

READERS AND “MISREADINGS” OF *BRAND* (1866)

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Introduction

This article is about the events that made it possible for the most important turning point in Ibsen’s career to transpire. After being voted the most worn out member among the Scandinavians in Rome the winter of 1866, Ibsen resumed in the spring his elegant style from the Bergen years: a visible and theatrical way of underlining the fact that *Brand* had become a great success and that ‘Ibsen the playwright’ had gotten his breakthrough.

Among scholars, *Brand*, and how to understand it in the framework of Ibsen’s oeuvre, seems to create trouble. While the importance of *Brand* in Ibsen’s career is widely accepted, the play is at the same time said to be the most misunderstood of all of Ibsen’s plays. Bjørn Hemmer, for instance, admits on the one hand that “the poem created the fundament on which he built his [...] fame and recognition” (Hemmer, 2003, 124) yet at the same time he writes that: “...the work and its main character was rather negatively understood, and rejected in clear words by leading critics...” (Hemmer, 2003, 124). Other scholars share Hemmer’s slightly paradoxical view on *Brand*’s reception, often coupling it with the idea that Norway’s “heavy and provincial” (Moi, 2006, 103–4) intellectual life created a barrier for Ibsen, and that only after being recognized outside Norway did he get acceptance among Norwegians.

It is easy to find support for the view that *Brand* was widely misread. In a much quoted letter to Brandes from 26 June 1869, Ibsen complains that “*Brand* has been misunderstood, [...] The misunderstanding is clearly rooted in the fact that *Brand* is a vicar, and that the conflict is placed in the religious sphere. But both these circumstances are quite irrelevant...”¹

Here I will approach these issues from different but related angles. First, I will comment on the reviews of *Brand* from the 1860s. Is it correct that the work was entirely negatively understood, and rejected by leading critics? Then I will take a quick look at how the play was received in the market, and also ask: Who were *Brand*’s readers? Finally, I will return to Ibsen’s letter and try to understand it in the light of some dominant intellectual currents in Norway at the time. Could there be alternative ways to interpret Ibsen’s complaints about the “misreadings”?

The “misreadings” of *Brand*

The number and the length of reviews give an indication on how the literary establishment of the 1860s looked upon the publication of *Brand*. The following is a list of the most important reviews of *Brand* from 1866 and the subsequent years:

NORWAY

Paul Botten Hansen, *Illustreret Nyhedsblad* 1 April 1866 (1114 words)

Marcus Jacob Monrad, *Morgenbladet* 5 April 1866 (3952 words, unsigned)

¹ http://www.ibsen.uio.no/BREV_1844-1871ht|B18690626GB.xhtml

Ditmar Meidell, *Aftenbladet* 7 April 1866 (2961 words):
 Aasmund Olavsson Vinje, *Dølen* 29 April 1866 (5839 words)
 Paul Botten Hansen, *Illustreret Nyhedsblad* 29 April 1866
 Marcus Jacob Monrad, *Morgenbladet* 2, 9, 16, and 23 September 1866 (6963 words).
 Aasmund Olavsson Vinje, *Dølen* 16 September 1866
 O.T. Krogh, *Morgenbladet* 29 October 1866
 Kristian Anastas Winterhjelm, *Morgenbladet* 1 and 4 December 1866 (6007 words)
 M. J. Monrad, *Morgenbladet* 3 November 1866
 O.T. Krogh, *Morgenbladet* 3 November 1866
 Anonymous, *Morgenbladet* 1 December 1866
 Anonymous, *Morgenbladet* 4 December 1866
 Jens Lieblein in the journal, *Norden*, Kria. 1866 (2435 words)

DENMARK

E. Bøgh, *Folkets avis* 1 May 1866
 Philip Weilbach, *Berlingske Tidende* 4 April 1866
 Clemens Petersen, "Fædrelandet" April 1866
 Georg Brandes, *Dagbladet* 23 May 1866 (1905 words)
 Anonym, *Illustreret Tidende* 29 April 1866

SWEDEN

Fredrik Bætzmann (Norwegian correspondent) *Aftonbladet* 31 Mars 1866
 Anonymous, *Ny illustrerad Tidning* 22 September 1866
 Carl Rosenberg (Danish), *Nordisk Tidskrift för politik, ekonomi och litteratur* 1866

BOOKS/JOURNALS

F(rederik). Helveg: *Bjørnson og Ibsen i deres to seneste Værker*. Copenhagen 1866
 Georg Brandes: *Æsthetiske Studier*. Copenhagen 1868
 J. Vibe: *Litterairt Tidsskrift*. Kristiania 1866. p. 183-223. (Only this issue appeared.)
 (6500-7000 words)
 Laura Petersen: *Brands Døtre. Et Livsbillede af Lili*. Christiania: Cappelen 1869

We see that there were at least 23 individually published reviews in Norway (since Jacob Monrad actually wrote five different texts, and Vinje, Botten Hansen and Winterhjelm wrote two texts each), many of them long, in addition to the four books solely² dedicated to *Brand*. Then there were a number of Danish and Swedish reviews (the list is not exhaustive). The conclusion one can draw from this is that the play was seen as a great literary event, and that it triggered an intense debate, which ran through 1866 and into the following years.

When reading the reviews of *Brand*, a few things stand out. Firstly, they all, without exception, recognize *Brand* as a splendid work, and Ibsen as a great author. This goes for both the play's aesthetic values as well as for its ideas. The poem is "monumental", it "shows the true Poet, a rich and autonomous spirit"³ (Botten

² Except for Helveg (1868) which is about Bjørnson, too.

³ <http://ibsen.nb.no/id/11192747.0>

Hansen), Ibsen “understands how to extract pure music out of language”⁴ (Monrad). Ditmar Meidell writes: “One dare easily say that not only is this the gifted writer’s most important work, but also that it will secure itself a lasting and influential place in the nation’s literature.”⁵ Aasmund Olavson Vinje states that “It is a masterpiece, [...] huge and moving.”⁶

Despite this unanimous acclaim, though, there is little doubt that *Brand* created challenges for its reviewers. The play collided violently with the aesthetic norms of the day, a set of norms that corresponded with one version or another of aesthetic idealism in the arts. Interestingly, one of the critics who most explicitly formulates these idealistic norms of in relation to *Brand* is the one who in the subsequent years most enthusiastically criticizes them. Georg Brandes writes in 1866: “The art of poetry only wants war for the sake of peace, only lets forces clash against each other in order to make the harmony in the end even more deep and uplifting.”⁷ In that respect Brandes, despite *Brand*’s clear “strength and beauty”, finds the play “less satisfactory.”⁸ Brandes particularly dislikes self-reflexive remarks, as when the bailiff says: “I am visibly moved.” Self-reflexive remarks are a sign of an artist reconciled neither with himself nor with society, writes Brandes, and such reconciliation is one of the core tasks of the arts.⁹

A different quality that creates trouble is the play’s realism. Even though the text is formed in rhyme and meter, the constant movement between “high” (the hero) and “low” (the others) makes the play hard to comprehend within the aesthetic ideals of many of Ibsen’s critics. Monrad writes: «In contrast to the society’s dominating flabbiness, Ibsen wants to put a sterling ideal character, who is being destroyed in his battle with these environs’ wickedness. But such an event is not tragic.” Brandes regrets that Ibsen denies Brand’s meeting a “truer hero”, and Meidell states that the uneven relationship between Brand and his antagonists makes it hard to take the play seriously as a whole.

Nonetheless, despite the play’s break with the aesthetic ideals of the time, one can hardly say that any of the critics actually reject *Brand* as such. On the contrary, their respect for the play and its artistic qualities is beyond doubt. It seems that instead of rejecting the play, the critics search for alternative reading strategies in order to give it a meaningful interpretation. It is therefore possible to understand the many and very different readings of the play as attempts in order to “rescue” *Brand*. More than a few of these critics recognize *Brand* as a *play of transition*, or a play for a time in transition, suggesting that the play might capture something that the readers are not ready for. I have counted at least six different genres in which the critics attempt to place *Brand*: it is a reading *poem* and *not* a drama (Meidell), it is a drama of ideas, it is a satire in the Roman sense, a satire in the comic sense, it is a tragedy in several different meanings of the word, and a syllogism (Ibsen’s own term)¹⁰ or a combination of all of these. Also, many of the critics get back to *Brand* with new

⁴ <http://ibsen.nb.no/id/102830.0>

⁵ <http://ibsen.nb.no/id/103058.0>

⁶ <http://ibsen.nb.no/id/310.0>

⁷ <http://ibsen.nb.no/id/11174160.0>

⁸ <http://ibsen.nb.no/id/11174160.0>

⁹ <http://ibsen.nb.no/id/11174160.0>

¹⁰ http://www.ibsen.uio.no/BREV_1844-1871htB18690626GB.xhtml

interpretations, as though giving the play a new chance. Monrad, for instance, writing on 5 April, says that the play is “admirable” in its consequence and tries to read it as a tragedy.”¹¹ Later, in September, he writes four long articles where he rejects *Brand* being a tragedy, discussing the possibility of reading the play as a Roman satire instead.¹² The reason, he writes, for penetrating *Brand* so deeply is that the play is “gigantic” in its construction and “splendid” in its poetry.¹³

Embraced by the readers

Another reason that the critics returned to *Brand* was that the public took great interest in the play, and that interest only increased over the time. Reviews that were based on a quick first time reading needed revision after being met with reactions. And the reactions must have been massive. There are many testimonies of the widespread readings of *Brand*. This is Paul Botten Hansen, in his second review of *Brand* (*Illustreret Nyhedsblad* 29 April):

Wherever you go, the only talk is of *Brand*, [...], regardless of one’s own admiration for the Poem, [one] has found oneself considerably tired by the “perpetual one and the same – to all times at all places...”

We can find the same kind of comments elsewhere. The then twenty-three-year-old Edvard Grieg writes to Ibsen:

I have read your splendid *Brand*, it’s a strange thing about truth, people can take it in poetry, (...) How else can one explain *the tremendous furor Brand has created, the huge numbers who daily gulp it down?* (the author’s italics) (cited in Meyer 1971, 57).

The 1869 book *Brand’s Daughters* by Laura Petersen takes it for granted that everybody knows and has read *Brand*, this “topic of today, this subject to every newspaper’s critic...” (Kieler 1969, 7)

For the first time in his career, then, Ibsen finds himself embraced by the readers. A quick look at the creation, printing and distribution of *Brand* confirms this impression. When Danish Gyldendal in the summer 1865 agreed to print Ibsen’s new play, publisher Fredrik Hegel had had the idea that it was an historical drama. On the basis of this, he suggested printing 1250 copies. When reading the proof copy of *Brand*, and thus learning that this instead was a play about contemporary society, Hegel had second thoughts. “Regardless of its beauties”, he doubted that it would have the same appeal as an historical play. He wrote to Ibsen in Rome and suggested a reduction of the print run by half. But Ibsen’s reply got lost in the mail, so with no answer from Ibsen, Hegel kept his word and printed the 1250 copies as originally planned. The book came out on 16 March 1866. After two weeks all copies were sold out. A new print run of 555 copies was out on 24 May, a third of 574 on 16

¹¹ <http://www.ibsen.net/index.gan?id=102830&subid=0>

¹² <http://www.ibsen.net/index.gan?id=69783&subid=0>

¹³ <http://ibsen.nb.no/id/69783.0>

August, and a fourth print run of 774 copies came in December. This makes a remarkable four print runs within the year of publication. (During Ibsen's life time the play was printed a total of fourteen times.) By comparison, Ibsen's previous play *The Pretenders* from 1864 sold poorly, and six years later, that is, four years after *Brand's* success, the publisher Dahl still had more than 200 copies left (Meyer, 1967, 231).

Religious "misreadings": The author, the critics and the readers

There is no doubt, then, that with *Brand*, something entirely new happened between Ibsen and the public. A whole new group had turned to him, reading his play, discussing it, "gulping it down" in large numbers. On top of that, the reviews were extremely respectful and mostly positive. So why did Ibsen express such disappointment in his letter to Brandes? Why did he feel that *Brand* had been misunderstood? After reading the reviews, one sentence in the letter in particular strikes me as being hard to understand: "The misunderstanding is clearly rooted in the fact that *Brand* is a vicar, and that the conflict is placed in the religious sphere."¹⁴

Ibsen might be right when he writes that *Brand* could have been placed in an entirely different environment and still demonstrate the same idea. With the exception of one critic (who explicitly writes "from a Christian point of view"), though, I have problems finding support for the view that the critics have, as Ibsen writes, stressed the religious dimensions of the play. On the contrary, when going through the texts of Monrad, Vinje, Botten-Hansen, Brandes and the other main critics, one finds that the discussions are not about religious issues. The critics mainly discuss the aesthetic and ethical problems that the play raises. The religious ideas are often mentioned only in passing.

So could it be that we are searching in the wrong place? Could it be that Ibsen had something other than the newspapers and journals in mind when he felt that *Brand* has been misread?

To search for an answer to these questions one needs to look at the situation in Norway in the 1860s. Actually, one might assume that, given *Brand's* main character and plot, religious interpretations of *Brand* would dominate, given the fact that Norway in the 1850s and -60s saw the rise of several pietistic movements. Gustav Adolph Lammers was a vicar who, after having built a new church for his congregation, broke with the Norwegian state church and founded the first dissenting denomination in Norway. Lammers was a close friend of Ibsen's sister Hedvig, and is rightfully said to have inspired *Brand*. While Lammers' influence was limited, though, there were other preachers with a much stronger impact. Clearly inspired by Søren Kierkegaard's ideas, Gisle Johnson changed the whole spiritual atmosphere in Christiania in the 1850s and -60s. What was special about Johnson was that he got a grip on citizens of all classes and had a particularly strong impact in learned circles (Molland 1979, 198). Gunnar Ahlström, who makes the pietistic movement into a villain in his book about the modern breakthrough, writes: "It was the dark Christianity of Kierkegaard that (...) confronted with the traps of modernity, by fear and trembling, built up an organization of missionary houses and pietistic churches, where philanthropic activity coupled with judgments and warnings about hell"

¹⁴ [http://www.ibsen.uio.no/BREV_1844-1871ht\[B18690626GB.xhtml](http://www.ibsen.uio.no/BREV_1844-1871ht[B18690626GB.xhtml)

(Ahlstöm, 1972, 89). As an example of the impact of the Johnsonian awakening, in numbers as well as over time, one can look at the popularity of his disciple Lars Oftedal's (1838–1900) book *Basunrøst og harpetoner* from 1871. The book was printed sixteen times in Oftedal's lifetime, and 120,000 copies were distributed (Molland, 1979, 221). But Oftedal was not an exception in being read by many. Active in the early years of the nineteenth century, another Christian preacher, Hans Nielsen Hauge, is said to have sold more than 250,000 copies of his books. So even if Norway might have been "heavy and provincial", there is no doubt that a reading culture did exist. In 1865 Ludvig Daae expresses his discontent with the situation. (Linneberg, 1992, 44). The reading has increased immensely over the last years, he writes, but at the expense of the serious, learned literature (poetry and science). The result is that entertainment and religious texts overflow the bookshops. (Linneberg, 1992, 44). This makes sense when we compare the sales numbers of Oftedal and Ibsen.

In this context I want to return to the book *Brand's Daughters*, written by Laura Petersen when she was only 18 years old. The book, a story about who Brand could have been had he had daughters, has a 34-page introduction. The introduction is a fictionalized conversation among "Several *actual* existing individuals' different judgments of *Brand* (...) five men and four elderly and three younger ladies." (Kieler, 1869, 6) We recognize many voices and arguments from the newspaper critics in the discussion. But the protagonist, Mrs. Hall, is there to present a dissenting voice. Her admiration for *Brand* is great, but not naïve. In *Brand* she sees a representative of the *Zeitgeist*, and she uses quite strong language to make her point clear:

The world and the life in it is like one tremendous, rough sea full of depravity, spiritual illness and misery. Those in the middle of the current don't see that, [...] they are in the middle of a dangerous maelstrom. [...] Really, [Brand has its mission as ...] a true Christian's serious voice [...] In particular I regard the play profitable opposite those who, with a certain disgust towards [...] all "religious sophism" flee from all that contains the Truth. [...] and nothing of what the Poet has described, is exaggerated. [...] (Kieler, 1869, 27).

Here we find, in the center of a group of twelve discussing *Brand's* impact and greatness, a woman echoing the popular language of the pietistic preachers of her time, and for her *Brand* fits smoothly into that discourse. Although highly speculative, one could ask how many did what Mrs. Hall did, discovering Ibsen because of *Brand* and loving it because of its religious themes? She finally adds, "I do not know Ibsen, and I have heard little about him as a person. Besides, *Brand* is the only work I have read by him." (Kieler, 1969, 27). Do we see in Mrs. Hall a typical first time reader of Ibsen around his breakthrough, buying *Brand* and sharing her enthusiasm? One could then be tempted to ask if it is the "Mrs. Halls" Ibsen has in mind when complaining about *Brand* being misread? Ibsen

read *Brand's Daughters* only later,¹⁵ but my point is that it might not be the written reviews he means at all when complaining about religious readings. Could it be that he refers to what he knows or thinks he knows about the many *common* readers of *Brand*? But if this is so, then the Norwegian religious reading culture, encouraged by Hauge, Lammers and others, can also be said to have paved the way for Ibsen (if nothing else, at least financially), rather than being a barrier for him.¹⁶

Earlier we saw that the critics disagreed widely on how to read *Brand*, and that many strategies were tested in order to make sense of its protagonist. To the list of genres one certainly has to include "religious tragedy". The dissenting interpretations underline the impression of a play of transition, a play that captures the tense relationship between the religious and "modern" currents, between idealistic and domestic heroes and between learned critics and common reading in a time when reading became widespread. In this perspective one also can see the focus on "breaks" and "epochs" in the history of literature in later scholarly attempts to categorize and explain how a complex web of impulses and expressions manifest themselves in new and original ways. Ibsen's success is often explained by his break with Norway, which might be true to some extent. But when we take a closer look at the reception of *Brand*, we see that the play was embraced by critics and readers alike. This is to me a testimony of how the play captured a Norwegian *Zeitgeist*.

Conclusion

In the case of *Brand* it seems that Ibsen "profited" greatly from the particular situation in Norway in the 1860s. The tense relationship at the time between the ecclesiastical establishment and dissenters like Lammers worked as raw material and role models for *Brand*. It was also a time of transition within the arts. We see that the play managed to touch upon these tensions and tendencies in a way that felt extremely powerful at the time. The result was that *Brand* was discussed "at all times at all places" (Botten Hansen 1866). The reviews were many, and despite finding the play extremely challenging, the critics did not reject it. The numbers that bought the book were high and the number of readers even higher. The success that *Brand* brought with it made Ibsen able to distance himself from the frustrating role as Bjørnson's bitter and poor protégé, and to celebrate this independence by getting dressed for the bourgeoisie and become their chronicler.

¹⁵ Ibsen received a copy of Petersen's book in 1870 and thanked her in a letter, expressing a similar view as in the letter to Brandes: "Everything that in your eyes is there for a religious sake can be taken out without damaging the play's organism."

http://www.ibsen.uio.no/BREV_1844-1871ht|B18700611LK.xhtml

¹⁶ I have met the argument that Kieler's book is not quite enough evidence to truly make the case here, because of its fictional character. I believe, though, that the time has come to discuss the strict line between "fictional" and "non-fictional" (giving the latter's status as "better evidence" or source). If we address this issue in the reception of *Brand*, the following questions emerge: Which of the reviews are fictional and which are not? (Read for instance A. O. Vinje's reviews (<http://ibsen.nb.no/id/186>) in the light of this question.) What status should letters have in this context? One also has to bear in mind that men and women tended to express themselves in different genres. We therefore need to ask ourselves why, and how, we consider one of these genres as better sources of the reception than the other.

One issue this article raises, and which remains to be explored further, is that a key to understanding *Brand's* (commercial) success is to be found in the introduction to *Brand's Daughters* by Laura (Petersen) Kieler (1869). The book has so far not been recognized as part of the *Brand* reception. A possible interpretation of *Brand's Daughters* is that *Brand* was welcomed, not rejected, in the strong and widespread religious reading cultures in Norway at the time. A further exploration of these questions might alter the way we understand Ibsen's path to fame, because it means that the religious currents did not so much block as they opened up for Ibsen's breakthrough as a dramatist. It also means that one should pay less attention to Ibsen's *break* with Norway and more to how the authorship was *connected* to social, intellectual, religious and financial currents within the Norwegian community at the time.

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Biographical note

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Summary

Scholars do not seem to come to terms with *Brand's* role in Ibsen's career as a playwright. While the importance of *Brand* is widely accepted, the play is at the same time said to be the most misunderstood of all Ibsen's plays. The argument goes that Norway's "heavy and provincial" intellectual atmosphere at the time created a barrier for Ibsen, and that only after being recognized outside Norway did the play get acceptance among Norwegians. Ibsen himself contributes to this conception in his famous letter to Brandes from 26 June 1869, where he complains about how *Brand* has been misunderstood.

This article challenges the impression that *Brand* was not accepted or understood by the Norwegians in the 1860s. We approach the subject via three different angles. Firstly, by reading the reviews of *Brand* from the 1860s, we see that the critics respected the play and its artistic qualities beyond doubt. Secondly, a look at how the play was received in the public shows that not only was *Brand* a great commercial success, it also became the prime subject of discussion, both in private and public settings. Finally, I read Ibsen's letter in light of some dominating intellectual currents in Norway at the time, and ask: Are there alternative ways of interpreting Ibsen's allegations about being misunderstood? Could it be that one should pay less attention to Ibsen's *break* with Norway and more to how the authorship was *connected* to social, intellectual, religious and financial currents within the Norwegian community at the time?

Keywords

Brand, reception, religious tragedy, play of transition, new readers, author autonomy, economic success, breakthrough, Laura Kieler