. Compare Peer Gynt in the Cairo asylum.

Note that Ibsen spells Peer the same as Holberg, whereas Asbjørnsen uses the common
Norwegian form of one “e”. I do not think that this is a coincidence.

However, using the model of Peer the Deacon for Peer Gynt is incomplete. While the latter shares many characteristics of the former, the bluffer from Gudbrandsdal is hardly a bloated old churchman reeking of failure. He is a dashing, handsome adventurer, not afraid to challenge anyone to a fight. And a charming Don Juan as well. He is, what we would call a lovable rascal or scoundrel. With visions of grandeur.

And which historical model would Ibsen turn to for a person of these qualities?

A 16th century charming Norwegian swashbuckler called Magnus Heinesson (Danish: Mogens Hejnesøn).

Magnus Heinesson was born on the Faeroe Islands in 1545. His father, a Norwegian clergyman, had been swept there by a storm while sailing to northern Norway to take over a parish. He fell in love with a local girl, and married her. Soon afterwards, he was appointed the resident pastor of the Faeroes.

Norway, which ruled most of the North Atlantic region during the early Middle Ages, had, by this time, lost most of its possessions; when Denmark started ruling Norway during the 1400s, it also acquired, besides the Faroes, Iceland and Greenland.

Growing up on the Faeroes, Magnus was obviously a precocious child. From an early age, he followed his father on his pastoral travels around the islands. He became an expert sailor with a thorough knowledge of the surrounding waters. At 18, he was given command of his first ship.

In 1566, at age 21, he moved with his family to Rødøy in Nordland, which would have repercussions for the rest of his life, both positive and negative. For here he met Margrethe Gyntersberg, one of the 6 daughters of a nobleman’s family from Bergen. He promptly seduced her. The resulting child would die young. Margrethe later married a man named Peder Hansen.

Moving to Bergen, Magnus started sailing merchant ships back and forth to the Faeroes, until one day, when his vessel was attacked and plundered by pirates. Greatly chagrined, he sailed to Holland, and went into Dutch maritime service. Norwegians serving on Dutch ships were far from uncommon during the turbulent 1500s. At this time, Philip II’s Spain was ruling most of the known world, with its colonies in the Americas and the Pacific. He was also subjugating the Low Countries. The Dutch welcomed Norwegian maritime expertise, and any help they could get to fight the Spanish. The Dutch were also intermittently engaged in hostile actions with Great Britain. The 1500s was a time of mercenaries, both on land and sea. Privateering and piracy were rampant.

In 1578, at the age of 33, Magnus Heinesson appeared at the court of Frederik II of Denmark-Norway. (Historically, Frederik II is known mainly as the father of Christian IV.) Having terminated his Dutch service, Magnus regaled the easy-going, party-loving,
and ardent *begersvinger* (beaker-swinger) with his many exciting sea-adventures. Frederik was favorably impressed, so favorably that he made Magnus his personal emissary to collect debts on the Faeroes.

Magnus attacked this chore with great gusto, especially since his (half) brother Jon had been appointed *Lagmann* (Judge) on the islands. The brothers would now wheel and deal to their own advantage in the trade between Bergen and the Faeroes. The following year, Magnus Heinesson, received royal sanction for this trade. This meant he could wheel and deal with greater impunity.

But now a most forceful presence arrives as the new *Lensherre* (Governor) of Bergen. His name: Christoffer Valkendorf. Formerly having served as Denmark’s Minister of Finance (*Rigets Rentemester*) Mr. Valkendorf was a no-nonsense, morally upright, totally unbribable, scrupulously honest, highly intelligent, completely uncompromising and a hard-as-flint administrator. (Replace administrator with pastor, and you have a perfect model for *Brand!*) He was sent to Bergen to break the back of the Hanseatic League, which was harassing the Bergen merchants. In short time, this hard man managed the task set for him.

Valkendorf then turned his mistrustful and suspicious eyes on the officially-sanctioned trade carried on by the Heinesson brothers between Bergen and the Faeroes. He did not like what he saw. And, when he heard complaints about Magnus’ often shady trading activities, he slowly started building a case against him. Valkendorf would be Magnus’ nemesis.

Meanwhile, the turbulent 1500s, with the constantly-changing political allegiances, sanctioned and non-sanctioned privateering and piracy continued. The stories of Magnus Heinesson’s exploits during these years are legion. He traded legally and illegally, he indulged in piracy, and was both a boon and a bane to his fellow Faeroese. His own crew once mutinied against him, resulting in 13 men being killed. He was both loved and feared. Complaints about him were constantly being sent to the King and duly noted by C. Valkendorf.

In 1580, Magnus was summoned before Frederik II to account for his trading practices. While he was vague on many issues, he reminded the King of his battles against pirates and the losses he had suffered thereby. He then volunteered to sail to Greenland to check on the status of its Norse inhabitants and investigate why no taxes were being paid. The affable King readily agreed and gladly overlooked Magnus’ dubious financial accounting. (Also duly noted by Valkendorf.)

But now things start to get complicated. In 1582, in Bergen, Magnus married Sofie Gyntersberg (Margrethe’s sister). Margrethe’s husband Peder now found out about her child with Magnus, and went to court to charge Magnus with heresy (*kjetteri*). According to the law of the time, having a child with a woman made the father a relative of her family. Hence, Magnus was *de facto* Sofie’s brother. In other words, Magnus was now charged with marrying his own sister.
When Magnus swore in court that he had never had sexual relations (heligget) with Margrethe, Hans Lindenov, the new Governor of Bergen, and a good friend of the Heinesson family, had Peder arrested and Margrethe thrown in jail (Bergenshus). The aristocratic Gyntersberg family now made the Heinessons their enemies. But, Sofie and Magnus stayed happily married and had several children together.

Valkendorf wanted to prosecute Magnus for heresy, which carried a death sentence at the time, but after a trial in Copenhagen in 1583, Frederik II brushed aside the heresy charges, and also cleared Magnus of any financial mismanagement.

Finding it expedient to cool things down, Magnus sailed off to Holland again, and became an officially sanctioned Dutch privateer, licensed to take Spanish ships. But he also took British, French, and even Danish ships, which resulted in another trial in Copenhagen, with Frederik II presiding and Valkendorf the Prosecutor. The jury cleared Magnus of all charges. He then sailed back to Holland and continued privateering.

In 1587, Magnus left Dutch service, and took up residence with Sofie at Hans Lindenov’s estate on Jutland. Magnus wined and dined with the King on Jutland that Christmas for the last time, for Frederik II died the following spring. His 11-year-old son, Christian IV became ruler with a 4-man Regency government (formynderregjering) which included Valkendorf.

Magnus moved back to Bergen in the summer of 1588, and now Valkendorf’s vice began to tighten. After the solid British victory over the Spanish Armada later that year Denmark wished to consolidate its friendship with this now great naval power. So when a British ship owner brought charges against Magnus for taking his vessel, Valkendorf had Magnus arrested and chained to a cell in Bergenshus. Ironically, this was the same place as Margrethe once was held. Furthermore, his ships were confiscated.

In the fall, Magnus was sent to Copenhagen and incarcerated in the infamous Blue Tower (Blåtårn). After a trial, the jury found him liable to refund the Englishman the value of his ship, and released him for 6 weeks so that he would have the opportunity to procure the necessary funds. He spent Christmas at the Lindenov estate and early in the new year, he faced the Court again. On January 16, 1589, Valkendorf sentenced him to death. Two days later, laughing and joking all the way to the Executioner’s block, Magnus Heinesson was beheaded.

Then came the aftermath. His untimely death made him a martyr of epic proportions. His conviction was labeled “a gross miscarriage of justice” (grovt justismord) and pure revenge by Valkendorf who had been after him for so long and failed to convict him of any wrongdoing. Sofie came from Bergen and had Valkendorf charged with murder.

During the annual Danish National Assembly (Herredag) in July 1590, Magnus Heinesson was completely exonerated and Valkendorf humiliated. He was fined 20,000 Riksdalers, plus large restitutitional fees, and sentenced to give a large sum in alms to the
poor. He lost his job as Finance Minister, but was made a High Court official (Rikshovmester) a few years before he died in 1601.

Magnus Heinesson’s body was exhumed with great pomp and ceremony, and with flags flying and church bells ringing, was brought to Hans Lindenov’s estate for a proper burial. In 1598, at the National Assembly, Lindenov had the English ship owner thrown in jail when he tried to collect the debt previously awarded him for his confiscated ship. (It had, after all, been 10 years since the Spanish Armada). Magnus Heinesson is still revered today as a national hero on the Faeroe Islands. But in Norway his name is virtually unknown. The stories circulating about him and his fantastic life would fill volumes.

And now the question remains: What did Henrik Ibsen know about Magnus Heinesson? Obviously a good deal, because this person, and his era, fascinated him enough to want to write a play about him. Ibsen was attracted to rebels, and even though Heinesson’s reasons for opposing the Danish bureaucracy may sometimes have been of dubious ethical value, he did follow a trend in Norway during the 1500s which has been called “The Century of Farmers’ Rebellions” (Bondeopprørets Hundreår). The rebellions were mostly against paying tax to the Danish Crown. So it is no wonder that Ibsen was attracted to Magnus Heinesson and his times, where there was a “lovable rogue” who lived a life defying authority. He was a person who indeed dared to be himself, for better or worse.

Ibsen probably first learned about Magnus Heinesson during his meetings at The Learned Holland, where Michael Birkeland, an historian, was collecting documents for Norske Rigs-Registranter, a series of volumes on the history of Norway. Volume II, which was published in 1863, contained eleven letters from Frederik II, telling of Magnus’ adventures on land and sea. We know Ibsen mentioned that he wanted to write “a historical play” from this era. Notes taken from these royal letters were found among Ibsen’s papers after his death.

That Ibsen intended to write a play about Magnus Heinesson before going to Italy in 1864, is beyond doubt. In a letter dated March 7, 1866, the year after he had written Brand, he wrote his publisher, Frederik Hegel, to inform him of a new play, which “takes place around the time of Christian IV’s youth”. Mr. Hegel, however, somehow misunderstood, and thought he was working on a play about Christian IV himself. Ibsen wrote back on November 2: “No, not about Christian IV, but something during the time of his youth.” He also added: “But I have a few other subjects in mind, so it might not be the first project.”

So now it appeared that either Peer Gynt or Magnus Heinesson would be his next play. I agree with Einar Østvedt, who wrote the book: Mogens Heinessøn, Et Ibsen-Skuespill som aldri ble skrevet (“Mogens Heinessøn, An Ibsen Drama that was never written”) that the similarities between Magnus and Peer were just too great for him to write both plays. It was either one or the other.
After *Peer Gynt*, Ibsen continued to be interested in Magnus Heinesson, as new information about him became available. However, he would write *The League of Youth*, instead. When this play was finished, while living in Dresden, we have the following anecdote from 1870, printed in the Danish *Nationaltidende* (“National Times”) July 28, 1926.

When the Danish author, Peter Andreas Rosenberg, was 12 years old, he remembered Ibsen visiting his father. On this occasion, Ibsen entertained the family with exciting stories of Magnus Heinesson. After he had finished, Peter asked him: “What kind of person was this Magnus Heinesson?” After pondering the question, Ibsen responded slowly, and with great emphasis: “Han var en stor skurk!” (“He was a big scoundrel!”)

And so, I find that Henrik Ibsen fused Peer the Deacon and Magnus Heinesson together for his model of Peer Gynt: One literary and one historical character. And what a great theatrical character he turned out to be.

**Bibliography**


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