

## **Mouths Gagging as Portrayed in Ibsen's Play**

### ***An Enemy of the People***

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### **Abstract**

Not too much values impact success as basically as truth, so truthfulness is the basis upon which man's relationships are built. Therefore, without truth, maintainable success is impossible in man dealings with others.

Power, authority and the feeling of being torn in so many directions because of different obligations are considered difficult problems to modern society. Hence, democracy offers man in any modern society with the power of free speech that accepts a right for each one to speak freely for his/her own rights. Though, not many individuals can think or tell the truth when the comfort and security of all of the people in a society is concerned.

Being the father of modern drama, Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) is a socio-realistic dramatist whose plays are devoted to criticize modern social evils and to find truthful characters with psychological complexity in order to create new movement in drama. He finds his duty to tell the truth in time Europe experiences social disorder and the people exposed to democratic ideology and political corruption, also Europe entered the second industrial revolution that is a part of new imperialism period. In the late 1890s Norway was undergoing industrialization. The new society prospered, but created new kinds of social problems that encourages many dramatists to shed light on.

**Key words:** truth, flattery, corruption, lies, evil.

الأفواه المكتومة كما وُصفت في مسرحية إِبسن "عدو الشعب"

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#### المستخلص:

لا تؤثر القيم كثيرًا على النجاح بقدر تأثير الصدق، فالصدق أساس علاقات الإنسان. لذا، فبدون الصدق، يستحيل تحقيق نجاح مستدام في تعامل الإنسان مع الآخرين. تُعتبر السلطة والشعور بالتمزق في اتجاهات متعددة بسبب اختلاف الالتزامات مشاكل صعبة تواجه المجتمع الحديث. لذا، تُتيح الديمقراطية للإنسان في أي مجتمع حديث حرية التعبير التي تُقر بحق كل فرد في التعبير بحرية عن حقوقه. ومع ذلك، ليس الكثير من الأفراد قادرين على التفكير أو قول الحقيقة عندما يتعلق الأمر براحة وأمن جميع أفراد المجتمع. باعتبارهِ أبا الدراما الحديثة، هنريك إِبسن (1828-1906) هو كاتب مسرحي اجتماعي واقعي، حيث كرس مسرحياته لانتقاد الشرور الاجتماعية الحديثة وإيجاد شخصيات صادقة ذات تعقيد نفسي من أجل خلق حركة جديدة في الدراما. وجد إِبسن من واجبه أن يقول الحقيقة في الوقت الذي تشهد فيه أوروبا اضطرابات اجتماعية ويتعرض الناس للأيديولوجية الديمقراطية والفساد السياسي، كما دخلت أوروبا الثورة الصناعية الثانية التي تعد جزءًا من فترة الإمبريالية الجديدة. في أواخر تسعينيات القرن التاسع عشر، شهدت النرويج مرحلة من التصنيع. ازدهر المجتمع الجديد، لكنه خلق أنواعًا جديدة من المشكلات الاجتماعية التي شجعت العديد من كُتّاب المسرح على تسليط الضوء عليها.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** الحقيقة، التملق، الفساد، الكذب، الشر

## 1. Introduction

Telling the truth is only considered hateful to those who hate the truth, because it is the foundation of all personal and social development, whether official or private. Without telling and affirming the facts, it is impossible to talk about a secure future for anyone / anything.

Ibsen's play *An Enemy of the People* (1882) is a social-political drama about a social rebel in which Ibsen analyzes the effects of the aristocratic man on the democratic society.

*This play* is about truth, freedom and tyranny. It deals with the loner versus the group, the role of the elite or minority and the power of the majority. Dr. Stockmann, the main protagonist and a small-town doctor in Norway, faces the consequences of negative public opinion after discovering water pollution in the town's newly-constructed public baths. The town prides itself on its democratic principles, but in fact the excessive power of public opinion means that Dr. Stockmann is disliked and ill-treated simply for making an unpleasant discovery. It criticizes the hypocrisy of his society's moral code in which man dares to expose an indigestible truth openly and is punished for it. This makes him believe that there are no absolute principles of either [wisdom](#) or [morality](#); "It may have been a truth once and a falsehood today"( *Krutch, 1953: 11*). Concerning truth – telling, Stockmann states in his profound tirade to his political enemies:

"Truths are by no means the wiry [Methuselahs](#) some people think them. A normally constituted truth lives, let us say as a rule, seventeen or eighteen years; at the outside twenty; very seldom more. And truths so patriarchal as that are always shockingly emaciated ( Ibsen, 2005, 16)."

Dr. Stockmann makes a discovery that he thinks will help his town. He presses for changes to be made to the baths, but the town turns on him. Not only have his scientific experiments been a waste of time, and not only will the townspeople suffer, but his freedom of speech and self-respect are being attacked.

He realizes that the only reason the leaders have turned on him is that they are afraid of the people. He, thus, lashes out at the people; motivated both by his anger and by true realizations about the corruption of the town.

### **2. Foucault's theory of Truth**

Telling the truth is the beginning as without truth we will only reach confusion and loss. The duty of an honest man is speaking the truth and opposing lies and deceits of his society. According to Foucault, parrhesia stands for fearlessly of telling the truth. Man/ woman is concerned with the act and courage of telling the truth to ignorant people. Therefore, parrhesia is not an aptitude but a "stance and a mode of action. it is a useful role which the parrhesiast undertakes for the well-being of others in the community, the city or the state (Foucault 2011:14).

Foucault traces parrhesia's concept back to ancient Greek which is a main unit of democracy practiced in ancient Athens that "had the freedom to say almost anything in their assemblies" (Wallace, 2002: 5). Dr. Stockmann after receiving a letter from the lab that shows the rightfulness of his experiments about pollution of baths, he insists to tell the truth and reveal that the baths' filthy is a source of many illness for visitors so the spa must be closed. His brother, Peter who is the mayor becomes angry due to Stockmann's frankness.

To tell all the people, Dr. Stockmann decides to inform the local press run by run by Hovstad and Billing who at the beginning support Dr. Stockmann by publishing the article. Then, they change their mind due to majority's obligations.

Ibsen's compelling social rebel, echoes his concern with the exposure of truth in the form of parrhesia that is mainly documented in Euripides' texts as "the individual's right to speak or to take the floor and speak publicly" (Foucault 2011:34) regarding his personal views about the truth and the safety of the city.

Dr. Stockmann as an intelligent man has the features of parrhesiastic character in its democratic form. Living in a democratic town, he has the right to express his ideas over the truth of the Baths to the people and leaders whether accepted or not. The refusal of his truth makes him enters a parrhesiastic fight with his brother, the mayor, journalists and the people. In this fight, the man with the right of parrhesia attempts to disclose "the moral qualities which are required, first, to know the truth, and, secondly, to convey such truth to others" (Foucault 2001:15). So Parrhesia " had a public aspect, an equal right to address the Assembly and a private one, the right to say what you thought in most settings" as Roberts avers ( 2005:201 ).

As a matter of fact, courage is an important factor of parrhesia; saying something different to the majority's conviction that is an evidence of his honesty. But to say the truth is dangerous things for any change within the society, the parrhesiast must have a social position; in addition taking dangers to tell the truth that may cause death(Foucault 2001:16)..

In Ledger's vision,

"Dr. Stockmann takes an extreme liberal-individualist position, determined to exercise his right to free speech, his right to publicize the truth, no matter what the consequences are for the sider community.....He maintains that the rights of the individual and abstract concepts of liberty and truth are more important than owning and defending property, earning a fortune and taking care of the interests of one's own family. (Ledger 2008:30)"

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This intensifies that truth-telling is a duty for the parrhesiast though sometimes he is silent just for survival. Therefore, according to Foucault, Dr. Stockmann uses:

“ his freedom and chooses frankness instead of persuasion, truth instead of falsehood or silence, the risk of death instead of life and security, criticism instead of flattery, and moral duty instead of self-interest and moral apathy. (Foucault 2001:20)”

In his *Depiction of Society as Infected Public* ” Fulsås realizes that the people of Ibsen's time “were not mature enough to hear the truth and should instead be left in peace with their stupid life-lies” (Fulsås 2011:3). This is shown clearly when Dr. Stockmann speaks to crowd who cannot act decisively as they neither represent all people nor wise enough to decide for all. Hence, For Ibsen, the minority “ can lead the van and pushes on to points the majority has not reached; that man is right who has allied himself most closely with the future (Ibsen 1964:198.). Therefore, as a hero, Dr. Stockmann can speak the truth without afraid of anyone. He cannot let himself to “be beaten off the field by public opinion and the compact majority” (Ibsen 2005:151) , simply to demonstrate that:

“ the liberals are the most insidious enemies of freedom, that party programs strangle every young and vigorous truth; that considerations of expediency turn morality and justice upside down and that they will end by making life here unbearable. (Ibsen 2005:151).”

This incites him to establish a school of parrhesia where people can rule themselves and adopt truth-telling as a moral duty in order to save them from unawareness and create new democracy as Milne states (2008:58)

By means of a practice, Parrhesia is also an attempt against “self-ignorance” (Foucault 2001:102.), that Dr. Stockmann’s morality helps him avoid it. Obviously, and according to Ibsen’s philosophy:

“all human knowledge, judgment, and action can only claim a relative truth due to the fact that humanity is subjected to motivations which change over time, and the consequences of our efforts at truth are not always known. Thus, the most powerful individual is always working for self-liberation and purification (Kaufman 1965:22).”

This clarifies that truth-telling is necessary for confronting corruption and changing society for betterment.

### **3. Democracy VS Bravery / Majority VS Minority**

It is important to confirm that future cannot be built on lies. Without telling the truth, it is difficult to discuss the possibility of achieving a civil state and the rule of law, because democratic systems are not founded on falsehood, but on facts. Hence, telling the truth does not encourage hatred rather, it clarifies the equations of conflict.

*An Enemy of the People* criticizes democracy through showing one man's bravery who can survive overwhelming odds. Ibsen's critique of democracy concentrates on presenting the tyranny of the majority; leaders of society are afraid to do what is right because they are at the people's mercy. Even though Hovstad, the journalist wants to print the doctor's report on the baths, but he is afraid because his subscribers would be upset. The mayor cannot propose any changes to the baths because the public might find out that the mayor had made a mistake in the original plans and, thus, exile him. The majority is afraid of risk and, according to Dr. Stockmann, it is not intelligent enough to do what is right.

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On the other hand, when Ibsen illustrates the tyranny of the majority, he exposes the leaders way in manipulating the majority and using them to their ends. It could be that Hovstad, the journalist merely cited his subscribers' possible wrath as an pretext because he himself does not want to print the article. More likely, both he and his subscribers would have been against Dr. Stockmann. Those who are in power, like Hovstad and the mayor, automatically predict the majority's needs and they always try to please them. While Aslaksen and the mayor manipulated the people at the town meeting, they influenced them in the lone way probable. In other words, it might be impossible for the mayor to convince all the people who support the doctor's comments about the stupidity of the masses. Clearly, the idea is that the majority does not rule directly; instead, the idea and threat of the majority keeps leaders from acting honestly. By constructing a story in which the rottenness of the majority is seen obviously, Ibsen concludes that "only the individual who stands alone will be always stronger than the masses, because he reached a conscious point, unreachable for lower classes" (Ibsen, 1964:116).

Ibsen's characterization of majority as an incapable to see the truth, ".....ignorant undeveloped and foolish reveal to us the fact that the masses are nothing but the raw material that must be fashioned into a People" (Ibsen, 2005: 115). In fact, he emphasizes that the minority is always right and the only one who has a right to lead the public, must be intelligent, courageous and wise. Throughout the play, Ibsen prototypes the fact that majority deceives man. Dr. Stockmann serves an intense example of a man suffers from his awful society. He thinks that by telling the truth, his society will consider him a hero and be proud of his honesty but he is considered "an enemy of the people" (Ibsen, 2005:



117). Nevertheless of people's rejection and betrayal, he converts into the strongest man of the world for standing alone and living of a hope for the betterment of the future; " I think we must agree that fools are in a terrible, overwhelming majority, all the wide world over. But how in the devil's name can it ever be right for fools to rule over wise men?" (Ibsen, 2005: 113). This exposes Ibsen's philosophy towards the majority that has been portrayed as foolish and dangerous to the society for being enemy of the truth and freedom. For him, one man can achieve many important things by never trusting the masses.

Though truth- telling is very important, it is rarely seen specifically when Petra said that she has to tell lies to her students which she defines " a good many things we don't believe ourselves" (Ibsen, 2005: 33). Later on, she challenges [Hovstad](#) when he wants to include a story in the paper she knows he doesn't believe. It is evident that everything happens to Dr. Stockmann because he speaks the truth. He wants to do what is right for the town and the patients who will use the Baths. When he is forbidden to do so, he gets angry and speaks a different kind of truth; his frustration with a social system that values comfort and financial security over health and facts. He also raises an interesting question: Do truths change?(Ibsen, 2005: 40). Here, seem to talk about "established truths" that are old and need to be substituted. In fact, Dr. Stockmann is so brave and has the courage to tell the truth but the majority tries to hinder him; meaning the minority challenges and confronts majority.

#### **4. The Price of Telling Truth:**

After discovering that the new baths in his town are infected with a deadly disease, Dr. Stockmann informs the mayor, his brother either to repair or close them but the latter refuses as it will cause financial collapse of the town. The mayor starts to incite the people against the Dr. and has declared him the enemy of the people. When all the town stands against him, Dr. Stockmann chooses to

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leave the town but he changes his mind, refuses to be silent and decides to stay and fight for the things he believes to be right regardless the price has been paid (Bagus, 2012: 17).

DR. Stockmann believes himself a hero for telling the truth, instead he becomes the most hated man in the town. Despite of people's hateful, he feels the strongest in the world as he fights for the truth all alone. Roshwald (2004: 22) observes that in this play, Ibsen praises Dr. Stockmann for his courage and responsibility; attacking the majority of people who are easily persuaded by the governing corrupted power and blindly refuses to accept the truth in time they should appreciate Dr. Stockmann for his attention to protect their lives from deadly illnesses. Therefore, Dr. Stockmann is regarded as an honorable reformer who has the ability to fight alone rather than compromise his values. He is really the strongest man in the world for fighting with the corrupted authorities, never giving up his principles, his rightness of purpose and self-confidence. He pays no attention to the price he has to pay even if the price is his life. For him, most important thing is the truth-telling and not living in a realm of lies and hypocrisy.

In the play and in life, Ibsen's standards of the truth are above everything. Dr. Stockmann is determined that the truth about the baths overcome in order to keep the health and honor of the society. He states that suppression of truth is a "fraud, a lie, an absolute crime against the public, against society as a whole!" (Ibsen, 2005: 93). So, when his truth is not published in a newspaper, Dr. Stockmann said:

“You think you can silence me and suppress the truth! But it won’t be that easy. . . I shall read it at a great mass meeting; all my fellow citizens shall hear the voice of truth!” (Ibsen, 2005: 107).”

Through his speech, he insists on telling only the truth and confirms that nothing can keep him silent. Truth-telling is above everything in his life. Nothing can make him give up his morals and responsibility. Here, Ibsen reveals that “individualism is an imperative that should be praised in a society, thereby contrasting it with the fact that the society is led by a tyrannical rule of fools represented by a majority” (Ibsen, 2005: 113). Clearly, Ibsen characterizes Dr. Stockmann as a lone strong man of morality and truthfulness on contrary to a huge majority that “is poisoning the sources of our spiritual life” (Ibsen, 2005: 114). Dr. Stockmann believes that telling-truth price might be so expensive that is his life but he does not care as for him truth is more important than his life.

## **5. Insisting on Truth-Telling**

Telling the truth can sometimes be difficult, whether it concerns everyday matters or matters of great importance. This can be due to several reasons, such as trying to protect oneself, fear of facing reality, or a lack of trust in people. In this play, the main protagonist, Dr. Stockmann is a truth-teller who insists and defends his attitude alone against egotistic and ignorant people. Being the spokesperson for Ibsen’s anger, Dr. Stockmann reveals the truth about the baths that changes from issue of cleansing to be a fight between the truth-telling minority and the satisfied majority. To deliver his voice, Dr. Stockmann depends on two publishers of the liberal newspaper, Hovstad and Billing who at the beginning accepts to publish the truth but they change their minds after knowing that the cleansing of baths will increase the taxes. Definitely, both are hypocrites and their betrayal reflects Ibsen’s dissatisfactions with the liberal press. Their refusing to tell or report the truth, the journalists reveals the corruption of such

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institution in time its duty to awake and warn the people from dangers that threaten their lives (Northam, 1973: 6).

Dr. Stockmann is an idealistic and truthful man whose main concern is to save the town and its people from the dirty baths but the rejection of people turns him to be an angry man against his society that refused the truth.

The town people stands against Dr. Stockmann for not paying higher taxes that would be asked if the town accepts cleansing the baths. Their refusal makes him feel the victim of the hypocritical practices of self-seeking politicians as all who stand with him for the truth retreat. Later and despite the town despising and distrusting, Dr. Stockmann insists to stay in the town and fights for the reality all alone. He fights “against tyranny of the majority but all his attempts to achieve democracy are failed as they all hate hearing the truth” (Heims, 2008: 10). But, unlike him, his brother Peter exposes his tyrannical nature against truth. For that, Dr. Stockmann said:

“liars and flatters as such are but “vermin” and “wolf:” What does the destruction of a community matter, if it lives on lies? It ought to be razed to the ground. I tell you-- All who live by lies ought to be exterminated like vermin! You will end by infecting the whole country; you will bring about such a state of things that the whole country will deserve to be ruined. (Ibsen, 2005:119)”

This clarifies Foucault's belief that (2011:13) “not only parrhesia is the truth-teller's courage in telling the truth despite risks, but also it is the interlocutor's courage in agreeing to accept the hurtful truth that he hears”.

Dr. Stockmann refuses the idea that “the common folk, the ignorant of the community should have the same right to pronounce judgment and to approve, to

direct and to govern, as the isolated, intellectually superior personalities in it” (Ibsen 2005:114), stating that

“raising up the masses would mean nothing more or less than setting them straightway upon the paths of depravity! . . . ignorance, poverty, ugly conditions of life . . . do the devil’s work! . . . Lack of oxygen weakens the conscience. And there must be a plentiful lack of oxygen in very many houses in this town, I should think, judging from the fact that the whole compact majority can be unconscientiously enough to wish to build the town’s prosperity on a quagmire of falsehood and deceit. (Ibsen, 2005: 118)”

Here, he attacks severely the people’s refusal the truth when the liberal press has inspired them.

The play’s ending shows “the dystopian image of a society where economy and personal happiness has ended up more important than anything and even the life of future generations” as Lisbeth Wærp (2015: 421) avers. Dr. Stockmann concludes that no one wants his income threatened and taxes raised, hence the people prefer no change despite the higher costs they paid that is their health.

Though there is no meaning in the society, all morals are mislaid, man and his freedom are meaningless, Dr. Stockmann still fight against the society that rejects him for the truth despite of being alone and isolated believing that; "the strongest man is the one who is alone" (Ibsen, 2005: 77). He struggles against society to prove that truthful minority can opposed the tyrannical majority refusing to be liar and deceitful (Kaufmann, 1965: 12). Thus, the conflict between Dr. Stockmann and his brother, the mayor develops to be between the town’s people and him. As the mayor orders his fellow countrymen to fight with him against what he calls “a common enemy.” Dr. Stockman is solidly known an enemy of the people, fired from his position of the town’s baths physician and no one uses him as a doctor. His tyrannical brother deprives of the democratic right of freedom of speech. Here, Ibsen shows his outrage against the democratic principle of majority rule through Dr. Stockmann words:

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“I am against the age old lie that the majority is always right...the Majority never has truth on its side-I say. This is one of these societies Lies that a free thinking man must revolt against... well, well, you can Shout me down, but you cannot reply. The majority has might on its Side-sadly, but it is not in the right. I and the other few individuals are In the right (Ibsen, 2005: 532)”

Then he adds; “the majority is never right until it does right” (Ibsen, 2005: 536) This reveals that his main intention is to say the truth nothing else though he never has the opportunity to be listened.

Ibsen, in this play, rebels against the conventions, ethics, and ideals of the social organizations. Dr. Stockmann, a rebel hero, is from the middle class. He is familiar with the social laws like the other people, but when his discovery is condemned by solid majority, he feels doubtful about social laws and modern man. His aim is to expose the diseased roots of modern life and to disclose the clashes of the rebellious character with the democratic community. His strong will pushes him to exemplify “the unselfish man of science who seeks to be a friend to the community and is howled at as a foe” (Egan, 2003: 301).

In the last act, Dr. Stockmann sees that his rightness is defeated by every person he wants to help; thus he attacks the people and the officials elected by the government and fights against the tyrannical majority. Then, he states many opinions Ibsen himself has been voicing in Rome:

“ ..... The most dangerous enemies of truth and freedom are the majority! Yes, the social, liberal, bloody majority, in the name of God it can't be right that the fools should rule the wise! Yes, yes, you can think me down. But you can't say I'm wrong! The majority has the power, unfortunately but the majority is not right! The ones who are

right are a few isolated individuals like me. The minority is always right! (Keyes 2008: 11)”

Here, Ibsen reveals man’s situation in modern society in which the present and future life of man and even his fate are under the domination of ruling class or majority. Though Dr. is alone in fighting society, he feels stronger for having freedom beyond himself. Freedom for Ibsen is “the first condition of the life and the highest” (Meyer, 1963: 420). Hence the minority is right as they have reached a point that majority not yet reached.

As a social –political play, *The Enemy of the People* shed lights on a social rebel and shows the effects of aristocratic man on the democratic society (Brustein 1965: 52). It shows a world of democratic ironies in which man’s rights not over their intension but against their universal well-being; meaning man cannot differentiate between the truth and lie due to the democracy’s nature.

The conflict is between the wise minority and the ignorant majority who become victim by unfaithful leaders. Ledger views that:

“Dr. Stockmann takes an extreme liberal-individualist position, determined to exercise his right to free speech, his right to publicize the truth, no matter what the consequences are for the sider community. He is at once a libertarian, an individualist and, significantly, anti-democratic, eventually campaigning for an aristocracy of the intellect. He maintains that the rights of the individual and abstract concepts of liberty and truth are more important than owning and defending property, earning a fortune and taking care of the interests of one’s own family, all of which were central preoccupations of nine-century bourgeois liberalism. (2008:30)”

On the other hand, Egan sees Dr. Stockmann a “soberly heroic doctor who dares and loses all but the consciousness of duty in a fight against unconquerable prejudice as truth-telling implies a duty” (Egan, 2003:100).

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Dr. Stockmann says that “there is only one single thing in the world a free man has no right to do and that is not to soil himself with filth; he has no right to behave in a way that would justify his spitting in his own face” (Egan, 2003: 136). Here, Dr. Stockmann illustrates the social responsibility that his enemies have replaced with self-interest (Milne, 2008:52) and insists on telling the truth. According to Foucault, “ honesty, truth, death, criticism and moral responsibility are better than persuasion, lies, life without security, silence and egotism” (Foucault 2001:20). Hence, for Dr. Stockmann liars and flatters are considered insects and wolf; stating:

“What does the destruction of a community matter, if it lives on lies? It ought to be razed to the ground. I tell you-- All who live by lies ought to be exterminated like vermin! You will end by infecting the whole country; you will bring about such a state of things that the whole country will deserve to be ruined. (Ibsen, 2005:119)”

This confirms that lies-telling not only affects and misleads the people in a wrong way but destroys the whole society, its morals, ethics and good future.

## Conclusion

The title of the play *An Enemy of the People* is absolutely ironic as Dr. Stockmann's aim is not only to protect the people from the polluted water that causes many illnesses but to save his society from scandal. For this reason his decision to fight for the truth shows his deep responsibility not only as a doctor but also as man whose duty is to save his society and its people. For him, it is a battle between his responsibility as a member of a modern society and the manipulations of the politicians.



As an honest man, Dr. Stockmann 's responsibility towards his town incites him to tell the truth through the press in time the majority seek to hide the fact. Instead of appreciating his truthfulness, all stand against him and named him an enemy of people. This clarifies the fact that anyone seeks to tell the truth do not match himself with the interests of the officials, definitely he will be punished. But the responsibility towards his people and society must encourage honest man to face hostility and violation of human values.

According to Foucault's theory, there is no place for the righteous man acting for the assistance of all. Dr. Stockmann's final decision in the face of such disaster is to raise a new contest who can internalize virtues like truth-telling and social responsibility, where parrhesia is considered a central part of the man's perfection. Therefore, Dr. Stockmann's failure as a democratic parrhesiast highlights Ibsen's hidden attack on democracy as a medication that conceals truth behind the democratic authority relations.

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