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The Pillar of Ibsenian Drama: Henrik Ibsen and *Pillars of Society*, Reconsidered

I. Introduction

Pillars of Society is the most ignored of the dozen major Ibsen prose plays. Written between 1875 and 1877, it was an immediate success and made Ibsen the champion of radical artists and social reformers throughout Europe, especially in Germany. Within four months of its publication in October 1877, it was being performed simultaneously at five different theaters in Berlin alone; within a year it had been produced by twenty-seven German-speaking theaters, besides productions in Norway, Denmark, and Sweden. *Pillars of Society* remained part of the standard Ibsen repertory through the first several decades of the twentieth century and was produced a number of times in England and America. But it is rarely presented in English today. Indeed, to take a prominent example, the American Conservatory Theater's revival of the play in 1974 was the first major American production of it in over half a century.

Critically the play has fared no better. *Pillars of Society* was the work that got William Archer excited about Ibsen, and it was the first Ibsen play to be translated into English—by Archer—but a few years after his translation he declared that British theater audiences had grown so advanced and enlightened that “the play already seemed commonplace and old-fashioned.” Most modern critics seem to agree, by default if nothing else. To wit: no major critical essay or article on the play has been published in several decades, and even full-length books on Ibsen usually either pass over it entirely or grudgingly accept it as another one in the long bumbling series of Ibsen's “apprenticeship plays.” Again and again we hear the same litany of complaints that includes its “creaky plot,” its improbabilities, its psychologically unjustified final reversal, its superficial idealism—all colored, of course, by our glib, liberal self-assurance that modern, enlightened contemporary Western society is leagues beyond the short-sighted, conservative, repressed, hypocritical world presented in the play. Moreover, *Pillars of Society* is still approached as a “problem play” in the narrowest definition of that term. (Shaw was correct in pointing out that, actually, all good plays are “problem” plays.) From this point of view, the meaning of the play indeed becomes simplistic, i.e., that bourgeois society is hypocritical and its leaders are often corrupt. But, as Horatio advised Hamlet long ago, “There needs no ghost, my lord, come from the grave / To tell us this.”

Ibsen worked longer (over two years) on *Pillars of Society* than on any of his twenty-six plays; five rough drafts of it survive, more than of any other drama of his. Upon its completion, Ibsen said that *Pillars of Society* was “of all my works

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