

Marie Wells

The Persuasive Rhetoric of Ibsen's *Brand*

Brand is a play about which the last word can never be said – the open and enigmatic ending quite apart from anything else ensures that. The list of those who have grappled with the play is a long one, but one of the most thoroughgoing, coherent and convincing interpretations is that of Bjørn Hemmer in his study *Brand, Kongs-emnerne, Peer Gynt* (Universitetsforlaget, Oslo, 1972). His interpretation is a religious one and may be summarised by saying that in the plays mentioned Ibsen distinguished between essential and existential values. As a result,

Ibsens helt har en dobbelt forpliktelse, overfor Gud og overfor verden. Han kommer gjerne til et punkt der han ikke lenger klarer å forene de to hensyn. Vanligvis – men ikke alltid – lar Ibsen helten lide et eksistensielt nederlag samtidig med at han vinner en essensiell seier; han virkeliggjør sitt essensielle selv, men forspiller dermed sine jordiske muligheter. [p. 5]

More recently Vigdis Ystad has offered another thoroughgoing and coherent interpretation of the play.¹ Taking as her starting point Ibsen's denial that *Brand* is an essentially religious play, she argues that the play is really the tragedy of a rigid personality and that Brand's rigidity of will is a defence against love and the type of openness to life and its diversity which is represented by Agnes. In fact she sees Agnes as Brand's main opponent,² and argues that in the last moments of the play when faced with the ice-church as a representation of his own values, Brand breaks down and accepts the rightness of Agnes's values, as he weeps and gives expression to his longing for 'Lys og Sol og Mildhed'.

Both Hemmer's and Ystad's interpretations pay close attention to the text and Hemmer in particular tries to

consider *all* the evidence, and yet the two scholars come to very different conclusions because their starting points are different – Hemmer's is religious, Ystad's psychological and interpersonal.³ Not surprisingly it is in relation to Agnes and the last section of Act V that their differences are most clear. However, if one reads the two interpretations alongside the text of *Brand*, I think one is compelled to see that Ibsen's persuasive rhetoric⁴ favours one interpretation rather than the other. A separate but associated point is that a reading of the text in one direction has consequences for how far one can consider *Brand* a tragedy.

Rather than consider in isolation the scenes in which Brand's and Agnes's values come into conflict, I think it is important to see how from the start Ibsen undermines most of the characters Brand comes into contact with (this does not apply to the doctor or to Agnes) and through the rhetoric of the text gives Brand an irrefutable case. The play is monolithic. It revolves round Brand and from the moment he enters with the peasant at the beginning of Act I till the moment when he and Gerd are swept away in the avalanche at the end of Act V he is never off stage, while at a rough guess I would say that Agnes is on stage for less than a sixth of the time. Furthermore from the first page the play sweeps unrelentingly to its climax, as the conflict which starts as an external battle against the elements soon becomes a much more psychological struggle which involves Brand's mother, his child, his wife and eventually his own life and faith. This is another aspect of the play's persuasive rhetoric and it is a dull reader who is not carried along by it. The versification – at least in the original – reinforces the urgent sweep of the play.

The peasant in the first scene is no match for Brand. His daughter has said that she cannot die happy if she does not see him before she dies, but he dare not cross the treacherous mountain upland in the mist and rain to visit her. Brand on the other hand insists on going on because, 'jeg gaar en Stormands Bud'⁵; when the peasant asks the name of the 'Stormand', Brand replies 'Gud'. Even in this short exchange Ibsen establishes Brand's credentials, and as the scene progresses

the peasant emerges as a pettier and pettier figure, whose every statement, is one that Brand can disagree with. Thus when the peasant says that Brand is risking his life, Brand replies 'Hvis Herren for min Død har Brug, – / velkommen Flom og Foss og Slug!' (p. 180). The final demonstration of the peasant's small-mindedness is his fear that if Brand were to go on alone, and something were to happen to him, he, the peasant might get blamed. In this first meeting between Brand and another, Brand in every exchange reveals his superiority – he has physical courage, commitment and the conviction that he is fulfilling God's purpose.

Shortly after Brand and the peasant part company, Brand catches sight of two figures dancing across the landscape. As they do and as Brand watches and describes their progress, the mist and rain that have enveloped the action so far clear to reveal a bright summer morning – the nature symbolism here reflecting the youthful happiness of the two people who are Einar and Agnes. However, Ibsen is not content to let the confrontation be between youthful happiness and severe otherworldliness, for he immediately undermines Einar's and Agnes's position, by letting them in their carefreeness come to the very edge of a snow cornice which overhangs a sheer precipice. It is Brand who warns them and their response to his warning only further undermines their position,

Einar: Det har ej Nød med mig og hende!

Agnes: Vi har et Liv at lege rundt!

Einar: I Solskin er en Færd os undt,
som først om hundred Aar har Ende. [p. 186]

The initial radiant impression which Einar and Agnes made, and which Brand registered is thus modified, both by the stage action and by what the two say – their happiness is associated with frivolousness and irresponsibility. During the remainder of the encounter the discussion is between Brand and Einar, Agnes says nothing. It emerges that all three are going down to the coast to take the same boat, but Brand declares that whereas they are going to their wedding he is going to a funeral, the funeral of the God they call theirs. In fact up to

now Einar and Agnes have hardly mentioned a god except as a God of Joy who led them to each other, but Ibsen lets Brand, undeterred, paint their God as the God of hacks and time-serving drudges. After this Einar twice tries to work out who or what Brand is, once describing him as sick, which Brand refutes, and then wondering whether he is one of the new school of fire and brimstone preachers, which Brand also denies, saying he is not even sure that he is a Christian. The only thing he is sure of is that he is a man and that something is eating away at the marrow of the men of Norway, something which he goes on to describe as half-heartedness. Einar feels compelled to agree, thus letting his opposition to Brand collapse. However, he tries to re-assert his position by saying that he does not see what this has to do with the God he worships. This gives Brand the opportunity to defeat Einar on his own ground – that of art. He says rather condescendingly that he is sure that Einar paints God as an old man and when Einar concedes this, Brand conjures up a picture which becomes more and more of a caricature. He then describes *his* God,

Min er en Storm, hvor din er Vind,
 ubøjelig hvor din er døv,
 alkjærlig der, hvor din er sløv; [p. 194]

and his mission which is to help man regain his original divine stamp,

af disse Aandens Torsoklumper,
 Af disse Hoder, disse Hænder,
 et h e l t skal gaa, saa Herren kjender
 sin M a n d igjen, sit største Værk,
 sin Ættling, Adam, ung og stærk! [p. 195]

I have dealt with these early scenes in such detail in order to show how Ibsen the whole time twists the dialogue to favour Brand and to undermine the position of others.

Brand has clearly made a profound impression on Agnes and when they meet again in Act II she goes with him in the

boat across the storm-lashed fjord to shrive the man who has killed his child and then tried to take his own life. Agnes has remained outside while Brand has been with the dying man, and when he comes out he finds her down by the fjord's edge lost in a vision which presumably was inspired by his deed. In her vision Agnes sees 'en større Jord, [...] Have ser jeg, Floders Munding; / Solblink gjenem Taagen glimter', and laying her hand on her breast, she continues

Herinde

kan jeg kjende Kræfter ulme,
 kan jeg føle Floder svulme,
 kan jeg se en Dugning rinde.
 Hjertet, lig en Verden, vider
 stort sig ud till alle Sider,
 og jeg hører Stemmer tolke:
 d e n n e Jord skal du befolke! [p. 217]

The scene is a crucial one for Ystad, for she says that Agnes's vision shows that she too 'bærer i seg lengselen etter en høyere virkelighet og en større verden som kaller på menneskelig innsats. Men den har sitt utspring i hennes hjerte, som i synet utvider sig til å omfatte og oppfylle hele verden' (p.142). But the world that Agnes sees in her vision is also a harsh one, something Ystad forgets to mention, 'Intet Livstegn er at finde; / det er ligt en Jord, som skabes', where palm trees sway in 'hvasse Vinde' and cast 'Skygger sorte'. Twice in the vision voices tell her 'n u du frelses eller tabes; / gjør dit Værk, det ansvarstunge' (p. 217). Agnes's vision acts like a cue to Brand who suddenly sees that

Eget Hjerte – D e t er Kloden,
 nyskabt og for Gudsliv moden;
 d e r skal Viljegribben dødes,
 d e r den nye Adam fødes. [p. 218]

Ystad seems to think that there is a qualitative difference between Agnes vision and Brand's insight – the difference between 'den aktive og totalt offervillige kjærligheten' and

'selvrettferdig isolasjon og hatefulle ødeleggelseslyst' (p.142). The text seems to me to give little support for this view since both speak of the heart as the starting point from which the transformation of the man and the world is to take place.

Immediately after the above scene Brand's mother enters, and it is because of her that Brand makes the final decision to stay in the valley. When she leaves, Brand realises how much has changed in the course of the day, 'Kvelden blev ej Morgnen lig. / Da stod Sind og Hug till Krig' (p. 227). Before he can compare this to the situation now, Agnes takes his words and changes their direction, 'Morgnen var mot Kvelden bleg. / Da jeg vilde Løgn og Leg, / vilde vinde, vilde skabe, / hvad min Vinding var at tabe' (p. 227). These are a crucial four lines, for they show Agnes freely choosing the same essential values that Brand espouses, the values that will lead to existential loss, but essential gain. However, almost as if he had not heard what Agnes said, Brand continues his comparison between the morning and the evening. At this point Einar returns to 'reclaim' Agnes, and Brand, who has not 'taken' her simply asks, 'Er det hende? D e r hun sidder.' Brand is often accused of fanaticism, but he cannot be accused of trying to seduce Agnes to his cause. In fact he tries to warn her off, but she has already chosen, and like Solveig in *Peer Gynt* she knows that her life has been decisively changed and where her loyalty now lies. Just as Solveig joins her fate to that of Peer while he is an outlaw in the forest, Agnes joins hers to that of Brand in a narrow valley 'stængt i Revnens Halvnatt inde' (p. 230). As if remembering the voice from the vision saying 'nu du frelses eller tabes; / gjør ditt Værk, det ansvarstunge' she joins Brand with the words, 'Ind i Natten. Gjennem Døden, - / Bagom dæmrrer Morgenrøden' (p.231). Agnes has a warmer, more loving personality than Brand, but she clearly puts it at the service of Brand's mission.

Three years later at the beginning of Act III Brand acknowledges fully that with Agnes 'drog Kjærligheden ind, / som solklar Vaardag i mit Sind' (p. 234), and that whatever potentiality for love had existed in him, it had not blossomed until Agnes and Alf entered his life. Agnes takes it further and says his love does not just extend to them, but to all in need,

who 'et kvægsomt Sæde finder ved / dit Hjertes fulde, rige Bord' (p. 235). However, she does say that his love is harsh, 'den, som du klappe vil, du slaar' (p. 235). When he asks if she has found him harsh, she says no, but that 'mangen Sjæl ifra dig faldt/ ved Kravet: i n t e t eller a l t.' This provokes Brand to his harsh definition of love, 'Guds Kjærlighed jeg kjender till, / og den er ikke vek og mild; / den er till Dødens Ræddsel haard' (p. 235). Though frightened by Brand's definition Agnes acknowledges its rightness when she says, 'Ja, det skal være, som du siger. / O, løft mig, løft mig hvor du stiger; / led mig mod dine høje Himle' (p. 236). Several more times throughout Acts III and IV Agnes asks Brand to lead the way or show her the way and she will follow.⁶ This seems to me to present a problem to anyone trying to argue that Agnes is in *opposition* to Brand. Furthermore Brand has always distinguished between his vocation and the love that entered his life with Agnes and Alf, as is clear from his remark, 'Med dig og ham [Alf] blev Lys og Fred / om alt mit Kaldsværk sænket ned' (p. 234). At the beginning of Act III there is no conflict between his vocation and his love of his wife and child, but by the end of Act III there is. However before going on to the end of the Act it is important to note Brand's exchange with the Doctor, which in some ways is an exact repetition of the one he has just had with Agnes. This time it is the doctor's famous lines about Brand's 'conto caritatis' being a virgin page that releases Brand's furious tirade against the general concept of love, and his view that in the world as it is 'ens bedste Kjærlighed er Hat' (p. 239). Ystad believes that here Brand lets slip what the real conflict is, i.e. not one between love and will but one between love and hate, an 'eksistensielt hat og en livsforakt som springer ut av en menneskelig angst for mangfoldet i tilværelsen' (p. 141). Brand certainly speaks the lines about hate, but surely what he hates and what he challenges his countrymen to do is to rise above all their pettiness and halfheartedness?

The end of Act III is one of the crisis points in the play and it is here that Ibsen's persuasive rhetoric is at its most cunning. When Brand is on the point of leaving the district because of Alf's health, Ibsen first has a man from the district come and

say that Brand cannot abandon the souls he has raised, then Gerd enters and says that the hawk (later identified with the spirit of compromise) has flown off with the priest and now the trolls are tumbling out of the hills again. Agnes, who suffers all the anguish of a mother's concern for her child, wants Brand to leave, but will not set herself up against him. When he asks her 'var jeg Prest, før jeg blev Faer?' she will not answer, and when Brand presses her to do so, she replies by saying 'Hustru er jeg; tør du byde / skal jeg bøye mig og lyde!' (p.262). As if this were not enough she asks him 'tror du fuldt paa Herrens Kald?' When he replies in the affirmative, she actually commands him 'Gaa den Vej, din Gud dig bød!' Finally, as if realising what Brand's decision not to move will mean, she lifts Alf up and declares, 'Gud! Det Offer du tør kræve, / tør jeg mod din Himmel hæve!' (p. 262). Given such a gesture, it seems hard to argue that Agnes provides an alternative to Brand, and opponent to his views. Rather one could say that Agnes fails in her primary duty of 'nestekjærlighet', the duty to love and protect of her son, Alf.

In the three major early plays (*Kongs-emnerne*, *Brand*, *Peer Gynt*) Ibsen creates women who sacrifice themselves for the vocation or ambition of the men they love. Not for another thirty-three years was he to create a woman, Irene, who at least in retrospective accepts responsibility and says she should never have followed the person whom she also calls her Lord and Master. Surely part of the eternal fascination of this play is the tension created between the text and the reader or viewer. We find Brand inhuman, but the logic of the text makes it difficult for us to argue against him. We can go outside the text, but that is another matter.

Act IV only increases the anguish and tension created at the end of Act III. Hemmer gives an admirable summary of the conflict in the opening scene,

For Agnes er det nå minnets verden som er hennes lykke, der lever Alf fremdeles sitt jordiske liv. Hun klarer ikke å trøste seg ved tanken på at han lever et himmelsk liv, det er de jordiske livsverdier som skygger for *dette* bilde. Hun har altså ikke foretatt noe avgjørende valg mellom

dennesidige og hinsidige verdier; hun er fremdeles først og fremst en mor som er full av omtanke for sitt frysende – og dog døde – barn ute på kirkegården. [*op. cit.*, p. 54]

And he continues, 'det blir Brands tunge plikt å tvinge henne til å velge mellom jordens og himmelens liv'. But he also admits that 'på dramaets menneskelige plan skaper Ibsen her noen scener som i foreningen av varme og lidelse kanskje må regnes til det ypperste i hele hans diktning' (p. 54).

Throughout the first scene Brand makes a clear distinction between his vocation and Agnes's part in it. He disagrees that she has 'en liden Gjærning'. He says it is her part to see God as mild and merciful, and then to

gaa ifra ham, sund og lett,
med hans Afglans i dit Øje,
bære Glansens Glorie med
ned till mig, som led og stred. [p. 267]⁷

When after some further painful exchanges, Brand asks if Agnes would to return to 'den Gud, som før du kjendte' she says no, 'Aldrig, aldrig did igjen!', though she does admit that it is 'tidt, soms drages/ jeg av Længsel ud, derhen,/ hvor det lysner, hvor det dages' (p. 269).

The last scene of the Act is even more painful than the first. Agnes has risen to the task of creating a festive Christmas, and by opening the curtain wants to let its light reach out to the spot where Alf lies. Brand makes her close them again, then exits. Left on her own, Agnes grapples with the problem of where Alf is, in the grave or in heaven, and then takes from the chest of drawers some of his clothes, the last, precious mementos of his life. When Brand returns and sees her, his anguish is intense, and he asks God to be relieved of the task of smashing her last 'Afgudshus', at which point the gypsy woman enters and begs for some clothes, which as we know Agnes eventually hands over – gladly.

No one denies that this sacrifice costs Agnes her life, but at the same time and from another perspective it is her transition from this life to another. One cannot disregard

either the stage instructions 'lidt efter lidt gaar Udtrykket i hendes Ansigt over till høj straalende Glæde', or her shout of triumph,

Jeg er fri! Brand, jeg er fri!
 [...]

Mørket er forbi!
 Alle Ræddsler som har tynget
 lig en Mare paa mit Bryst,
 ligger nu i Sluget slynget!
 Det er Sejr i Viljens Dyst! [p. 300]

Not only that but now she would not ask for Alf back even if she could,

Om jeg ejed tusind Munde,
 om jeg turde, om jeg kunde,
 ikke e n jeg dog oplod
 for at kræve ham tilbage. [p. 301]

Finally she thanks Brand, 'Takk for alt, – og Takk for dette! / Du har ledet tro den trætte!'⁸ We who belong to an age that has largely ceased to believe in a life hereafter, may find the end of Act IV difficult to swallow – a life hereafter seems little compensation for the life here and now, but it is a choice Ibsen's heroes make time and time again in the early plays.

If this interpretation of the end of Act IV holds water, then it has consequences for the interpretation of the end of Act V. According to Ystad once Agnes is dead the side of the conflict between love and hate which she represented, i.e. the side of love, now has to be presented through the symbols and visions that dominate the last part of the act. When Brand's parishioners desert him he loses faith in everything he once believed, 'O, hvor bittert jeg bedrog mig / Beggort Natt imøde slog mig' (p. 350). In this state he is visited by the invisible choir, which tells him that he is a worm and can never be like God. Ystad sees both Brand's despair and the accusations of the choir *not* as temptations to Brand in his darkest hour, – temptations to be resisted, but as the final emergence of truths

within himself which he has always managed to suppress. As he sees the impossibility of the mission he once believed in, she argues that his despair opens him to an acceptance of the attitude to life against which he had defended himself before. It is in this new state according to Ystad that he calls on Agnes, and all she stands for, 'og kjærligheten byr ham nå trøst, varme og fred i forhold til den indre sjelestrid som har brutt ham ned' (p. 143). However, when Agnes says that the price of these gifts is that Brand should relinquish his belief in the slogan by which he has lived his life he cannot, and the vision disappears to be replaced by Gerd who according to Ystad, 'gjennom hele skuespillet har representert den éne side ved stykkets konflikt: nemlig hatets konsekvenser, i form av vanvidd og isolasjon' (p. 144). Brand rejects Gerd when she sees him as the suffering Christ, and when she says that he is finally visiting *her* church, the ice church, he is horrified. According to Ystad, it is now when Brand for the first time is brought face to face with 'dette lukkede byggverk av evig is og kulde' (p. 144), that he is able to make the decisive choice and express his longing for the values of *life*,

O, hvor inderligt jeg higer
 efter Lys og Sol og Mildhed,
 efter Fredens Kirkestillhed,
 efter Livets Sommerriger! [p. 361]

This transformation is expressed in the fact that for the first time Brand weeps, and his weeping also transforms Gerd, who can finally shoot the hawk. As she does so, and as she starts the avalanche, 'det kalde, lukkede og destruktive erstattes av det varme, åpne og inkluderende' and 'gjennom kjærlighetens forløsende kraft blir altså Gerd og Brand på én og samme gang forvandlet og frigjort' (p. 144).

Ystad's interpretation of the last scene of the play is less than clear,⁹ yet overall her interpretation is an attractive one, and one that has several advantages. It makes the play far more of a two-person drama rather than the monolithic, monologic play that it becomes if Brand is regarded as the unyielding heaven-stormer who is only defeated by reality

itself. It also shows Brand as deeply divided against himself, and this makes the play more of a tragedy as self-division is often considered one of the essential characteristics of tragedy. Furthermore it brings *Brand* into line both with *Kongs-emnerne* which preceded it and *Peer Gynt* which succeeded it, for both Skule and Peer, like Brand, go their own mistaken ways for most of their lives and only at the eleventh hour see where God's finger had been pointing all along. Finally in Ystad's interpretation Agnes parallels Solveig in representing the positive values to which the male protagonist finally finds his way back at the end of his life. It is all very tempting, but unfortunately it ignores the evidence of the text and the considerable persuasive rhetoric which Ibsen employed to lead us to a very different reading.

To return to the end of Act V again, Ystad sees the choir and appearance of Agnes as the re-emergence of positive 'livskræfter han [Brand] tidligere har beskyttet seg mot' and to which he now is ready to open himself. This seems doubtful, for surely the vision does not represent a direction Brand should take, but rather one that he may be tempted to take but must resist. There are several reasons for this. Most importantly the vision lies. It tells Brand that he only dreamt that 'din Hustru fra dig gik-'. Another lie is that Alf 'lever sund og rød' and is with Brand's mother, who is also well. Not only that but the people of the district toil 'jævnt som i de gode Tider'. The second reason for believing that the vision of Agnes is a temptation to be resisted is that it appears in the list of *dramatis personæ* as 'Fristeren i Ødemarken'. Finally, there is an almost universal tradition of temptations running in threes. According to Ystad the choir and the vision of Agnes represent truths Brand must now admit, while Gerd's seeing Brand as Christ is a temptation to be resisted. Quite apart from anything else this seems aesthetically unsatisfactory.

As the vision disappears it pronounces a death sentence on Brand, 'Dø! Dig har ej Verden Brug for!' This may be true, for the world can never fully accommodate the idealist or the visionary, but it does not mean that these characters are wrong. From the very first scene of the play, Ibsen has made it clear that Brand is ready to die for what he believes, 'Hvis

Herren for min Død har Brug / velkommen Flom og Foss og Slug! Death does not necessarily mean defeat or that Brand was wrong.

After Brand has resisted the temptation posed by Gerd to see himself as Christ, the play enters its final scene, when Brand comes face to face with the ice church. This is a difficult symbol, but it is one that is closely associated with Gerd, who in turn is closely associated with Brand. Brand feels in a way related to Gerd, since she was the result of a relationship between the man his mother rejected and a gypsy woman. But he is also related to her in another way, for in her madness and 'vildsinn' she could be said to represent a madness in the form of fanaticism that is always latent in Brand. However in him it was controlled because for much of the play he was fully integrated into society – he had a wife and child and was a priest in the community whom many valued and did not want to lose. Furthermore the 'vildsinn' which Gerd represents was part of the 'Trippelallians' against which Brand in Act I promised to fight, though it has to be admitted it was the part that held a great deal of fascination for him. The ultimate symbol of this 'vildsinn' is the ice church, an inhuman, cold and hostile structure where no one can live. Faced with this ultimate image of *an aspect* of himself Brand rejects it, longing to be 'tusind Mile bort herfra!'¹⁰ But it is hardly surprising that he who has already expressed his willingness to live again the life he has just lived *and this time to know in advance the full cost of it* should see and long for 'livets sommer-riger', i.e. those aspects of life which because of his decision he must renounce. His vision of, and longing for, these aspects expresses itself in tears, which melt the extreme Gerd-element in him and in parallel melt something in her.¹¹ Then, having won the battle of re-affirming what he saw as his mission, while at the same time allowing his longing for 'Lys og Sol og Mildhet', Brand is transfigured, just as Agnes was at the end of Act IV when she had won her final battle. As Brand has made his ultimate decisions without compromise, Gerd is now free to shoot the hawk which has been clearly identified as 'Akkordens Aand' and as such the enemy of Brand's 'Intet eller alt'. Then as it

falls it blends with the avalanche, which Gerd's shot releases and is transformed into a white dove, which Brand had already mentioned in Act III, when describing to Agnes and the Doctor what is required of anyone who tries to realise the divine image,

Et springes over; Viljen først
maa læske Lovens Rettfærdstørst.

Først maa du v i l l e , ikke blot
hvad gjørligt er i stort og smaat,

[...]

nej, ville maa du stærk og glad
igjennem alle Ræddslers Rad.

[...]

Vandt Viljen Sejr i s l i g en Strid,

da kommer Kjærlighedens Tid,

da daler den som Duen hvid

og bringer Livets Oljeblad; [p. 238-39]

As the avalanche engulfs Brand he seems to see it as a punishment for inherited guilt, 'Ja, hver Slægtens Søn tilløde / dømmes maa for Slægtens Brøde!'. In his case it is the spiritual debt he took over from his mother and which he has tried to the best of his ability to make good. Thus it is hardly surprising that he who has struggled so valiantly should ask with his last gasp whether what he has done has not counted for anything. The answer given by the voice in the thunder seems to me not to express judgement, but acceptance, the release of Brand from living life over again this time knowing what it would entail, and in the final instance it is a God whom Brand should understand, whose love 'er til Dødens Ræddsel haard'.¹²

If in the above I have followed what seems to me the incontrovertible rhetoric of the text, there still remains the problem of how far we may trust that rhetoric. It is almost a commonplace in Ibsen criticism, especially in relation to the late plays, to argue that the texts are ironic and that the rhetoric may be deceptive, a cover-up for baser motives, which it is the duty of the critic to find and expose. Is this true

also of *Brand*?

Raymond Williams has said of the Brand that he 'has in effect, no unspoken experience, no hidden motivation'.¹³ Robin Young would disagree, arguing that,

Brand's beliefs are not only the outcome of some elective decision; it is clearly implied that it is in his childhood that the roots of these beliefs, and with them the shape of the play's dramatic action, must be sought. As so often in Ibsen's plays, it is only by examining closely what we are told of the past that we can understand what happens in the dramatic present.¹⁴

Ibsen gives the reader an insight into Brand's background when Brand returns to his home district and all the memories associated with it coming flooding back to him. What he remembers is that 'Der, imellem Strandens Stene, / blev min Barnesjæl alene' (p. 198) and he feels the oppressive weight of being related to 'en Aand, som altid peged / jordvendt, udenfor mit eget' (p. 198). This was his mother who had rejected the man she loved and married for money, and who as soon as her husband was dead had groped in his bed for the money he had left behind – an episode which Brand as a child had witnessed and which had marked him for life and determined his subsequent relationship to his mother. As Young says,

When Brand faces his mother we see two utterly opposing views – the purely material and the uncompromisingly spiritual – yet their equal ruthlessness in the struggle which follows suggests how deep an influence family inheritance has exercised on Brand. [pp. 37-38]

Or to put it even more bluntly, Brand's otherworldliness could be seen as a direct reaction to his mother's total materialism. This is true, but in the end this is a drama of ideas, *not* a psychological drama. In a psychological reading Brand's fierce mission to inspire men to become what he believes God intended them to be, would be seen as a perverse and destructive reaction to being an unloved child, and therefore

invalidated, but such a reading would prevent an exploration of the ideas – the conflict between essence and existence, man's dream of absolute integrity in the face of the limits set by reality. If we question the motivation, we cannot explore the ideas as something *sui generis*.

Finally, I indicated at the beginning that my reading of the play has consequences for an understanding of it as a tragedy. I also suggested that Ystad's interpretation allows for more self-division in the character of Brand and that this is regarded by many as an essential characteristic of tragedy. According to Ystad's psychological interpretation the conflict in Brand is between moral rigidity and suppressed human warmth and generosity – qualities on the same ethical plane. In Hemmer's interpretation of the play, there is a hierarchy of values, the essential and the existential. Brand may be tempted by his filial duties to his mother, and his love of his wife and child, but in the final resort he does not waver from what he sees as his religious duty, and in this he seems very like Kierkegaard's Knight of Faith.

Many critics have mentioned the influence of Kierkegaard on the play¹⁵ and noted the parallel between Abraham being willing to sacrifice Isaac and Brand being willing to sacrifice his son Alf, but few apart from Young¹⁶ have noted the relevance of Kierkegaard's ideas about the Tragic Hero and the Knight of Faith as outlined in *Frygt og Bæven* to an understanding of the play as tragedy. According to Kierkegaard the tragic hero remains within the ethical sphere (the universal), even when he, like Agamemnon, sacrifices his daughter for a greater good (in Agamemnon's case that of gaining a fair wind to help the becalmed Greeks). The tragic hero, he maintains, 'er stor ved sin sædelige Dyd'.¹⁷ Abraham, the Knight of Faith, on the other hand is great 'ved en reen personlig Dyd'. Morally (in the realm of the universal) Abraham had no higher duty than that of caring for his son. Why then was he willing to sacrifice him? The answer according to Kierkegaard is

For Guds Skyld og aldeles identisk hermed for sin egen Skyld. For Guds Skyld gjør han det, fordi Gud fordrer dette

Bevis paa hans Tro, for sin egen Skyld gjør han det, at han kan føre Beviset.

In the case of Abraham, an ethical concern for his son would have been a temptation which if he had succumbed to it would have been sin. And Kierkegaard continues

Her viser Nødvendigheden sig af en ny Kategori for at forstaae Abraham. Et saadant Forhold til Guddommen kjender Hedenskabet ikke. Den tragiske Helt træder ikke i noget privat Forhold til Guddommen, men det Ethiske er det Guddommelige.

[..]

Medens derfor Abraham vækker min Beundring, forfærder han mig tillige. [...] Den tragiske Helt opgiver det Visse for det endnu Vissere, og Betragterens Øie hviler trygt paa ham. Men den, det [*sic*] opgiver det Almene for at gribe noget endnu Høiere, der ikke er det Almene, hvad gjør han? Er det muligt, at dette kan være andet end en Anfægtelse? Og hvis det er muligt, men den Enkelte da greb feil, hvad Frelse er der for ham? Han lider den tragiske Helts hele Smerte, han tilintetgjør sin Glæde i Verden, han forsager Allt, og maaskee tilspærrer han sig i samme Øieblik den ophøiede Glæde, der var ham saa dyrebar, at han vilde købe den for enhver Priis. Ham kan Betragteren slet ikke forstaae. [*ibid.*, p. 124]

The relevance of this quotation to Brand is striking, but my aim in quoting it at such great length is not to demonstrate that *Brand* is a Kierkegaardian dramatisation of a nineteenth century knight of faith, but to highlight some more general problems associated with seeing the play as a tragedy.

It is part of the accepted psychology of tragedy that we feel pity and fear for the protagonist and his dilemma, we understand his struggle in the grip of conflicting loyalties, or in the grip of the conflict between passion and duty, and we admire the way in which he grows as he grapples with the conflict, but in relation to Brand we feel admiration, at the same time as he appals us. We cannot understand such

inhuman adherence to a belief which at best seems to us extreme – at worst a perversion of everything Christianity should be. This is the fate not of the tragic hero but the lonely fate of the knight of faith, and I would argue that Brand is such a knight. Furthermore as in the case of Abraham the conflict is not between two claims of equal weight, but between two claims hierarchically ordered, and then not to follow the higher would clearly be wrong, and Brand though he has moments of anguish does not hesitate to follow the higher claim. This reduces the tragic conflict, the self-division of the protagonist. Finally it is a defining characteristic of tragedy that it is irreparable. There is no redemption. Yet the whole of Ibsen's play, *Brand*, presupposes a spiritual dimension, and man as created in the image of God, a God who may, possibly, speak to Brand out of the avalanche at the end of the play and offer him salvation. But as I.A. Richards as succinctly put it 'the least touch of any theology which has a compensating Heaven to offer the tragic hero is fatal'¹⁸ (for tragedy).

Brand is a play concerned with profound issues, and because it also ends in catastrophe, it is all too easy to see it as a tragedy, and then to find in it many of the characteristics which we associate with tragedy. This is what Ystad does when she sees Brand's breaking down in tears as his *anagnorisis* or recognition of his failing. But one can take the argument further and suggest that because the temptation to see *Brand* as a tragedy is so strong, it actually colours and distorts our reading and makes us look for turning points where there are none. The play climbs to its climax and in the words of Koht, 'med spanning, ofte med redsel og gru, følger vi Brand i striden hans. Gong på gong spør vi oss sjølv om han ikkje no skal bogne. Men nei' (p. 260). But if *Brand* is not a tragedy, what is it? This is a question which I think it is wiser to leave open, so long as to pigeonhole it is to distort it.

Notes

1. 'Brand og det umulige', *Nytt Norsk Tidsskrift*, 1991, pp. 134-147.
2. This may be partly in opposition to Hemmer who says (p. 30-31) that he does not have a 'likeverdig motstander'.
3. In the end these two angles of approach are incompatible.
4. Rhetoric – 'The art of using language so as to persuade or influence others' (*The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*); 'In a general sense, then, rhetoric can be described as the study of language and its practical uses, focusing on the effects of language, especially persuasion, and on the means by which one can achieve these effects on auditors or readers' (M.H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, Sixth Edition, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Fort Worth, 1993).
5. Henrik Ibsen, *Samlede Verker*, Hundreårsutgave, ed. Francis Bull, Halvdan Koht and D.A. Seip, vol. V (Gyldendal, Oslo, 1928), p. 179. As all the Ibsen quotations are taken from this volume, only the page number will be given in future references.
6. 'Jeg gaar, hvor du har Foden satt!' (p. 236); 'Naar Kravet skræmmer med sin Gru, – / min stærke Husbond tal da du!' (p.239). In Act IV, 'Takk, at du min Haand har ledet; / du har trofast for mig stredet' (p. 301).
7. It could be over such egocentricity that Ibsen was ironising twenty years later when he created Lyngstrand in *Fruen fra havet*.
8. John Northam, *Ibsen. A Critical Study* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1973), interprets this final scene between Agnes and Brand very differently. He admits that 'Agnes passes through her total despair into joy. She becomes radiant' and 'for an instant it looks as though Brand has been proved right – after will has been pressed to victory, then comes the turn of love', but he goes on to argue that it is not so and that Agnes has simply 'lost the will to live. She has not come through to a brighter vision but to Brand's repressive vision; it is Jehovah whom she has looked upon. She rejoices that Brand's way brings light while her way leads through darkness – but we have seen the contrary' (p. 61). To deny the validity of Agnes's transformation and to say that it is a delusion seems to me to be an interpretation for which there is no foundation in the text.
9. For example, she does not interpret the symbol of the hawk, but simply says that after Brand's transformation has effected a parallel transformation in Gerd, she is able to shoot the hawk. But if according to the text the hawk represents 'Akkordens Ånd', then how is her shooting it an expression of her transformation?
10. I am aware of the similarity of my views to those of Bjørn Hemmer at this stage, and indeed have no argument with his interpretation of the closing pages of the play.
11. As Hemmer says, 'Når hun setter Brands tårer og hans forvandling i forbindelse med den forvandling som finner sted i henne selv [...] da illustrerer hun tydelig hvordan hun representerer noe i Brands indre liv, Gerd-naturen i ham' (p. 75).
12. At this point it is worth mentioning Halvdan Koht's interpretation

of the last moments of the play. While he does not think the voice expresses judgement, because 'då måtte han [Ibsen] ha gjevi retten åt dem som står Brand imot', and while he thinks it is *possible* to interpret the ending in a Kierkegaardian way with Brand suffering the martyrdom which Kierkegaard claimed was inevitable for the true Christian, he does not favour this view either, believing it to be 'for filosofisk; ho spring ikkje klart og greitt fram or diktverket; vi må liksom tvinge ho inn på tanken' (*Henrik Ibsen. Eit diktarliv*, Ny omarbeid utgåve, Aschehoug, Oslo, 1954, vol. 1, p. 262). Koht believes that the voice tells Brand that 'det var ein ting det hadde skorta han på – den milde kjærleiken'. He does not believe that Brand lacks the capacity to love, indeed 'den eine prøva etter den andre dreiv trongen sterkare og sterkare fram', but he was not great enough to unite his mission with the capacity to love, 'Det er ikkje kravet som er rangt. Det er mannen som ikkje ha vori stor nok for det. For han har ikkje greidd å semja det med kjærleiksbodet. Men no i nederlaget har han fått syn for det óg, og dermed er nederlaget snudd til siger [...] Ibsen har ikkje gjort noko avslag i vilje-kravet sitt; han har haldi det oppe heilt in i "Dødens Slug". Men han har gjort det rikare og varmere og dermed bygd opp nye voner' (p. 263-264). Deeply attractive as this interpretation is, it seems we have to 'tvinge ho inn på tanken' just as much as the Kierkegaardian interpretation which he rejected for that reason. One simply cannot imagine how Brand could have united 'vilje-kravet' and 'kjærleiksbodet'.

13. Raymond Williams, *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht* (Pelican, Harmondsworth, 1973), p. 35.
14. Robin Young, *Time's Disinherited Children* (Norvik Press, Norwich, 1988), p. 34.
15. Harald Beyer, *Søren Kierkegaard og Norge* (Aschehoug & Co., Kristiania, 1924); Brian Downs, *Ibsen. The Intellectual Background* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1946) and *A Study of Six Plays by Ibsen* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1950); Halvdan Koht, *op. cit.*, and most recently Helje Kringlebotn Sødal, who in an article in *Edda*, no. 1, 1999, 'Henrik Ibsens Brand – illustrasjon på en teleologisk suspensjon av det etiske?', compares and contrasts Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac and Brand's sacrifice of Alf. She also refers the reader to an interesting article which seems to have been overlooked before, John M. Hems, 'Abraham and Brand', *Philosophy. The Journal of the Royal Institute of Philosophy*, vol. 39, 1964.
16. Young states that 'Brand cannot be seen as the tragic hero, which so many critics have imagined him to be. Nor after Act III, can he be seen as remaining within the ethical sphere. He can only be *en Troende* – a true believer – or a deluded murderer' (p. 42), but he does not develop the idea, as not germane to his investigation.
17. Søren Kierkegaard, *Samlede Værker*, ed. A.B. Drachmann, J.L. Heiberg and H.O. Lyngé, 2nd ed., vol. 3 (Gyldendalske Boghandel, Nordisk Forlag, Copenhagen, 1921), p. 123.
18. I.A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism*, 2nd ed. (Kegan Paul, London, 1926), pp. 246-7. George Steiner makes the same point in *The Death of Tragedy* (Faber & Faber, London, 1961).