

**HONOR: A PLAY  
IN FOUR ACTS**

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Honor: A Play in Four Acts by Hermann Sudermann

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**HERMANN SUDERMANN**

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# HONOR

**A Play in Four Acts**

BY  
**HERMANN SUDERMANN**

TRANSLATED BY  
**HILMAR R. BAUKHAGE**  
WITH A PREFACE BY  
**BARRETT H. CLARK**

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## HONOR

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The French expression, a "man of the theater," is best exemplified in the person of the German dramatist Hermann Sudermann. The term is intended to convey the idea of a playwright who is interesting and effective, one who is, in short, master of his trade. The author of "Die Ehre," which is here presented for the first time to English readers, was for many years a man of the theater in the strictest acceptance of the term.

Hermann Sudermann was born at Matziken, Prussia, in 1857. After receiving his preliminary scholastic training in his native province, he attended the Universities of Königsberg and Berlin and immediately after his graduation from the latter institution entered the field of journalism. His first works were short stories and novels, of which "Dame Care," "Regina," and "The Song of Songs" are the best known. German critics and the German reading public are inclined, of late years, in view of Sudermann's repeated failures in the field of drama, to place his fiction on a distinctly higher plane than his plays, and it is true that much of the finer intelligence of the man has gone to the making of his better novels. However, the earlier plays exerted an influence so widespread and are of such unquestioned intrinsic value, that there is some question as to the ultimate disposition of the laurels.

"Honor" was published in book form in 1888, the year before the founding of the famous "Freie Buhne," or "Free Theater," which was to usher in and nourish modern German Realism. It was first produced in 1890.

While Sudermann was not properly speaking a member of the new movement, his early works, "Honor" in particular, were shaped by and served partially to create the ideas which the founders of the "Freie Buhne," Arno Holz and Johannes Schlaf, had formulated. But a closer inspection of "Honor," of "The Destruction of Sodom," "Magda," and "The Joy of Living," leads us to the conclusion that Sudermann was playing with the Naturalistic formula, using it as a means rather than an end. One example will suffice: Arno Holz invented the phrase "Sequential Realism," by which he meant the chronological setting down of life in as minute and truthful a manner as possible. He aimed at the photographic reproduction of life; that process he called "art re-making nature." In his own plays, above all in "Die Familie Selicke," written in collaboration with Schlaf, his skill in noting details, his quest for truth at all costs, lent a decided air of actuality to the work, and the *appearance* was what Sudermann, who was more of an artist than the pair of young revolutionists, strove to imitate. After all, Sudermann is little more than a surface Realist, for he incorporated only what seemed to him valuable in the new formulas. Sudermann is the lineal descendant of Augier, Dumas fils and Sardou; he introduced into Germany a new manner of combining much that was good of the conventional and some that would prove beneficial of the Realistic ideas. The long speeches of Trast, the numerous asides, the more or less conventional exposition, the rather rhetorical style of the dialog, are reminiscent of the mid-century French dramatists, while the carefully observed types, the



attention paid to detail, the occasionally realistic language, are indicative of the new spirit which was about to manifest itself in so concrete a form as the "Freie Buhne."

"Honor" is clearly a thesis play: it aims at the presentation and consideration of an idea, a problem, and the problem is that which arises when one's individual principles are at variance with those laid down in a conventional society. In Germany "honor" is not so much a personal matter as a fixed code applicable to situations, and an individual who finds himself in a certain situation must have recourse to the code, not his own convictions. Sudermann in this play sets himself the task of opposing the current conception of honor, and in Trast's mouth he places what arguments he wishes to have advanced. Trast is what the French call the "raisonneur": he who reasons. This method is a very direct but rather bald one, as the audience is likely, nowadays at least, to resent a preacher who is only too obviously doing his duty. It prefers the method followed by another very skilful writer of thesis plays, Brieux, who in his "Red Robe" allows the thesis to unfold itself before the eyes of the spectators rather than permit a "raisonneur" to expound his personal ideas. But in Sudermann's day the technic of the drama was not so far advanced as it was twelve years later, when the French dramatist was able to employ means to his end which were artistic in the highest degree.

-Yet Sudermann always lacked the sincerity and earnestness of Brieux, for he considered the play primarily as a means to tell a story in as effective a manner as possible. Brieux's purpose has always been to expose a state of affairs and argue about it. As a consequence, Sudermann never fell into the error of allowing the thesis to overshadow the play. As a matter of fact, he became with years less and less didactic, and took good care that his later plays

should be free of encumbering theses, so that now his desire to please the unthinking public has brought him near to artistic bankruptcy.

Sudermann is clearly a man whose best work is over. "Honor" led dramatists to treat the theater more seriously, it taught them to construct plays with a story, and showed that a thesis play is not necessarily a "conversation"; his attention to detail instilled a desire for greater truthfulness in the delineation of character. "Honor" and its immediate successors present a series of pictures of lower, middle, and upper class German society of the day which are and will in the future prove of great value for the student of the times and of the drama.

BARRETT H. CLARK.

