

Thornton Wilder in Collaboration

Thornton Wilder in Collaboration:

*Collected Essays
on His Drama and Fiction*

Edited by

Jackson R. Bryer, Judith P. Hallett
and Edyta K. Oczkowiec

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INTRODUCTION

Literature has always more resembled a torch race than a furious dispute among heirs.

Thornton Wilder, "Preface to *Three Plays*" (Wilder 2007: 687)

I'm like a woman I heard about who was arrested in Los Angeles for shoplifting. Her defense was "I only steal from the best department stores, and they don't miss it."

Thornton Wilder, Letter to Zoë Akins Rumbold, 18 November 1940
(Wilder 2008: 282)

The essays in this volume evolved from the papers presented at the Second International Thornton Wilder Conference, held at Salve Regina University in Newport, Rhode Island, from 11-13 June 2015. They examine Wilder's work as playwright and novelist, focusing upon how he drew on the collaborative mode of creativity required in the theatre, when writing both drama and fiction. The book's authors use the term "collaboration" in its broadest sense, at times in response to Wilder's critics who faulted him for "borrowing" from other, earlier, literary works rather than recognizing these "borrowings" as central to the artistic process of collaboration. In exploring Wilder's collaborative efforts of different kinds, the essays not only consider how Wilder worked with and revised earlier literary texts in different languages and the ideas central to those texts, but also analyze how Wilder worked with and inspired other creative individuals.

Wilder's biography, like Wilder's correspondence, presents him as a complex, enigmatic figure. On the one hand, he was the consummate loner: living inside his own head, seeking to write in isolation, often in remote locales far from familiar surroundings and people (in 1962-63, he spent 20 months in Douglas, Arizona, a mining town where he knew no one and no one knew who he was), and finding particular pleasure in omnivorous reading and anonymous theatre attendance. On the other hand, he was an extremely socially connected individual, who had a network of friends throughout the world whom he visited frequently and with whom he corresponded on a regular basis. His voluminous correspondence testifies eloquently to the range and intensity of these friendships as well as to his knowledge of literature, the visual arts, and music and to his fluency in French, German, Spanish, and Italian. As Christopher J.

Wheatley has noted, Wilder “certainly knew all the major literary and philosophical works of classical Greek and Roman civilization. He adapted Ibsen for the Broadway stage and translated Sartre for Off-Broadway. He published scholarly articles on dating the plays of the Spanish Golden Age playwright Lope de Vega . . . and annotated Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* obsessively.” “Few readers,” Wheatley observes, “can share Wilder’s enormous erudition” (Wheatley 2011: 4). Wilder’s good friend, playwright, author, and director Garson Kanin, when asked once where he went to college, famously replied, “I never did. I went to Thornton Wilder” (qtd in Wilder 2008: [xiii]).

Wilder’s need for connectedness was at the heart of the broadly defined notion of collaboration this collection explores. For him, the entire world and its cultural legacies were simultaneously an open book and a stage. His constantly replenished store of literary knowledge embraced countless works of fiction and non-fiction as well as drama, in the multiple languages with which he was familiar. Wilder’s globally reaching erudition especially permeates the quintessential American scenario of his final novel, *Theophilus North*, through playful salutes, witty homages, and coyly veiled allusions to earlier writers and thinkers. At the same time, however, his vast store of knowledge managed to isolate him further from contemporary literary circles, and prompted critics to assail him for his insensitivity to pressing social issues, and later to accuse him of plagiarism.

Despite these criticisms, Wilder continued to draw heavily upon what he had read, seen, and studied to make emotionally charged connections with others, and to collaborate in different ways with those who shared his intellectual passions and personal concerns: by engaging with earlier writers and thinkers through allusions to their work; by sharing perceptions and feelings on both life and literature in letters; and above all by recognizing that writing for the theatre differed from other artistic endeavors in its necessity for constant engagement with the other humans with whom a playwright must collaborate and with the social world about which he must write. Characteristically, in a 1954 letter to aspiring dramatist Michaela O’Harra, he asked “Is silence and solitude and isolation and leisure necessary for playwriting? It certainly is for poetry and musical composition. It is probably desirable for all artistic work. But most dramatists we read about seemed to have lived in a city turmoil—Goldoni and Congreve and Shaw and Beaumarchais and Sheridan, to name some in the second rank. . . . They all coped with the theatre, the commercial theatre of their day. . . . In the theatre one writes for PEOPLE” (Wilder 2008: 520-21).

What is more, Wilder often vividly testified to the sheer gratification he himself derived from the act of collaborating with other artists. In a 1942 letter to his sister Isabel, he described his work with Alfred Hitchcock on the screenplay of *Shadow of a Doubt* as a joyous endeavor, declaring, “Work, work, work. But it’s really good. For hours Hitchcock and I with glowing eyes and excited laughter plot out how the information—the dreadful information—is gradually revealed to the audience and the characters. And I will say that I’ve written some scenes. . . . There’s no satisfaction like giving satisfaction to your employer. . . . Satisfaction to yourself is fleeting, spite of what the moralists say” (Wilder 2008: 395-96). With characteristic modesty, Wilder does not acknowledge the satisfaction his own artistic labors afforded his collaborators; but through his work, he took his own charge to write “for PEOPLE” and for the “satisfaction” of others rather than simply for himself beyond any limitations of time, place, or culture. Through exploring his collaborations, the essays in this collection reveal how he has inspired and been relevant for artists, readers, and theatre audiences throughout the world.

We have divided the book into five sections. The five essays in the first section, “Wilder in Literary and Intellectual Collaboration”, approach Wilder’s collaborative efforts from different theoretical perspectives. In “Thornton Wilder and the Humanist Tradition”, Christopher J. Wheatley, observing the criticism aimed at Wilder for his lack of originality, acknowledges that Wilder is often indebted to the works of earlier writers. But he calls attention to the important points missed by such criticisms: that certain “ideas and motifs recur in literary texts across time”; and that Wilder has stronger affinities with the European humanist tradition than with American literature as a whole. Contending that Wilder’s *The Matchmaker* incorporates Erasmus’s *In Praise of Folly*, he spotlights the collaborative relationship between source and adaptation, arguing that reading Wilder may also inform how we interpret Erasmus, and viewing acts of adaptation as “collaboration across epochs”.

Lincoln Konkle’s “‘Preparing the Way’: *Our Town* and *The Skin of Our Teeth* as Proto-Postmodern Drama” considers both plays as examples of postmodern drama—or, at least, postmodern aesthetics applied to dramatic form. Konkle draws on Mufti Mudasir’s 2011 essay, “Language, Character and History in Postmodern Drama: Towards Formulating a Poetics”, to identify and illuminate the most loosely agreed upon characteristics of postmodernism. Quoting Mudasir, himself indebted to Barbara Hutcheon’s theorizing of postmodernism, Konkle seeks to apply Mudasir’s postmodern poetics to Wilder’s drama in order to contemplate whether Wilder should be classified as “postmodern, or pre-postmodern,

or proto-postmodern, or at least a possible influence on postmodern drama”. Examining another intellectual connection, Macy McDonald’s “Thornton Wilder, American Existential Playwright: Existential Themes in *Our Town* and Sartre’s *No Exit*” takes as its starting point Wilder’s 1966 letter to his friend Amy Wertheimer, which acknowledged “a partial resemblance” between *Our Town* and Sartre’s *No Exit*. Wilder contrasted these works by reading Sartre’s message as “the proximity of other people renders life a Hell”, whereas his own “suggests that life—viewed directly—is damned near Hell”. McDonald’s essay explores “the hellish and non-hellish existential aspects” of *Our Town* by examining Sartre’s existential thought and its influence on *Our Town*.

Howard R. Wolf, in his essay “Thornton Wilder’s Syncretic Field of Reference: A Mosaic of Antiquity and Modernity”, takes a wide-ranging look at Wilder’s perspective, observing that it constitutes a fusion of numerous philosophical, literary, and religious constructs—past and present. Wolf also compares Wilder’s revising and re-envisioning of Euripides’s tragedy *Alcestis* in his *The Alcestiad* to T. S. Eliot’s rewriting of the “same” play in his *The Cocktail Party*, distinguishing Wilder’s “celebratory approach to life” from Eliot’s “quest for salvation and the transcendence of life”. The final essay in this section, Samuel Perrin’s “Thornton Wilder and the Modernists”, defines the hallmark of modernist literature as spatial form, “a method of structuring the text in such a way that the units of meaning can only be fully comprehended when, after they have been initially encountered in a temporal frame of reference—as one sentence is read after another—they are instantaneously reconfigured in the mind of the reader into a spatial array, yielding the intended meaning by accessing each unit’s meaning simultaneously.” Perrin interprets the structure of *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* as epitomizing Wilder’s collaboration with modernist authors insofar as it modifies but does not drastically diverge from that employed by his contemporaries.

First of the four essays in the second section, “Wilder in Collaboration with Dramatic Traditions”, is David Radavich’s “Reference Works: Strategic Allusion in Thornton Wilder’s Theatre”, which considers how Wilder’s plays frequently refer to sources outside of the text to “engage audiences in co-creating the meaning of what they experience during performance”. Radavich contends that Wilder’s most fascinating and complex allusive technique involves evoking ideas which draw on the audience’s imagination and integrate cultural constructions beyond the play into the dramatic action; apparent in *The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden*, *Our Town*, and *The Skin of Our Teeth*, it achieves its fullest expression in *Pullman Car Hiawatha*, where “direct quotations from

poets, philosophers, and theologians” constitute the dialogue. By thus expanding the theatrical world of his plays, Wilder “actively engages his audiences in co-constructing what he calls ‘the group-mind’”. In her essay “Producing *The Skin of Our Teeth* by the Skin of Their Teeth: The Changing Dynamic of Wilder’s Apocalyptic Play”, Susan C. W. Abbotson reviews several productions of this play from the time it was first staged in 1942, soon after the outbreak of World War II, to trace and account for evolving perceptions and receptions of Wilder’s message. By the 1990s, the comic renditions which conveyed a sense of optimism, popular during the previous half-century, were often replaced by productions “focused on the play’s darker vision” and “layered with more topical satirical references”, increasingly satisfying to audiences and critics and perhaps closer to Wilder’s original intention.

Felicia Hardison Londré’s “Collaborations to Counter Menace: Freudian Influence in Wilder’s World War II-Era Works” investigates Wilder’s collaboration with filmmaker Alfred Hitchcock on the 1943 film noir *Shadow of a Doubt*. “A perpetual collaborator with the past, with other writers, and with other disciplines”, Wilder brought to this project his voracious reading and a wide array of intellectual interests. Among them was his familiarity with “breakthroughs in clinical studies of psychopathy” that elucidated “characteristics of psychopathic or sociopathic personalities along with their skill at concealing the aberrant mental condition in most social situations”. Wilder’s acquaintance with this emerging body of knowledge informs not only this screenplay but also his late play/opera libretto *The Alcestiad*. Robert Gurval also adopts a cinematic focus in his essay “Playing Caesar: Thornton Wilder, Julius Caesar and Rex Harrison in Joseph L. Mankiewicz’s *Cleopatra* (1963)”. Gurval initially argues that Wilder’s “wildly imaginative re-creation of Julius Caesar” in his novel *The Ides of March* was influenced by his reading of the existential philosophy of Sartre and Kierkegaard. He then explores how this modern construction of Caesar as a “moral, just, reasoned, and dispassionate political leader” shaped the words and deeds of the character in Mankiewicz’s film, in particular the Academy Award-nominated performance by the distinguished British actor Rex Harrison, who prepared for his role as Caesar by reading Wilder’s book.

The book’s third section, “Wilder in Collaboration with Fictional Traditions”, begins with Stephen Rojcewicz’s “Our Tears: *Lacrimae Rerum* and Thornton Wilder”. Rojcewicz focuses on Wilder’s intellectual self-formation as a Roman-style *poeta doctus*, a learned man of letters, drawing on the Greco-Roman classical tradition, evoking its literature, and transforming our understanding of its authors as collaborators. Looking

more specifically at Wilder's novel *The Cabala*, where the spirit of Vergil appears to the protagonist, and at the visit to the living from the grave by Emily Webb in *Our Town*, Rojcewicz argues that in both works Wilder has reinterpreted Vergil's line, "*sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt*" ("Here are the tears of the world, and human matters touch the heart"), to render *lacrimae rerum* "our tears for the beauty of the world", and exhorts us to "observe lovingly and to live life fully while on earth". In another reading of Wilder's work from the perspective of classical reception, "Re-Envisioning World War I as America's Trojan War: Thornton Wilder as Homeric Bard in *Theophilus North*", Judith P. Hallett illuminates Thornton Wilder's final novel, *Theophilus North*, which features an elaborate comparison between the physical site of ancient Troy, immortalized as the site of war in Homer's *Iliad* and the site of remembrance in his *Odyssey*, and the novel's setting, the "nine-layered city" of Newport, Rhode Island. Her essay contends that in this novel Wilder and the title character, who serves as its first person narrator and shares key autobiographical details with Wilder, echo Homer's works and other classical texts to collaborate with Homer, equating World War I with the mythic Trojan conflict.

Sarah Littlefield also focuses on Wilder's final novel in "Newport By the Sea: A Link to Meaning for Thornton and Theophilus". She observes that Newport, Rhode Island, looms long and importantly in Wilder's literary life, from 1922, when he wrote his first published novel, *The Cabala*, there, through 1973, with the publication of *Theophilus North*, which is set in the city. As well as interpreting the novel as a guidebook both to the city and to a half-century of Wilder's thought, Littlefield also looks at the previously unacknowledged allusions to Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* in the "Myra" chapter, which result in yet another form of collaboration.

The fourth section, "Wilder in Collaboration with Contemporary Colleagues", features four essays. In "'What Are You Waiting For': Thornton Wilder, Clifford Odets, and American Drama in the Late 1930s", David Roessel and Tori Novack recover and explicate a forgotten skit, *Our Borrowed Substance*, composed and performed by the young leftist TAC (Theatre Arts Committee) Cabaret in 1938, that responded to the content and staging of *Our Town* as well as to other contemporary plays. They contend that "a form of 'collaboration' in the theatrical world takes place on stage when a work comments on an important new play". The complete text of *Our Borrowed Substance*, published here for the first time, follows Roessel and Novack's essay.

On 24 February 1939, Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* had its Eastern European premiere in Warsaw. Edyta K. Oczkowicz's "*Nasze Miasto: The Eastern European Premiere of Wilder's *Our Town* and Beyond*" discusses this production, along with two others staged in Łódź and Lviv on 25 February and 22 April 1939, all three directed by the influential Polish theatre director Leon Schiller. She then looks at and contextualizes two later Warsaw productions: one by Schiller's assistant director Edwin Axer in 1957, the second by Axer's pupil Maciej Englert in 1998. The three productions were staged at critical moments in Polish history: right before Nazi Germany invaded Poland, at the height of Communist fervor, and soon after the fall of the Berlin Wall, respectively.

Brian Rowe's "Thornton Wilder, Uncle Charlie and Homosexuality: Alfred Hitchcock's *Shadow of a Doubt*" observes that even though male homosexuality could only be portrayed on film obliquely until the 1970s, famed director Alfred Hitchcock managed to get homosexual characters in his films past the censors: among them Uncle Charlie in *Shadow of a Doubt*, for which Wilder wrote the screenplay. Rowe's essay examines the collaboration between Hitchcock and Wilder. Despite suggesting that there may be something of Wilder in Uncle Charlie's closeted homosexuality, Rowe argues that Wilder, who earlier portrayed male homosexual characters sympathetically, here shares Hitchcock's uniformly negative view of such figures. Another director-playwright collaboration is examined by Terryl W. Hallquist in her essay "The Urge to Push: The Wilder-Kazan Collaboration on *The Skin of Our Teeth*", in which she investigates the long-distance collaboration between Thornton Wilder and Elia Kazan in preparing the Broadway debut of *The Skin of Our Teeth*. Wilder's service in World War II made it necessary for the two artists to communicate entirely by mail. By sharing "the story of Kazan's struggle to interpret Wilder's script and the seasoned playwright's effort from afar to assist Kazan's process of bringing what was eventually to be Wilder's second Pulitzer Prize-winning play to the stage", Hallquist illuminates not only their collaboration but also an important chapter in American theatrical history.

The four essays in the final section, "Performing and Interpreting Wilder Collaboratively Today", bring the purview of the book up to the present day. Hansong Dan's essay, "The Worlding of *Our Town*: The Case of China", reflects on the difficulties of translating and adapting Wilder to (post-)modern China. Dan observes that the 1960 premiere of *Our Town* in Hong Kong and the adaptation of the play during the 1980s in post-Mao China were not successful because they "merely prioritized Wilder as an iconic American playwright, allowing for little partnership with the target

culture”. He contrasts these productions with Taiwanese productions of Wilder’s classic play—aspects of which resonate with Taiwanese culture—and asserts that the Taiwanese productions “illustrate the possibilities of intercultural appropriation”.

The three other essays in this section further demonstrate the enduring effect Wilder’s work can have—whether abroad or in the U.S. Among the Wilder Papers at Yale University’s Beinecke Library is a play, set on the Island of Capri, which Wilder wrote during his initial trip to Italy in 1920. Almost a century later, Dianna Pickens rediscovered the play, translated it into Italian, and oversaw its production/adaptation for the Italian audience in collaboration with Italian theatre professionals. It premiered at the Naples Theatre Festival in June 2015 and was well received, garnering renewed attention for Wilder in the Italian press. Pickens’s “*Villa Rhabani, Capri: Putting an Unfinished Wilder Play Onstage in Italy*” recounts the play’s history and describes its theatrical debut. Describing another recent collaboration—this one with students—Laurie McCants’s “Collaborating Across the Centuries: Teens Take a Ride on the *Pullman Car Hiawatha*” gives an account of her twenty-first-century high-school students’ collaboration with Wilder in the fall of 2014. The end result was a contemporary, “intensely personal,” production of his 1930s experimental one-act play, *Pullman Car Hiawatha*. The students’ initial skepticism about the project dissipated as they researched and presented papers for each other on the dazzling array of subjects Wilder touches upon in the play’s brief compass, and as they created a production rich in meaning for their peers and one that strengthened their own sense of possibility as artists and heightened their awareness of the world around them. And, finally, in “Our Norristown: On Producing *Our Town* at a Psychiatric Hospital”, Gabriel Nathan describes an experience similar to that of McCants that he shared with a very different group, twenty-two of his fellow staff members at Montgomery County Emergency Service (MCES), an inpatient crisis psychiatric hospital in Norristown, Pennsylvania, in 2014, when they collaborated on producing a fully staged production of Wilder’s most beloved play. Although they had worked together daily “on complex issues related to patient care, discharge planning, medication management, and emergency stabilization,” they had never before undertaken a project of this kind, which “turned out to be a gift to the community and an everlasting memory for those who participated”.

In a 1913 letter to his father, sixteen-year-old Thornton Wilder described his efforts at organizing a collaborative artistic venture: a one-act farce, *The Advertisement League*, that he had written and was directing “at a vaudeville given at the Berkeley High School”. He reported that his cast of

3 boys and 4 girls, “all secured at a tremendous expenditure of debate and extortion, are some zealous for it some pulling the other way; and our rehearsals, when there are no teachers present, are perfect nightmares for me. I get corrected to the left and uncomfortably pushed at the right. The performance will come off next Friday night before an audience of 1200+” (Wilder 2008: 36). Whatever his frustrations and misgivings on this occasion early in his life, Wilder soon became accustomed to, and skilled at, fostering collaboration as a central element of artistic expression—by providing words, often inspired by those of earlier authors, that stimulated performers to act and interact successfully or readers to react positively. The essays in this volume seek to illuminate the different ways in which Wilder’s collaborations inform and enhance his work.

J. R. B.
J. P. H.
E. K. O.

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THORNTON WILDER: A CHRONOLOGY

- 1897 Born in Madison, Wisconsin (April 17) to Amos Parker Wilder and Isabella Niven Wilder; twin brother Theophilus, stillborn; siblings Amos (b. 1895), Charlotte (b. 1898), Isabel (b. 1900), Janet (b. 1910)
- 1906 Moves to Hong Kong (May) after father (editor of *Wisconsin State Journal*) appointed U.S. consul general to Hong Kong under Theodore Roosevelt administration
- 1909-10 Returns to U.S.; attends Emerson Public School in Berkeley, California
- 1910 Attends China Inland Mission School, Chefoo, China (one year)
- 1912-13 Attends Thacher School, Ojai, California; first play: *The Russian Princess* (unpublished)
- 1915 Graduates from Berkeley High School
- 1915-17 Attends Oberlin College
- 1917-20 Transfers to Yale (with several months interruption serving in the Army First Coast Artillery Corps during World War I); B.A., Yale College, 1920
- 1920-21 Studies archaeology at the American Academy in Rome
- 1920s Teacher, Lawrenceville School, Lawrenceville, NJ (1921-25 and 1927-28)
- 1924 First visit to the MacDowell Colony, Peterborough, NH

- 1926 M.A., French, Princeton University; first novel *The Cabala* published (April); play *The Trumpet Shall Sound* produced in New York off-Broadway by the American Laboratory Theatre (December)
- 1927 Second novel *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* published (November) and wins the Pulitzer Prize the following spring
- 1928 First published collection of plays, *The Angel That Troubled the Waters and Other Plays*, sixteen three-minute playlets, published (November)
- 1930-36 Teaches at the University of Chicago (comparative literature and composition); lectures across the U.S.
- 1930 Third novel *The Woman of Andros* published (February)
- 1931 Second collection of plays, *The Long Christmas Dinner and Other Plays*, six one-act plays, published (January)
- 1932 *Lucrece* (Wilder's translation of André Obey's play *Le Viol de Lucrece*) opens on Broadway starring Katharine Cornell (December)
- 1934 Meets and befriends Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas
- 1935 Fourth novel *Heaven's My Destination* published (January)
- 1937 Wilder's adaptation of Ibsen's *A Doll's House* starring Ruth Gordon opens on Broadway (December)
- 1938 *Our Town* opens on Broadway (4 February); wins Pulitzer Prize the following spring; *The Merchant of Yonkers* opens on Broadway (28 December)
- 1942 Collaborates in Hollywood with Alfred Hitchcock on *Shadow of a Doubt*; *The Skin of Our Teeth* opens on Broadway (18 November); wins Pulitzer Prize the following spring

- 1942-45 Military service with Army Air Force Intelligence in North Africa and Italy
- 1948 Fifth novel *The Ides of March* published (March); performs in summer stock productions of his plays; *The Victors*, Wilder's adaptation of Sartre's *Mort sans sepulture*, opens off-Broadway (December)
- 1951-52 Serves as Charles Eliot Norton Professor of Poetry at Harvard University, delivers lectures on "The American Characteristics in Classic American Literature"
- 1952 Awarded the Gold Medal for Fiction by the American Academy of Arts and Letters (May)
- 1953 On cover of *Time* magazine (12 January)
- 1955 *The Alcestiad*, Wilder's version of Euripedes's play, opens at the Edinburgh Festival under the title *A Life in the Sun* (August); *The Matchmaker* (a reworking of *The Merchant of Yonkers*) starring Ruth Gordon opens on Broadway (5 December)
- 1957 Wilder becomes first American to receive German Peace Prize (October)
- 1961 Opera version of *The Long Christmas Dinner* (music by Paul Hindemith; libretto by Wilder) premieres in Mannheim, Germany (26 December)
- 1962 *Plays for Bleecker Street* (three one-act plays: *Someone from Assisi*, *Infancy*, and *Childhood*) opens off-Broadway (11 January); opera version of *The Alcestiad* (music by Louise Talma; libretto by Wilder) premieres in Frankfurt, Germany (1 March)
- 1963 Receives the Presidential Medal of Freedom at the White House (1 December)

- 1964 *Hello, Dolly!*, musical adaptation of *The Matchmaker* starring Carol Channing, opens on Broadway (16 January)
- 1965 Receives the National Book Committee's first Medal for Literature at the White House (4 May)
- 1967 Sixth novel *The Eighth Day* published (March) and wins the National Book Award
- 1973 Seventh novel *Theophilus North* published (October)
- 1975 Dies of apparent heart attack at his home in Hamden, CT (7 December)

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I.

WILDER IN LITERARY AND INTELLECTUAL COLLABORATION

THORNTON WILDER AND THE HUMANIST TRADITION

CHRISTOPHER J. WHEATLEY

Abstract: Thornton Wilder has often been criticized for a lack of originality, and it is true that he frequently adapted earlier authors, as he did in *The Matchmaker*, where he modernized Nestroy. These criticisms miss two important points: 1. Some ideas and motifs simply recur across time; and 2. Wilder has more in common with the European humanist tradition than he does with the American literary tradition. Stoppard adapted Nestroy and praised Wilder's adaptation while nevertheless feeling free to write his own version. This essay argues that previous critics have not noticed that Wilder is also incorporating Erasmus's *In Praise of Folly* into *The Matchmaker*. But the relationship between source and adaptation is collaborative rather than merely derivative; while reading Erasmus can inform our reading of Wilder, reading Wilder may also shape our understanding of Erasmus. The act of adaptation becomes a collaboration across epochs.

Keywords: Erasmus, *In Praise of Folly*, Tom Stoppard, adaptation, *The Matchmaker*

In *The Saturday Review of Literature* on 19 December 1942, Joseph Campbell and Henry Morton Robinson argued that *The Skin of Our Teeth* was "not an entirely original creation, but an Americanized recreation, thinly disguised, of James Joyce's 'Finnegans Wake'". After pointing out shared elements, they asked, "Is he hoaxing us? On the one hand, he gives no credit to his source, masking it with an Olsen and Johnson technique [in reference to *Hellzapoppin* which opened in 1938¹]. On the other hand, he makes no attempt to conceal his borrowings, emphasizing them rather, sometimes even stressing details which with a minimum of ingenuity he could have suppressed or altered" (Campbell and Robinson 1942: 3, 4). In "The Skin of Whose Teeth? Part II: The Intention Behind the Deed", Campbell and Robinson used harsher language, pointing out "Captain Wilder has not deigned to make public comment. But the play itself very

cryptically pronounces as harsh an evaluation of his work as will ever be made" (Campbell and Robinson 1943: 19). They then quote the passage in which Henry suggests an improvement to the wheel, that "you could put a chair on this" and Antrobus responds, "Ye-e-s, any booby can fool with it now,—but I thought of it first" (Wilder 2007: 229). Joyce's great novel is "the wheel" in Robinson and Campbell's analogy, and Wilder's play is merely the addition of a chair. Without using the word "plagiarism" Campbell and Robinson made clear that they regarded Wilder as an uncreative hack stealing from and debasing a great original. I shall argue that Wilder operates in a Humanist tradition that sees the relationship between new and prior works of art as collaborative. That is, a dialogue exists between works of art and their sources that shapes our understanding of both. Originality occurs as a reinterpretation of existing material, not as the creation of something without literary precedent.

Wilder actually wrote a response to Robinson and Campbell—echoing at one point Pope's Horatian dismissal of Theobald and Bentley as pedants in *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot*²—although Wilder decided not to send it: "The ant-like industry of pedants, collecting isolated fragments, has mistaken the nature of literary influence since the first critics arose to regard books as a branch of merchandise instead of as expressions of energy" (Wilder 2008: 414). The charge against Wilder was fundamentally mistaken, as Edmund Wilson and others pointed out (Wilson 1943), but that did not change Robinson's view of Wilder's work, and he returned to the attack fourteen years later. This time, he chose *The Matchmaker* as the vehicle for his hostility to Wilder. He claimed, "Wilder's fidelity to Nestroy (and Oxenford, for that matter) reeks of slavishness as the first scene unfolds." As to Wilder's lack of a response to the initial charges he and Campbell had made, Robinson sneered, "He may have valid reasons for acting as he did, but until he gives those reasons a tongue, his reputation will be clouded by puzzlement, controversy and contempt." Finally, Robinson saw Wilder's use of other literary sources as the work of a writer who "seems at times to have lost confidence in his own creative gifts" (Robinson 1957: 71, 124).

In a more thoughtful and sophisticated piece than Robinson's, Harold Clurman turned an apparent compliment about the 1955 production of *The Skin of Our Teeth* into perhaps an even more damning charge than plagiarism. Clurman wrote,

Though Wilder when we look closer has a mark of his own, his work strikes one as that of an "arranger" rather than a creator. His arrangements are artful, attractive, scrupulously calculated, and unmistakably gifted. They are delightfully decorative patterns created from the raw material

dug up by other men. To put it another way, he arranges “flowers” beautifully, but he does not grow them. In this sense he resembles certain modern Frenchmen rather than one of our own playwrights. (Clurman 1955: 210)

One contributing factor to Clurman’s damning with faint praise of Wilder was his own background with the left-wing, red-blooded Group Theatre, and it is true that Wilder had little in common with the Group’s radical social program. Even so, this strikes me as an odd thing to say. Consider the case of Eugene O’Neill: *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931) is Aeschylus’s *Oresteia* brought forward to the United States in the wake of the Civil War; *Desire Under the Elms* (1924) is O’Neill’s version of the Phaedra myth, and has some affinities not only with Euripides’s *Hippolytus* but with Racine’s *Phèdre*; and *The Iceman Cometh* (1946) shares both a scenario and themes with Gorky’s *Night Hotel* (the play’s title in the 1920 translation by Edwin Hopkins that O’Neill would have read, but also sometimes known as *The Lower Depths* and *The Submerged*). Echoes of Synge and T. C. Murray are unmistakable in “*Anna Christie*” (1921) and *Beyond the Horizon* (1920) respectively. Above all, there is Strindberg, whom O’Neill frequently acknowledged as the most important influence on his work. But I know of no critic who has suggested of O’Neill, as Hemingway did of Wilder, that his works smell of the library (Hemingway 1981: 366). Yet Clurman and Robinson are both doing a variation on Michael Gold’s claim that Wilder could not write about real American life (Gold 1930).

My own view is that Wilder writes in a vein of literary humanism that is unusual in American literature. In a sense, Wilder, despite writing one of the best American plays, *Our Town*, and the most underrated of American picaresque novels, *Heaven’s My Destination*, does in fact fit more comfortably in a European literary tradition than in the American tradition. In the play “Centaur” from his early collection of “three-minute plays”, *The Angel That Troubled the Waters*, the poet Shelley explains, “Well, it is not a strange idea, or a new one, that the stuff of which masterpieces are made drifts about the world waiting to be clothed with words.” In Wilder’s playlet, Shelley was thinking of writing a poem to be called THE DEATH OF A CENTAUR when he unfortunately drowned, but it was not lost. Ibsen claims “the poem hung for a while above the Mediterranean, and then drifted up toward the Tyrol and I caught it and wrote it down. And it is THE MASTER BUILDER” (Wilder 2007: 31). On one level this is another example of the neo-platonism that characterizes so many of Wilder’s early plays, but it also provides an example of the endless recurrence of ideas and themes by a writer who

believes that human nature across time and space shares essential characteristics; such a person is likely to find works written in different periods instructive, and see a continuity between the works of different epochs.

To give an example of how some ideas just “drift about the world”, in a 2015 issue of *The Economist*, an article entitled “Human Mating Strategies: Cads and Dads” began “Received wisdom and biological theory both have it that males are (or, at least would like to be) more promiscuous than females. . . . Conversely, wisdom and theory also suggest that once a woman has kissed the frog who turns into a prince, she will stick with him till death do them part” (“Human” 2015: 75). Whether or not one regards this theory as wisdom, it certainly has a lengthy literary heritage. In Frank Norris’s *McTeague* (1899), one sees a somewhat similar claim. After McTeague kisses Trina the first time he realizes “a slight, a barely perceptible revulsion of feeling had taken place in him. The instant that Trina gave up, the instant she allowed him to kiss her, he thought less of her. She was not so desirable after all.” Shortly thereafter they are married and Trina “was his now irrevocably; struggle against it as she would, she belonged to him, body and soul, for life or for death”. For McTeague, on the other hand, “The very act of submission that bound the woman to him forever had made her seem less desirable in his eyes. Their undoing had already begun” (Norris 1958: 62, 66). In a naturalist novel, disparate responses to intimacy are presented as virtually an inevitable biological response.

But of course, this observation long predates naturalism. In Matthew Lewis’s lurid 1796 bestseller *The Monk*, we are told that “[p]ossession which cloyes man, only increases the affection of women. Matilda with every succeeding day grew more attached to the friar Unfortunately as her passion grew ardent, Ambrosio’s grew cold; the very marks of her fondness excited his disgust, and its excess served to extinguish the flame which already burned but feebly in his bosom” (Lewis 1998: 203). In Baldesar Castiglione’s *The Book of the Courtier* (1528), Gasparo remarks in Book Three, “I recall once having heard that a great philosopher says in his *Problems*: ‘Why is it that a woman always naturally loves the man to whom she first gives herself? And why, on the contrary, does a man hate the woman he first enjoyed?’” (Castiglione 2002: 158). The reference to a great philosopher alludes to a text that the sixteenth-century knew as “Aristotle’s *Problems*”, although the work is certainly not by Aristotle. While not mentioning how women respond to sex, in Book IV the text queries, “Why do young men, when they first begin to have sexual intercourse, hate those with whom they have associated after the act is