

## ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: OUR TEARS: THORNTON WILDER'S  
RECEPTION AND AMERICANIZATION OF  
THE LATIN AND GREEK CLASSICS

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I argue in this dissertation that Thornton Wilder is a *poeta doctus*, a learned playwright and novelist, who consciously places himself within the classical tradition, creating works that assimilate Greek and Latin literature, transforming our understanding of the classics through the intertextual aspects of his writings. Never slavishly following his ancient models, Wilder grapples with classical literature not only through his fiction set in ancient times but also throughout his literary output, integrating classical influences with biblical, medieval, Renaissance, early modern, and modern sources. In particular, Wilder dramatizes the Americanization of these influences, fulfilling what he describes in an early newspaper interview as the mission of the American writer: merging classical works with the American spirit.

Through close reading; examination of manuscript drafts, journal entries, and correspondence; and philological analysis, I explore Wilder's development of classical motifs, including the female sage, the torch race of literature, the Homeric hero, and the spread of manure. Wilder's first published novel, *The Cabala*, demonstrates his identification with Vergil as the Latin poet's American successor. Drawing on feminist scholarship, I investigate the role of female sages in Wilder's novels and plays, including

the example of Emily Dickinson. *The Skin of Our Teeth* exemplifies Wilder's metaphor of literature as a "Torch Race," based on Lucretius and Plato: literature is a relay race involving the cooperation of numerous peoples and cultures, rather than a purely competitive endeavor.

Vergil's expression, *sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt* [Here are the tears of the world, and human matters touch the heart] (Vergil: *Aeneid* 1.462), haunts much of Wilder's oeuvre. The phrase *lacrimae rerum* is multivocal, so that the reader must interpret it. Understanding *lacrimae rerum* as "tears for the beauty of the world," Wilder utilizes scenes depicting the wonder of the world and the resulting sorrow when individuals recognize this too late. Saturating his works with the spirit of antiquity, Wilder exhorts us to observe lovingly and to live life fully while on earth. Through characters such as Dolly Levi in *The Matchmaker* and Emily Webb in *Our Town*, Wilder transforms Vergil's *lacrimae rerum* into "Our Tears."

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AMERICANIZATION OF THE LATIN AND GREEK CLASSICS

by

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## Dedication

For my wife, Mary Alice Miller Rojcewicz, whose love, inspiration, support, flexibility, resilience, and patience make her the appropriate recipient of Thornton Wilder's words of high praise, since she is also "one of Shakespeare's girls."

## Acknowledgements

The words of Thornton Wilder eminently apply to my dissertation director, Judith P. Hallett, Ph.D., Professor of Classics, to whose wide erudition, superb scholarship, mastery of literary style, and guidance I am greatly indebted. Wilder wrote that his graduate school professor, M. Louis Cons, gave him “that highest privilege, a great teacher in the classics.” I, too, am grateful for that highest privilege. Jane Donawerth, Ph.D., Professor of English, taught me the benefits of meticulous attention to organization of thought and paragraph structure. Wilder’s narrator’s praise of Alix, Princess d’Espoli are pertinent: “She employed an unusually pure speech . . . invariably terminating in some graceful turn.”

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## Chapter One: Introduction (*Poeta Doctus*)

In this dissertation I study Thornton Wilder (1897–1975) as a *poeta doctus*, a “learned writer,” who consciously placed his writings within the classical tradition, and created works that assimilated Greek and Latin literature, not only citing and alluding to them, but also transforming our understanding of them through the intertextual aspects of his oeuvre. In a 2001 essay the German critic Raimund Borgmeier first designated Wilder as “a kind of *poeta doctus*, who is examining the classical tradition” (334), although Borgmeier neither defines *poeta doctus* nor provides other examples of the phenomenon. Borgmeier argues that Wilder not only utilizes elements of ancient Greek and Roman texts but also directs the reader’s awareness to the relationship with classical literature. Instead of demonstrating “antiquarian preservation, isolated reconstruction, or a mere reproduction of the classical heritage,” Wilder instead “strove for a lively grappling with ideas issuing from the ancient world” (347). Indebted to Borgmeier’s insights, I expand the range of ways in which Wilder grapples with the classical tradition by further examining Borgmeier’s primary focus — those writings set in ancient times and the dramas *Our Town*, *The Skin of Our Teeth*, and the *Matchmaker* — adding how Wilder integrates classical influences with biblical and Western European texts. In addition, I survey the classically related motifs, allusions, and dramatic techniques throughout Wilder’s works, with emphasis on Wilder’s integration of American themes and a classical perspective.

To explore Wilder’s reception and Americanization of the classics, this introduction traces Wilder’s classical education and engagement with Roman and ancient Greek culture throughout his life, beginning with his childhood. These grand themes

include the female sage, the torch race of literature, the spread of manure, and *lacrimae rerum*, “the tears of the world,” deriving from a line by Vergil<sup>1</sup>: *sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt* [Here are the tears of the world, and human matters touch the heart] (Vergil: *Aeneid* 1.462).<sup>2</sup> Vergil’s phrase is multivocal, so that the reader must deliberate to interpret it. Wilder elucidates *lacrimae rerum* as “tears for the beauty of the world,” which epitomizes his relation to the classics. In his reception, moreover, Wilder integrates the classical sources with a wide range of other materials, making him a learned writer, a *poeta doctus*, analogous to a Latin poet who emulates and also transforms Greek literature. By using these texts to develop his own vision in reference to American historical and literary experiences, grounded in the details of what he sees as typical American everyday life, Wilder also Americanizes the classics.

Creating works filled with numerous allusions to Latin and Greek classics, Wilder revives classical dramatic forms and techniques such as the trilogy (the three acts of *Our Town*,<sup>3</sup>), the trilogy plus satyr play (the three acts of *The Alcestiad* plus *The Drunken Sisters*), and metatheatricality (especially in *Our Town* and *The Skin of Our Teeth*). He transforms typical Roman and Greek Old Comedy stereotypes, such as the *parasitus*, into life-affirming characters like Dolly Gallagher Levi. Wilder even masters difficult Latin and Greek poetic meters, composing the 1920 Yale University commencement poem, the “Ivy Ode,” in the challenging metrical form of Sapphic strophes.

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<sup>1</sup> In this dissertation I will use “Vergil” as the English spelling of the Roman poet Publius Vergilius Naso (70-19 BCE). Direct quotations from Wilder or from other sources, however, will provide whatever spelling those authors used in any given work. Wilder’s manuscripts for *The Cabala* use both “Vergil” and “Virgil,” although the printed text has “Virgil.” In *The Ides of March*, however, Wilder preferred to use the spelling, “Vergil.”

<sup>2</sup> All translations are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>3</sup> Except for flashbacks, each act takes place in one day, analogous to the three separate but connected plays of the ancient trilogy.

This dissertation is informed by the methods of classical philology, feminist scholarship, and theories of intertextuality, especially those formulated by Gian Biagio Conte, Stephen Hinds, and John Hollander; my arguments also critique Harold Bloom's theory of the "anxiety of influence" as applied to Wilder. I have enriched my own readings by means of Wilder's journal entries, manuscripts, correspondence, and the annotations he hand-wrote in the copies of two novels given to friends, *The Ides of March* and *The Eighth Day*.

Clarification of the term "classical tradition" as well as an examination of the meaning of "*poeta doctus*" are necessary for an understanding of Bergmeier's identification of Thornton Wilder as a *poeta doctus* within the classical tradition. Once a popular academic topic in the early 1900s through the 1950s, the idea of the "Classical Tradition" has since been largely superseded by the broader field of "classical reception," although there has been a recent resurgence of the original name. The broadest definition and explanation of the "classical tradition" occurs in Grafton, Most, and Settis's collection of essays, *The Classic Tradition*, published in 2010. In the Preface to this work, Grafton, Most, and Settis define the classical tradition as

the reception of classical Graeco-Roman antiquity in all its dimensions. Understandings and misunderstandings of ancient Greek and Roman literature, philosophy, art, architecture, history, politics, religion, science, and public and private life have shaped the cultures of medieval and modern Europe and of the nations that derived from them—and they have helped to shape other cultural traditions as well, Jewish, Islamic, and Slavic, to name only these (Grafton *et al.* vii).

*Poeta doctus* appropriately describes Thornton Wilder because *poeta* in Latin means "maker, writer, playwright or poet," while *doctus* is the perfect passive participle

of the verb *doceo*, *docēre*, *docui*, *doctum*, “to teach, instruct.” *Doctus* is the adjective that classical Latin writers Tibullus, Ovid, and Martial ascribe to the Roman poet Catullus (circa 84-54 BCE). Catullus himself uses the term three times, not referring to male Roman poets, but applying it to the prose historian Cornelius Nepos in Catullus 1, his dedication poem; to the Muses as *doctis . . . virginibus*, “learned maidens,” in Catullus 65; and to a female lover of the poet Caecilius, “a girl who is more learned than the Sapphic Muse” (*Sapphica puella Musa doctior*), in Catullus 35. The Sapphic Muse could be the goddess that inspired Sappho, or it could be Sappho herself (Hallett, “Catullus and Horace” 68). For Catullus, the *poeta docta* was Sappho. Borgmeier’s characterization of Wilder as *poeta doctus* establishes a link with Catullus, and ultimately a link with Sappho. As we will see later, Wilder uses female sages who instruct and inspire others.

Borgmeier argues that the American critical establishment did not seem to value Wilder as a “*poeta doctus* in the New World,” whose plays and novels not only use classical elements, but also show a basic affinity with ancient models. According to Borgmeier, by opposing those principles in American literary life that have diminished the value of antique Greek and Latin literature, Wilder has suffered neglect, and sometimes scorn, from American critics. German literary scholars, however, have resisted this valuation (345-46).<sup>4</sup>

For Wilder it is the mission of the American writer to merge classical works with the American spirit. Although Wilder’s publications rarely detail his efforts to integrate the classical tradition with contemporary American themes, he discusses individual

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<sup>4</sup> Many surveys of twentieth-century American fiction do not mention Wilder at all (e.g., Stoneley and Weinstein’s *Concise Companion to American Fiction*). Matthew’s Wiley-Blackwell *Companion to Modern American Novels* cites Wilder only in a list of those authors who also wrote screenplays for the movies (468).

examples in his letters and journals, and, in one newspaper interview from 1930, presents his programmatic statement about the mission of the American writer. This article in the *San Francisco Chronicle* reports that Wilder would not discuss his European walking tour with Gene Tunney.<sup>5</sup> After citing Wilder's comments on the large group of independent, if not rebellious, American writers, such as Walt Whitman, the article concludes with Wilder's statement: "But it is the business now of the American writer to merge this obstinate native force to a respect for the classical tradition" ("Pal of Tunney" 15).<sup>6</sup> Beginning early in his writing career, Wilder was committed to the goal of Americanizing the classical tradition.

Wilder's utilization of the Greek and Latin classics is intricate and often indirect: his reception of Latin and Greek works is never a retelling of only one story, but an integration of many ancient texts, biblical literature, and medieval, early modern, and modern works inspired by the ancient sources. Vergil's spirit in *The Cabala*, for example, combines elements of Vergil's *Aeneid*, Dante's *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*, medieval legends, lectures by Wilder's college professor, Charles Wager, Wilder's own teaching notes,<sup>7</sup> a poem Wilder wrote in college, and his own thoughts about the Florentine poet. In addition, Vergil's spirit repeats the message that Vergil's character, Creusa, gives to

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<sup>5</sup> James Joseph "Gene" Tunney (1897-1978), world heavyweight boxing champion from 1926 to 1928, well-read in English literature, even gave a lecture on Shakespeare to a standing-room-only crowd in a large auditorium at Yale University (Niven, *Life* 321-23).

<sup>6</sup> Scholars have not fully mined this interview, perhaps because the headline, "Pal of Tunney Bars Talk of Walking Trip," neither mentions Wilder by name nor refers to classical literature. Claudette Walsh does provide a reference to this short newspaper piece in her annotated bibliography, stating that Wilder "was happy to comment on the American novel. He sees Realism as losing ground and 'emphasizes a respect for the classical tradition'" (43). Walsh, however, omits mention of Wilder's stated goal of integrating the American spirit with classical writings.

<sup>7</sup> Wilder had written to Gertrude Stein: "my teaching notes on Dante and where would I be without them?" (Stein 97).



Aeneas in Book II of Vergil's *Aeneid*. While *The Matchmaker* and its earlier version, *The Merchant of Yonkers*, to give another example, have a basis in the two plays Wilder cites in his introduction, *Matchmaker* and *Merchant* are also indebted to classical sources. Wilder credits a comedy by Johann Nestroy, *Einen Jux will er sich machen* (Vienna, 1842), and its precursor, the English *A Day Well Spent* (London, 1835) by John Oxenford, as the foundation of his own comedies. However, Wilder introduces a major character, Dolly Gallagher Levi, not even remotely present in Oxenford and Nestroy. Through Dolly Levi, Wilder develops and transforms the ancient Greek and Roman figure of the *parasitus* featured in his classical sources: the Greek Menander (circa 344 - 292 BCE); the Italian provincial Plautus (*Aulularia* and *Menaechmi*, 205-184 BCE); and the North African playwright Terence, originally brought to Rome as a slave. Terence's *Phormio* (161 BCE) is a major influence, while Plautus' *Aulularia* [*Pot of Gold*,] is a direct source for Molière's *L'Avare* [*The Miser*, 1668], whose Act II, Scene v Wilder translates into English and incorporates wholesale into *Merchant* and *Matchmaker*.

### **Wilder's Study of the Classics**

Wilder's role as a *poeta doctus* started in his childhood and was lifelong, so that he continued to grapple with specific classical motifs in multiple writings and different genres, including narrative prose, dramatic prose, and an opera libretto containing lines of poetry. As a college student Wilder describes such recurrent themes as "strands and threads." He noted in his Oberlin journal entry of May 26, 1917: "Since I have been keeping this Journal I have seen the incidents of the day's life in a new light. One aspect of this consideration of events is the surprising discovery that life is more a matter of

strands and threads than the young platitudinous philosopher<sup>8</sup> who uses the phrase erewhile realized. In the Rondo of life there are more recurrent themes than there appears at first hearing” (*Journal from Oberlin* 35). A major example of such recurrence of strands and threads is the plot of *The Alcestiad*, from which Wilder drew for over thirty years. According to his sister Isabel, Wilder first became aware of the legend of Alcestis at age seven or eight, from Bullfinch’s *The Age of Fable* (Isabel Wilder, “Foreword” to *Alcestiad* 154). The 1930 novel, *The Woman of Andros* makes two references to the story, while a fictionalized version by Catullus plays a crucial role in the 1948 *The Ides of March*. Wilder subsequently expands the legend in his 1955 drama, *The Alcestiad*, then combines it with a satyr play, *The Drunken Sisters*, in 1957. The narrative finds a profound expression in the 1962 opera, *The Alcestiad*, also produced in German as *Die Alkestiade*, with the libretto by Wilder and the music composed by Louise Talma (Blank, “The Alcestiad” 88-98; Leonard 156-85). Wilder’s dialogue in this opera is a mixture of blank verse and prose, with repetition and addition of imagery in order to have the poetic lines correspond to the development of the music.

Beginning with his schoolboy years, Wilder immersed himself in the Latin and Greek classics, and in classical mythology. When his father, Dr. Amos P. Wilder, was named U.S. Consul General in Hong Kong, the entire family accompanied him to the post, arriving in May 1906. Young Wilder’s first immersion in a foreign language now occurred, although that language was German. He and his siblings attended what was considered the only reputable school in Hong Kong for foreign children, run by two women from a local German Lutheran church, with instruction only in German. A private

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<sup>8</sup> This appears to be a reference to Herbert Spencer, the neo-Darwinian social philosopher.

German tutor also taught the children. After five and a half months, Wilder's mother and the children returned to the United States, the father staying in Hong Kong (Niven, *Life* 20-26).

Living with his mother and siblings in Berkeley, California, young Wilder attended Emerson Grammar School from November 1906 through January 1911. His cultural life flourished, with his mother taking the children to symphony orchestra performances and to theaters, especially the William Randolph Hearst Greek Theatre at the nearby University of California, Berkeley. Wilder attended plays by Shakespeare, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aeschylus, sometimes climbing a tree or sneaking into the Greek Theatre to watch rehearsals (Niven, *Life* 27-28). His older brother, Amos N. Wilder, recalled that young Thornton Wilder and his siblings appeared on stage in supernumerary roles in performance of ancient plays, taking part "in mob scenes in the plays put on in the Greek Theater by the classics department. We likewise took part in the Nativity tableaux in our church" (*TW and His Public* 62). During these years in Berkeley, young Wilder started writing his own plays. He read widely, not only at the public library but also at the library of the University of California, Berkeley.

Wilder's fascination with Greek and Roman mythology now developed further, leading to a schoolboy paper on the Roman gods, an essay that he valued highly throughout his life. According to a *Time Magazine* interview published on January 12, 1953, the young Wilder "lapped up mythology" at Emerson Grammar School in Berkeley. "Vulcan," he wrote at eleven, "was the god of goldsmiths, ironsmiths, leadsmiths, silversmiths, coppersmiths, brassmiths and Mrs. Smiths—there, now, I'm all

out of breath”) (*Time* 44-46, 48-49).<sup>9</sup> Included with this essay in the Thornton Wilder Papers at the Beinecke collection is an undated letter by Wilder, stating, “Pretty remarkable writing for a sixth grader, eh?” (TW Papers, Box 127, Folder 2911).

Describing this essay in the “Foreword” to *American Characteristics*, Wilder’s sister, Isabel, provides the sentence about the god Vulcan as an example of her brother’s ability to “toss off definitive statements for his fourth-grade English assignments with the speed of light” (“Foreword” to *American Characteristics* ix).<sup>10</sup> In her biography of Thornton Wilder, Penelope Niven claims that he “could be glib as well, as in this fourth-grade English assignment when he was asked to write about Vulcan.” While Niven’s comment about Wilder being “glib” can be accurate at times, the essay as a whole reveals the beginnings of Wilder’s scholarly propensities — a fascination with classical culture and with the persisting influence, in some way, of the ancient gods.

After his father became U.S. Consul-General in Shanghai, Thornton Wilder and his family returned in February 1911 to China, where Wilder first studied for a few months at a local German school, then became a student at the China Inland Mission Boys’ School in Chefoo (modern Yantai), Shandong Province, 450 miles distant from Shanghai. Here, during the Winter Term, late 1911 through January 1912, Wilder applied himself to the writings of Julius Caesar, and in the subsequent term studied Latin extensively as preparation for the Oxford Preliminary Examinations. In a memoir, “The Old Days,” written in 1939 for the Semicentennial of his next educational venue, the

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<sup>9</sup> A photocopy of this hand-written essay on the ancient gods resides in YCAL MSS 108, TW Papers, Box 127, Folder 2911, although this folder appears to be misattributed to “China Inland Mission Boys’ School [Chefoo].”

<sup>10</sup> While Isabel Wilder identifies this essay as a fourth grade product, Thornton Wilder assigns it to the sixth grade.

Thacher School, Wilder reports that “Greek and Latin began early, and even the slang spoken in the dormitories contained a good many Latin words” (TW Papers, Box 119, Folder 2681). In his draft autobiographical essay, “Chefoo, China,” (written 1968-69), Wilder adds that at this school “Latin phrases abounded: permissions to leave the grounds were accorded us on *exeat* [the present subjunctive of the Latin verb *exeo*, ‘he may go out’] days.” In a system echoing Roman nomenclature, the students, Wilder wrote:

were addressed by our last names; if a number of students bore the same family name they were known as Smith Major, Smith Minor, Smith Tertius . . . Quartus . . . Quintus . . . and so on, to Smith Minimus. The sons of an eminent medical missionary in Peking, Dr. George Wilder, arrived at the school before and after me. I was Wilder Minor. Wilder Major and Wilder Tertius were to be my best friends among my fellow students (“Chefoo” 719-20).

While his marks in Latin were at times only average or less,<sup>11</sup> Wilder strengthened the classical literary interests he maintained throughout his life. During his time at Chefoo, for example, he wrote to his mother that he was reading on his own Horace’s *Odes*, Vergil’s *Aeneid* I, II and VIII, and selections from Ovid in the original Latin (*Selected Letters* 23-25). Wilder’s first novel, *The Cabala* (1926), includes untranslated lines from Horace’s *Ode* 1.7 and numerous allusions to Vergil’s *Aeneid*.

At fifteen Wilder returned to the United States for a year at the private Thacher School in Ojai, California, where he wrote, produced, and acted in student performances at the school’s Greek-style amphitheater. After this year, his father arranged the boy’s transfer to Berkeley High School, California, where the young Wilder studied introductory ancient Greek and the Latin poet Vergil, continuing to write and to act in

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<sup>11</sup> Wilder achieved grades of 62 for Caesar in 1911, and 70 for Latin in Preparation for the Oxford Preliminary Exams in 1912, but 93 for Cicero in 1912.

student performances. In addition, he attended every possible play, concert and lecture at the Greek Theatre in the nearby University of California, Berkeley (Niven, *Life* 85-86).

As he had done for all Wilder's education as well as for his summer work, usually as a farm laborer, his father determined Wilder's college placement, deciding to send him to Oberlin College, despite his son's wish to attend Harvard, or if not Harvard, Yale. At Oberlin, Wilder continued to study Latin and classical literature, as well as English composition, literature, German, history, and required courses in biblical studies. Though his academic marks were average or mediocre, Wilder wrote plays, essays, and short stories for the *Oberlin Literary Magazine*, and appeared in school dramatic productions, playing the role, for instance, of the parasite Peniculus in an English version of Plautus' comedy, *Menaechmi*.

Oberlin's greatest influence on Wilder was Charles Henry Adams Wager, whom Wilder describes as "the greatest class lecturer I have ever heard." Chair of the English Department and professor of classics, Wager became Wilder's life-long friend and mentor. Lecturing on Homer, Sophocles, Dante, Cervantes, the Italian Renaissance, Elizabethan and Victorian England, St. Francis of Assisi and the Franciscan order, and John Henry Cardinal Newman, Wager helped determine Wilder's early literary and philosophical influences. Wilder commented, for example, that Wager was "looking after my reading," and his writings at Oberlin reflect Wager's interest in Saint Francis and in spirituality (Niven, *Life* 96, 109-14, and 119). Through explications of the influences of classical authors on later writers, such as the effects of Vergil on Dante, Wager's course on "Classics in Translation" profoundly affected Wilder. Wager can be seen as a

proponent of the Classical Tradition, as well as a scholar of the interrelations between classics and Christian religious texts.

Wilder's journal entries during at Oberlin College in 1917 often refer to Wager, both in reference to his lectures on Dante, Ignatius Loyola, Cardinal Newman, and the Bible, and to his role in conducting chapel services. In his journal entry for May 5, 1917, for example, Wilder writes, "And as I go about I wonder whether there would be an influence over me greater than that of this man" (*Journal from Oberlin* 17). In a letter to Wager soon after he left Oberlin, Wilder pays tribute to Wager's mastery of the classical and the Christian religious traditions, utilizing this mastery as if it were the sacred grounds for a solemn oath: "By the great rivers, classical and Christian, I swear that every word [of his conversation with Chauncey Tinker about Wager] is true" (Niven, *Life* 151).

In September 1917, after two years at Oberlin, Wilder transferred, again at his father's behest, to Yale University, greatly enhancing his cultural life, and continuing his studies of English literature and Latin. His college marks at Oberlin having been mediocre, Wilder entered Yale as a sophomore, not as a junior as he had expected. His Yale years also suffered a six-month interruption due to Army service in World War I. An English major, Wilder minored in Latin, studying Horace, Tacitus, and Catullus, and auditing many lectures, including a senior course, given to only a very few advanced students, on "The Fragments of the Lost Plays of Aeschylus." Yale provided Wilder's second great teacher and life-long influence, Chauncey Brewster Tinker, whom Wilder met shortly after arriving at Yale, through the Yale Elizabethan Club, which the professor had founded. Tinker, the Sterling Professor of English Literature, was an expert on Samuel Johnson and James Boswell, and had also written on Old English literature and

Shakespeare. Although Wilder was not officially enrolled in Tinker's famous course on "The Age of Johnson," he heard all the lectures, many of them twice (Niven, *Life* 176).

Attending outside dramatic performances, composing plays, writing for one of the college newspapers, and serving on the editorial board (eventually being elected chairman) of the *Yale Literary Magazine*, not attending required classes, were Wilder's priorities, and so he wound up failing three courses at Yale: Latin Grammar, Biology, and Geology. With the exception of another Latin grammar class which he passed but did poorly, Wilder received B+ or A in his remaining Latin literature classes at Yale (Tappan Wilder, "Afterword" to *Ides* 249). While at Yale Wilder wrote to a friend that the university is "a vast emporium of lectures many of which were more tempting than those one was under an obligation to attend" (Niven, *Life* 176). In a draft autobiographical fragment, Wilder states that his "grades were perilously low, but Dean Jones was an old friend of my father and I graduated. I derived as much stimulation from the courses I flunked as from those I passed" (Wilder, "New Haven, 1920" 732).

Despite his reluctance to attend classes under obligation, Wilder managed to impress his Latin professors and the English Department faculty, strengthening his pattern of becoming the beneficiary of long-term mentorships and friendships. Henry Seidel Canby, for example, who became a friend, remembered that the highlight of his teaching career was the advanced Literary Composition course in which he taught in the same class Thornton Wilder and the poet Stephen Vincent Benét, then a post-graduate student (Niven, *Life* 176). Yale University chose Wilder to deliver the commencement poem in 1920, "Ivy Ode," which he composed in the technically challenging Sapphic



meter. Two Latin professors, George Lincoln Hendrickson and Clarence Mendell, also recommended that Wilder attend the American Academy of Rome.

Although critical of the atmosphere of conformity at Yale, Wilder's draft autobiographical essay emphasizes the enduring friendships he had made with his fellow students, Stephen Vincent Benét and Robert Maynard Hutchins, who, as president of the University of Chicago, would hire Wilder in 1930 to teach "Classics in Translation" and "Creative Writing." Wilder's main criticisms concern what he called "the Puritan dispensation" of many literature classes. In reference to "Chaucer," Wilder writes, "certain of the *Tales* were not required reading," and in regard to "Shakespeare and Marlowe," "many salient passages were passed over without clarification; we were given to understand that they were interpolations by tasteless hacks" ("New Haven" 734-36). In this memoir, Wilder does not comment on any class discussion of Catullus, but if the poems were studied in the atmosphere Wilder describes, it was probable that the risqué poems were glossed over. While Wilder quotes some of Catullus' love poetry in *The Ides of March*, he does not cite any poems that could be considered sexually explicit or that deal with homosexual relations with the boy, Juventius.

After graduating from Yale, Wilder worked on a farm for six weeks, a summer assignment that his father had arranged, while his parents, at this time especially his mother, Isabella, planned the graduate's next position at the American Academy of Rome. Beginning in the fall of 1920, Wilder was an informal student at the American Academy for eight months, studying Latin, Italian, and archeology, followed by a six-week stay in Paris, where he began writing what would eventually become his first novel,

*The Cabala*, heavily influenced by his experiences in Rome, and his engagement with Vergil and with Greek and Roman mythology.

The European experience was followed by a job teaching French at the Lawrenceville School in New Jersey, a placement his father had also orchestrated. During the time he worked as a teacher and assistant housemaster at this private school, Wilder, at the urging of his father, began graduate French studies at Princeton University. While biographers describe the degree as a Master of Arts in French, the commencement program indicates that Wilder earned the degree of “Master of Arts, Modern Languages (Romanic)” (TW Papers, Box 127, Folder 2924). French literature was the core of the program, with the curriculum also stressing the evolution of French from Latin. Wilder studied the historical development of the Romance languages, including Vulgar Latin, Gallo-Roman, and Francien. Here is an example from his last graduate final exam at Princeton, French 503, Question VII: “Trace the development of Classic Latin *ē* and *á*. Illustrate by examples. What is the general history of checked vowels which remain. How do you explain table and tôle, which are both from Latin tabula? Explain the writings scavoir and aulture?” (TW Papers, Box 127, Folder 2923). By emphasizing the effects of Latin on the developing local vernaculars and then on modern Romance languages, the curriculum for this Master of Arts degree reinforced the concept of a classical tradition, in linguistics as well as in French and other Romance language literature.

The Master of Arts program in Modern Languages (Romanic) brought Wilder in touch with another influential professor of the classics. As Gilbert Harrison notes, “a third master teacher entered his life at Princeton (the other two were Wager at Oberlin and Tinker at Yale) — Prof. M. Louis Cons. Never before, Thornton Wilder said, had he

had ‘that highest privilege, a great teacher in the classics’” (Harrison, *Enthusiast* 87). M. Louis Cons (1879-1942), born and educated in France, wrote and lectured on medieval French farces, Renaissance French literature, and on Blaise Pascal. Prior to World War I, Cons had been tutor to the royal family in Prussia, and during the war served as an intelligence officer in the French army (as Wilder would do in the American Army during World War II) (*Princeton Alumni Weekly* 38-39).

These great teachers — Wager, Tinker, and Cons — were all proponents of the study of writers within literary traditions, and the effects on those writers of earlier traditions. When *Time Magazine* featured Thornton Wilder on its cover on January 12, 1953, the accompanying article quoted him paying homage to Charles Wager. “From Wager,” according to the magazine, “Thornton learned a lesson he was never to forget: ‘Every great work was written this morning’” (46). Later in the article Wilder credits Gertrude Stein for motivating him to realize fully the implications of Wager’s statement. As David Garrett Izzo has commented, this means “that to new eyes, every great literary work was being read for the first time. This . . . anti-dogmatic approach to literature (and life) became the guiding principle of Wilder’s existence” (111).

### **Classical Literature and Languages Are Alive**

For Wager and for Wilder, the classics are not dead: they live and thrive because they are able to inspire new creative writings and new interpretations. Great teachers and writers — Wager, Tinker, Gertrude Stein, for example — imbued Wilder with this freshness. When the reader, without blinding presuppositions, confronts a classical work, the reader sees and interprets the work anew. Wilder’s lectures in the 1930s on “Classics in Translation” follow this principle. In “Instructions to students re reading Dante,”

included in his lecture notes for Jan. 4 – March 19, 1932, Wilder advocates for students to read more slowly than usual, the first time without notes, then a second time marking with pencil in the margins, with particular attention to “Things that may surprise you” and “Passages that are beautiful; or that intimately speak to you” (TW Papers, Box 135, Folder 3070).

Wilder’s lectures discussed Homer, the Greek tragedians, Aristophanes, Julius Caesar, Vergil, Dante, Cervantes, etc. The course was open not only to students but to anyone who wished to attend. The 1953 *Time* article describes:

Wilder as the happiest and hammiest of stars. He would fling his arms about, jump from the platform and leap back again. Talking at trip-hammer speed, he was sometimes in the front of the class, sometimes in the back, sometimes at the window waving to friends. Necks craned to keep up with him; heads swung back & forth as if watching a tennis game. Wilder could play the blind Homer, a Greek chorus or the entire siege of Troy. He shook his finger at imaginary demons, crouched behind the podium, peeked out from under chairs. Even his pauses were timed, with an actor’s timing, to keep his audience in suspense.

(*Time* 12 Jan. 1953: 46)

By keeping the Greek and Latin masterpieces fresh, Wilder was situating himself within the classical tradition. While his lecture notes are usually in telegraphic style instead of in complete sentences, they do indicate that his discussion of Vergil examines the poet’s medieval reception as a magician and as a proposed Christian prototype, and that his lectures on Dante bring up the concept of “POET = VATES,” the Latin term for “prophet.” Wilder’s lecture notes correspond with the discussion of the classical tradition in Gilbert Highet’s magisterial *The Classical Tradition* (1949). Highet elucidates, in great

detail, “the chief ways in which Greek and Latin influence has moulded the literatures of western Europe and America” (vii). Latin and Greek are not dead: “Latin and Greek, which are still conveying new thoughts to new readers, are not dead languages . . . The only dead languages are those which no one now either speaks or reads, like Etruscan and Cretan” (Highet 544). For Highet, the fundamental relation between the modern and classical worlds is an educational one. Wilder exemplified this principle not only in his eight years of lectures on “Classics in Translation” at the University of Chicago in the 1930s, but in his novels, plays, critical writings, and explanatory notes to his correspondents.

As a *poeta doctus* within the classical tradition, Wilder shows affinity with the Latin elegists through the use of a simple phrase to conjure up a world of allusions. In 1967, for example, at the request of Otto Klemperer (1885-1973), Wilder had added hand-written annotations, explaining multiple literary references, to the copy of the first edition of *The Eighth Day* he had given to the German composer and conductor. A modern-day scholiast, Wilder inserted \* or \*\* in the text, calling attention to his marginal comments, marked with the same \* or \*\*. Page 67, for example, prepares the way to understand the numerous Homeric allusions. The novel describes the Ashley family: “They read the *Odyssey*. It told of a man undergoing many trials in far countries; to him came the wise goddess, the gray-eyed Pallas Athene.” More than 50 pages later, Wilder’s marginal note to Mrs. Hodge’s “grey eyes” reads: “\* *First of the avatars of Pallas Athene*,” since Athena’s standard Homeric epithet is “grey-eyed” (TW Papers, Box 103, Folder 2434: 119).

Incorporating lines and phrases from the classical languages into his novels, plays, and personal correspondence, Wilder demonstrates how thoroughly these languages and literatures pervade his life. At times his fiction provides brief references to the study of Latin; while daydreaming, for example, the narrator in *The Cabala* states that “Tacitus lay unread upon my knee” (*Cabala* 57). Describing Félicité Lansing in *The Eighth Day*, Wilder writes, “Her Latin compositions won the prize in Chicago in the whole ‘Four States’ Contest” (321). In Act II of *Our Town* Emily Webb asks her friend Ernestine: “Can you come over tonight and do Latin? Isn’t that Cicero the worst thing—!” (*Our Town* 65). At times, Wilder relied solely on his memory for Latin quotation. In an August 10, 1935 letter to Gertrude Stein while he was in Austria, for example, Wilder wrote: “*sic parva licuit componere magnis*,” [thus it has been permitted to compare small things to great] (Stein 43). Wilder conflates into one sentence two slightly different versions of this saying by Vergil. In the *Eclogues* Vergil writes “*sic parvis componere magna solebam*” [thus (Latin *sic*) I used to compare great things (*magna*, accusative plural) to small (*parvis*, dative plural)] (*Ecl.* I.23). The *Georgics*, however, give us “*si parva licet componere magnis*,” [if (*si*) it is permitted to compare small things (*parva*, accusative plural) to great (*magnis*, dative plural)] (*G.* IV.176). Using the *parva . . . magnis* construction of the *Georgics* text, Wilder prefaced it with the *sic* of the *Eclogues* version, and changed the present tense verb *licet* (“if it is permitted”) to the perfect form, *licuit*. Retaining Vergil’s meaning, Wilder’s new sentence indicates that he did not look up the citation in a reference work but that Vergil’s words had stayed in his memory.

Citing thirty-two lines in Latin from five different poems of Catullus in *The Ides of March*, Wilder also provides his own English translations of these lines and of other

Catullan lines that are not given in Latin. Wilder comments on the quality of his translations of Catullus in annotations he hand-wrote in the copy of the Longmans, Green edition of the novel that he had given to Terry Catherman, an American diplomat who assisted Wilder during his lectures in Germany after World War II. Wilder marked the title page:

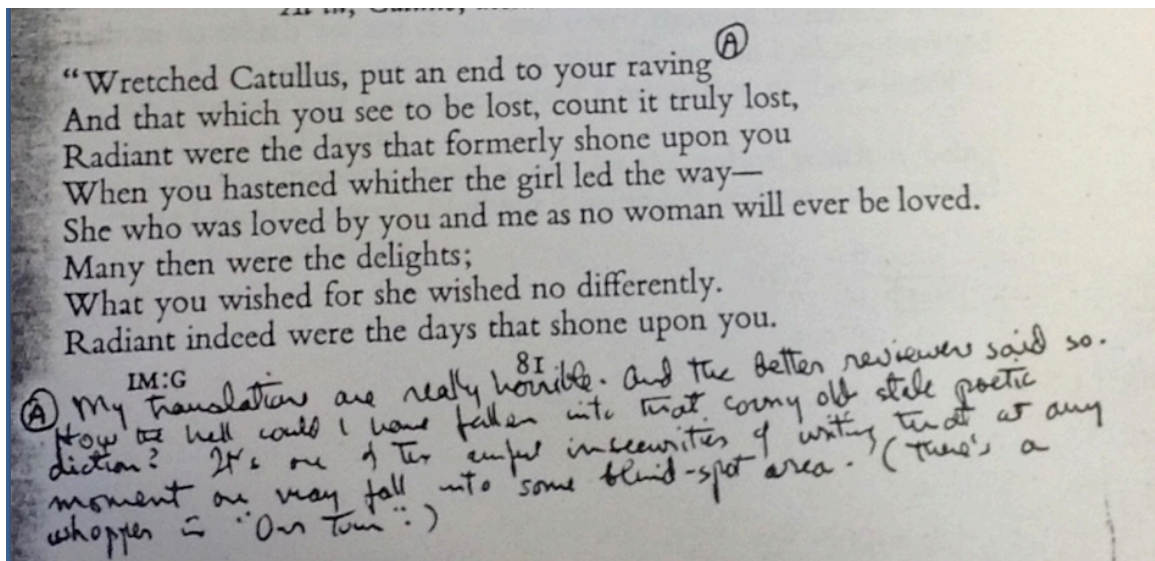
TFC from T.N.W.

—ad usum Delfini—

The phrase “*ad usum Delfini*,” or more properly, “*ad usum Delphini*,” means “for the use of the Dauphin,” referring originally to classical editions containing expurgated texts, prepared for the education of the Grand Dauphin, the son of the French King Louis XIV. In modern times the phrase typically means an edition containing somewhat simplified versions of texts for those not proficient in Latin or Greek.

In the Catherman copy, Wilder used upper-case letters, A or B, enclosed in a circle to refer to his marginal comments. His hand-written annotation to his own translation of Catullus 8, *Miser Catulle*, states:

My translations are really horrible. And the better reviewers said so. How the hell could I have fallen into that corny old stale poetic diction? It’s one of the awful insecurities of writing that at any moment one may fall into some blind-spot area. (There’s a whopper in “Our Town”). (Catherman’s copy of *Ides of March*, 81).



Wilder's translations in *The Ides of March*, however, are not all "really horrible." The novel, for example, concludes with Wilder's own translation of Chapter 82 of *Divus Iulius* [*The Deified Julius Caesar*], by Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus (circa 69 - after 125 CE). While remaining faithful to the text, Wilder presents it in a lively fashion, with subtle changes, such as using the active voice instead of the passive, and finite verbs instead of the Latin participles, resulting in a more dramatic narrative than that of other contemporary versions of Suetonius.

While engaging with the classics through quotations and characters based on Greek and Roman historic and literary persons, Wilder fully integrates these individuals and quotations into his narrative. Wilder cites, for example, Catullus' two-line poem, Cat. 85, *Odi et amo* [I hate and I love] in Latin and in English, not only as an example of Catullus' poetry, but also as an integral part of the plot, helping to explain Clodia's personality and motives, based on the hate she feels after her uncle violated her. In Wilder's reception, a single historical character can give rise to two fictional people, as when Wilder splits the historical Volumnia Cytheris into two fictional persons, Volumnia



and Cytheris, in *The Ides of March*. In contrast, one fictional person can reflect numerous literary and historical individuals, since Chrysis in *The Woman of Andros* combines elements of the historical poet Sappho, the fictional Phoenicium from Plautus' *Pseudolus*, the historical Aspasia, the lover of Pericles, from Plato's *Menexenus*, and Diotima from his *Symposium*. Characters can be reborn multiple times: the female teacher (often a foreign-born immigrant) returns as the Marquesa de Montemayor in *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, Cytheris in *The Ides of March*, and Olga Doubkov in *The Eighth Day*.

Wilder relies on multiple sources for the characters based on ancient history and literature, resulting in a complex, rounded portrayal. Besides relying on standard ancient historians and writers on Julius Caesar, such as Plutarch, Suetonius, and Cicero for *The Ides of March*, for example, Wilder made use of lesser known historians such as Velleius Paterculus and Cornelius Nepos' *Life of Atticus*. Although Alcestis, as another example, recalls Euripides' *Alcestis*, her characterization owes large debts to Euripides' *Hippolytus* and *Bacchae*, and to Aeschylus' *The Libation Bearers*. The accompanying satyr-play narrates how Apollo tricked the three Fates into saving someone from death by getting the Fates inebriated. The source for this story is just six lines from Aeschylus' *The Eumenides* (*Eum.* 723-28).

Although Wilder is primarily a writer of novels, plays, and essays, his brief forays into writing poetry demonstrate another aspect of his classical reception, his sensitivity to classical meter, specifically the Sapphic strophe. Originally employed by the Greek poet Sappho and the Roman poets Catullus and Horace and revived as the meter of English

Protestant hymns,<sup>12</sup> the Sapphic strophe influenced Wilder through motifs selected from Greek and Latin poems in this meter, as well as providing him with the metrical expertise that led to his verse translations of Catullus' poetry and his own "Ivy Ode."

### **Wilder's Reception and Americanization of the Classics**

The chapters in this dissertation elucidate how Wilder, employing complex allusions and developing grand themes from Greek and Latin literary works, creatively explores the implications of the classical tradition. Chapter Two, "An American Successor to Vergil: *The Cabala*," introduces the theme of Vergil's *lacrimae rerum*, "the tears of the world," presenting the protagonist, called "Samuele," as an ideal American author who is inspired by Greek and Roman poets, particularly Vergil, in integrating classical learning into his writings. Alluding to Dante's *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*, the spirit of Vergil appears at the conclusion of the novel, and through the words of Creusa in Vergil's *Aeneid*, anoints Samuele as his American successor, who will focus on Vergil's own theme of "the tears of the world" to represent the shortcomings and brevity of human existence in all its beauty.

Investigating Wilder's recurrent motif of "The Female Sage," Chapter Three, "*Sapphica puella Musa doctior*: The Female Sage," surveys the series of wise women in Wilder's works who draw on classical Greek and Roman texts and thought in order to become witnesses and guides to the sorrow and joys of humanity. Integrating his classical prototypes with the influence of his mother, Isabella, his first female sage, his relationship to Gertrude Stein, and his reading of Madame de Sévigné, Wilder develops such memorable characters as the Marquesa de Montemayor and the Abbess, Madre

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<sup>12</sup> The Congregational hymn, "Upright of Life," for example, is a translation of Horace's Sapphic *Ode* 1.22, *Integer Vitae*,

María del Pilar, in *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (1928), Chrysis in *The Woman of Andros* (1930), the actress Cytheris in *The Ides of March* (1948), the avatars of the goddess Athene in *The Eighth Day* (1962), and Myra Granberry, an incipient female sage, in *Theophilus North* (1973).

Chapter Four, “The Torch Race of Literature and *The Skin of Our Teeth*,” presents Wilder’s metaphor of a “torch race,” in which he compares literature to a relay race involving the cooperation of various people, rather than strictly individual competition. *The Skin of Our Teeth* not only elucidates this collaborative torch race through references to biblical, mythological, classical, medieval, early modern, and modern literature, but it also dramatizes the Americanization of these influences. The name of the protagonist, George Antrobus, for example, synthesizes allusions to ancient Greek, Homeric, Latin, biblical, and Shakespearean sources, while indicating American history through associations with George Washington. The play links the Antrobus family to ancient prehistory and history, classical Greek literature and mythology, the Hebrew Bible, and American popular music. The maid, Lily Sabina, represents an integration of ancient Roman legends with Hebrew mythology, as well as with a short story by Stephen Vincent Benét and *Peter Pan* by James Barrie.

The concluding chapter, “Our Tears: *Lacrimae Rerum* in *The Matchmaker*, *The Ides of March*, and *Our Town*,” focuses on Dolly Gallagher Levi in *The Matchmaker* (1954), Emily Webb in *Our Town* (1938), and Julius Caesar in *The Ides of March* (1948). Although these three personages emphasize observing and loving life with its joys and its sorrows, each demonstrates a different facet of approaching everyday life with wisdom. Julius Caesar praises the world despite its sorrows, while advocating the reading of great

Greek and Latin literature as a means for the dying to reconcile with leaving this life. Dolly Levi, a transformation of the comic Latin and Greek character of the *parasitus*, advocates a return to a fuller life after a period of desiccated existence. Using the image of the “Spread of Manure,” Dolly sees life-nurturing elements in those aspects of everyday life often seen as degraded, ridiculous, or unworthy. Emily Webb champions everyday details, echoing, but transforming, the classical literary models as well as the letters and poems of Emily Dickinson. The response of these characters to the “tears of the world” involves the integration of examples of great literature, resulting in the moral imperative to notice the beauty and wonder of the world and to live everyday life fully.

Throughout his works, Thornton Wilder creatively incorporates classical writings, themes, characters, styles, and mythology, integrating these influences with a literary tradition stretching through the Middle Ages to modern times, and reinterpreting the classics in an American context. A true *poeta doctus*, learned but not pedantic, he places himself within the long literary tradition of European culture, passing and receiving the light in the “torch race,” with his words reverberating in what Clive James has called the “echo chamber” of literature (80-91). In his reception of the Greek and Latin texts, Wilder Americanizes these works, in the process illuminating ancient classics while also stimulating future writers.

## Chapter Two. An American Successor to Vergil: *The Cabala*

Exemplifying his goal of merging American themes with the classical tradition, Thornton Wilder offers a portrait of the ideal American author in his first novel, *The Cabala* (1926). Not enslaved by the European past like the aristocratic Roman coterie, known as “The Cabala,” who have welcomed the novel’s narrator into their privileged circles, this writer is inspired by Greek and Roman poets, particularly Vergil, in integrating classical learning into his writings, in developing characters influenced by Creusa in Vergil’s *Aeneid*, and in focusing on Vergil’s own theme of “the tears of the world” to represent the shortcomings and brevity of human existence in all its beauty. Wilder evokes the classical world in this novel through quoting Roman poetry, portraying contemporary Latin scholars, alluding to Latin and Greek literature, depicting landscapes and architecture suggesting antique Rome, and creating an ensemble of characters as the avatars of the ancient Roman gods.

In this, his initial novel, Wilder introduces motifs that he will develop in subsequent writings, often through classical allusions, like the contrast between male fathers and female sages, the father attacked by his son or disciple, the risks of religious fanaticism, the death of a character soon after making a positive life-changing decision, and the persistence of love beyond death. In the conclusion of the novel, the spirit of Vergil appears, transferring literary greatness from Rome to America, and in particular to the unnamed American narrator, an *alter ego* for Wilder. Vergil’s farewell to Samuele, as the narrator is nicknamed by the Cabala, anoints him as an American successor to the Latin poet, a writer in the classical tradition who will follow Vergil’s urgings to “give

heed to your Latin” and “in the pride of your city . . . do not forget mine” (133).<sup>1</sup>

By means of Wilder’s numerous direct references and subtle allusions to Vergil, *The Cabala* offers a complex intertextuality not only with Vergil’s *Aeneid* but also with passages in Dante’s *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* that engage with the Latin poet. Introduced by the Bulgarian-French writer Julia Kristeva, the term “intertextuality” covers a wide range of theoretical and ideological perspectives. Eisenhauer, in the Introduction to *Intertextuality in American Drama*, provides a broad definition of intertextuality as “the many sources that form, influence, impinge on, limit, and expand the meaning of a text.” Such a definition encompasses words, phrases, and literary allusions; interactions between genres; inter-relationships between different texts in an author’s canon; and the interdependence between a text’s meaning and the entire schemata of social and historical context (Eisenhauer 1-8). In contrast, some literary theorists and classicists distinguish between “allusion” as the imitation of, or a reference to, earlier texts, and intertextuality as “the conversation between texts” (O’Rourke 390-409). As an example, Hinds uses the term “signposting of reflexive annotation” to represent an allusion that is fully integrated into new work itself (4). When a conversation between texts results in a reinterpretation of a prior text, the result is what the critic and poet John Hollander defines as *metalepsis* (μετάληψις < μετά, “beyond” + λήψις, “taking”) or as *transumption* (Latin *transumptio* “taking from one point or situation to another” < *transsumo* < *trans*, “beyond” + *sumo*, “take”). Metalepsis, for Hollander, is an interpretive allusion or echo, going beyond the traditional understanding of the alluded text, resulting in a new interpretation of the original text, and richer insights into both the new and the prior texts (Hollander 114-49).

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<sup>1</sup> Citations to *The Cabala* are from the 2006 Harper Perennial Modern Classics edition.

## The Presence of Vergil

In *The Cabala*, Wilder's classical and other allusions and intertextualities assume multiple forms. They include echoes of an overall emotional tone (such as the landscape in the first few pages suggesting Vergil's *lacrimae rerum*), as well as seemingly random details from the Graeco-Roman past (such as naming a cat after the decadent Roman empress "Messalina"), an example of what John Hollander calls a "near echo" with "no resonance of context" (118). The narrator provides direct quotation from a Roman poet in Latin (Horace's *Ode* 1.vii), as well as translations and paraphrases of excerpts from Vergil's *Aeneid*; readers with a classical background are encouraged to understand the new text in the context of the entire poem in which the quoted lines appear. Allusions with context are plentiful, among them speculation about where Vergil is buried and reports that Vergil has not died, which prepare the way for the presence of Vergil at the novel's conclusion.

At times, allusions with context also contain other types of echoes. In describing the death of a young man named Marcantonio, Wilder alludes not only to the death of the emperor Augustus' nephew and heir, Marcellus, which resulted in a change in Augustus' dynastic plans, but also to the death of Marcellus' stepfather and Augustus' foe, Mark Antony (Marcus Antonius), thereby combining a phonetic echo of Mark Antony's name, an allusion to the Roman ruler associated with Rome's Golden Age, and an acknowledgment of Puritan attitudes toward pagan hedonism. Sensitive to the effect of Vergil on other writers, Wilder's allusions also incorporate the medieval reception of Vergil by Dante (*circa* 1265-1321). In the concluding pages Wilder achieves intertextuality in its most specific senses: an allusion that is fully integrated into new

work itself, a conversation between texts, a reinterpretation of Vergil's famous phrase, *sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt* [here are the tears of the world, and human matters touch the heart, Verg., *Aen.* 1.462].<sup>14</sup>

In a 2010 essay, Michael Putnam has argued, thoroughly and convincingly, for the prominence of Vergil in *The Cabala*, citing and explicating relevant passages in the *Aeneid*, Books 3 and 4 (Putnam 113-9). References to Vergil in the initial and concluding paragraphs bookend the novel, and loom large throughout. In addition, the words of Vergil's spirit in the concluding pages correspond closely to words spoken by Creusa to Aeneas in *Aeneid* 2 (*Aen.* 2.776-89), although the novel does not mention Creusa. The narrator's invocation of Vergil as "*O anima cortese mantovana*, greatest of all Romans," as Putnam has also pointed out, repeats verbatim the words of Dante's Beatrice, who addresses these precise words, "O courteous Mantuan spirit," to Vergil in *Inferno* 2.58, when enlisting Vergil's aid for Dante's epic journey. Vergil's farewell to the narrator at the end of the novel evokes Vergil's farewell to Dante in *Purgatorio* 27, leaving Dante as a successor to Vergil in poetic laurels, but one who will now rely on his natural talents and on Beatrice as a guide. Similarly, Vergil anoints Samuele, and thus Wilder, as an American successor to the Latin poet.

The intertextuality reaches a peak with indirect allusions to Vergil, *Aeneid* 1.462: *sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt* (Verg., *Aen.* 1.462). Although Richard H. Goldstone has contended that Vergil's appearance to the narrator at the conclusion of *The Cabala* creates in Samuele an overall atmosphere "of the sad music that sings of the Vergilian *lacrimae rerum*," Goldstone does not develop this insight, either by

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<sup>14</sup> I refer to passages from ancient authors by the abbreviations used in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, Third Edition.



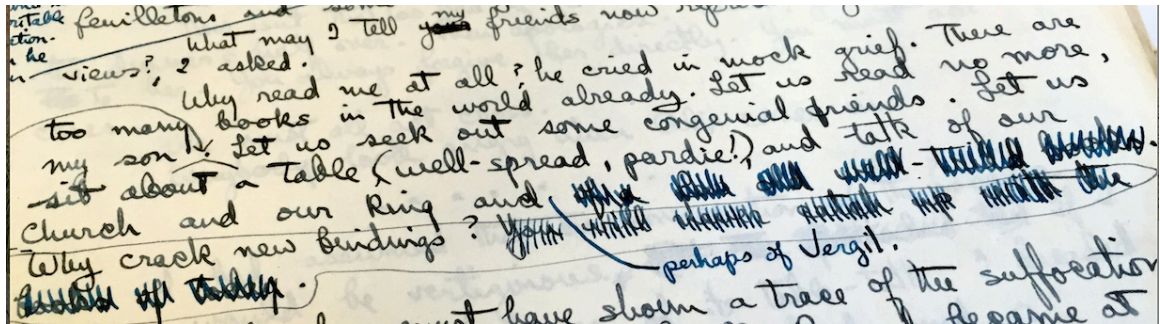
recognizing earlier allusions to Vergil's line, or by elucidating how the spirit of Vergil creates this atmosphere (47). To be sure, Wilder does not cite Vergil's phrase, but he alludes to it most significantly in describing the reactions of Vergil at the conclusion of *The Cabala*. Aeneas says "*sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt*" when he examines the artistic depictions of the Trojan War on the walls of Juno's temple, built by Dido in Carthage. As I will discuss below in more detail, there have been dozens, if not hundreds, of English translations. *Lacrimae* has been rendered not only as "tears," but as a metonym for "sorrow," "emotions," "sympathy," or "pain." The noun *rerum* is the genitive plural form of *res, rei*, whose dictionary definition is "thing," but which Vergil uses to mean "the universe" or "the world." At the end of *Georgics* 2.490, for example, Vergil employs the phrase *felix qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas* [happy is he who was able to know the causes of things], alluding to the name of the didactic poem by Lucretius (circa 99-55 BCE), *De rerum natura* [*On the Nature of Things/the Universe*], and using *rerum* to mean (as Lucretius does) "the universe." This is why *lacrimae rerum* at *Aeneid* 1.462 may be interpreted to mean "tears of things/the universe/the world." Indeed, this connection between Vergil in the *Cabala* and Lucretius strengthens the case for understanding *rerum* as "world," and *lacrimae rerum* as "tears for the beauty of the world," an interpretation Wilder introduces with this novel.

In addition to underscoring the living presence of Vergil, the early pages of *The Cabala* also suggest the complex nature of Wilder's identification with the Latin poet and Wilder's utilization of classical civilization, including his self-assessment in comparison with the magisterial Vergil, and with the reception of Vergil by early Church writers. These pages also point out the dangers of a "passion for aristocratic circles," and the need

to evaluate contemporary representatives of once powerful, but now fading, institutions and their power brokers. When the narrator, on his way to the aristocratic Villa Horace, meets with M. Léry Bogard, a former writer and member of the French Academy, the young man mentions his pleasure in the author's works, especially those on Church History, eliciting this response: "“Why read me at all?” he cried in mock grief. ‘There are too many books in the world already. . . . Let us sit about a table (well-spread, pardi!) and talk of our church and our king and perhaps of Virgil’” (*Cabala* 35). After publication, Wilder often signed copies of *The Cabala* with this quotation, “Why read me at all?” (Harrison 95). Wilder is associating his novel with the works of Vergil, a Vergil who remains a living presence.

Examination of the revisions in Wilder's holograph manuscript of *The Cabala* indicates the importance of the phrase —Why read me at all? — and of Wilder's insertion of a reference to Vergil at this point in the novel. The published version features the interaction of the narrator and M. Bogard on the eighth page of Book Two, “Marcantonio.” Yet the manuscript chapter begins this narrative at the bottom of page one. While Wilder crossed out this section of the holograph page 1, making it illegible, he then rewrote the passage on page 2, only to revise it further. The manuscript describes the encounter of the French writer with the narrator: “Why read me all? he cried in mock horror. There's too many books in the world already. Let us read no more, my son. Let us seek out some congenial friends. Let us sit about a table (well-spread, pardie!) and talk of our Church and our King, and ”; the next six words are crossed out. “Why crack new bindings?” the manuscript continues, only to be followed by ten more crossed-out words. To replace the words to be deleted, Wilder draws a line, adding the phrase “perhaps of

Vergil” to “Let us . . . talk of our Church and our King, and . . .” (TW Papers, Box 95, Folder 2372). “Perhaps of Vergil” thus first occurs in the third version of the manuscript, but Wilder creates a signpost for these words:



The paragraph in the manuscript immediately preceding M. Bogard’s remarks, not included in the eventual printed text, demonstrates the danger of excessive devotion to the powerful and the wealthy, implying that it will result in the sacrifice of one’s writing career to an unexamined ideal or to social climbing:

Suddenly I remembered hearing somewhere that Léry Bogard, the artist, had been so far the victim of his humble origin, as to have suffered shipwreck through a passion for aristocratic circles. His pursuit of crested invitations had brought about in him a conversion to the church . . . [here follow fifteen crossed-out, mostly illegible words].

The paragraph concludes with “[so that now he wrote] little, a few feuilletons and some dialogues for garden-parties.” In the completed novel, Wilder does not “tell” (as in the manuscript version) but “shows” that M. Bogard has renounced his literary career due to his infatuation with aristocracy and religious fanaticism.

Although Wilder’s commandeering of the phrase “Why read me at all?” in signing copies of *The Cabala* is playful and ironic (“*Why read me all?*” but buy my book!), it is also a way to contrast himself, as a novelist who will continue to write and to be inspired by Vergil, with M. Bogard, who has repudiated his writings on the early

Church Fathers. While Bogard disparages his books in comparison with the poetry of Vergil, the narrator is searching for a way neither to disparage his work in reference to Vergil nor to boast of it as superseding the accomplishments of the Latin poet, but to pay appropriate homage to his precursor and to continue to gain inspiration from him. Wilder's use of "Why read me at all?" and "perhaps of Vergil" also enter into dialogue with some of those same Christian writers apparently studied by M. Bogard. Wilder had consulted *Histoire de la Littérature Latine Chrétienne* by Pierre Champagne de Labriolle (1874-1940) as preparation for writing *The Cabala* (Niven, "Foreword" to *Cabala* xv). Since many of the biographical details of Pierre Labriolle match those of the fictional M. Léry Bogard (both are members of prestigious institutes and write on church history), Labriolle appears to be a model for Bogard. As part of his study, Labriolle investigates numerous early Christian writers, elucidating, beyond purely doctrinal controversies, the issues faced when Christian writers either relied upon or totally dismissed pagan authors, tracing their connections to classical Latin authors such as Vergil, Ovid, and Cicero, and to late antique writers such as Claudian (*circa* 370-404). The narrator faces the early Christian dilemma, described by Labriolle, of how to engage with the classics while not slavishly following them nor automatically rejecting their achievements and rhetorical style. This dilemma concerned St. Augustine, for example, about whom the narrator of the novel is writing a drama.

Analogous dilemmas concern the attractions of powerful institutions such as the aristocracy and the church, and the scorn merited by the degeneracy and rigidity of their contemporary representatives. Critics such as Edmund Wilson (1895-1972) and Wilder himself have recognized the influence of Marcel Proust (1871-1922) on *The Cabala*

(Wilson, "Influence of Proust" 303-05; Niven "Foreword" to *Cabala* xvi). Like Proust's narrative of the fading French aristocracy in *À la recherche du temps perdu*, Wilder's novel is a critique of this lost world (in Wilder's case, the world of ancient paganism as well as that of the European aristocracy), a paean to its glamor and possibilities, and a celebration of how a novelist can transform contact with this world into art. Although the dilemmas are introduced at this stage of the narrative, their resolution comes only in the concluding pages of the novel, a solution promoted through a direct dialogue with Vergil. The conversation with M. Bogard underlines the importance of Vergil. Having at one point asked himself whether Vergil was buried in Rome or in Naples (24), the narrator later hears a report that Vergil never died but is still alive on the island of Patmos, eating the leaves of a peculiar tree (90). For Thornton Wilder, Vergil is alive, with the full impact of Vergil's presence to be explored in later sections of the novel.

Additional classical echoes in *The Cabala* feature motifs that Wilder will elaborate in subsequent works, including the continuity between certain cultural practices of modern times and those of classical antiquity, the relevance of the Greek and Roman classical writings to this continuity,<sup>15</sup> the survival in some form of the Greek and Roman gods, and the influence of a great female teacher. Passing references occur to many classical literary and historical figures, including Cato, Aeneas, and the *Senatus Romanus* (11), Tacitus (57), Livy (68), Cicero (90), Sophocles' play, *Oedipus at Colonus* (119), and, on two occasions, a Christian church built over the ruins of a pagan Roman temple, Santa Maria sopra Minerva (38 and 129). The narrator's high school Latin teacher makes a cameo appearance (99), and even a cat is named after a historical Roman, Messalina,

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<sup>15</sup> Wilder utilizes Horace as well as Vergil to emphasize this continual presence of the classics.

the promiscuous wife of the emperor Claudius (8). The ancient gods survive in some form as the members of the Cabala and as Samuele, and the allusion to Creusa at the conclusion of the novel is the first instance where Wilder uses the motif of the female sage. The ancient Greek and Roman world permeates the atmosphere of this novel.

Thornton Wilder began the initial drafts of his first novel, *The Cabala*, in April, 1921, in Paris, after eight months of studying Latin, Italian, and Roman archaeology at the American Academy in Rome. The author's dedication of the published book reads, "To my friends at the American Academy in Rome, 1920-1921. T.W." Wilder's handwritten notes, called *The Memoirs of Charles Mallison: The Year in Rome*, indicate that the story originally began with the protagonist, Charles Mallison, as a youth in China, underlining the similarity with Wilder's own biographical details (TW Papers, Box 95, Folder 2371). Continuing to work on the book during his years as a French teacher at the Lawrenceville School and as a graduate student in Romance languages at Princeton, Wilder experimented with various titles: *Roman Memoirs*, *Notes of a Roman Student*, and *The Trasteverine [Across the Tiber]*. Submitting the first complete version to Dial Press as *The Trasteverine*, Wilder received a rejection letter. After sending the manuscript to the publishing firm of Albert & Charles Boni in February 1925, however, he received a preliminary acceptance one month later, but with the comment that the novel needed revision (Niven, *Life* 243-44).

Requesting feedback, Wilder submitted the manuscript to Henry Blake Fuller (1857-1929). An American novelist, short story writer, and art critic, Fuller is known primarily for the controversial *Bertram Cope's Year*, a subtle novel about American male homosexual life in a university setting, published in 1919. In an undated editorial

memorandum Fuller advised Wilder that a “little more of Virgil at the front would have nicely balanced the Virgil at the back” (TW Papers, Box 95, Folder 2373, “Editorial memo by H. B. Fuller, n.d.”). Because few early drafts of *The Cabala* have survived, it is not absolutely certain what changes Wilder made to the revised manuscript that he returned to the Bonis in November 1925, but since the printed text of the book, published on April 20, 1926, incorporates spelling changes that Fuller had recommended (e.g., “Scriabin”), it is very likely that Wilder also expanded the allusion to Vergil in the opening pages. According to his nephew and literary executor, Tappan Wilder, Thornton Wilder made multiple changes to the novel between March and late November 1925, adding new material and almost certainly Book Five, “The Dusk of the Gods.” The final title, *The Cabala*, dates from this eight-month period of revision (Tappan Wilder, “Afterword” to *The Cabala* 213). While the Italian word *cabala* does indicate a “cabal” (a secret conspiratorial group), it may also mean an “imbroglio” (a complicated or confused situation or disagreement). So, too, it may refer to the Jewish mystical Kabbalah, an occult and often numerological interpretation of Hebrew scripture, a significant detail, since the nickname of the narrator, Samuele, recalls a Hebrew prophet.

The opening paragraph of the novel introduces the reader to Vergil’s “tears of the world” or “tears of things,” a melancholy tone that will suffuse the work, and whose meaning Wilder will expand in the concluding pages. This chapter, “First Encounters,” characterizes the unnamed first-person narrator, a well-read and classically educated young American of a Puritan mindset, on his way to Rome with his friend, the scholar James Blair. Traveling by train, they notice the countryside: “It was Virgil’s country and there was a wind that seemed to rise from the fields and descend upon us in a long

Virgilian sigh, for the land that has inspired sentiment in the poet ultimately receives its sentiment from him” (1). Some critics have identified this sentence as an example of the pathetic fallacy (Castronovo 59), a term coined by John Ruskin for the attribution of human feelings to the natural world (Burris 888-89). Wilder echoes the “long Virgilian sigh” of *The Cabala*’s opening paragraph in the first sentence of his 1930 novel, *The Woman of Andros*, “The Earth sighed as it turned in its course” (*Woman* 137).

As noted above, the meaning of Vergil’s phrase, *lacrimae rerum*, is open to various interpretations. Some critics, for example, consider *rerum* to be an objective genitive, constituting the object of the tears, “tears about the world” (Stewart 116-22). Others argue that it is a subjective genitive, *rerum* denoting the subject that experiences the tears, “tears inherent in or shed by the world,” for example, in Jackson Knight’s comment that “the world has tears as a constituent part of it” (Knight 193). A few commentators think that the phrase refers specifically to the Carthaginians; e.g., John Dryden: “ev’n here [in Carthage] / The monuments of Trojan woes appear!” (Dryden, 644-45), while other scholars emphasize that it has a general significance, applicable to all of humankind (Feder 197-209).

Not only is the opening of *The Cabala* an allusion to the Latin poet, but Wilder’s personification of the earth as sighing recalls Vergil’s notion that things or the world (*rerum*) have tears, an *exemplum* of *lacrimae rerum* as a subjective genitive, “tears belonging to, or shed by, the world.” Below is a selection of additional English translations and paraphrases, whose occasional verbosity and clumsiness constitute a tribute to Vergil’s powers of concision and allusion.



“Tears are universal, belong to the constitution of nature, and the evils of mortality move the human heart.” (Henry 705);

“there are tears for events” (Page 185);

“Tears haunt the world; man’s fortunes touch man’s hearts.” (Duff 1909);

Even here, on the remote and savage shore of Libya, renown has its due, and tears are real things, *i.e.* sympathy exists as part of the real world, not as a merely imagined consolation.” (MacKay 257-258);

“And the universe has sympathy for us, and deeds of the past do affect men’s minds.” (Stewart 116-22);

“even here, the world is a world of tears / and the burdens of mortality touch the heart” (Fagles 63).

David Wharton argues that Vergil wrote this line to be deliberately ambiguous, so that the reader has to try to interpret it (259-79). The various meanings of *lacrimae rerum* are not exclusive; Wilder will expand the significance of *lacrimae rerum* in the novel’s conclusion, and develop the theme in his later writings.

The train ride and the arrival in Rome prepare the reader for the Cabala, while hinting at the survival of the ancient pagan gods, evoking Dante, and prefiguring the appearance of Vergil’s spirit. During the journey Blair tells the narrator about the Cabala (Wilder pronounced the word as a dactyl, with an accent on the first syllable), a small, international group of aristocrats possessing special influence in Roman circles. Briefly describing the eccentricities of the members, all of whom have extensive resources, not only in terms of their material wealth but also their personal networks, Blair adds that an acquaintance “has a sort of hysterical fear of them, and thinks they’re supernatural” (5).

There will be further hints of something supernatural in relation to the Cabala as the novel progresses. Continuing on the train journey, the narrator fantasizes about going to “the Lateran where Dante mixes with the Jubilee crowd” (76). When he arrives in Rome, however, “the station was deserted; there was no coffee, no wine, no moon, no ghosts” (7). In contrast to the narrator’s arrival in a Rome that is deserted (without the expected Dante), with no moon in the sky and no ghosts, his departure from Italy will feature Dante, lights in the night sky, and the ghosts of Vergil and of Creusa.

After the narrator arrives in Rome, Blair introduces him to his friend, the wealthy American heiress Elizabeth Grier, “the latest dictator of Rome,” and a member of the Cabala. As noted by Lincoln Konkle, Miss Grier provides the first occasion in print in which Wilder introduces his Stage Manager (Konkle, *Puritan* 153).<sup>16</sup> Wilder does so indirectly, by means of a simile: “As by the click of some invisible stage-manager Miss Grier entered” (49). At a party later on the same day that she first meets the narrator, Miss Grier brings him into contact with another member of the Cabala, Mademoiselle Marie-Astrée-Luce de Morfontaine, described as a “high Merovingian maiden,” an excessively rich advocate of the Royalist movement in France and of the divine right of kings. Ms. Grier asks the narrator to return later that night since there is a service she wishes to ask him, leading the narrator to fantasize, “Apparently the whole Cabala wanted me to do favors.” Since they have “two hours to kill,” Blair takes the narrator to visit a friend, a mortally ill English poet.

### **The Dying Keats**

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<sup>16</sup> The “Manager,” a Stage Manager-figure, occurs in the three-minute play, “Proserpina and the Devil,” written in 1915, but not printed until two years after publication of *The Cabala*.

Into this encounter between the narrator and the English poet, Wilder integrates such themes as comforting the dying with the words of poetry, ensuring the survival of literary works, engagement with classical art, and the consequences of culture wars as well as further allusions to Vergil's poetry. Although the poet remains unnamed, multiple clues (e.g., the poet's coughing up blood, residence in a small apartment near the Spanish Steps, references to "Chapman's Homer," and the poet's epitaph) indicate that the narrator is in the presence of the dying John Keats (1795-1821), even though the novel is set in 1921 while Keats died in 1821. Wilder especially emphasizes the English poet's classical associations. When the narrator offers to read something, the poet asks for a translation from the Greek. Keats had studied Latin as a boy at a village school in Enfield, but he did not know much Greek. After his mother died when he was fourteen years old, Keats started a prose translation of Vergil's *Aeneid*, apparently on the suggestion of the school's headmaster, in an effort to help distract the adolescent from his grief. Although the translation was completed after Keats had left school, the manuscript has not survived. Keats's recent biographer, Nicholas Roe, considers this translation to be "Keats's first major literary achievement, sowing ground to be harvested in his later encounters with the classical world" (Roe 42-43). Wilder was most likely aware of Keats's translation of Vergil's *Aeneid*, since he read Amy Lowell's biography, *John Keats*, while he was writing *The Cabala* (Niven, *Life* 238). Not only does Lowell mention this translation by Keats (Lowell I, 50), she also describes Keats's expertise in Latin (I, 42-43; II, 83). Keats's subsequent poetry engaged with Greek and Roman culture through topics such as translations by other individuals ("On First Looking into Chapman's Homer"), classical mythology ("Ode to Apollo" and *Endymion: A Poetic Romance*),

Greek sculpture (“On Seeing the Elgin Marbles”), and ancient vases (“Ode on a Grecian Urn”) (Keats, *Complete Poems*).

The use of classical themes by a lower-middle class individual such as Keats and his associates provoked a culture war in the periodical press of the 1810s between British reformists and conservatives concerning the proper use of classical culture, as Wilder learned from Lowell’s biography of Keats (Lowell II, 77-93). Tory critics writing in the Scottish *Blackwood’s Magazine* attacked John Keats together with Leigh Hunt (1784-1859, the primary target), William Hazlitt, Robert Haydon, and other contributors to the middle-class periodical, *The Examiner*, as members of the “Cockney School of Poetry.” The cultural conservatives assailed these writers for their “pretensions” to knowledge of Latin and Greek, and for daring to use classical culture as part of a reformist program. John Gibson Lockhart, for example, erroneously claimed that Keats “has never read a single line . . . of Ovid,” and denigrated Keats for “low diction.” In one essay, Lockhart wrote: “No man whose mind has ever been imbued with the smallest knowledge or feeling of classical poetry or classical history, could have stooped to profane and vulgarize every association” as Keats has done (qtd. in Stead, “Swinish Classics 55-78). These attacks on Keats for daring to use classical motifs resemble the outcry by men in Wilder’s 1930 novel, *The Woman of Andros*, against an immigrant woman, Chrysis, for daring to teach Greek literature: “A few more imported notions and our island will be spoiled forever. It will become a mass of poor undigested imitations. All the girls will be wanting to read and write and declaim. What becomes of home life, Simo, if women can read and write?” (*Woman* 140-41).

The narrator's attempts to comfort the dying poet highlight the issues of the persistence and the value of great poetry through the ages, and prefigure Wilder's integration of multiple literary sources into a single scene, as in the conclusion of *The Cabala*, or throughout an entire work, as in *The Skin of Our Teeth*. Since the English poet in *The Cabala* especially desired praise of poetry, the narrator speaks:

of Sappho, of how a line of Euripides drove mad the citizens of Abdera; of Terence pleading with audiences to come to him rather than to the tight-rope walkers; of Villon writing his mother's prayers before the great picture-book of a cathedral wall; of Milton in his old age, holding a few olives in his hand to remind himself of his golden year in Italy (26-27).

The narrator continues his account of the dying poet: "Quite suddenly in the middle of the catalogue he burst out fiercely: I was meant to be among those names. I was. . . . But it's now too late. I want every copy of my books destroyed. Let every word die, die." The poet then demands that the narrator make sure that no name be placed on his grave. "Just write: Here lies one whose name was writ in water." Theodore Ziolkowski has noted that this wish of the dying poet is an allusion to Vergil, who, on his deathbed, had asked his friends to destroy copies of the *Aeneid* (Ziolkowski, *Virgil* 197).

As suggested by Stead, the epitaph, "Here lies one whose name was writ in water," further associates Keats with Latin literature, specifically with Catullus 70, a poem written in elegiac couplets (*Cockney Catullus* 300-01).

*Nulli se dicit mulier mea nubere malle  
quam mihi, non si se Iuppiter ipse petat.  
dicit: sed mulier cupido quod dicit amanti,  
in vento et rapida scribere oportet aqua.* (Cat. 70: 1-4).

My woman says that she will prefer to marry no one except me,  
Not even if Jupiter himself would seek her.

She says; but what a woman says to her eager lover

One ought to write in the wind and in swiftly moving water.

Examination of Keats's image of "writ in water" yields multiple literary influences, including the possibility of Catullus. Stanley Plumly has commented that "Like much of his original writing, Keats probably synthesized the phrase 'writ in water' from more than one source, primarily Beaumont and Fletcher's *Philaster*, Act V, Scene 3" (Plumly 68). Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher are among the authors Wilder listed as reading in 1925, while writing *The Cabala* (Niven, *Life* 237-38). These lines occur in their *Philaster, or Love Lies-a-Bleeding* (circa 1608-10):

All your better deeds

Shall be in water writ. ( *Philaster* 5.3.81-82).

In addition, *The Famous History of the Life of King Henry the Eighth*, now believed to be a circa 1613 collaboration between William Shakespeare and John Fletcher, contains:

Men's evil manner live in brass; their virtues

We write in water ( *Henry VIII* 4.2.45-46).

While these two Jacobean plays may have been the immediate sources for Keats, the context of these phrases in the plays is much different from that of the poet's epitaph. In *Henry VIII* Griffith responds to Queen Katherine's criticism of the recently deceased Cardinal Wolsey by telling her that men's better deeds are "writ in water" while their evil deeds are memorialized in brass. The hero Philaster tells the King of Sicily that if he goes through with his intended crime his better deeds "shall be in water writ," while his evil deed will be writ "in marble" for "the shame of men." In both cases, Queen Katherine and the King of Sicily reverse course, so that the virtues of Wolsey and of the King of Sicily will not be "writ in water." In reference to the epitaph, "whose name was writ in water," Stanley Plumly notes that "*Was* is the operative word" (Plumly 69). Thus Wilder

indicates in the last sentence of his first chapter that the fame of the dying poet is substantial, not writ in water: “when I came back from the country he had died and his fame had begun to spread over the whole world” (*Cabala* 27).

Although he probably had not studied Catullus formally in school, Keats demonstrates the influence of this Roman poet. A regular reader, since his school days, of Leigh Hunt’s weekly journal, *The Examiner*, in which Hunt published his own translations of Catullus alongside the Latin text, Keats later held long discussions with Hunt about Catullus. In addition, lines 35-37 of Keats’s description of the “peaceful citadel . . . emptied of its folk, this pious morn” in his “Ode on a Grecian Urn” reflect the identically numbered lines, 35-37, of Catullus 64, where Greek towns lie emptied of their inhabitants because the people have gone to the wedding of Peleus and Thetis (*Cockney Catullus* 122-26 and 298-300). Such use of identically numbered poetic lines for similar themes constitutes what Llewelyn Morgan names “stichometric intertextuality” (< στίχος, a line of poetry) (Morgan 23-27). To be sure, Gian Biagio Conte notes that allusions should not be confused with background noise or accidental confluence (Conte 218). Even so, while there is no certainty that Keats’s epitaph alludes to Catullus 70, the connection appears plausible given what we know about Keats. What is more, Wilder had stated in a June 1953 interview given in German that it was during his eight months of classical and archaeological studies in Rome (which led to *The Cabala*) that he first got the idea for his “fictitious autobiography of Julius Caesar,” that is, *The Ides of March*, which also features the poet Catullus as a major character (Wagner 59). In addition, the account of the narrator comforting the dying Keats by reading poetry is analogous to the scene of Julius Caesar comforting the dying Catullus with poetry in *The Ides of March*.

In subsequent novels and plays Wilder will return to the themes of using poetry to comfort the dying, and to emphasizing connections among great poets and writers from various centuries and cultures. In these works Wilder cites the writers whom the narrator discusses with the English poet: Sappho, Euripides, and Terence, especially the prologues to Terence's Latin comedies. Wilder balances the dying English poet's wish to be "among those names" of influential writers with the catalogue of Vergil's peers in the concluding pages of *The Cabala*. In this section of *The Cabala*, the spirit of Vergil tells the narrator that he has just come from an afterlife conversation in which Erasmus is in debate with Plato, and Augustine is present. When the narrator asks specifically about English poets, Vergil states that he has talked with Milton, who "spoke a noble Latin."

The novel's comments about William Shakespeare that next occur are puzzling. Although esteeming Shakespeare as greater than Milton, Wilder's Vergil complains that Shakespeare is "proud and troubled and strode among us unseeing" and "sits apart, his hand over his eyes." The narrator accounts for Vergil's attitude toward Shakespeare by noting that he "knew but little Latin . . . and perhaps had never read" the Latin poet (133). This depiction of Shakespeare is unfair and inaccurate.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps the comments of Wilder's Vergil that Shakespeare is "proud and troubled and strode among us unseeing" and Samuele's minimization of Vergil's influence on the English playwright's works reflect the narrator's Puritan background. While Samuele accepts Vergil as a spiritual

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<sup>17</sup> The works of Vergil were second only to Ovid in the grammar school curriculum in Shakespeare's day, and Shakespeare relied on Vergil heavily in many works, including, to mention just a few, *The Rape of Lucrece*, *Venus and Adonis*, *The Tempest*, and the prologue to *Henry IV, Part Two*. Although Baldwin and others have found numerous parallels in Shakespeare to Vergil's *Aeneid*, especially to Books 1, 2, 4, and 6, scholars have identified fewer Shakespearean allusions to Vergil's *Eclogues* and *Georgics*. See Baldwin, Vol. 2, 456-96.



figure, he criticizes Shakespeare for not committing himself to religion, thus being unsure of his place in the afterlife: “Moreover in life he was neither the enemy nor advocate of grace and being arrived in your region his whole mind may well have been consumed with anxiety as to his eternal residence” (133).

### **The Members of the Cabala**

Book Two, “Marcantonio,” emphasizes the conflict between the attractions of a pagan civilization and the narrator’s Puritan background, a tension that Wilder addresses in the conclusion. Son Altesse Leda Matilda, duchessa d’Aquilanera, descended from multiple aristocratic lines with “cardinalitial, royal and papal traditions,” asks the narrator to come to her home to speak to her sixteen-year old son, Marcantonio, so that the boy might learn to curb his sexual appetites. Mlle. Astrée-Luce de Morfontaine has also invited the narrator to spend a weekend at her villa in Tivoli, the Villa Horace. Arriving at the villa, the narrator expands the classical Latin allusions in *The Cabala* beyond Vergil, in a way that recalls Wilder’s schoolboy Latin studies at the China Inland Mission Boys’ School in Chefoo (1911-1912). There, as he wrote to his mother, he was reading on his own Horace’s *Odes*, Vergil’s *Aeneid* I, II and VIII, and selections from Ovid (*Selected Letters* 23-5). Wilder evokes Horace’s *Odes* and the idea of continuity of modern with classical culture when Mlle. Astrée-Luce de Morfontaine claims that her villa is the very one that the literary patron Maecenas had given to Horace (65-8 BCE). Astrée-Luce states:

even onomatopoeia testified, declared our hostess, asserting that from her window the waterfall could be literally heard to lisp

‘ . . . domus Albuniae renantis

Et praeceps Anio ac Tiburni locus et uda

Mobilibus pomaria ravis.’ (36).

These untranslated lines are from Horace’s *Odes*, Book 1.7, lines 12-14. “Tiburni” refers to Tibur, the modern Tivoli, where Astrée-Luce’s villa is located. In this *Ode*, Horace writes that others may praise Rhodes, Mitylene, and other locations, but

Neither stubborn Lacedaemon  
Nor the rich Larissa plain have struck me  
As much as Albunia’s resounding home  
And the down-rushing Anio and Tivoli’s grove  
And its orchards watered by running streams.”<sup>18</sup>

(translating lines 10-11 in addition to lines 12-14, which are the only ones given in *The Cabala*).

In the rest of the *Ode*, Horace advises his friend Plancus to be wise enough to set aside the sorrow and troubles of life with mellow wine. The associations of the full poem are relevant to the attempt to reform Marcantonio, and to conflicts between the narrator’s Puritanism and the attitudes and luxury he encounters in Rome.

The Villa Horace provides the opportunity to describe two additional members of the Cabala, Cardinal Vaini and Alix, Princess d’Espoli, and for the narrator to speculate that the gods of antiquity have not died and may be incarnated in the members of the Cabala. A former successful missionary in China, the eighty-year old Cardinal is an intellectual giant who had harmonized Christianity with the religions of China, becoming an influential, scholarly churchman. In his hand-written manuscripts, Wilder spelled the Cardinal’s name as “Vaïni,” indicating that it is trisyllabic. In his hand-written manuscript, Wilder sketched “Cardinal Vaïni” (TW Papers, Box 95, Folder 2372):

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<sup>18</sup> The 2007 Library of America edition of Wilder’s novels does provide an English translation of lines 12-14 from this Horatian *Ode* in the endnotes, but without giving the context of the lines.



Waiting for dinner but disappointed in not yet encountering the wit and eloquence he had expected, the narrator introduces the theme of the continuing, but disguised, presence of the pagan gods, a motif that becomes prominent in the concluding book of *The Cabala* and that Wilder develops in *The Alcestiad* and *The Eighth Day*.

I recalled the literary tradition that the gods of antiquity had not died but still drifted about the earth shorn of the greater part of their glory—Jupiter and Venus and Mercury straying through the streets of Vienna as itinerant musicians, or roaming the South of France as harvesters. Casual acquaintances would not be able to sense their supernaturalism; the gods would take good care to dim their genius but once the outsider had gone would lay aside their cumbersome humanity and relax in the reflections of their ancient godhead (43-44).

The three gods Wilder specifically mentions, Jupiter, Venus, and Mercury, are crucial for the plot of Vergil's *Aeneid*, just as their avatars are central figures in *The Cabala*. Jupiter's decision determines the success of the exiled Trojans in becoming the Romans, rulers of the world. As the mother of Aeneas, Venus causes Dido to fall in love with him, and the goddess brings Aeneas his armor, not only essential for victory, but through its ekphrasis summarizing Roman history. Mercury as messenger of the gods appears to Aeneas, calling him away from Dido and back to his destiny by sailing to Italy. In *The Cabala*, Cardinal Vaini reincarnates Jupiter, the power of Venus determines the actions of Marcantonio as well as Alix's infatuations, and the narrator becomes

Mercury, the messenger of the gods. Wilder treats the motif of the disguised gods in numerous writings throughout his life. Since the gods “take good care to dim” and to disguise themselves, however, humans cannot be certain whether they have truly encountered the gods (Alcestis and Apollo in *The Alcestiad*), or whether these gods exist as real beings, as fantasies, as metaphors, or as symbols for general personality types (*Eighth Day*).

After dinner, the narrator is called into the presence of the Cardinal, where he experiences the first of several assaults on his rigid, moralistic stance. Discussing his mission in regard to Marcantonio, the narrator is astonished to learn that the Cardinal believes that the goal of the adolescent’s moral reform should be short-term only, so that the boy might control his sexual escapades long enough to marry an aristocrat and continue their noble line. The Cardinal explains, “But after all, we are in the world.” Samuele thinks to himself: “I thank thee . . . Never try to do anything against the bent of human nature. I came from a colony guided by exactly the opposite principle” (48-49. *Italics in the original*). The narrator, nevertheless, agrees to the Cardinal’s request that he spend a week with Marcantonio at his family’s estate in the countryside.

By attesting that various practices of pagan antiquity still abide in twentieth century Rome, and by alluding to Mark Antony (83-30 BCE) and Marcellus (42-23 BCE), the young heir of Augustus, depicted in Vergil’s *Aeneid*, the narrator’s experiences with Marcantonio draw into stark relief the contrast between the narrator’s Puritan world-view and the attraction of Marcantonio’s pagan ethos, a tension (for Wilder as well as Samuele) concerning how to incorporate pagan Vergilian themes in the light of his own religious tradition. Mesmerized by the beauty and antiquity of the Villa Colonna, and

impressed with the young Italian's "vision of a civilization where no one thought about anything but caresses," the narrator at times becomes lost in fantasy, while "Tacitus lay unread upon my knee." This seemingly casual association of Marcantonio's sexual behavior with a Roman historian suggests that the adolescent's name at least partly derives from Mark Antony, whose sexual recklessness Wilder portrays in *The Ides of March* (1948). In his discussions with Marcantonio, the narrator learns that the boy's behavior has alternated between periods of disorderly dissipation and times of more orderly behavior, although these last are marked by episodes of religious frenzy. Vergil elaborates such frenzy when depicting the struggle between a crazed, disordered world and an orderly one in the *ekphrasis* of the armor and the Shield of Aeneas in Vergil's *Aeneid*, Book 8, 615-731. The heart of the shield portrays the battle of Actium, with Agrippa and Caesar Augustus leading the Roman forces. Opposing them is Mark Antony:

*hinc ope barbarica variisque Antonius armis,  
victor ab Aurorae populis et litore rubro,  
Aegyptum virisque Orientis et ultima secum  
Bactra vehit, sequiturque (nefas) Aegyptia coniunx* (*Aen.* 8. 685-88).

From here Antony, victorious with barbarian aid and various arms  
From the people of the East and the shore of the Red Sea,  
Drags Egypt, Oriental powers, and very remote Bactria with him,  
And unspeakable (*nefas*) his Egyptian wife follows.

Terrorized by the might of Rome, Cleopatra and Antony flee in chaos, eventually to commit suicide.

The suicide of Marcantonio also echoes the identification of Antony as Bacchus in Plutarch's *Life of Antony* and the interpretation of his suicide as a noble act in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*. For Vergil and other official writers of Augustus'

Golden Age, Mark Antony, who had only temporarily reformed after marriage to Augustus' sister, represents the excesses of sensuality and the dangers of submission to a foreign woman. Plutarch's *Life of Antony* prefaces Antony's death by a report of religious superstition; a troupe of actors displaying Bacchic revelry had processed, with musical accompaniment and dancing, out of the city of Alexandria, leading the populace to conclude that the god Bacchus, to whom Antony attached himself, had now abandoned him (Plut. *Ant.* 75.3-4). Shakespeare depicts the suicide of Antony as a noble act, initiated because Antony thinks erroneously that Cleopatra has abandoned him, but not dying until he is carried into Cleopatra's presence (*Antony and Cleopatra* 4.15-16). In *The Cabala*, although the narrator appears to reform Marcantonio through the "remorseless counsels . . . of the Puritans and alternating the vocabulary of the Pentateuch with that of psychiatry," the change is for a short time only. For Marcantonio relapses, attempts sexual relations with his half-sister, and then commits suicide (52-59). His mother, however, sees Marcantonio's death as somehow reflecting the fact that his moral reformation had broken his health; "he has gone insane from an excess of virtue and shot himself from too much sanctity" (60).

The narrative about Marcantonio also alludes to Vergil's depiction of Marcellus given at *Aeneid* 6. 882-83. The nephew and adopted son of Augustus, Marcellus died in 23 BCE at age 18 or 19, approximately the same age as Marcantonio, disrupting the succession plans of a noble family. In his descent to the Underworld, Aeneas sees historic and legendary Roman heroes, including the third-century BCE Roman general Marcellus and a youth next to him (*Aen.* 6.855-83). When Aeneas asks the identity of the boy, Anchises, the father of Aeneas, answers, emphasizing the dynastic connection to the

older Roman general: *Heu, miserande puer, si qua fata aspera rumpas/ tu Marcellus eris* [Oh! boy to be pitied, if by any means you should rupture the harsh fates, you will be Marcellus, *Aen.* 6.882-83].

By alluding to the nephew and adopted son of Augustus, Marcellus, the story of Marcantonio carries an additional Vergilian resonance, adding to the atmosphere of *lacrimae rerum* and suggesting a way for Samuele to incorporate pagan classical themes in the light of the narrator's own traditions, through the example of early Christian writers. An allusion to Marcellus may have been prompted by Wilder's reading of Pierre Champagne de Labriolle, whose *Histoire de la Littérature Latine Chrétienne* Wilder had consulted as preparation for writing this novel (Niven, "Foreword" xv). Discussing a fourth-century CE Christian author (now known as Pseudo-Hilarius), Labriolle writes: "L'auteur du *Metrum in Genesin* s'attendrit sur Adam et sa posterité en des termes qui évoquent la mélancolie de Virgile déplorant de triste destin du jeune Marcellus" [The author of the *Poem on Genesis* is deeply moved over Adam and his posterity in terms evoking the melancholy of Vergil deploring the sorrowful destiny of the young Marcellus] (Labriolle 469). While the allusion to Mark Antony depicts the dangers of unbridled pagan sensuality, the echo of the premature death of Marcellus gives Marcantonio's death an atmosphere of Vergilian *lacrimae rerum*, leading to a possible resolution for the narrator's dilemma on how to utilize classical literature. Samuele will respond to Vergil's concluding words by becoming a writer who incorporates classical writings in a manner reminiscent of those early Christian authors who utilized some Greek and Latin literature for specific themes and rhetorical strategies while remaining committed to their own religious beliefs and to addressing contemporary issues.

Approximately halfway through the novel,<sup>19</sup> Alix, Princess d’Espoli, gives the narrator the nickname by which he is then known, “Samuele.” In the midst of a discussion of the young man’s “new world” background and hints at his vocation as a writer, Alix says that he reminds her of her former dog, a setter, named Samuele: “Samuele spent all his life sitting around on the pavement watching us with a look of most intense excitement. . . . You won’t be angry with me if every now and then I call you Samuele to remind me of him?” (61-62). Where the published novel states that “[T]he whole Cabala had followed the Princess in calling me Samuele” (101), Wilder’s hand-written manuscript adds: “because I was supposed to have a look that said: ‘Speak, Lord: Thy servant heareth’” (TW Papers, Box 95, Folder 2372, “Holograph plus some typescript pages of Notes of a ‘Roman’ Student,” Book Four, p. 5). This is an allusion to the Hebrew Biblical prophet Samuel, who not only was always watching for and attentive to God, but also had anointed David as successor to Saul as King of Israel (1 *Sam.* 16:1-13). Konkle has pointed out that the Biblical Samuel was also a messenger (Samuele will later become Mercury, the gods’ messenger), bringing God’s word to Saul, and that, in addition, “Samuele” alludes to “Uncle Sam,” the representative of America (*Puritan* 79). The bestowal of the name “Samuele” not only suggests that the narrator will be attentive to the Cabala and become their messenger, but also that he will write about the Cabala and classical Roman civilization specifically as an American.

An example of the dangers of erotic obsession, Alix’s infatuation with his friend, James Blair, re-enacts a Venus-Adonis paradigm, illustrating a survival of the pagan gods, but also serving as a negative example to Samuele on how to be attentive, and how

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<sup>19</sup> Page 62 out of a total of 132 in the Harper Perennial edition.



not to use Latin literature. A woman of strong emotional sensibilities, Alix is “excessively pretty in a fragile Parisian way; her vivacious head, surmounted by a mass of sandy reddish hair, was forever tilted above one or another of her thin pointed shoulders; her whole character lay in her sad laughing eyes and small red mouth” (62). Wilder sketched a portrait of Alix in a hand-written manuscript (TW Papers, Box 95, Folder 2372).



Meeting Blair while visiting Samuele, Alix gets subjected to an inappropriate use of the Roman classics through Blair’s pedantic, distant, rude personality. “Coldly, haughtily, and with long quotations from Livy and Virgil, he harangued my guest.” Alix, nevertheless, falls in love with Blair, ignoring the Cabala while she desperately follows him. Having repeatedly experienced Blair’s coldness and rejection, she finally stops her pursuit and returns to the Cabala, although she remains devoted to him in her heart. Blair, a brilliant scholar, has published nothing, and projects his Latin erudition into all types of life activities, no matter how inappropriate. The narrator, in contrast, gives full attention to the individual members of the Cabala, as befits his name “Samuele,” and will use Latin when it befits his writings, and not succumb to the temptation of some classical scholars to belittle other with their erudition rather than sharing as Wilder’s heroes do.

The catastrophic interchange between Astrée-Luce and Cardinal Vaini introduces the theme of father figure/teacher who will be attacked by his son/disciple, a motif that Wilder continues to explore in his works, often through classical allusions. Cardinal Vaini exemplifies the limitations of erudition without empathy and good will. Unlike the Cardinal, Wilder's female sages integrate these qualities, becoming more successful in their efforts to guide and inspire others. In Wilder's later writings, Henry attempts to assault his father, George Antrobus, in *The Skin of Our Teeth* (1942); Brutus, rumored to be the son of Julius Caesar, assassinates him in *The Ides of March* (1948); and George Lansing murders his father, Breckenridge, in *The Eighth Day* (1967).

In addition, this chapter on Astrée-Luce and the Cardinal explores the risks of religious fanaticism, which Wilder develops in *Heaven's My Destination* (1935), and the persistence of love beyond death, a motif in *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (1927). Although Astrée-Luce "lived in a mist of piety . . . [but] had no brains" (98), Samuele nevertheless concludes that: "Strange though Mlle. de Morfortaine was, she was never ridiculous . . . she was able to let fall remarkably penetrating judgments, judgments that proceeded from the intuition without passing through the confused corridors of our reason" (99). Deeply admiring the Cardinal, Astrée-Luce has her irrational faith deliberately challenged by him. Having studied Freud, Spengler, and Greek tragedians in the original, he employs his vast worldly knowledge, powerful intellect and rationalism to demolish Astrée-Luce's naive beliefs. Devastated, she identifies the Cardinal as the Devil. It warrants note that Samuele had a few pages earlier characterized Astrée-Luce as possessing "remarkably penetrating judgments," and that the name "Astrée-Luce" means "starlight," a significant

image for the presence of Vergil in the concluding chapter. Attempting to shoot the Cardinal with a pistol, she misses, although the Cabala itself is gravely damaged.

The Cardinal's subsequent death serves as a reflection on the English poet's death earlier in the novel, as well as a prototype of later characters in Wilder's fiction whose deaths occur soon after they make life-affirming major decisions. Having decided to return to China where he had found fulfillment as a successful missionary, the Cardinal dies on shipboard (104-23). The German scholar Hermann Stresau (1894-1964) comments that it is the Cardinal's name that becomes "writ in water" (17). Confirming Stresau's aperçu are the thoughts the narrator of the *Cabala* ascribes to the Cardinal when he had arranged to be buried at sea in case he would die en route: "Better, better to be tossing in the tides of the Bengal Bay and to be nosed by a passing shark, than to lie, a sinner of sinners, under a marble tomb with the inevitable *insignis pietate* [distinguished in piety], the inescapable *ornatissimus* [most ornate, probably referring to the style of the carving of the inscription]" (123). The Cardinal's reference to an unwanted tomb and epitaph contrasts him with the dying poet; Keats' poetry will live, but the legacy of a father figure who has not acted with empathy and good will is "writ in water." In addition, the Cardinal is the first of many characters who will die soon after making positive life-changing decisions, but prior to being able to implement them.

### **The Survival of the Gods**

The concluding chapter, "The Dusk of the Gods," presents the survival of the ancient gods, and shows us Samuele receiving wisdom from Vergil and Creusa, while beginning his return journey to America, where he will become an author integrating

classical learning into his writings, but one not rigidly adhering to the European past. Having decided to return to America, Samuele makes his goodbyes to the members of Cabala still in Rome. In response to his request to shed some light on the Cabala, since “there appears to be some last secret about you that I’ve never been able to seize,” Elizabeth Grier agrees to talk to him about the group. “Well, first you must know, Samuele,” she begins, “that the gods of antiquity did not die with the arrival of Christianity . . . when they began to lose worshipers they began to lose some of their divine attributes. They even found themselves able to die if they wanted to. But when one of them died his godhead was passed on to someone else.” Miss Grier states that she will not tell Samuele whether this is true, or an allegory, or just nonsense, adding, “I sometimes think that you are the new god Mercury.” Summarizing a document describing encounters with the manifestations of other gods, she asks Samuele, “Do you recognize anything?” She concluded that these gods become tired, give in, renounce themselves, and die out (126-30).

Although first spelled out in published form in *The Cabala*, Wilder’s fascination with avatars and representatives of the ancient Greek and Roman gods extends from a school essay he had written at age eleven to many of his later works, including *The Ides of March*, *The Alcestiad*, and *The Eighth Day*. Literary scholars have identified the members of the Cabala and their acquaintances with various pagan gods: Cardinal Vaini as Jupiter, Elizabeth Grier as Demeter or Ceres, Marcantonio as Pan (as he is called in the novel) or as Dionysus, Alix and Blair as Venus and Adonis, and Samuele as Mercury (Burbank 35), as well as Astrée-Luce as Artemis (Wilson, “Influence of Proust” 305). Samuele accepts the identification with Mercury, both as the messenger of the gods, and

as the conductor of the dead (131). Entranced by Greek and Roman mythology, Wilder traced his engagement with the ancient gods to his years at Emerson Grammar School in Berkeley, California, which he attended from November 1906 through January 1911.

A schoolboy essay from sixth grade at this school, featured in the *Time Magazine* cover story on Wilder cited in Chapter One, introduces a motif that will remain prominent in Wilder's writings — the human manifestations of the gods (see Appendix A). Here are the passages concerning Mercury, with whom the narrator of *The Cabala* identifies, and Apollo, who will be a major presence in *The Alcestiad* and Wilder's critical writings. A catalogue of the gods also becomes significant in *The Eighth Day*, which features numerous human representatives of Greek and Roman female goddesses, including Juno, Aphrodite, and especially, Athena, the goddess of wisdom.

Apollo, God of a few (Oh, yes, a few) things got on on Ceasar [on Caesar] who could dictate so many letters in so many towns at once, in that he was God of many things at once, God of the honorable sun, God of the game of Archery, God of Music and Harmony, God of hunting in col[l]aboration with his sister Diana, God of Poetry and Art, and at the same time god!

Mercury . . . = Eloquence = fair speech = Flattery. . . . also God of Commerce and (*word illegible*) boys, with whom he can sympathize, himself.

Apollo is a direct participant in *The Alcestiad*, a priest of Apollo is a role model in *The Woman of Andros*, and Apollo's patronage of writing "many letters . . . at once" extends beyond Caesar to Wilder himself. Even if Wilder, like Samuele, associates himself with

Mercury, the God of Eloquence, Wilder identifies even more emphatically with Apollo, the God of Poetry, Art, Music and Harmony.<sup>20</sup>

### **The Spirit of Vergil**

In the final pages of *The Cabala*, the narrator's attention to the stars and constellations summons up a complex intertextuality, echoing a specific passage in the *Aeneid* that marks the transition to a new land, and also alluding to the appearance of the ghost of Creusa and her advice to the traveling Aeneas. Waiting in the Bay of Naples for his ship to set sail for his return journey to America, Samuele wonders whether he is wrong to leave Rome. The narrator phrases his self-questioning in reference to Vergil's *Aeneid*: "On the night that my steamer left the bay of Naples I lay sleepless in my deck-chair until morning. Why was I not more reluctant at leaving Europe? How could I lie there repeating the Aeneid and longing for the shelf of Manhattan?" Noting that it "was Virgil's sea that we were crossing," Samuele identifies Arcturus, the showery Hyades, the two Bears, and Orion in his harness of gold. As Putnam has demonstrated, Vergil mentions Arcturus on four occasions, the Hyades on three, the Bears five times, and the constellation Orion four times. There is, however, only one passage, *Aeneid* 3.512-19, where Vergil combines Arcturus, the Hyades, the Bear, and Orion, specifically Orion armed with gold: *armatumque auro . . . Oriona* (Putnam 114). In Samuele's description of the sky Wilder also includes direct translations of two Vergilian phrases from the same passage: "cloudless sky" (*caelo . . . sereno*, *Aen.* 3.518) and "gliding constellations" (*sidera . . . labentia*, *Aen.* 3.518) (*Cabala* 133). When Aeneas' helmsman Palinurus sees

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<sup>20</sup> Koutsoudaki has argued that in *The Cabala* there is no identification of Apollo with any member of the group for Apollo "cannot possibly terminate his glorious existence like the rest of the divinities in Rome" (91). She speculates further that it "is possible that Wilder had reserved this deity to identify himself" (102).

this combination of stars and constellations, he concludes that it will be smooth sailing, and signals the troops to leave their temporary camp in Epirus to resume their journey to the west. A few lines later, the Trojans get their first glimpse of Italy. This combination of stars marks a major transition from Troy to Rome, emphasizing, in Putnam's words, "the prominence of the idea of journey as the occasion both of change and of enlightenment" (Putnam 116). The same stars preside over Samuele's journey from Italy to New York.

The attention to the stars not only reflects Vergil's words, but also signals the presence of Vergil's spirit; in addition, the narrator's three invocations of Vergil links his words with Vergil's *Fourth Eclogue*, medieval legends about Vergil, and Dante's *Inferno*, all of these passages being robust influences on Wilder's reception of Vergil. Concluding that "Mercury is not only the messenger of the gods; he is the conductor of the dead as well," Samuele tries to summon Vergil. Having first tried to evoke the Latin poet with these words — "Prince of poets, Virgil, one of your guests and the last of the barbarians invokes you" — Samuele is not certain if he has been successful. "For an instant I thought I saw the shimmer of a robe and **the reflection of the starlight** on the shiny side of a laurel leaf" (131). Strengthening his invocation, the American next addresses Vergil in words from Dante's *Inferno*, "*O anima cortese mantovana* [O courteous Mantuan spirit], greatest of all Romans." As Putnam has also pointed out, it is Beatrice who addresses these precise words to Vergil in *Inferno* 2.58, enlisting Vergil's aid for Dante's epic journey. This second invocation is more successful, since now "the shade stood in mid-air just above the handrail. The **stars were glittering** and the water was glittering, and **the great shade, picked out in sparks, was glittering furiously.**"

Attempting to make the apparition clearer, Samuele attempts a third summoning, using the “title that might avail more with him than those of poet and Roman” (131). The narrator thus continues: “Oh, greatest spirit of the ancient world and prophet of the new, by that fortunate guess wherein you foretold the coming of him who will admit you to His mountain, thou first Christian in Europe, speak to me!” With this invocation, based on the medieval belief that Vergil’s *Fourth Eclogue* foretold the coming of Christ, a legend given literary prominence in Dante’s *Inferno*, “the gracious **spirit became completely visible with pulsations of light**, half silver and half gold, and spoke” (132). [*Bold emphases mine*].

These three invocations of Vergil — as a Latin poet, as the guide of Dante, and as representing the medieval legend of a precursor of Christianity, result in Vergil’s spirit becoming increasingly clear, allowing Samuele to become more attentive to Vergil and his words. The results of these invocations progress from “reflection of the starlight” to “the stars were glittering . . . and the great shade, picked out in sparks, was glittering furiously” to “the spirit became completely visible with pulsations of light, half silver and half gold.” The earlier presence of the named stars and constellations prepares the way for starlight as signaling the presence of Vergil. I argue later in this chapter that the stars are also an allusion to the shade of Creusa, the recently deceased wife of Aeneas, and to the astronomical universe described by Lucretius. The quotation from Dante of the words of Beatrice to Vergil, *O anima cortese mantovana*, reflects Beatrice’s eventual replacement of Vergil as Dante’s guide, preparing the way for Creusa as a female sage who offers guidance to the young male.



Vergil now alludes subtly to Aeneas' words in *Aeneid* 1.462: *sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt* [here are the tears of the world, and human matters touch the heart]. After telling Samuele to "give heed to your Latin," recognize that Rome is not eternal, and "seek out some city that is young," his own city in the West, Vergil notices the beauty of the Mediterranean:

(Suddenly the poet became aware of the Mediterranean:)<sup>21</sup> Oh, beautiful are these waters. Behold! For many years I have almost forgotten the world. Beautiful! Beautiful! – But no! what horror, what pain! Are you still alive? Alive? How can you endure it? All your thoughts are guesses, all your body is shaken with breath, all your senses are infirm, and your mind ever full of the fumes of one passion or another. Oh what misery to be a man. Hurry and die!

The text of the novel then ends, with:

Farewell, Virgil!

The shimmering ghost faded before the stars, and the engines beneath me pounded eagerly toward the new world and the last and greatest of all cities (134).

With Vergil's emotional reaction to the beauty of the Mediterranean, Wilder re-interprets the *lacrimae rerum* as tears for the beauty of the world, or what I might call, "Our Tears." Wilder's depiction of the stars and constellations evokes the astronomical universe and the explanation of the movements of the heavenly bodies that Lucretius (circa 99-55 BCE) provides in *De rerum natura*, 5.64-81, 416-79, 509-33, and especially 621-770. Lucretius and Vergil's understanding of *rerum* as "the universe" or "the world" reinforces Wilder's interpretation of *lacrimae rerum* as "tears for the beauty of the

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<sup>21</sup> Parentheses in the original.

world.” This insight becomes an organizing principle for much of Wilder’s work, exemplified by Julius Caesar in *The Ideas of March*.

Although Putnam’s essay does not mention this point, the words of Vergil and the reference to the stars in *The Cabala* point to Creusa, the recently deceased wife of Aeneas. Samuele’s position debating whether or not he should leave Rome reflects the scene in *Aeneid*, Book 2, when Aeneas is debating within himself whether or not he should leave Troy. As the ancient hero frantically searches the streets of the burning Troy for Creusa, he calls out her name in vain, again and again. Finally he sees her ghost, who speaks to him to ease his anguish. She tells him that the gods want him to leave the city of Troy and sail for the West (Hesperia), in order to found a new city (*Aen.* 2.780-84). *The Cabala* now mirrors Creusa’s advice to Aeneas. The spirit of Vergil advises Samuele to leave Rome, sail to the West, but “in the pride of your city, and when she too begins to produce great men, do not forget mine.” The *Aeneid* describes Creusa as dissolving or dwindling into thin air (*tenuisque recessit in auras*) (*Aen.* 2.791), with Aeneas a few lines later looking on the morning star that has just begun to rise (*surgebat Lucifer*) (*Aen.* 2.801), just as the last sentence of *The Cabala* begins, “The shimmering ghost faded before the stars” (*Cabala* 134). Appendix B summarizes the comparison of the spirit of Vergil in *The Cabala* with the ghost of Creusa in the *Aeneid*.

Wilder’s appropriation of Vergil is complex, developing over time. Diverging from the medieval and modern reception of Dante, Wilder makes Vergil express indignation that Dante was harsher than God in assigning his soul to limbo (*Cabala*

132).<sup>22</sup> Vergil tells Samuele that he will attain heavenly bliss after paying a penalty of ten thousand years, specifically after he has purged the “great delusion, —that Rome and the house of Augustus were eternal. Nothing is eternal save Heaven . . . When shall I erase from my heart this love of her? I cannot enter Zion until I have forgotten Rome” (133). Not everything the spirit of Vergil says in *The Cabala* becomes incorporated into Wilder’s later oeuvre. He directly returns to Vergil’s cry, “Hurry and die!” only in a November 1926 entry in a notebook he had entitled *Cahier E*. Wilder associates Vergil’s exclamation with *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*: “The Bridge was written because I wanted to die and I wanted to prove that death was a happy solution. . . . In The Cabala I began to think that love is enough to reconcile one to the difficulty of living (i.e. the difficulty of being good); in The Bridge I am still a little surer. Perhaps some-day I can write a book announcing that love is sufficient” (“Cahier E” 18). Indirectly, however, Wilder may reflect Vergil’s “Hurry and die!” in those characters who make positive life-changing decisions and then die before fully implementing them, like Cardinal Vaini in *The Cabala*, the Marquesa de Montemayor in *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, and Breckenridge Lansing in *The Eighth Day*.

Although Wilder’s later fictional works do not elaborate on the legend that Vergil foretold the coming of Christ, the basis of Samuele’s third, and most successful, evocation of Vergil, Wilder did discuss this belief in his lectures on Classics in Translation at the University of Chicago (TW Papers, Box 135, Folder 3067). Late antique and early medieval European writers interpreted passages in Vergil’s *Fourth*

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<sup>22</sup> “Indignation infused a saffron satin into the noble figure in silver-gold: Where, where is he, that soul of vinegar, that chose to assign the souls of the dead more harshly than God?”

*Eclogue* as referring to a child (*puer*) who will usher in a Golden Age and become divine. The Greek bishop Eusebius first attributes this interpretation to an address by the emperor Constantine in 312 or 313 CE (*Life of Constantine* 4.32; Bourne 390-400). Despite the rejection of the idea of Vergil as a forerunner of Christianity by ecclesiastical authorities and the ridicule of this idea by St. Jerome, it retained a strong hold on some early Christian writers, and was instrumental in Dante's choice of Vergil as a guide (Curtius 212 and *passim*; Highet 74 *ff.*). Wilder's reception of Vergil thus includes an examination of the way medieval Christianity and especially Dante understood the Latin poet.

Wilder identified with the writer being guided by Vergil, both by means of Vergil's farewell words to Samuele, and through Wilder's own relationship to great teachers in his life. As a young college student at Oberlin, Wilder had been fascinated with the model of Vergil as Dante's guide, identifying himself with Dante, and seeing his teacher, Charles H. A. Wager, as Vergil. Chair of the English Department at Oberlin College, Wager (1869-1939) was a distinguished classicist and medievalist. Having attended his courses on Homer, on Dante, and on Classics in Translation, Thornton Wilder wrote that Wager was "the greatest class lecturer I have ever heard" (Niven, *Life* 118). In the summer between leaving Oberlin and starting at Yale, Wilder's poem, "To a Teacher," dedicated to C.H.A.W., was published in the *Oberlin Literary Magazine*. It included these lines:

So may I listen, bear away the Spark, . . .  
Knowing myself enriched though poor in giving,  
Enriched and freed from fear, thy face toward mine—  
As Vergil led the hooded Florentine ("To a Teacher" 269).

While Vergil's farewell speech does not specifically state that Samuele will become a writer, Wilder's allusions to Dante strongly suggest this. In earlier passages the

novel hints at the narrator becoming a writer; the members of the Cabala, for example, believe that Samuele is writing a play on Augustine. Samuele's second invocation of Vergil uses the words, *O anima cortese mantovana* [O courteous Mantuan spirit," *Inferno* 2.58]. In *Inferno* 2, Vergil narrates how Beatrice had come from Heaven to Limbo to address him in these words, asking him to guide Dante through Hell. When Vergil reports this to Dante, Dante finds the courage to continue his journey, thanking both Vergil and Beatrice (*Inferno* 2.131-5). Vergil's guidance, however, can only go so far. Vergil makes a farewell speech to Dante in *Purgatorio* 27.127-142, which can be compared to Vergil's farewell speech to Samuele. In both cases Vergil prepares the aspiring writer, who has now had the benefits of the Latin poet's inspiration, to rely on his own judgment and to gain inspiration from a female sage. In *The Cabala*, Vergil's words of advice echo that of his character Creusa; in *Purgatorio*, Vergil passes any further direction of Dante to Beatrice, telling Dante to rest or stroll enjoying the flowers, "until she comes, that woman with the beautiful eyes (*li occhi belli*), who, weeping (*lagrimando*), had me come to you." The last four lines that Vergil speaks in Dante's *Comedy* are:

*Non aspettar mio dir più né mio cenno;  
libero, dritto e sano è tuo arbitrio,  
e fallo fora non fare a suo senno:  
per ch'io te sovra te corono e mitrio.* (*Purg.* 27.136-42).

Don't expect more words from me, even hints,  
Your judgment is measured and free, and so  
To act against it would be deviance.  
The crown and miter I bestow!

Vergil concludes by placing the crown and miter (*corono e mitrio*) on Dante's head. While many scholars have interpreted the crown and miter in philosophical or theological terms, some commentators have seen this action of crowning Dante as the equivalent of bestowing the laurel wreath, associated with the god Apollo, on a poet. Picone, for example, interprets Vergil's action as a rite of passage (*passaggio rituale*), resulting in the transfer of honors to a new poet (*translatio poetica*) (Picone 389-402).

Vergil's farewells to Dante and to Samuele indicate that they can now be writers on their own, but that they should rely for additional guidance on a female sage (Beatrice, Creusa). In subsequent works, Wilder develops the character of the female sage as, among others, the Marquesa de Montemayor and the abbess Madre María del Pilar in *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*; Chrysis, an elegant courtesan who educates young men at her dinner parties in *The Woman of Andros*; Emily Webb in *Our Town*; the actress Cytheris, whom even Julius Caesar visits "to hear her declaim passages from the Greek and Roman tragedies" in *The Ides of March*; and Olga Sergeievna Doubkov plus many female characters who function as avatars of the goddess Athena in *The Eighth Day*.

Vergil's concluding speech to Samuele crowns him as an American successor to Vergil, who will integrate Greek and Latin classics into his writings, a parallel to Vergil's farewell speech to Dante in *Purgatorio*, crowning the Florentine as Vergil's successor. Just as the Biblical Samuel anointed David as the new successor to Saul, Vergil anoints Samuele as a successor, but not as the only successor, since Vergil discusses Milton and other writers, but as an American successor. Vergil predicts, then, that Wilder will become a writer in the classical tradition who will be true to his own nature, but follow Vergil's advice: "give heed to your Latin" and "in the pride of your city . . . do not forget

mine” (*Cabala* 133). Vergil’s farewell comment regarding a “city that is young” indicates that the narrator will become an American writer, but one always attuned to the classical tradition. His writings will be in contrast to the other characters in *The Cabala* who are expert in Latin. He will not become pedantic and dry as James Blair, who, although brilliant, does not publish anything, and responds to a woman’s love by haranguing her with long quotations from Livy and Vergil. Samuele will not become as cynical and non-empathetic as Cardinal Vaini, although the cardinal is “the only person living who could write a Latin that would have enhanced the Augustans” (37-42). Unlike the Cabala, Samuele will not be enslaved to the European past. Inspired by Greek and Roman authors, the narrator (and Wilder) will integrate classical learning into his writings, will develop such themes inspired by Vergil as “the tears of the world” and the female sage, but will not be a slave to the past as are the members of the Cabala.

Although relying on Homer, Vergil often radically changed whatever he appropriated, combining different elements from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* into one Latin passage.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, Thornton Wilder utilizes multiple sources, not only classical, but also medieval, Renaissance, early modern, and modern, modifying what he incorporates. *The Cabala*’s Vergil, for example, derives from medieval legend, Dante, and Charles Wager’s lectures at Oberlin, as well as from the poetry of the historical Vergil. By utilizing many texts for his inspiration and by following the Latin poet’s advice to Samuele, Wilder is a true American successor to Vergil.

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<sup>23</sup> Macrobius Ambrosius Theodosius (early fifth-century CE) explicates in great detail in the *Saturnalia* how Vergil had borrowed phrases from archaic Latin authors, such as Quintus Ennius (second century BCE) and Aulus Furius Annius (*fl. circa* 100 BCE), who themselves were translating lines of Homer (Macrobius, *Sat.* 6.3.1 – 6.4.7).

## Appendix A

Sixth grade essay (age 11) about the ancient Roman gods.

In this essay the young Wilder discusses the gods in pairs: Vulcan and Apollo, Jupiter and Juno, Neptune and Pluto, Mars and Mercury. The first sentence is the only one quoted in printed sources —*Time*, Isabel Wilder (ix), and Penelope Niven (*Life* 28).

Vulcan and Apollo. Vulcan was the god of goldsmiths, ironsmiths, leadsmiths, silversmiths, coppersmiths, brasssmiths and Mrs. Smiths. (There now, I'm all out of breath.) Apollo, God of a few (Oh, yes, a few) things got on on Ceasar [on Caesar] who could dictate so many letters in so many towns at once, in that he was God of many things at once, God of the honorable sun, God of the game of Archery, God of Music and Harmony, God of hunting in col[l]aboration with his sister Diana, God of Poetry and Art, and at the same time god!

After some sentences on physical training and the role of the Roman augurs, the essay continues with discussions of other gods:

Jupiter and Juno, — the butt of the augurs['] lies and foolishness. They were supposed to be king and queen of heaven itself and earth in the bargain. They were also the parents of many long, ungainly names, merely names. Juno found it hard to keep her (*illegible*) fold, for Jupiter had a weak point and Juno was jealous.

Neptune and Pluto,— the personification of two elements, water and darkness. It is impossible to find out if the latter were ~~were~~ a ghost (Excuse me) (*illegible*) and the other a fish. Because who, oh yes who, believes in unreality? A man in water. Shocking! (Pardon.)

Mars and Mercury,— The first was bad temper and war and the second = Eloquence = fair speech = Flattery. The second was also God of Commerce and (*word illegible*) boys, with whom he can sympathize, himself.



## Appendix B

### Comparison of the spirit of Vergil in *The Cabala* with the ghost of Creusa in the *Aeneid*

<b>Spirit of Vergil, <i>The Cabala</i></b>	<b>Ghost of Creusa, <i>Aeneid</i></b>
Episode occurs at end of the novel.	Episode occurs near end of Book II.
Samuele debates within himself whether or not to leave Rome.	Aeneas debates whether to leave Troy or to stay to fight again: 2.657-70.
Samuele makes three separate evocations of Vergil.	“In vain, I repeatedly called out, Creusa, again and again.” <div style="text-align: center;">. . . <i>Creusam/</i>  <i>nequiquam ingeminans iterumque iterumque</i>  <i>vocavi.</i> 2.769-70.</div>
Spirit of Vergil becomes completely visible.	The shade of Creusa appears, larger than life.
Vergil advises Samuele to leave Rome, sail to the West, to seek out “some city that is young.”	Creusa advises Aeneas to leave Troy and sail to the West (Hesperia), to obtain a new kingdom: 2.780-784.
[ <i>The Matchmaker</i> : Spirit of Ephraim Levi tells Dolly to re-marry, return to life].	Creusa tells Aeneas he will re-marry ( <i>regia coniunx parte tibi</i> , 2:783-784).
Narrator, last sentence of the novel: “The shimmering ghost faded before the stars . . .”	The ghost of Creusa faded into thin air ( <i>tenuisque recessit in auras</i> ): 2.791. Aeneas soon sees the rising morning star: 2.801.

### Chapter Three. *Sapphica puella Musa doctior*: The Female Sage

While Wilder introduced the spirit of Creusa in *The Cabala* as his first major example of a female sage, in his later novels and plays he adds greater depth and emotional power to his portrayals of female teachers, drawing on classical Greek and Roman texts and thought in order to represent a series of wise women as witnesses and guides to the sorrow and joys of humanity, the “tears of the world.” Among Wilder’s fictional characters, his women embody the wisdom in recognizing the tears inherent in the world, as well as demonstrating the ability to notice and to enjoy everyday life fully, experiencing both the light and the dark. Wilder’s development of the female sage from classical prototypes goes beyond imitation, quotation, allusion, and echo to constitute a true intertextuality, a conversation between texts that re-interprets the earlier work. Integrating details from numerous sources, Wilder develops his classical and modern prototypes into such memorable characters as the Marquesa de Montemayor and the abbess Madre María del Pilar in *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*; Chrysis, an elegant courtesan who gives dinner parties in which she educates young men, in *The Woman of Andros*; Emily Webb in *Our Town*; the actress Cytheris, whom even Julius Caesar visits “to hear her declaim passages from the Greek and Roman tragedies” in *The Ides of March*; Dolly Gallagher Levi in *The Matchmaker*; and Olga Sergeievna Doubkov as well as the many female characters in *The Eighth Day* who function as avatars of the goddess Pallas Athene,<sup>1</sup> and an incipient sage for a new generation, Myra Granberry, in his last work, *Theophilus North*.

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<sup>1</sup> Wilder preferred the Greek spelling of the goddess’s name.

The bases for Wilder's female sages include real-life, fictional, and mythological women, including the seventh-century BCE poet Sappho, heroines of Roman comedy such as Cleostrata in Plautus' *Casina* and Chrysis in Terence's *Andria*, the learned courtesans Aspasia and Diotima in Plato's *Dialogues*, and the goddess Athene as depicted in Homer's *Odyssey*. Wilder's development of these female sage figures can be understood through examining the classical literary and historical sources for the individual women, along with exploring the influence of relevant female writers from later eras. My decision to categorize sages by investigating the most prominent literary sources for them does not impose rigid, exclusionary boundaries, but is a flexible and permeable mode of classification, acknowledging differences in emphasis and degree.

This chapter analyzes Wilder's female sages in six separate sections. This includes the inspiration and education that Wilder himself had received; the influence of Euripides' tragedy, *Hecuba*, and Catullus' poetry on the female sages in *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*; the evocation of Plato's Aspasia and Diotima as female sages by Chrysis in *The Woman of Andros*; the historical poet Sappho and actress Cytheris as female sages in *The Ides of March*; the Homerically-inspired sages in *The Eighth Day*; and the final passing of the torch, whereby Wilder's *alter ego* in his last work, *Theophilus North*, transfers the gift for inspiration and education that Wilder had received from his mother to Myra Granberry, a female sage in training.<sup>2</sup>

Distinguishing between experienced female sages and their younger counterparts, Wilder portrays mature sages who educate and guide many individuals, an incipient sage

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<sup>2</sup> In addition, the later chapter entitled "Our Tears: *Lacrimae Rerum*" discusses Emily Webb in *Our Town* as a younger female sage who channels both Plato's Aspasia and Wilder's Chrysis and also demonstrates intertextual connections between the fictional Emily Webb and the poet Emily Dickinson.

whom the author has anointed but whose career will take place in the future, and Emily Webb, a sage whose early death limits her hope of guiding others during her lifetime. Yet it is Emily who, from the grave, speaks Wilder's most eloquent paean to living and loving everyday life most fully. Finding an ideal in learned, creative writers such as Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) and Gertrude Stein (1874-1946), Wilder often represents his female sage as a poet or a reciter of poetry, especially Greek tragedy. Indeed, these representations recall Catullus' homage to Sappho, the seventh-century BCE poet from Lesbos, through his description, in Poem 35, of a learned female reader of poetry as a *Sapphica puella Musa doctior* (a literarily knowledgeable woman more learned than the Sapphic Muse) (Cat.26: 16-17). Through their spoken words or their writings, these powerful female sages offer guidance especially, but not exclusively, to young men, giving expression to many of the major themes underlying Wilder's oeuvre.

Tracing the evolutions of the female sage in Wilder's oeuvre chronologically by date of publication, this chapter demonstrates that Wilder's female teachers of wisdom have multiple literary sources, early modern and modern, as well as classical, including later works that are themselves based on Latin and Greek originals. Chrysis in *The Woman of Andros*, for example, derives partly from Chrysis in Terence's *Andria*, but even more markedly from Plato's Aspasia and Diotima. To cite another example, Dolly Levi in *The Merchant of Yonkers* (first performed 1938, printed 1939), later revised as *The Matchmaker* (1954), acquires a portion of her grand soliloquy in Act IV from the speech of Creusa's ghost to Aeneas in Book II of the *Aeneid*.<sup>3</sup> Yet she owes her personality and her impact on the plot to the figure of the *parasitus* in Greek New

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<sup>3</sup> For a detailed examination of Dolly Levi, see the chapter on "The Spread of Manure."

Comedy and in the Latin plays of Plautus and Terence; to the matron, Cleostrata, who pulls the strings for the plot as the *poeta* (playwright) in Plautus' *Casina*; and to a female figure in Molière's *L'Avare* (*The Miser*, 1668).<sup>4</sup> Even when Wilder's female sages do not have obvious Greek and Roman antecedents, like the Marquesa de Montemayor and the abbess Madre María del Pilar in *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, they have subtle classical associations, since their own activities and the responses they elicit from others prefigure characters in later works by Wilder who are clearly based on classical women of wisdom.

### **Wilder's Own Female Sages: Isabella Wilder and Mme. de Sévigné**

Throughout his life, Wilder relied on female teachers and sources of inspiration, especially his mother, Isabella Thornton Niven Wilder (1873-1946), his friend Gertrude Stein, and several authors of early modern and modern literature. Nourishing Thornton's love of literature, Isabella Wilder brought him to his first play, Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, beginning his lifelong fascination with the English playwright. Isabella Wilder, moreover, sparked Thornton's interest in a wide variety of dramas, including his active participation in performances, encouraged his childhood and adolescent writings, and cultivated a circle of writers and university faculty members whom he was able to meet. A poet in her own right, Isabella Wilder also translated the French poetry of the Belgian Émile Verhaeren and the Italian poetry of Giosuè Carducci. Greatly indebted to his mother for his love of languages and of literature, Thornton Wilder, quoting Shakespeare, said that she was "like one of Shakespeare's girls - a 'star danced and under it I was

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<sup>4</sup> Molière's play is itself a rewriting of Plautus' *Aulularia* [*The Pot of Gold*, circa 201-184 BCE].

born” (Harrison 15).<sup>5</sup> Wilder was later to apply this phrase, “Shakespeare’s girls,” to a fictional character, Myra Granberry, whom the narrator grooms to become a female sage.

While Wilder’s teachers of wisdom are most often female, he also develops two major male characters who embody and impart wisdom: the Stage Manager and Theophilus North: these exceptions to the female sage are characters with whom Wilder personally identified.<sup>6</sup> There is no requirement, however, for the Stage Manager to be male, and many modern productions cast a female in this part.<sup>7</sup> *Theophilus North* (1973) is a re-telling of the Homeric *Iliad* in the context of post-World War I America, as well as an autobiography-like fantasy. Theodore Theophilus was the name of Wilder’s identical twin brother who died at birth, and “North” is an anagram for THORN-ton himself. That Wilder predominantly structures his sages as females rather than as males, except for figures who are slightly disguised versions of Wilder himself, may be a tribute to Isabella Wilder’s massive influence on his love for literature and languages.

### **The influence of Euripides’ *Hecuba* and Catullus on the Sages in *The Bridge of San Luis Rey***

At first glance, Wilder’s second book, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (1927), set in eighteenth-century Peru, does not seem to be an obvious contribution to classical reception, but the novel contains subtle references to Greek and Latin literature and exemplifies Wilder’s skill in integrating classical, pre-modern, and modern influences. Mary Koutsoudaki, in the only book-length study of Wilder’s reception of the classics to

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<sup>5</sup> Beatrice says this phrase in *Much Ado About Nothing* 2.1.310.

<sup>6</sup> As he himself performed the role of the Stage Manager in some productions of *Our Town*, and often dressed as the Stage Manager for public appearances, Wilder seems to embody this character in popular imagination.

<sup>7</sup> For an exploration of the Stage Manager, see Chapter Four, “The Torch Race of Literature and *The Skin of Our Teeth*.”

date, her 1992 *Thornton Wilder: A Nostalgia for the Antique*, mentions *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* only parenthetically, without discussing any classical allusions in the novel.

Two of the main characters, however, represent female sages who have a great impact on the education of others: the Marquesa de Montemayor and the Abbess, Madre María del Pilar. Although Wilder has based the Marquesa and another character, the actress Camila Perichole, primarily on French literary sources, he does briefly employ classical allusions when describing the Marquesa and the Abbess, implying their connection with his portrayals of female sages based on Greek and Latin sources.

Having admired throughout his life the letters that Mme. de Sévigné had written to her daughter, Françoise-Marguerite, comtesse de Grignan, Wilder transmutes Mme. de Sévigné into the Marquesa. Changing the language of her correspondence from French to Spanish and the setting from seventeenth-century France to eighteenth-century colonial Peru, Wilder uses Mme. de Sévigné's letters as the prototypes of those of the Marquesa de Montemayor to her own daughter, Doña Clara, the Condesa d'Abuirre. The opening sentences of Part Two, "The Marquesa de Montemayor," inform us that: "Any Spanish schoolboy is required to know today more about Doña María, Marquesa de Montemayor, than Brother Juniper was to discover in years of research. Within a century of her death her letters had become one of the monuments of Spanish literature" (*Bridge* 13).<sup>8</sup>

The daughter of a wealthy cloth-merchant and widow of a ruined aristocrat, the Marquesa pours her energy and emotions into the letters describing colonial society and personalities that she sends every month to her daughter in Spain, hoping to gain her daughter's attention, if not her admiration. Desperately loving but rebuffed by her child,

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<sup>8</sup> Citations from Wilder's works are from the HarperPerennial editions, where available.

“Night after night in her baroque palace she wrote and rewrote the incredible pages, forcing from her despairing mind those miracles of wit and grace, those distilled chronicles of the viceregal court. . . . The Marquesa would have been astonished to learn that her letters were immortal.” Although mostly ignored by her daughter, the letters are saved by her son-in-law, the Conde d’Abuirre, and their eventual publication dazzled readers. “Like her son-in-law,” the narrator continues, “they [members of the public] misunderstood her: the Conde delighted in her letters, but he thought that when he had enjoyed the style he had extracted all their riches and intention, missing (as most readers do) the whole purport of literature, which is the notation of the heart” (166). Wilder here comments on his own work, implying that readers who focus only on his style — as poetic, learned, affected, or plain — praising it or savagely attacking it, may be missing “the notation of the heart” that he explores.

The intertextual elements of the Marquesa de Montemayor’s letters also includes the literary reception of Mme. de Sévigné. In his 1928 lecture at Yale University on “English Letters and Letter Writers,” posthumously published in 1979 as “On Reading the Great Letter Writers,” Wilder calls Mme. de Sévigné “the greatest of all letter writers” (155). Influenced by Marcel Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu*, which represents the narrator’s grandmother and mother as frequently reading and citing Mme. de Sévigné, Wilder approaches the seventeenth-century letter writer through Proust and through other French authors. To enter the mind of Mme. de Sévigné, one must not look solely at her anecdotes, her language, or her jokes, Wilder writes, but “enter it as Marcel Proust said his grandmother did, by the door of her heart” (156).



Wilder provides a brief, but apposite, classical allusion for the Marquesa, associating her with Homeric epic, Greek tragedy, and the Golden Age of Spanish drama. When the actress Camila Perichole comes to apologize for a deliberately insulting scene in the theater, she is struck with the dignity of the old woman, even though the Marquesa is intoxicated at the moment. “The mercer’s daughter could carry herself at times with all the distinction of the Montemayors and when she was drunk she wore the grandeur of Hecuba” (*Bridge* 24). In Greek myth, Hecuba, wife of the Trojan king Priam, witnesses her children being killed in front of her eyes or dragged off, like herself, into slavery. Her laments for her children were famous in European early modern theater, as in the players’ rehearsal (*Hamlet* 2.2.477-94) or Hamlet’s subsequent soliloquy: “For Hecuba!/ What’s Hecuba to him or he to Hecuba/ That he should weep for her?” (2.2.529-31; Q 141). Despite Hecuba’s losses, she retains both grandeur and an ability to formulate and carry out complex plans of revenge (Euripides, *Hecuba* 1187-1256). The actress Camila Perichole, depicted as an expert in the dramatic roles of the *Siglo del Oro*, the Golden Age of Spanish literature (early sixteenth to late seventeenth century), would be expected to be familiar with the role of Hecuba in Spanish baroque tragedy (*Bridge* 152). Fernán Pérez de Oliva (1494 – *circa* 1531), the first secular playwright in Spanish, composed a free translation in prose of the Latin version of Euripides’ *Hecuba*, called *Hecuba triste* [*Hecuba Sorrowful*] (Ziomek 21-22). Echoes of Homer’s and Euripides’ Hecuba and the reception of Hecuba in English Renaissance and Spanish Golden Age drama powerfully inform Wilder’s bestowal of Hecuba’s tragic grandeur on the Marquesa.

While references to Hecuba have entered into the general fund of knowledge, the classical allusion Wilder uses for the Abbess, that the Archbishop hated her — with a

Vatinian hate — is of a subtle nature, recalling the writings of Cicero and Catullus. The Abbess's activities and the Archbishop's response also link her to Chrysis in Wilder's next novel, *The Woman of Andros* (1930). Just as the Abbess, Madre María del Pilar, gathers orphans, the sick, and the destitute, Chrysis in *The Women of Andros* adopts the misfits and those who are suffering, "stray human beings who need her" (Woman 152). Emphasizing her importance, Wilder gives the Abbess the last words in *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*.<sup>9</sup> Contrasting the Abbess's action for the poor and those in need and her managerial tactics with the reaction of the Archbishop of Lima, Wilder writes:

Her plain red face had great kindness, and more idealism than kindness, and more generalship than idealism. All her work, her hospitals, her orphanage, her convent, her sudden journeys of rescue, depended upon money. . . . she had been obliged to watch herself sacrificing her kindness, almost her idealism, to generalship, so dreadful were the struggles to obtain her subsidies from her superiors in the church. The Archbishop of Lima . . . hated her with what he called a Vatinian hate and counted the cessation of her visits among the compensations for dying (*Bridge* 28).

An unscrupulous but effective ally of Julius Caesar, the first century BCE Roman politician Publius Vatinius was the object of scorn and hate from both Cicero and Catullus, but Wilder's allusion to him underscores the opposition and hate that female activists face when trying to improve social conditions or overcome political injustices. In a speech delivered in 56 BCE, *In P. Vatinium Testem Interrogatio* [*Interrogation against the witness, Publius Vatinius*] Cicero advised Vatinius to kill himself, "since you are the public object of hate (*odium*) of the people, the senate, and all the men of the

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<sup>9</sup> Analogously, Pamphilus, the young male protagonist of *The Woman of Andros*, repeats Chrysis' final words as an epiphany and guide for his life in the novel's penultimate paragraph.

countryside,” *si es odium publicum populi, senatus, universorum hominum rusticanorum* (Cic., *Vat.* 39). One year later, however, because he was afraid of the triumvirs who were backing Vatinius, Cicero changed course and defended Vatinius on a charge of bribery brought by Gaius Licinius Calvus. Catullus mentions Vatinius in two poems, Catullus 14 and 53. Referring to the same lawsuit in which Cicero reversed himself to defend Vatinius against allegations by Calvus, Catullus 53 mentions “the Vatinian accusations (*Vatiniana . . . crimina*) that my Calvus had unfolded in a wonderful manner,” *mirifice Vatiniana meus crimina Calvos explicasset* (Cat. 53: 2-3). In Poem 14 Catullus directly links the adjectival form of the name Vatinius with hate, stating: “I should hate you with a Vatinian hate,” *odissem te odio Vatiniano* (14:3). An ablative of manner, *odio Vatiniano* corresponds grammatically with the prepositional phrase that the Archbishop uses, “with . . . a Vatinian hate.” Wilder’s point is not that the Abbess deserves hate as Vatinius may have, but that her expert generalship and leadership skills and her social activism evoke obstacles as intense as a “Vatinian hate” from male authority figures.<sup>10</sup>

The Marquesa and the Abbess confirm the import of the classical allusions that establish them as female sages through their writings, their spoken words, and their actions, although it is their final contributions that firmly establish this identity. Two days prior to her death, the Marquesa has a life-changing experience through reading a letter that her young companion, Pepita, has written to the Abbess, who had raised the orphan girl. After realizing that Pepita loves and wishes to return to the Abbess, the Marquesa

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<sup>10</sup> Similarly, in *The Woman of Andros*, Chremes, the neighbor who wishes to become the father-in-law of Pamphilus, complains that Chrysis’ efforts at education will result in all the girls’ “wanting to read and write and declaim. What becomes of home life . . . if women can read and write?” (*Woman* 140-41).

understands her own domination over Pepita and the extent of her selfishness in reference to her own daughter. She composes what turns out to be her last letter to her daughter:

It is the famous letter XVI, known to the Encyclopedists as her Second Corinthians because of its immortal paragraph about love: "Of the thousands of persons we meet in a lifetime, my child . . ." and so on. It was almost dawn when she finished the letter. She opened the door upon her balcony and looked at the great tiers of stars that glittered above the Andes. . . . "Let me live now," she whispered. "Let me begin again" (*Bridge* 38).

Wilder does not quote or summarize the rest of the letter, but he shows its results: reading the letter changes the life of the Marquesa's daughter, Doña Clara, and results in new insights on the part of the Abbess. After Doña Clara has received the letter, she returns from Spain to Peru, giving the letter to the Abbess, and providing a passionate appreciation of her mother. The Abbess is astonished that

such words (words that since then the whole world has murmured over with joy) could spring in the heart of Pepita's mistress. "Now learn," she commanded herself, "learn at last that anywhere you may expect grace." And she was filled with happiness like a girl at this new proof that the traits she lived for were everywhere, that the world was ready (106).

The Marquesa's last letter demonstrates her appreciation of the daily experience of Pepita and perhaps that of "the thousands of persons" she meets during a lifetime, while the Abbess's words after reading the Marquesa's letter indicate that she will now honor everyday experience since it, in her religious vocabulary, is a means of grace. The Abbess's words of wisdom conclude the novel:

But soon we shall die and all memory of those five [the victims of the bridge collapse] will have left the earth, and we ourselves shall be loved

for a while and forgotten. But the love will have been enough; all those impulses of love return to the love that made them. Even memory is not necessary for love. There is a land of the living and a land of the dead and the bridge is love, the only survival, the only meaning (107).

Through the classical narrative device of ring composition, in the last sentence, referring to a bridge, the living, and the dead, Wilder returns to the topic of the novel's first sentence: "On Friday noon, July the twentieth, 1714, the finest bridge in all Peru broke and precipitated five travelers into the gulf below." It is only now, through the Abbess's guidance, that we learn that the Bridge of San Luis Rey is also the human bridge constructed by the five travelers through their impact on others, a bridge that provides meaning and the survival of love.

### **Chrysis' Evocation of Plato's Aspasia and Diotima in *The Woman of Andros***

In the introductory note to *The Woman of Andros*, Wilder draws immediate attention to the novel's complex intertextuality, signaling that he is not only situating his novel within the ancient Greek and Roman tradition, but also that he is following the example of the ancient Roman playwrights in significantly modifying for his own creative purposes what he finds in the classical sources, including the portrayal of the heroine, Chrysis. In his author's note to this novel, Wilder states: "The first part of this novel is based upon the *Andria*, a comedy by Terence who in turn based his work upon two Greek plays, now lost to us, by Menander" (*Woman* 136). This comment warrants attention for its reference to the chain of literary tradition. The Greek comedian Menander, who died in 292 BCE, had written two plays, *Woman of Andros* and *Woman of Perinthus*, which Terence translated and revised to constitute his own comedy; Wilder, in turn, uses Terence's work as the starting point for part of his tragic novel.

By writing this introduction in the style of Terence's own prologue, Wilder also announces that his work will not be a simple update or paraphrase of a play by Terence, but will be a creation in his own style that utilizes multiple sources.<sup>11</sup> Roman comic playwrights would often base a new work on a Greek original but typically only on one Greek play. Critics at the time decried Terence's combining of two precursor plays instead of only one, a practice called *contaminatio*, "touching together" or "spoiling." The intertextual implications of Wilder's author's note thus prepare the reader for *contaminatio* throughout the novel.

In his author's note Wilder invites attention to Terence's own prologue to the *Andria*, thus asking for the same courtesy that Terence had requested, that readers judge his novel on its own merits, without partiality, slander or evil-speaking. I provide the Latin text from the edition by Sidney Ashmore, published in 1908 by Oxford University Press, a textbook widely used in American colleges during Wilder's school years.<sup>12</sup>

In the prologue, the Latin poet complains that he is writing this introduction:

*non qui argumentum narret sed qui maliuoli  
ueteris poëtae maledictis respondeat.* (Ter. An. 6-7).

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<sup>11</sup> Publius Terentius Afer (*circa* 195-159 BCE), now known as Terence, was a Roman slave of North African origin who produced Latin comedies from 166 to 160 BCE. *Andria* was his first play, produced for the Megalesian Games in April 166 BCE at a festival for the Great Mother goddess Cybele.

<sup>12</sup> This 1908 Latin text is almost identical to current versions except for slight differences in capitalization, word division, printing consonantal "i" as "j" and consonantal "u" as "v," and occasional variations in the placement of commas. For example, Ashmore's edition has the following as lines 6-7 of the *prologus*:

*non qui argumentum narret sed qui maliuoli  
ueteris poëtae maledictis respondeat.*

which the modern edition by John Barsby (50) renders by:

*non qui argumentum narret sed qui malevoli  
veteris poetae maledictis respondeat.*

Similarly, where Ashmore prints *dein* in line 79, Barsby has *dehinc*, and for Ashmore's two-word *male dicere* in line 23, Barsby gives one word, *maledicere*.

not in order to relate a summary of the plot, but to respond to the slanders of a spiteful old poet.

Donatus identifies this “spiteful old poet” as Luscius of Lanuvium, a comic dramatist.

Terence continues:

*Menander fecit Andriam et Perinthiam . . . (9)*  
*quae conuenere in Andriam ex Perinthia*  
*fatetur transtulisse atque usum pro suis.*  
*id isti uituperant factum atque in eo disputant*  
*contaminari non decere fabulas. . . . (13-16)*  
*fauete, adeste aequo animo et rem cognoscite,*  
*ut pernoscat is ecquid spei sit relicuom,*  
*posthac quas faciet de integro comoedias,*  
*spectandae an exigendae sint uobis prius. (Ter. An. 24-27).*

Menander has composed *The Woman of Andros* and *The Woman of Perinthus*. . . .

He [Terence] admits that he has transferred such passages as suit him from *The Woman of Perinthus* to *The Woman of Andros*, and made use of them for his own purposes.

These people [*i.e.*, the critics] blame him for having done this, and they contend with him that it is not proper to mix up (contaminate) plays. . . .

Be well-disposed; listen with impartial mind and consider the matter, so that you may thoroughly examine if any hope would remain, whether the new comedies he will write should be watched by you or should be driven off, right from the start.

By referring, in his author’s note, to Terence’s prologue which itself indicates the Latin playwright’s reception of the Greek Menander, Wilder underlines the importance of how he has changed his own sources. Despite the loss of the two precursor Greek plays by Menander, we know from the mid-fourth century CE commentator Aelius Donatus that Terence had made changes to his original by re-writing the first scene, by

introducing new characters, and by adding a subplot (Gratwick 117-19). Just as Terence's rewriting of Menander included new plot elements and characters and re-writing parts from two of Menander's plays, Wilder's rewriting included new plot elements and characters, the elimination of some characters, and allusions to a wide range of classical tragedies and philosophy. Wilder also referred to the prologues by Terence in other contexts, specifically in his response to insinuations of plagiarism regarding *The Skin of Our Teeth*. In the 2013 Blackwell's *Companion to Terence*, Mathias Hanses has examined in great detail not only how Wilder alludes to Terence in *The Woman of Andros*, but also how Wilder has changed what was in his source. These alterations include the setting (the island of Brynos, not Athens), the time of the action (although the novel does not specify the time, in later discussions Wilder usually referred to it as occurring *circa* 200 BCE), and the genre (from dramatic comedy to narrative tragedy) (Hanses 433-35).

The most striking modifications that Wilder has introduced into Terence's comedy are the expansion of Chrysis' character and her impact on others is: she is now an educator and a sage, who guides young men by means of literature and philosophy, instilling in them an awareness of earthly joys and sorrows. In a scene proleptic of Emily Webb's graveyard experience in *Our Town*, for example, Chrysis narrates to the young men a fable of a hero who had performed a great service to Zeus, and after his death had called out to the god to grant him the ability to return to earth for one day. Grateful to the hero, Zeus intercedes with the King of the Dead, who allows the man to return to the one day in his past that had been least eventful. Choosing a day from his fifteenth year, the hero notices on his return to earth that his mother focuses primarily on her work, ignoring



everything else, and that his father passes through the courtyard not seeing the life around him. Chrysis concludes:

Suddenly the hero saw that the living too are dead and that we can only be said to be alive in those moments when our hearts are conscious of our treasure; for our hearts are not strong enough to love every moment. And not an hour had gone by before the hero who was both watching life and living it called on Zeus to release him from so terrible a dream. The gods heard him, but before he left he fell upon the ground and kissed the soil of the world that is too dear to be realized (149).

The full appreciation of everyday life, its joys and its sorrows, is the message not only of Chrysis but also of many of Wilder's female sages, especially Emily Webb in *Our Town*.

In changing the genre from comedy in Terence's *Andria* to tragedy, Wilder also transforms Terence's Chrysis from a woman without intellectual attainments to one who is aware of the sorrows as well as the joys of life, using elegant dinner parties to awaken the love of beauty, literature, and humanity in young men. While Hanses does describe the erudition of Wilder's Chrysis, he does not note one fundamental transformation: Terence does not ascribe any educational achievements to his Chrysis, while Wilder's Chrysis establishes herself as a mentor to the young men of the island through her philosophical and poetic discussions at her dinner parties. Acutely aware of the pain and injustice of life, Wilder's Chrysis has "adopted stray human beings who needed her" (152). These "sheep," as she calls them, include slaves, a woman beaten and left for dead, misfits, and a sea captain who after having been severely mutilated in war has now become insane. Chrysis experiences rejection, loneliness, the scolding, condescension, coldness, and willfulness of her "sheep," and the awareness that her young men will eventually become graceless, pompous, envious and "so busily cheerful" (150-59).

Chrysis, nevertheless, loves the everyday world, her banquets and the intellectual conversation, classics of tragedy and philosophy, and simple music such as “Andrian cradle-songs.” The main instrument of Chrysis’ effect as a female sage on the young men, however, occurs not as a result of her own commitments and pleasures but through the fable she tells of the hero who revisited the earth, realizing the joy and sorrow of everyday life.

Through his characterization of Chrysis, Wilder emphasizes the importance of women’s education, which evokes the resistance of men to women’s dignity and worth. The neighbor Chremes, although eventually a more sympathetic character, initially reacts vehemently to the audacity of Chrysis, a woman, in instructing young men. Chremes says to the father of Pamphilus:

I don’t think you like this resort to foreign women any more than I do . . .  
But this Andrian has brought the whole air of Alexandria to town with her, perfumes and hot baths and late hours. . . . she recites poetry to them [the young men] like the famous ones. She has twelve or fifteen of them to dinner every seven or eight days . . . Presently she rises and recites; she can recite whole tragedies without the book. She is very strict with the young men, apparently. She makes them pronounce all the Attic accents.

Chremes concludes:

A few more imported notions and our island will be spoiled forever. It will become a mass of poor undigested imitations. All the girls will be wanting to read and write and declaim. What becomes of home life, Simo, if women can read and write? (140-41).

Chremes not only attacks the idea of women teaching men, but also criticizes the very idea of female education, underlining the obstacles that Chrysis, or any woman, faces.

A comparison between the texts of Terence and Wilder demonstrates further changes in the character of Chrysis from Terence's sex worker — who does not teach literature and philosophy — to Wilder's learned courtesan. Neither Terence's nor Wilder's Chrysis is a *pornē*, a slave prostitute working for a pimp in a brothel or on the streets. Rather, she is a *hetaira*, an independent courtesan, providing companionship and intellectual stimulation to one or only a few men as clients during any during any single period of time, developing long-term relationships with these men.<sup>13</sup> Terence's character Simo describes the arrival of Chrysis at Athens in these words:

*interea mulier quaedam abhinc triennium  
ex Andro commigrauit huc uiciniae,  
inopia et cognatorum neglegentia  
coacta, egregia forma atque aetate integra. (An. 69-72).*

Meanwhile, about three years ago, a certain woman (*mulier*) immigrated (*commigrauit*) to this neighborhood from Andros, driven by poverty (*inopia . . . coacta*) and by the indifference of her relatives (*cognatorum neglegentia*), a woman with outstanding beauty (*egregia forma*) and in the prime of life.

Simo proceeds with his description:

*primo haec pudice uitam parce ac duriter  
agebat, lana ac tela uictum quaeritans;  
sed postquam amans accessit pretium pollicens  
unus et item alter, ita ut ingeniumst omnium  
hominum ab labore procliue ad lubidinem,  
accepit condicionem, dein quaestum occipit. (An. 74-79).*

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<sup>13</sup> *Hetairai* even contributed to religious life by dedicating statues of the goddess Aphrodite at Delphi and other temples and shrines (MacLachlan 103). Athenaeus of Naucratis (late second century CE) provides examples of witty and literary conversation by historical, legendary, and fictional *hetairai* in his *Deipnosophistae* [*The Learned Banqueters*]. (Athenaeus 13. 571-94).

At first she was leading her life modestly, frugally and strictly, seeking her livelihood by spinning and weaving; but after a lover approached offering a payment (*pretium pollicens*), first one lover and likewise another one, thus as the nature of all humans inclines away from labor toward pleasure, she accepted the arrangement, and from that time on took up the business (*quaestum occipit*).

In developing the character of Chrysis, Wilder relies on the Platonic dialogues *Menexenus* and *Symposium*, which praise two courtesans — Aspasia, who teaches rhetoric to Socrates and composes speeches, and Diotima, who instructs Socrates in the progression of love from physical attraction to the love of beauty and of the beautiful soul. Wilder's study of Plato began early and continued throughout his life. For example, at age twenty, while attending Oberlin College, Wilder wrote to his father that he was reading some *Dialogues* of Plato (*Selected Letters* 104). Wilder's reception of Plato included both the study of translations of Plato and relying on modern writers directly influenced by the Greek philosopher. In his journal entry for February 8, 1939, for example, discussing an early draft of what would become *The Ides of March*, Wilder states that he has taken the arguments for the immortality of the soul from Walter Savage Landor (1775-1864), and that Landor in turn was indebted for them to Plato and to Cicero (Niven, *Life* 580, 788). In addition, Wilder's correspondence discusses the multiple meanings of Eros as derived from Plato's *Symposium* (Niven, *Life* 694-95). Underlining the importance of Plato for Wilder's Chrysis, the courtesan recites two long passages from Plato's dialogue *Phaedrus* (*Woman* 159-60; Pl. *Phdr.* 230b-c, 279b-c).

The *Menexenus*, a Platonic dialogue whose authenticity has sometimes been questioned, brings into prominence the figure of a woman who is a great teacher despite being a foreigner by birth and of low origin and low social status. Aspasia of Miletus was

the companion of the Athenian statesman Pericles; some sources state that she was a brothel keeper and a sex worker as well. Her house was an intellectual center in Athens, attracting writers, statesmen and philosophers, including Socrates. In *Menexenus*, Socrates declares not only that Aspasia was his teacher in rhetoric (*Menex.* 235e) but also that she has composed funeral orations, one of which he proceeds to summarize (236d-249d). Socrates also refers to “many other political speeches” of Aspasia, speeches that have been “kept secret,” though he merely offers ironic praise of her oratory (249e). Charles H. Kahn argues that Plato’s *Menexenus* derives its characterization of Aspasia as the rhetorical teacher of Socrates and Pericles from an earlier work, Aeschines’ Socratic dialogue, *Aspasia* (circa 389-387 BCE), itself replying to Antisthenes’ *Aspasia* (circa 390 BCE) (Kahn 87-106). In Aeschines’ dialogue, Aspasia teaches Xenophon and his wife about the power of love and its connection with *aretē* (excellence). Although only fragments of Aeschines’ dialogue survive, Cicero provides a Latin translation of the Xenophon-Aspasia interaction in *De inventione* 1.32.51-52. Xenophon himself cites Aspasia as Socrates’ teacher in *Memorabilia* 2.6.36 and *Oeconomicus* 3.14-16.

The *Symposium* features another foreign-born female teacher of Socrates, Diotima of Mantinea, who educates Sophocles about Eros. Although a symposium is a drinking party (*sumposion*, συμπόσιον, is Greek for “drinking together”), this particular party, Plato emphasizes, is not one of drunkenness, but a gathering where wine is merely refreshment (Pl., *Symp.* 176e), and during which the central focus will be the speech of the participants in praise of love. The setting resembles that of the dinner party given by Clodia in *The Ides of March*. Phaedrus begins the first of the six main speeches, arguing that love stimulates great deeds (178a-180b). The best witness for his argument is

“Alcestis, for she alone was ready to lay down her life for her husband . . . in recognition of [which, the gods granted] . . . that she should rise again from the Stygian depths” (179c). This passage, along with Euripides’ play, *Alcestis*, other Greek tragedies, and the myths collected by Apollodorus provide the sources for Wilder’s own dramatic treatment of this legend in his *Alcestiad*.

After contributions by Pausanias on the heavenly and beautiful Eros, and by the physician Eryximachus on erotic desires that are healthy, characterized by harmony and balance, the comic dramatist Aristophanes gives one of the most memorable speeches in the dialogue. Originally, he claims, humans were globular in shape, with four arms, four legs and two sets of sexual organs. Because the gods were jealous, Zeus separated the original humans into halves with his thunderbolt. Since then, the halves have been searching for their natural mates, resulting in male-male, female-female, and male-female sexual desires. Aristophanes claims that the worship of Eros will bring healing and eternal happiness through reunion of the separated halves (189a-193d). Agathon, the tragic dramatist, next praises Eros as the most beautiful of the gods, and as giving beauty, charm, and happiness to humanity (193d-197e). Although Chrysis does not specifically mention the *Symposium*, she recites both Aristophanes and Plato in *The Woman of Andros*. Aristophanes’ speech in the *Symposium* is relevant to Wilder’s portrayal of the woman of Andros because it includes women as equal and natural participants in love, in both heterosexual and Lesbian relationships.

Socrates’ speech follows, expanding the significance and impact of the foreign-born female sage. (201d-212d). Here Socrates credits his own lessons in Eros to Diotima from the city of Mantinea. Socrates also claims that she benefited the entire city of

Athens by bringing about a ten years' postponement of the great plague through a sacrifice (201d). Diotima teaches Socrates that Eros causes humanity to seek beauty, but more fundamentally, urges him to seek love in his mind and soul. The ideal progression of Eros is from love of a particular physical body (beauty), through love of all physical bodies (abstract beauty), then love of beautiful activities, followed by love of beautiful intellectual activities, culminating in love of absolute beauty and of the beautiful soul. Diotima adds that this makes "life ever worth the living" (211d). It merits note that Wilder echoes Diotima's statement in his June 29, 1972 letter to Enid Bagnold: "There is no age limit to creativity, but there are two required conditions: EROS at your right hand, Praise of life at your left" (Selected Letters 679-82). In addition, Wilder describes Gertrude Stein as "my dear Diotima" in handwritten notes for the copy of *The Eighth Day* that he prepared for Otto Klemperer (1885-1973), the German-Jewish composer and conductor who had fled from the Nazis to America (TW Papers, Box 103, Folder 2434, p. 10; also Stein xx).

Wilder also makes reference to Aspasia in his journal on February 10, 1930, indicating that Aspasia, female education, and dreams of a fulfilling future remain linked in his mind. Approximately one month after he had completed *The Woman of Andros*, and less than two weeks before the novel's publication, Wilder composed a journal entry which fantasizes about a course that he is preparing to teach at the University of Chicago class on classics in translation.<sup>14</sup> Wondering how such a class would unfold, he imagines one of his students writing a story about Katie, a married woman expecting her thirteenth child, and dreaming of Paris and a career as an opera singer. Katie's hopes seem dashed

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<sup>14</sup> Wilder's journal entries often contain drafts of fiction that he may or may not expand in later works, as well as comments on his reading and on his writings.

when she looks at her children, including “little Aspasia” (Harrison 127). Here, although realistically accepting the difficulties faced by this particular woman, Wilder continues to associate Aspasia with the hope for education.

Chrysis, however, is effective in influencing Pamphilus; owing to his attendance at the symposia, Pamphilus becomes profoundly affected by interaction with her, leading him to question the meaning of existence and to incorporate Chrysis’ (and Wilder’s) attitudes, asking questions such as “How does one live?” and “What does one do first?” (*Woman* 150). In facing his sorrows at the end of the novel, Pamphilus recalls fragments of Chrysis’ words and actions, for example, her touching the hand of a man who had experienced a loss, assuring him that the happiness he had experienced will remain as real as his sorrow. “Pamphilus knew,” Wilder writes, “that out of these fragments he must assemble . . . sufficient strength, not only for himself, but for these others . . . who . . . now turned to him” (203).

Although his father, Simo, has planned for Pamphilus to marry the daughter of his neighbor Chremes, the young man accidentally meets Glycerium, who, in Wilder’s novel, is Chrysis’ actual sister, not the alleged sister, as in Terence. Pamphilus falls in love with Glycerium, offers his help, and at their third meeting, “those caresses that seemed to be for courage, for pity and for admiration, were turned by Nature to her own uses” (165). Aware of the relationship between her sister and Pamphilus, Chrysis, although she also loves the youth, tells the young man on her deathbed:

I want to say to someone . . . that I have known the worst that the world can do to me, and that nevertheless I praise the world and all living. All that is, is well. Remember me as one who loved all things and accepted



from the gods all things, the bright and the dark. And do you likewise,  
Farewell (180).

Chrysis' acceptance of "all things, the bright and the dark" makes her a sage who not only is aware of the "tears of the world" but who also can impart to others the moral imperative to "praise the world and all living." She has achieved her insight and fundamental stance toward the world through suffering and loneliness, to the point where she regards herself as having already died, while she hears her internal voice saying, "I am alone . . . I am alone" (151). Leading young men to "the analysis of ideas and of masterpieces" during one of her banquets, she recites from memory the opening and closing passages of Plato's *Phaedrus*. After Socrates prays for inner beauty and for harmony, Phaedrus adds: "And let the same prayer serve for me, for these are the things friends share with one another." Observing that Pamphilus now has tears in his eyes, Chrysis begins to weep "as one weeps who after an absence of folly and self-will returns to a well-loved place and an old loyalty. It was true, true beyond a doubt, tragically true, that the world of love and virtue and wisdom was the true world and her failure in it all the more overwhelming" (160).

Even though she is dying and has not herself experienced romantic love, Chrysis has successfully communicated to Pamphilus her stance of praising the world despite its tears and its tragedies. When he is perplexed about what to do concerning his parents, Pamphilus specifically recalls Chrysis' fable of the hero who returns to earth for a day, and when he is beset by loss, he repeats to himself the words of Chrysis (148, 202-03). For Wilder, the true sage is not a hermit in isolation, but a person deeply cherishing friendship, capable of influencing others through "love and virtue and wisdom," and actively spreading that wisdom to others. Chrysis, after meeting once with Simo, the

father of Pamphilus, has deeply influenced him by her integrity, dignity, and independence (144-47). Despite his earlier protestations, he now agrees that his son can marry Glycerium, rescuing the girl and an old servant from being sold into slavery, and bringing her to his home, where she comes under the care of Pamphilus' mother. After several days, labor begins and Glycerium dies in childbirth, as does her child. Despite the sorrows he has experienced, Pamphilus retains the major lesson of Chrysis, as emphasized by the sentence that ends the penultimate paragraph of the novel: "But in confusion and with flagging courage he repeated: I praise all the living, the bright and the dark" (203).

Eliminating what he calls the farcical elements of Terence's original, Wilder also expands the time frame of his story from one day to approximately one year, fleshing out the personalities of Chrysis, Glycerium and Pamphilus, thereby introducing motifs that he will develop in future works. Wilder emphasizes Chrysis' erudition, her role in the education of young men, and her pithy gnomic sayings.<sup>15</sup> For example, when a young man returns to her dinners after an absence, begging her pardon for his indignation at her criticism that he had spoken demeaningly about women, she said, "Happy are the associations that have grown . . . out of a fault and a forgiveness" (155-56).

Underscoring the importance of Chrysis' gnomic statements, Wilder attributes to her a statement that he himself uses, with slight variations, in three other works, even applying it to himself as an adolescent. Another earnest young man condemns Chrysis'

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<sup>15</sup> I use "gnomic saying" in the Greek grammatical sense, to indicate a statement of a general truth or an aphorism, not in the modern meanings of "enigmatic, ambiguous" or "mysterious and not easily understood" (*Cambridge English Dictionary* "Gnomic").

means of livelihood and demands that she become a servant or a “sempstress.”<sup>16</sup> Chrysis smiles, telling the company: “It is true that of all forms of genius, goodness has the longest awkward age” (158). In an undated notebook entry, found on the same page following dated entries for June 6, 1927, Wilder uses these very words when writing about Christian evangelicals: “The so-called Christers at Yale: Of all the forms of genius goodness has the longest awkward age” (*Cahier E* 33). He next utilized this aphorism in the foreword to *The Angel That Troubled the Waters and Other Plays* (1928), a collection of early one-act plays, including some he had written in high school; commenting on himself as a sixteen year old author, he writes: “in life and in literature mere sincerity is not sufficient, and in both realms the greater the capacity the longer the awkward age” (*Angel* 3-4). Finally, in a fourth instance, Wilder specifically mentions *The Woman of Andros* as the source for one of the epigrams to the 1935 novel, *Heaven’s My Destination*:

“Of all the forms of genius,  
goodness has the longest awkward age.  
—— The Woman of Andros” (*Heaven’s*).

These details suggest that Chrysis is Wilder’s *alter ego*,<sup>17</sup> in that both exhort others to enjoy a fuller life and recognize that talents take time to ripen. Among the texts that Chrysis recites to the young men is the fable of a hero who is allowed to return to earth for one day but becomes overwhelmed with pain because the world “is too dear to

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<sup>16</sup> Wilder uses the archaic “sempstress” for “seamstress,” perhaps because of a phonetic resemblance to “temptress.”

<sup>17</sup> Analogous to Dolly Levi in *The Matchmaker*.

be realized.”<sup>18</sup> Chrysis also asks whether the young men would understand *The Alcestis*, a Greek play and legend figuring prominently in Wilder’s later works.<sup>19</sup>

In Wilder’s novel, Chrysis emphasizes to her sister that they are strangers, women, non-citizens, without many rights. She says: “We are not Greek citizens. We are not people with homes. We are considered strange, only a little above the slaves. All those others live in homes and everyone knows their fathers and their mothers; they marry one another. They think we would never fit into their life” (174). Simo reinforces this anti-immigrant notion that non-citizens have no rights when telling his son that there is no outward obligation to marry the girl. I’ve looked into the matter. She is not a Greek citizen” (185). Strikingly, Wilder does not take the escape route used by Terence, who makes Glycerium a long-lost Athenian citizen, now restored to her privileges. In *The Woman of Andros*, Glycerium and Chrysis remain women from Andros, legally dependent on men (the Greek word *andros*, ἄνδρoς also means “of the man” or “of the husband”), and foreigners, with none of the rights of citizens. Chrysis is Wilder’s prime and most sustained example of a great teacher, a foreigner by birth and of low origin and social status. Through this expansion of the role occupied by Chrysis, Wilder develops the themes of women’s education, women’s rights, and societal issues surrounding

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<sup>18</sup> This experience reaches its peak in Emily Webb’s graveyard scene in *Our Town*.

<sup>19</sup> Wilder uses the motif of returning from the dead, central to Euripides’ tragedy on Alcestis, in his own explorations of the Alcestis legend, *The Alcestiad*. So, too, Catullus introduces but is prevented by Caesar’s epileptic fit from fully reciting a poem about Alcestis in *The Ides of March*. In addition, Chrysis’ comment, “Would they understand the *Oedipus at Colonus*” (*Woman* 158), prefigures Wilder’s use of this Sophoclean tragedy by Julius Caesar in *The Ides of March* to comfort the poet Catullus on his deathbed (*Ides* 183).

immigration, motifs that were implicit in Terence but not fully explored in the Latin comedy.<sup>20</sup>

Relying perhaps on the influence of his mother as his first inspiration, as well as on his intellectual mentor Gertrude Stein, Wilder portrays the female sages as older than the men they influence in his early novels. Chrysis, the epitome of the older female sage who preferentially imparts her wisdom to young men, is thirty-five, ten years older than Pamphilus. The narrator comments:

Perhaps the maturity of a civilization can be judged by this trait, by observing whether the young men first fall in love with women older or younger than themselves; if in their youth their imaginations pass their time in hallowing the images of prattling unnourishing girls their natures will forever after be thinner” (*Woman* 152).

In works subsequent to *The Woman of Andros*, however, the age of the female sage is not rigidly determined; as Wilder gets older, the sages tend to become younger. Emily Webb in *Our Town*, for example, is a prime example of the younger female sage.

### **Sappho and Cytheris as Female Sages in *The Ides of March***

In *The Ides of March* (1948) Wilder presents us with two major examples of the female sage: the poet Sappho as a model of literary excellence, and the actress Cytheris, whom even Julius Caesar admires for her ability to recite literary passages and to educate others. In this epistolary novel characterized by distorted temporal sequences and deliberate anachronisms, Wilder offers us numerous fictitious letters and documents,

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<sup>20</sup> Wilder’s *The Woman of Andros* provides a new understanding of Terence’s *Andria*, an intertextuality that serves as what Donncha O’Rourke terms “a conversation between texts” (390-409) and that John Hollander defines as *metalepsis* or *transumption*, an allusion that re-interprets an earlier text (133-49).

interspersed with actual poems by Catullus in his own English translation along with thirty-two lines from five poems also given in the original Latin.

The linguistic beauty and metrical effects of the poem in the original language and the evocation of additional lines of the poem beyond those in the excerpts that Wilder quoted all add to the work's impact for those individuals who can understand the context. In the words of Gian Biagio Conte, such resonance with the original text creates "parity between poet and reader with allusions coming into existence only when a poem triggers a sympathetic vibration in both the poet's and reader's memories of the literary tradition" (Conte 32-39). As Wilder wrote to his friend Amy Wertheimer (Harrison Papers, Box 6, Folder 1948-1949) and as he also stated in a marginal annotation on a copy of the book given to Terry Catherman, *The Ides of March* is a book to be read twice (TW Papers, Box 108, Folder 2490, p. viii.) For maximum impact the Latin text is to be read multiple times, in the original form, because "for those who get it, it will be a value so deep-reaching."

Sappho's poetry plays a profound role in several episodes of the novel, through direct and indirect references to the female Greek poet and through Wilder's selection from Catullus. Clodia, a major character in *The Ides of March*, is known through Catullus' poetry as "Lesbia," a metrically-equivalent pseudonym ("Clodia" and "Lesbia" are both dactyls, a long syllable followed by two short syllables) in homage to Sappho, who was born and lived on the Greek island of Lesbos. In the novel not only Catullus but also Julius Caesar and his confidant Lucius Mamilius Turrinus have written poetry to Clodia. The letter from Caesar to Turrinus in which Caesar identifies Clodia as Lesbia and cites Catullus' poetry to her contains the first iteration of Caesar's interest in "the

endowment from which springs great poetry” (32-33).

Among the significant Catullan passages that Wilder quotes in Latin are the first five lines of Catullus 51, the Roman poet’s translation of a poem now known as Sappho 31. Sappho, who wrote in the Aeolic Greek dialect, was ancient Greece’s most renowned female poet, one whose literary achievement speaks profoundly to men as well as women.<sup>21</sup> Wilder portrays Clodia Metelli as taking Sappho as her personal model for literary excellence by her choosing to recite some of Sappho’s verses at the dinner party she has organized for Julius Caesar, and to which she has also invited Cicero and Catullus. Underlining the importance of literature at this Greek-style symposium, Caesar assigns as the subject for discussion “whether great poetry is the work of men’s minds only, or whether it is, as many have claimed, the prompting of the Gods” (77). Later in the novel Caesar will comfort the dying Catullus by reciting such “great poetry.”<sup>22</sup>

Exemplifying the emotional relevance of Sappho’s poetry to men as well as to women is Catullus’ Poem 51, his rewriting of Sappho 31; Wilder incorporates Catullus 51 into *The Ides of March*. Written in the metric form known as Sapphic strophes, Sappho 31 describes the emotional and physiological effects on the narrator when she

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<sup>21</sup> Although Sappho is associated with female homoerotic desire, her verses may or may not be autobiographical, but as Judith P. Hallett (“Catullus and Horace” 68) wrote, they “were basically intended as public, rather than personal, statements . . . aimed at instilling sexual awareness and sexual self-esteem in young women.” Sappho is an educator and sage, especially, but not exclusively, for young women. Marilyn Skinner argues that Sappho’s great poetic achievement “was to articulate a female desire so compellingly as to make it emotionally accessible to men as well as women.” (Skinner 137-38). Aristophanes’ speech in Plato’s *Symposium*, claiming that women’s desire for other women as well as for men is a natural human condition may attest to the influence of Sappho’s poems on Plato.

<sup>22</sup> I discuss the significance of the “great poetry” Caesar uses to comfort Catullus in Chapter Five: “Our Tears: *Lacrimae Rerum* in *The Matchmaker*, *The Ides of March*, and *Our Town*.”

sees a young woman, her beloved, seated next to an unidentified man. Catullus' revision of Sappho (Cat. 51) applies the Greek female narrator's experience to his own male reactions to his "Lesbia," Clodia Metelli. Using many of the same images as Sappho does, Catullus translates Sappho's first three stanzas into Latin, but the two poets diverge in the fourth stanza. Sappho's fourth stanza continues with physical manifestations: "cold sweat possesses me"; "a trembling seizes me"; "I am paler than grass"; "I seem to lack only a little of dying"; "but all must be endured, and since poverty . . ." Although the rest of the Greek text has not survived, the conclusion to Sappho's poem could very well have been known to Catullus. In contrast to what we have of Sappho 31, Catullus' last four lines switch tone or personae, so that his final stanza appears to show him berating himself or Lesbia berating him. As Judith P. Hallett has suggested, Clodia may have written this stanza in reply to Catullus as a learned critique of his poems as well as a poetic communication regarding his personality ("Catullus and Horace" 68). Wilder's comment on the impact of the original languages "for those who get it" indicates that knowledge of the full texts of Catullus 51 and Sappho 31 enhance the experience of the novel's readers.

Wilder uses the Latin original and his own English translations of Catullus not only serve to illustrate the beauty of Catullus 51 and Sappho 31, but also to demonstrate the power of the Sapphic strophe in conveying emotion. Both Catullus and Sappho compare a man to a god, with the person making that comparison displaying great agitation. In the novel, Caesar quotes Catullus 51 in Latin and in English, but only the first five of the sixteen lines, before the emotional turmoil becomes apparent. In Catullus 51 and Sappho 31, the meter is that of the Sapphic strophe: each 4-line Sapphic stanza contains 3 lines of



hendecasyllables (eleven syllables) in a specific metrical pattern, plus a fourth line of five syllables, consisting of a 4-syllable choriamb (long-short-short-long) followed by an anceps (which can be either long or short). After citing the Latin, Wilder provides his own English translations of the beginning of Catullus 51:

Ille mi par esse deo videtur,  
Ille, si fas est, superare divos,  
Qui deans adversus itentidem te  
Spectat et audit  
Dulce ridentem  
That man to me seems equal to a God,  
That man surpasses the Gods—if such  
a thought be allowed —  
Who sitting before you  
Gazes and hears you  
Sweetly laughing. . . . (*Ides* 135).

Note that the fourth line, “Gazes and hears you,” is metrically identical to Catullus’ original *spectat et audit* (“sees and hears”) and to the Greek fourth line of Sappho 31: long-short-short-long-anceps. Although Wilder does not attempt to reproduce in English the hendecasyllables of the first three lines, he does succeed in capturing the meter of the fourth line of the Sapphic strophe.<sup>23</sup>

While Clodia Metelli is too destructive to be a female sage, attempting to train men

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<sup>23</sup> Familiar with this difficult Latin and Greek poetic form, Wilder had composed the 1920 Yale University commencement poem, the *Ivy Ode*, in Latin, using exactly metrical Sapphic strophes. Wilder was also acquainted with this meter through Congregational church music. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Sapphic strophe became a popular meter for Protestant hymns, after Friedrich Ferdinand Flemming (1778-1813) put the Latin text of Horace’s Sapphic ode, *Integer Vitae* (*Ode* 1.22, “Upright of Life”), to music in 1811. Wilder utilizes some elements of the Sapphic meter to convey the strong emotional experiences of Catullus (and, by intertextuality, those of Sappho).

to hate, instead of guiding them to a realization of the joys and sorrows of the world, her references to Sappho and the poems that Catullus writes to Clodia signify the importance of Sappho as muse and teacher. Catullus 51, a rewrite of Sappho 31, describes the joy, anguish, and physical manifestations of intense love. In inspiring Catullus' writings, Sappho demonstrates the power of what Julius Caesar identifies as "great poetry," literature that not only reflects human joys and pains, but stimulates others to compose works based on that poem as well as on human experience.

An additional female sage in *The Ides of March* is the actress and courtesan Cytheris, whom Wilder uses to emphasize the value of reciting Latin and Greek literature and to provide a socio-cultural commentary on the status of women in late Republican Rome. Crediting Cytheris for the education and improvement of her lover, Mark Antony,<sup>24</sup> Julius Caesar also recommends that his own lover, Cleopatra, and his wife, Pompeia, go to Cytheris for the study of Latin and Greek declamation, and he himself visits her "to hear her declaim passages from the Greek and Roman tragedies" (177). Correcting what has been a relative lack of critical emphasis on Wilder's classical women, Allison Keith examines two characters in this novel, Cytheris and Volumnia. While Cytheris is a lower-status actress and courtesan, Volumnia is a high-status Roman aristocratic matron, the former lover of Julius Caesar. Volumnia appears only three times, always in the company of upper-class Roman matrons. In Roman history, however, Volumnia Cytheris was one person, the freedwoman of P. Volumnius Eutrapelus, as well as a courtesan and mime-dancer/actress ("Wilder's Roman Women" 4-5).

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<sup>24</sup> Although English writers frequently render the name "Marcus Antonius" as "Mark" Antony, Wilder uses the spelling "Marc."

In an earlier paper, Keith catalogues Cytheris' lovers as including her patron Volumnius, Caesar's assassin M. Junius Brutus, the poet Gallus (whose elegiac poetry celebrates her under the pseudonym of Lycoris), and adherents and protégés of Julius Caesar, such as Mark Antony ("Lycoris Galli" 23-55). Several of Cicero's letters attest to his meeting Cytheris at dinner parties, with Cicero using her formal name, Volumnia, in a letter to his wife, Terentia, but the less formal and sexually suggestive name, Cytheris, in a letter to his friend Paetus. According to Keith, "the Greek name Cytheris implies non-Roman lineage, slave provenance, and the carnal sexuality associated with Venus/Aphrodite, from whose association with the island of Cythera her stage name was derived" ("Wilder's Roman Women" 4-5).

Wilder's splitting (a literary *tnesis*) of the real Volumnia Cytheris into two fictional characters, Cytheris and Volumnia, results in a socio-cultural commentary on the status of women in late Republican Rome. The lower class sage spreads knowledge of literature and expertise in declamation, while the aristocratic woman sinks herself in narcissistic pleasure-seeking: "Cytheris, the alluring courtesan and brilliant tragic actress of socially undistinguished origins . . . mingles easily with the Roman elite . . . [while] Volumnia [is] a Roman matron of the highest lineage and lowest morals" ("Wilder's Roman Women" 4-5). By splitting Volumnia Cytheris into two characters, Wilder is able to demonstrate the greater importance of the lower-status actress/teacher compared to the upper-class matron.

Cytheris' skill as a sage consists of her teaching Greek literature and the skills of recitation to men and women in such a way that they can develop their own judgment, becoming aware of tragedy and human limitations, yet not losing their capacity for joy.

Julius Caesar admires Cytheris, valuing her, the daughter of a carter, more highly than he does any “woman of the highest aristocracy,” because Cytheris serves as a role model for others in “dignity, charm, and deportment.” In particular, she has educated Mark Antony, increasing his powers of judgment, imagination, and understanding without “drain[ing] him of his joy and aggression.” As a result, he has not become another Cato or Brutus, who are industrious, but with a poverty of imagination. “Happy would I be,” Caesar writes to Cleopatra, “if it could be said of me that like Cytheris I could train the unbroken horse without robbing him of the fire in his eye and the delight in his speed” (124-26).

While Clodia relies primarily on Sappho as her literary inspiration, Cytheris ranges over all of classical Greek tragedy for her sources, as well as echoing Wilder’s own interest with themes of freedom and its limitations as developed by existentialist philosophers (124-26). Not only does Cytheris recite the roles of Aeschylus’ Clytemnestra, Sophocles’ Antigone, and Euripides’ Medea, but she also discusses the philosophical implications of female tragic protagonists in her correspondence. In a letter to Caesar’s confidant, Lucius Mamilus Turrinus, she uses the example of Antigone as someone who has pushed the limits of human freedom, arguing that what people conventionally call “wickedness” might primarily reflect “the very principle of virtue exploring the laws of its own nature.” Cytheris states that:

only the Gods have put a veto on the adventures of our minds. If They do not choose to intervene, we are condemned to fashion our own laws or to wander in fright through the pathless wastes of our terrifying liberty, seeking even the reassurance of a barred gate, of a forbidding wall (191-94).

Cytheris concludes this letter with what Wilder indicates is a summary of the major themes of the novel. The final sentences of her letter explore the dangers of a fear

of freedom, analogous to Sartre's *mauvaise foi* [bad faith], an inauthentic abdication of freedom which leads people, in Cytheris' words, to wish others to "take the responsibility for marking out the permissible." Those fearing freedom accept the limitations handed down by abusers and by dictators. Caesar, she tells Mamilus, is a "tyrant . . . out of touch with the way freedom operates and is developed in others; always mistaken, he accords too little or he accords too much." In the hand-written annotations Wilder made on the copy of the book he had given to the American diplomat Terry Catherman, Wilder comments on Cytheris' discussion of responsibility and freedom: "Liberty and responsibility = the themes of the book. Cytheris has prepared us for what is wrong with Caesar — and prepares us for his death" (TW Papers, Box 108, Folder 2490, p. 155).<sup>25</sup> In dramatizing the themes of responsibility and freedom through her letters and by using examples from the ancient Greek tragedians Cytheris is not only a female sage but also Thornton Wilder's *alter ego*.

### **Homerically-Inspired Sages in *The Eighth Day***

Not only are the female sages in Thornton Wilder's next novel, *The Eighth Day* (1967), based on Homeric epic, but Wilder also signals that many of these sages are avatars of Athene, goddess of wisdom and protector and guide of Odysseus. Rewriting the *Odyssey* in an American setting, Wilder suffuses the novel with references to Homer. The Prologue provides the first allusion to Athene, linking her to creativity and to providing guidance to humans: "nothing is more interesting than the inquiry as to how

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<sup>25</sup> It is of note that Wilder used the first United Kingdom edition, published by Longmans, Green, and Company, for these annotations. This edition incorporates the corrections Wilder noted in the Latin quotations, and differs in pagination from the first American edition; page 155 of the U.K. edition, for example, corresponds to page 194 of the American version.

creativity operates in anyone, in everyone. . . . Pallas Athene's Athens [is] like a lighthouse on a hill, sending forth beams that still illuminate men in council" (10). Wilder provided his own hand-written annotations on a presentation copy of the 1967 Harper and Row first edition of *The Eighth Day*, which he gave to Otto Klemperer. These annotations, usually marked by an \* next to the printed text and a corresponding \* at the bottom of the page indicating Wilder's comments, explicate the novel's numerous biographical and literary allusions, including references to Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Alexander Pushkin, Wolfgang von Goethe, Søren Kierkegaard, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, and Gertrude Stein. For example, Wilder's annotations regarding the Ashley family after the husband and father, John, has disappeared prepare the way for understanding the numerous Homeric allusions (10):

They [Beata Ashley and family] read the *Odyssey*. \* It told of a man undergoing many trials in far countries; to him came the wise goddess, the gray-eyed Pallas Athene, upbraiding him when he was discouraged and promising him that one day he would return to his homeland and to his dear wife.

\* *Some critics have ridiculed all this reading in a remote small town. (There's still more when we come to the Lansing family), but they are wrong. Strangers are now writing me of their home life 50 + years ago - much reading aloud, Hausmusik - all replaced by movies, radio and television (67-68).*<sup>26</sup>

Following the twists and turns of John Ashley on his journey of escape through the Americas, *The Eighth Day* depicts numerous women, predominantly avatars of the goddess Athene, who help the fugitive in these wanderings. Unjustly sentenced to death

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<sup>26</sup> I give the printed text of the novel in Roman type (with occasional italics when the printed book has italics), and Wilder's hand-written annotations in italics.

in Coaltown, Illinois for allegedly killing his friend, Breckenridge Lansing, John Ashley is rescued by persons unknown during the train journey to his execution. Ashley, supplied with a horse by his rescuers, rides on it to the Mississippi River, where Mrs. Hodge buys the horse, providing him with money, advises him to “trust women” rather than men, and arranges a boat-crossing of the Mississippi and plans for subsequent barge transport to New Orleans. The rest of Ashley’s escape parallels the journey of Odysseus from Troy to Ithaca, occurring entirely by ship. After a stay in New Orleans, where he feels like “a Ulysses beggar at his own hearth,” Ashley travels to Ecuador, and Peru, eventually reaching Chile (124).

In an economy of allusiveness worthy of the most subtle of Latin elegists, Wilder uses only two words, “gray eyes,” to indicate that the women who assist Ashley in this odyssey are representatives of Pallas Athene. Describing Mrs. T. Hodge, the first woman to help John Ashley in his escape, Wilder writes that a “short solid woman of fifty marched in and placed herself before Ashley. . . . Her manner was brusque, but a smile seemed to come and go in her gray eyes.” \* (118-19). Wilder’s marginal note reads: \* *First of the avatars of Pallas Athene.* These words, “her gray eyes,” constitute the allusion to Athene, whose standard Homeric epithet was *glaukōpis*, γλαυκῶπις, which means “gray-eyed,” although it is sometimes translated as “gleaming-eyed” or “bright-eyed.” Additional avatars of gray-eyed Athene include John Ashley’s grandmother (120)<sup>27</sup> and Mrs. Ada Wickersham, an English-born hotel owner in Chile, who tries to improve conditions for the local populace and orchestrates Ashley’s escape from a bounty hunter by staging a fake funeral, reminiscent of Odysseus’ escape from the cave

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<sup>27</sup> “only once before had he seen such eyes—his grandmother’s.”

of Polyphemus.<sup>28</sup>

Reinforcing the association of gray eyes and Athene, and placing it in the context of the ancient pantheon, Wilder presents a conversation between John Ashley, now working at a Chilean copper mine under a pseudonym, and the mine director, Dr. MacKenzie. Explaining to Ashley his theory that the Greek gods represent different types or aspects of human personalities, Dr. MacKenzie describes the goddess who is the “guardian of civilization and friend of man”:

Athene. Pallas Athene. Minerva to the Romans. She doesn't give a damn about Hera's cooking and diapers, or about Aphrodite's perfumes and cosmetics. She gave Greece the olive; some say she gave it the horse. She wanted her city to be a lighthouse on a hill for all peoples and, by God, she did it. She's a friend to good men, Mothers are no help; wives are no help; mistresses are no help. They want to possess the man, They want him to serve their interests. Athene wants a man to surpass himself. . . . (163-64).

Ashley asks him, “What color eyes did she have, sir?”

“Color eyes? . . . Hmm . . . Let me think.” Remembering a line from Homer, MacKenzie replies, “Then the grey-eyed Athene appeared to the far-voyaging Odysseus as an old woman, and he knew her not. . . . Grey eyes.” \*

Wilder's annotation for this passage then identifies three of the embodiments of Athene:

\* *His grandmother; Mrs. Hodge; Mrs. Wickersham.*

Although identified as an avatar of Athene, Mrs. Wickersham had previously modified Dr. MacKenzie's theory that each goddess corresponds to a distinct female personality type, demonstrating that such representations are neither static nor all-

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<sup>28</sup> Both escape monsters (the Cyclops and the rat catcher) using deception, Odysseus being carried out of the dangerous situation under a ram, and Ashley carried out under the lid of a coffin.



encompassing. MacKenzie tells Ashley of his conversation with Mrs. Wickersham, who had argued that while each man belongs to only one type (that's why they are so tiresome), in contrast:

most women were all five or six goddesses mixed up together. . . . She said that she's been all of them—all six. She said that it's a lucky woman who graduates from Artemis to Aphrodite, to Hera and ends up as Athene.\*

It's sad when they get stuck in one image.

\* *A theme of the book: man can only advance or recede into their type; women can change their rôle (or fail to)* (178).

Like the Abbess in *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, Mrs. Wickersham builds and manages orphanages and hospitals. In one conversation, a group of benefactors want her to build a new city, telling her, "You should found a city. . . . What shall we call this town of light and healing? . . . Let us call it Athens—*Atenas*."\*<sup>29</sup> Wilder's annotation states: "\* *Pallas Athene builds cities*." Mrs. Wickersham is certainly Athene since she guides Ashley in his wanderings and builds cities, but she is also a hunter (Artemis) of secrets by examining her boarder's luggage, dresses with a "marked décolleté" (Aphrodite), and demonstrates motherly love to the orphans she has educated and to John Ashley (Hera). While John Ashley's guides reflect Athene, Wilder signals that these women are complex, cannot be pigeon-holed into one personality type, and are not wholly based on

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<sup>29</sup> Wilder's phrase, "this town of light," conveys multiple intra- and intertextual resonances. It echoes the words of the Prologue of the novel: "Pallas Athene's Athens, like a lighthouse on a hill, sending forth beams that still illuminate men in council" (10), and the comments of Dr. MacKenzie on Athene's "lighthouse on a hill" (163-64). The "city . . . of light and healing" also reflects the hopes for the Puritan settlement of the Americas in "A Model of Christian Charity," the 1630 speech of the Pilgrim leader John Winthrop, given on board the Mayflower just before arrival in New England: "for wee must Consider that wee shall be as a Citty upon a Hill, the eies of all people are uppon us." Winthrop's image derives from the city of light in *Matthew* 5:14-16, which itself alludes to the brightness of the light of the virtuous in *Proverbs* 4:18.

one classical precedent.

In addition to Ada Wickersham, Mrs. Eustacia Lansing, the wife of the man John Ashley is accused of killing, has also gone through stages of representing various goddesses, eventually becoming a manifestation of Athene, but Wilder's description of her eye color alludes to an additional female sage. In reference to a passage where Eustacia states that "There's no need for Coaltown to be so narrow-minded and solemn and boring," Wilder provides this annotation: "*Aphrodite and Hera passing into Pallas Athene*" (356). The intertextuality of the color of the eyes is now more complex, associating the color to another source of inspiration for Wilder. For both Eustacia and her daughter Félicité Lansing, one eye is of a slightly different color than the other: "one of her eyes was green-to-blue and the other was hazel-to-dark brown." \* Wilder annotates this passage: "\* *As were Madame de Sévigné's*" (153). Integrating features of Madame de Sévigné into his character portraits of fictional women, Wilder is signaling through the same mechanism of eye color that his female sages are syntheses not only of various goddesses, but also of great human writers, expressing the broad scope of his intertextuality.

Eustacia and Félicité Lansing are primarily females sages through their correspondence and interactions with George. Writing her son about the risks of focusing on "external things in order to escape from thoughts of death, illness, solitude, and self-reproach," Eustacia Lansing educates him about his choices in responding to the evils he has endured. Acknowledging the injustices toward George by his father, she tries to get George to understand his father's fears and background, indicating that his father had committed to making a basic change in his behavior just before he was murdered. Since

George had written that he will be soon playing the role of Shylock, Eustacia tells him to remember his father when he hears Portia's "Quality of Mercy" speech, quoting some of the lines. Félicité's correspondence with her brother challenges George's self-portrayal as a "tragical person," advocating sincerity in facing up to his sorrows, by citing the examples of Shakespeare and Pushkin (384-91).

*The Eighth Day* features another foreign-born, allegedly low status female sage, Olga Sergeievna Doubkov, who while not directly assimilated to Athene via Wilder's annotations, functions as an Athene-like figure to the young man, George Lansing. An impoverished Russian-born countess whose father had escaped from a death sentence for crimes against the Tsar, Olga works as a needlewoman, gives advice on trousseaux, and is in charge of a linen room at the Illinois Tavern in order to earn money for her return to Russia. Although the town treats her as a foreigner and disparages her as someone who is "extremely outspoken" (like Chrysis in *The Woman of Andros*), Olga befriends and assists members of both the Ashley and the Lansing families, encouraging the young Lily Ashley's singing career and educating George Lansing.

Olga becomes a female sage through guiding George in recognizing and understanding his sadness, thereby laying the groundwork for his acceptance of suffering and for finding a purpose in life. This process is immersed in the Russian language. When the fifteen-year old George asks her to speak something in Russian at a dinner at the Lansing's home, she does so, then translates her words into English:

George, son of Breckenridge . . . You are young. You are not happy now because you have not yet discovered the work to which you will give your life. Somewhere in the world there is a work for you to do, to which you will bring courage and honor and loyalty. . . . [This work] will demand a

brave heart and some suffering; but you will triumph (340). Hearing Miss Doubkov speak of “Russia, its history, its greatness, its holiness . . . [and] the glories of Pushkin,” George asks her to teach him to speak Russian. She does so, emphasizing Russian literature, and, at George’s request, often repeating the first words in Russian she had spoken to him, words that attested to his sadness and future suffering. Although George is considered the town’s “holy terror,” and despite Miss Doubkov’s lack of experience in teaching languages, George makes remarkable progress, not only becoming fluent in Russian, but also discovering that his goal in life is to become an actor, specifically an actor in the Russian language (339-43).

Several years after Breckenridge Lansing’s murder, Ms. Doubkov elicits George’s confession and provides for his escape to Russia, leading to his eventual successful career. Having left town riding on top of a train on the night before his father’s murder, George had sustained a head injury resulting in psychiatric symptoms, causing him to be held in an insane asylum from May to September 1902. Thus George does not learn about John Ashley’s arrest and sentencing for Breckenridge Lansing’s murder until months after Ashley’s escape. After becoming an actor in California, George returns to Coaltown on Christmas, 1905. Meeting with Miss Doubkov, he confesses to her that he had secretly returned home the day after he had ostensibly left, murdering his father because he believed that his father was abusing his mother and because he had overheard that his father was planning to kill John Ashley that day out of jealousy. John Ashley is a positive role model father-figure to George, in contrast to George’s real father, Breckenridge Lansing. As George’s mother says, Ashley “had been a very good friend to George when he needed one” (371). After George’s confession, Olga reads to George the Old Slavonic Prayer of Contrition, gives him money and arranges a plan whereby he can escape

through Canada to Russia, and has him sign a written confession which she will give to the police after she has heard that he has arrived in Russia. George successfully escapes, becoming a famous actor in Russia, while Olga also fulfills her hope of returning to her native country, although both disappear at the time of the 1917 Revolution (418-21).

While multiple avatars of Athene help John Ashley in his Odysseus-like wanderings through the Americas, as Athene helped Odysseus in his wanderings through the Mediterranean Sea, it is a single female sage, Olga, who educates George Lansing and helps him to escape, just as Athene, in the disguise of Mentos, helps Telemachus, the son of Odysseus, in his maturation, his journey, and his escape from the murderous suitors in the *Odyssey*, Books 1-4. Because there are many avatars of Athene in this novel, Wilder develops only one of them, Mrs. Wickersham, in depth. While the other representatives of Athene help Ashley in his flight, Mrs. Wickersham not only facilitates Ashley's escape from the bounty hunter, but also comments on human failures and weaknesses, criticizing Ashley for not being honest with her and for concealing his dangerous situation. The numerous avatars of Pallas Athene provide guidance, and Mrs. Wickersham educates orphans, but these representatives of Athene do not directly address issues of joy and suffering. Olga Doubkov, however, is the female sage in this novel who most directly addresses sadness and suffering.

Olga passes on her wisdom through emphasizing great literature, as do Chrysis in *The Woman of Andros* and Cytheris in *The Ides of March*, in this case by using the Russian classics such as Pushkin.<sup>30</sup> Like Mrs. Wickersham in reference to John Ashley,

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<sup>30</sup> Wilder's annotations to the novel indicate that he has placed allusions to Pushkin in the text. For example, the evocation of the seasons in several sections deliberately echo

Olga also guides George Lansing in his escape, but, in contrast to Mrs. Wickersham, she directly addresses sadness and suffering, offering the possibility of meaning through finding one's career and via the possibility of religious experience and forgiveness. Mrs. Wickersham channels Athene as a guide for wanderers and exiles. While Olga serves as an Athene-like figure to George's Telemachus, she directly invokes not the Greek goddess, but the Russian conception of the "Mother of God" as a source of consolation "to us who are wanderers and exiles" (419). By teaching the literature and the love of a foreign language and by emphasizing a "Mother," Olga's influence on George parallels Isabella Wilder's impact on her son, Thornton.

Highlighting the patterns in *The Eighth Day*, Wilder devotes the last page of this book to the concept of a design in the tapestry. "History is *one* tapestry," he writes, explicating this image in the final paragraph:

There is much talk of a design in the arras. Some are certain they see it.  
Some see what they have been told to see. . . . Some find strength in the  
conviction that there is nothing to see. Some (435).<sup>31</sup>

The paragraph concludes with this single word, "Some," without any punctuation marks.

Commenting on this image of the tapestry and on Pallas Athene in a reply to a reader a few months later, Wilder not only illustrates his thinking on the modern relevance of the ancient gods, but also indicates his overall approach to the female sage and other figures from the classics, linking them to the progression of humanity and to

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"those wonderful 'seasonal' introductions to several of the books of *Eugene Onegin*" (TW Papers, Box 103, Folder 2434, p. 97).

<sup>31</sup> Finding a design in the tapestry as indicating the search for the meaning of life derives from Maugham's "pattern of a Persian carpet" in *Of Human Bondage* (223) and Henry James' "complex image in a Persian carpet," from the novella, "The Figure in the Carpet" (586). In his annotations to the novel, Wilder also compared this paragraph to "the works of Gertrude Stein." (TW Papers, Box 103, Folder 2434, p. 455).

the evolution of the literary tradition. To a reader who had expressed difficulty in understanding *The Eighth Day*, Wilder wrote the following on March 16, 1968:

Yes, many people have been non-plussed by the book.

But the main simple idea is not hard to see: it's about evolution—  
Man evolving and individuals evolving (and back sliding!) . . .

Either God made Man in His own image or Man made the gods out  
of some aspiring extension of his own image of himself . . .

Notice: these Man-projected gods are both or either terrifying or  
benign . . . but they also evolve . . . notice the recurrence of Pallas Athene,  
friend of godman, who gave civilization the image of what a noble city—  
or city-state—could be.

Notice: the women pass through (or are arrested in one or another  
of) the successive phases: Artemis—Aphrodite—Hera to Athene, (if  
they're lucky).

That is the design in the Tapestry. Sez I. (Tappan Wilder,  
“Afterword” 464-65).

The designs in this Tapestry, according to Wilder, thus emphasize powerful  
ancient female goddesses, especially the recurrence of Pallas Athene; Wilder cites no  
ancient male gods in this passage. The many avatars of Athene are guides to John Ashley,  
but not full sages in the sense of spreading wisdom about the joys and sufferings of the  
world. Somewhat resembling Athene in her role in the education of George Lansing,  
Olga Sergeievna Doubkov is the most developed female sage in the novel, addressing  
sadness and suffering, supporting and fully accepting her young protégé, eliciting his  
confession and the possibility of forgiveness, and, in her love for languages and literature,  
echoing the importance of Wilder's own mother as his first female sage.

### **Myra Granberry as a Sage in Training in *Theophilus North***

The major sage in Wilder's last novel, *Theophilus North* (1973), is Wilder himself, in the persona of Theophilus (Theodore Theophilus was the name of Wilder's twin brother who died at birth), an idealized version of himself as a young man who not only solves numerous problems encountered by individuals from different social classes of Newport, RI, but also transforms an invalid woman who hates reading, Myra Granberry, into an inspiring figure powerfully motivated to carry on the tradition of female sages by her interest in reading, especially in reading about the resourceful female characters in Shakespeare and modern literature. It is of note that the real Theophilus died at birth, Emily Webb dies during childbirth, and Myra is pregnant when Theophilus North meets her.

As demonstrated by Judith P. Hallett, *Theophilus North* is a re-writing of Homer's *Iliad* as applied to America in the years soon after World War I ("Re-envisioning" 464-65). Like Wilder, Theophilus was born in Wisconsin and, at the novel's opening, has just resigned from his teaching post at a private preparatory school in order to become a writer. He arrives at Newport, where Wilder had been stationed in the U.S. Army Coast Artillery during the war. The author equates Newport with Troy by having Theophilus compare the nine historical layers of Newport to "ancient Troy—those nine cities one on top of the other" (14).

In order to support himself while he is writing, Theophilus advertises that he is available to tutor individuals for school and college examinations in English, French, German, Latin, and Algebra, and to read aloud in these languages and in Italian. Through these activities, Theophilus comes into contact with men and women of various ages from the entire spectrum of Newport's social classes, using his readings and erudition and



his Odyssean wives to transform their lives for the better. He even impregnates a woman, Alice, who wants a baby “more than anything in the world” in order to improve her relationship with her husband, George, who seems to be infertile. That chapter ends with Theophilus comparing himself to Odysseus as an absentee father: “Of course, all those twenty years [of Odysseus’ absence] Penelope had Telemachus growing up beside her” (261-72). Theophilus is a Homeric hero, although more often Iliadic than Odyssean. The narrator’s words, as cited by Judith Hallett, serve to underscore the novel’s identification with the *Iliad* and Theophilus’s identification with the hero of the epic: “Persons . . . are offered and must accept the choice of Achilles: a brief but buoyant life as against a bland and uneventful one” (8).

Among the clients whom Theophilus changes from a bland life to one with the possibility of fulfillment is Myra Granberry, a woman six months’ pregnant, basically ignored by her wealthy husband, and who seems to be an invalid following an injury in her early twenties. Although she hates reading, especially Shakespeare and the poets, Myra agrees to listen to Theophilus, who introduces her to Shakespeare, Jane Austen, Edith Wharton, and Henry Fielding’s novel, *Tom Jones*. Becoming enraptured by such characters as Rosalind and Viola, especially when Shakespeare’s females are dressed as males, Myra is able to confront her husband by enacting a staged reading of *The Merchant of Venice*, with Myra as Portia and her husband as Shylock. While the other readers rely on the written script, Myra has memorized her lines.

Myra’s first assertive actions are to touch her husband’s shoulder after he has read Shylock’s line, “On what compulsion must I? Tell me that!” She then proceeds to “tell him that!” by reciting “gravely, earnestly, from some realm of maturity that had long

been absent from his life” the “Quality of Mercy” speech.<sup>32</sup> The speech and Myra’s actions constitute an invitation to her husband to change his attitudes and behavior toward her, to treat her as an adult, to recognize that basic human qualities are superior to his wealth, egotism, and, as Portia states, even superior to “the force of temporal power.” Confused, her husband leaves the room. On his next visit, Theophilus meets Myra who has disguised herself as her fictitious twin brother (as noted, echoing the real Theophilus, who was Thornton’s twin), wearing male clothing and asking Theophilus to drive her to confront her husband’s mistress. When Theophilus states that she must immediately change out of male clothing, Myra defends her attire by retorting: “Shakespeare’s girls did it.” This allusion to Shakespearean females who wear men’s clothing is also a signal that Myra is in the process of becoming a female sage: as noted earlier, Wilder first applied the phrase — “she was like one of Shakespeare’s girls” — to his mother, his great source of inspiration and encouragement concerning literature.

With her growth catalyzed through Shakespeare’s female characters and Theophilus’s reading, Myra is now becoming more independent. Through her actions, her husband also achieves insight into his own personality. Displaying the influence of the “Quality of Mercy” speech with its praise of the benefits for both the bestower and the recipient of mercy, Mr. Granberry asks forgiveness of Myra, so that a new mutually satisfying relationship seems in store (219-20). Myra is an incipient, not an actual female sage, not yet providing guidance to the joys and sorrows of the world, and having inspired only her husband to date. Her identification with “Shakespeare’s girls” and thus with Wilder’s first sage, his mother, suggests, however, that she will become a figure of

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<sup>32</sup> *The Merchant of Venice*, 4.1.181-202. In *The Eighth Day*, Eustacia Lansing uses the same “Quality of Mercy” speech in order to influence her son George.

inspiration to others based on her new assertiveness, her love of reading, and her likely impact on the education of her expected child.

The distinction between experienced female sages and those just beginning to become sages is complex. Wilder's last novel, for example, serves to transfer the role of sage onto Myra Granberry, a young woman who shares some of his own biographical features. Although the narrator in *The Woman of Andros* had emphasized the importance of an older woman for a young man, Wilder later modifies this position. Commenting on Søren Kierkegaard's "In Vino Veritas," Wilder writes in a journal entry dated February 26, 1950:

I see that I may have been wrong in that phrase of *The Woman of Andros*—on which I used rather to pride myself . . . "Perhaps the maturity of a civilization can be judged by . . . observing whether the young men first fall in love with women older and younger than themselves . . ." *Une femme mûre* [A mature woman] can civilize; she cannot irradiate, cannot provoke a man to invest her with that overwhelming ideality, which, in turn, both renders him creative and endows him with "*la conscience de l'immortalité*." (Or perhaps she can only do this for him, if his love is not gratified physically—which S. K. [Søren Kierkegaard] implies, and perhaps Goethe illustrates) (*Journals* 62).

Although Wilder seems to focus on sexual initiation in this journal entry, he immediately expands the scope to intellectual inspiration and guidance by providing the example of the thirteen-year old Beatrice influencing Dante, a relationship to which Wilder had already alluded in *The Cabala*.<sup>33</sup>

Emily Webb and Myra Granberry are Wilder's prime examples of the younger female sage, as Wilder progresses from reliance on his mother, Isabella Wilder, to the

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<sup>33</sup> See Chapter Two, "An American Successor to Vergil: *The Cabala*."

hope of transmitting wisdom to future generations. Having matured into their roles, Chrysis, Dolly Levi, Cytheris, Mrs. Wickersham, and Olga Doubkov are certainly able to guide numerous characters through their wisdom and example, summoning them into a richer life. The young Emily Webb, however, might appear to be a female sage manqué: her hopes never come to fruition since she dies in childbirth at an early age. Her wisdom, nevertheless, manifests itself to the audience after her death in the graveyard scene, an episode that constitutes the summit of the *lacrimae rerum* motif. Myra is an incipient sage. Wilder provides her with elements of biography similar to his own — Myra and Thornton Wilder were born in Wisconsin, for example, and the narrator emphasizes Myra's birthplace and her identifications as a "Badger" numerous times. In his last work, Thornton Wilder has passed on the torch of literature and the attributes of the female sage to Myra. His engagement with the figure of the female sage, embodying wisdom and guidance on the sorrows and joys of humanity, has evolved from Wilder's personal experiences with his mother as his first teacher and inspiration, into fictional expression, through multiple characters who enlighten others while providing harmony and greater appreciation of life, culminating in Myra, who is poised to carry the torch of literature and the spirit of independence to a new generation.

For Wilder, the classical tradition remains central to modern literature and life; this legacy must not be worshipped as static, but engaged with, in a continually evolving process. This tradition unites the literature of the Greeks and Romans and ancient mythology to medieval, early modern, and modern writers, such as William Shakespeare, Madame de Sévigné, Emily Dickinson, and Thornton Wilder himself. Great writers are full participants in an on-going process, modifying our understanding of the female sage

and the ancient gods, while expanding and reinterpreting the significance of classical motifs. Sappho, women more learned than the Sapphic muse, heroines of Latin comedy like Cleostrata and Chrysis, elegant courtesans from the Platonic *Dialogues*, and avatars of the goddess Pallas Athene, with contributions from early modern and modern literature, constitute the sources for the development of the female sage in Wilder's oeuvre.

#### **Chapter Four: The Torch Race of Literature and *The Skin of Our Teeth***

Exemplifying the value of ongoing human struggle for progress, no matter what disasters have occurred, Thornton Wilder's drama, *The Skin of Our Teeth* (1942), continues his engagement with classical as well as, medieval, early modern, and modern texts, achieving the Americanization of these influences. Not merely citing or alluding to the ancient works, Wilder wrestles with the motifs and characters from his multiple sources, using these texts to develop his own vision in reference to American historical and literary experiences, grounded in the details of what he sees as typical American everyday life. Wilder captures the resulting intertextuality and intratextuality in the metaphor of the "torch race of literature," that is, a relay race involving cooperation, rather than competition. Borrowing from the critic and poet Clive James, I argue that the torch race also takes place in a type of literary echo chamber, where Wilder passes the torch and his words not to a single recipient or in one direction only, but continually back-and-forth, to his contemporaries and then again to himself. As demonstrated by *The Skin of Our Teeth*, for Wilder intertextuality is constitutive of his methods, essential for his narrative and his technique, multi-sourced, thoroughly re-worked, and fundamentally presented within an American context.

Previewing in New Haven, Connecticut on October 15, 1942 and debuting on Broadway on November 18, 1942, *The Skin of Our Teeth* presents the Antrobuses as an American family living through much of Western human history and legend, from the Garden of Eden to the Ice Age, Noah's flood, the Great Depression, and the devastations of world war. Consisting of the father George, his wife Maggie, son Henry (the family

called him Cain until he killed his brother), daughter Gladys, and maid Lily Sabina, the Antrobus household emerges through every catastrophe ready to rebuild once again. The Antrobuses encapsulate the qualities of being American that Wilder identifies in his 1950 Norton Lectures at Harvard University on “the American Characteristics of Classical American Literature.” For Wilder, an American is “a nomad in relation to place, disattached in relation to time, lonely in relation to society, and insubmissive to circumstance, destiny, or God . . . still engaged in inventing what it is to be an American” (Wilder, “American Language” 12).

### **The Torch Race and the Echo Chamber of Literature**

While *The Skin of Our Teeth* represents a high point of inter- and intratextuality for Wilder, it also occasioned the articulation of his theories on the interconnectedness of literature, due to attacks on the play as representing unacknowledged borrowings from James Joyce. The December 19, 1942 issue of *The Saturday Review of Literature* carried an article by Joseph Campbell, Professor of Literature at Sarah Lawrence College, and Henry Morton Robinson, a senior editor at *Reader's Digest*: “The Skin of Whose Teeth? The Strange Case of Mr. Wilder's New Play and *Finnegans Wake*.” This essay, which generated major controversy and a substantial increase in sales for the *Saturday Review of Literature*, begins: “While thousands cheer, no one has yet pointed out that . . . *The Skin of Our Teeth* is not an entirely original creation, but an Americanized re-creation, thinly disguised, of James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*” (3-4).

A dramatic work of fiction, not a scholarly review with footnotes for all the sources, *The Skin of Our Teeth* did not explicitly delineate its precursors at the time of production. Wilder had occasionally listed acknowledgment of sources for a drama in a

playbill, but at other times he placed such recognition in a preface to the later, printed editions. Although Wilder did not at that time publicly respond to Campbell and Robinson, in the 1957 “Preface” to *Three Plays: Our Town; The Skin of Our Teeth; The Matchmaker*, he clearly states that *The Skin of Our Teeth* is “deeply indebted to James Joyce,” [and] “I should be very happy if . . . some author should feel similarly indebted to any work of mine,” adding: “Literature has always more resembled a torch race than a furious dispute among heirs” (Wilder, “Preface” xiv).

Crafting the image of “the torch race” to pay homage to his predecessors, Wilder emphasizes that literature, instead of having to be ruthlessly competitive, is fundamentally collaborative. A torch race is a relay race involving the cooperation of various people, rather than an individually agonistic race, sprint, or marathon. The first draft of Wilder’s preface occurs as a private journal entry, Number 742, dated 2 June 1957: “To those who love literature and who follow it closely as a tradition and a craft, it presents itself in the image of a torch race, rather than as a jealous and airless patent office. I hope that in turn others will find occasion to acknowledge an indebtedness to me” (Niven 641-42). The choice of the metaphor of collaborative race, in contrast to a “furious dispute among heirs,” is partly based on the teenage Wilder’s athletic prowess: Thornton Wilder had competed in track as a high school athlete, participating in running meets (Tappan Wilder, interview). Among the mementoes he had preserved is a red ribbon for second place finish in the 75-yard dash as a sixteen-year-old (TW Papers, Yale, Box 127, Folder 2918).

While Wilder’s metaphor of a torch race has personal associations, its main source is that of classical Greek and Latin literature. Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* trilogy (458



BCE), for example, a subject for Wilder's lectures at the University of Chicago as well as the basis for a large proportion of his essay, "Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*," starts and ends with torches. This ancient Greek trilogy begins with lighting of torches in order to signal Clytemnestra that Agamemnon is on his way back from Troy so that she can prepare to murder her husband on his return. The plays conclude with a triumphal torch-lit procession, where the torches now mark the transformation of the persecutory Furies into the peaceful Eumenides. The "torch race" thus alludes to light in darkness, celebratory processions, the Athenian torch race in honor of Athena (the *lampadedromy*, instituted 566 BCE), and perhaps the torch relay process that begins the Olympic games.

In the context of Wilder's "Preface," I would like to suggest a Latin allusion that might help explain Wilder's choice of the metaphor of a torch race — a line from Lucretius. Wilder was familiar with the writings of Lucretius, having mentioned reading him in a letter he wrote as a teenager to his father in 1912 (Wheatley, *Amos Wilder* 10-11). Wilder's Julius Caesar also cites Lucretius in *The Ides of March* (1948: 39). In *De Rerum Natura*, 2.79, Lucretius writes:

*et quasi cursores vitae lampada tradunt*

and like runners, they pass on the torches of life.<sup>1</sup>

According to Marvin Ferguson Smith, Lucretius appears to have taken the metaphor of a torch race from the Athenian relay torch race, especially as alluded to by Plato in *Laws*, *Book Six*, 776b (100-01).

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<sup>1</sup> The immediately preceding lines in Lucretius mention that the races or species increase (*augescunt alia gentes*) and then decrease (*aliae minuuntur*, 2.77). These lines are often interpreted as referring to different biological species becoming prominent and then disappearing, since *gentes* is the plural of *gens*, which can mean "a natural kind" or "a class or set" (*Oxford Latin Dictionary* 759.5). The first *OLD* definition of the word *gens*, however, is "a race, nation, people" (*OLD* 759.1).

In his earlier work, the *Republic*, Plato demonstrates the high value Athenians and philosophers placed on the torch race, thus preparing the way for utilizing this event for metaphorical purposes. A torch race is part of the narrative framework of the *Republic*, where in the opening pages Polemarchus uses the possibility of a torch race to induce Socrates to stay in the area of the Piraeus. Shorey's translation of the first sentence of the *Republic* reads: "I went down yesterday to the Piraeus with Glaucon, the son of Ariston, to pay my devotions to the goddess, and also because I wished to see how they would conduct the festival, since this was its inauguration" (*Rep.* 327a). While it might at first glance seem a minor detail, the introduction of a torch race at a festival at the beginning of the *Republic* is significant, since Plato particularly crafted the wording of his opening paragraphs, polishing them numerous times.<sup>2</sup>

Plato uses the torch race as a metaphor for dialogue in which the speakers pass their ideas to each other, influencing one another. After Polemarchus announces that "there is to be a torchlight race this evening on horseback in honor of the goddess," Socrates responds, "On horseback . . . That is a new idea. Will they carry torches and pass them along to one another as they race with the horses, or how do you mean?" "That is the way of it," Polemarchus answers. Glaucon, Socrates' companion, and then Socrates, agree to stay (327b-328b). By deciding to remain for the torch race (although the *Republic* does not recount that Socrates actually watched the race), Socrates has set up the framework to engage his interlocutors. Through this carefully crafted opening

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<sup>2</sup> Commenting on the opening of the *Republic*, Dionysius of Halicarnassus reports that after Plato's death a tablet was found containing many subtle variations of the opening of the *Republic*, and that Plato "did not stop combing and curling his dialogues and braiding them in all ways (κτενίζων καὶ βοστρυχίζων καὶ πάντα τρόπον ἀναπλέχων, *ktenizōn kai bostruchizōn kai panta tropon anaplechōn*), not even at the age of 80" (Smith 100-01).

narrative, Plato has utilized the idea of riders passing their torches back and forth in the torch race as a metaphor for dialogue.

The Platonic torch race in *Laws* and Lucretius' intertextual reference to this passage describe the transmission of values by ordinary people as well as the influence of great literature on stimulating future writings. The *Laws*, a dialogue left unfinished at Plato's death in 347 BCE, clearly involves people, not different kinds of biological species, as in some interpretations of Lucretius' passing of the torch. In the *Laws*, the main character, called the Athenian, says that a married pair should be "handing on life, like a torch, from one generation to another" (καθάπερ λαμπάδα τὸν βίον παραδιδόντας ἄλλοις ἐξ ἄλλων, *kathaper lampada ton bion paradidontas allois ex allōn*) (Plato, *Laws* 776b). Lucretius' phrase, *vitai lampada*, "the torches of life," repeats Plato's combination of torches (*lampada*), and life (*bion* in Greek, *vitai* in Latin). Lucretius' allusion to Plato includes Plato's words concerning everyday people in *Laws* 776b and the dialogue of ideas in the *Republic*, and Wilder's metaphor of the "torch race" of literature captures all of these elements. It can be said of great writers and of an Everyman such as George Antrobus that they, "like runners (*quasi cursores*), pass on (*tradunt*, from *trado*, the root of the English word, "tradition") the torches of life (*vitai lampada*)."

In the spirit of expanding metaphors, I would like to couple the image of "the torch race" with that of a literary "echo chamber." Christopher Wheatley has added nuance to the torch race metaphor: if literature is a torch race, "it is a torch race that does not move in a linear fashion, but in an ever expanding circle" ("Humanist" 9). While this image of an ever-expanding circle is apt, the torch race also takes place in an echo chamber, to use Clive James's metaphor for the literary canon or pantheon: "The

pantheon is not a burial chamber for people who have said things, it is an echo chamber for things that have been said” (80-91).

While the modern image of a news media echo chamber connotes uncritical uniformity and unwarranted magnification, the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* defines “echo chamber” as “an enclosed space for reverberation of sound” (453). In a literary context, the basic metaphor of an “echo chamber” primarily applies to hearing and examining a work in juxtaposition to other writings and to oral performances.<sup>3</sup> In the sense applicable to Wilder’s work, a literary echo chamber is a mechanism for reverberating, amplifying, and preserving writings and sounds by multiple authors, so that an individual can, more distinctly, hear others as well as herself or himself. An 1851 article in *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* adds the nuance that an echo chamber also allows foreign phrases to be examined in an English language and Western cultural context. Discussing a translation of the Middle High German epic, *The Lay of the Niebelungen*, this magazine article states that the translator, W. N. Lettsom, has “put us into the condition of that strange old Teutonic lyre prolonged through the aisles of an English echo-chamber” (56).

### **Torch Race and Echo Chamber in *The Skin of Our Teeth***

Neither mutually exclusive concepts nor ideas with rigid boundaries, the metaphors of the torch race and the echo chamber are instead heuristic guides, pragmatic

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<sup>3</sup> A trendy, but narrow, usage of the term “echo chamber” applies it to news media. The “media echo chamber” is “a colloquial term used to describe a group of media outlets that tend to parrot each other’s uncritical reports on the views of a single source, or that otherwise relies on unquestioning repetition of official sources” (SourceWatch, “Echo Chamber”).

tools to help elucidate Wilder's reception and transformation of his sources.<sup>4</sup> The metaphor of the torch race, for example, is useful in understanding a direct progression from one or a few authors to Wilder's re-creation. The anointing of Samuele as an American successor to Vergil at the conclusion of *The Cabala*, for example, can be seen as the passing of a torch from the spirit of Creusa in Vergil's *Aeneid*, through Wilder's Vergil, to Samuele and Wilder himself. For Wilder, the passing of the torch from classical times often included intermediary texts. As earlier chapters argue, Wilder integrates early modern and modern sources that were themselves based on the classics into his reception of the Greek and Latin originals. Dante, *e.g.*, strongly influences Wilder's Vergil, Molière contributes to Wilder's use of Plautus, and Gertrude Stein and modern commentators such as Walter Savage Landor shape Wilder's use of Plato. In contrast, the concept of the echo chamber seems most helpful in tracing complex interactions through multiple influences and various cultures, and those instances when Wilder reexamines and modifies a dramatic technique he had earlier used. Intratextuality meets intertextuality through an inclusion of elements from Wilder's previous writings, such as *a Stage Manager*, and the utilization of metatheatricality.<sup>5</sup> Instances of the literaryecho chamber include the biblical, Homeric, classical Greek and Latin, gnostic, Shakespearean, and American associations of the name "George Antrobus, and the flood

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<sup>4</sup> Scholars have suggested other metaphors to capture Wilder's multiple allusions and numerous influences, including "a mosaic of allusions" (Brunauer 269-82) and "theatrical ragoût" (Lifton, "Ragoût" 283-95). While these terms pay tribute to Wilder's extensive range of sources, they do not capture the interactions among the influences.

<sup>5</sup> "Metatheatricality" is the technique whereby a play comments on itself and its production, including calling attention to the presence of the audience and to the actors *qua* actors.

scene of Act II of *The Skin of Our Teeth*, where biblical, medieval English, and modern texts predominate, with lesser direct classical impact.

A prime example of the appropriateness of the echo chamber metaphor occurs in Wilder's portrayal of Homer and Moses; here we have an echo chamber resounding with contemporary social issues and the oral component of popular songs, as well as biblical texts and ancient Greek epic and mythology. Wilder introduces Moses and Homer as beggars, "typical elderly out-of-works from the streets of New York today" (*Skin* 156). The echo chamber allows American popular songs, including "Jingle Bells" and "Tenting Tonight," a song Wilder also utilized in an earlier play, to reverberate next to the *Iliad* of Homer, so that Wilder depicts Homer as carrying, instead of a lyre, a modern, popular musical instrument, a guitar. Just prior to reciting the beginning lines of the *Iliad* in archaic Greek, Homer strikes a chord or two on his guitar. The second word he speaks is the imperative, ᾄειδε (*aeide*, "sing!") (*Skin* 157). When Mr. Antrobus starts to despair in Act I, his wife tries to restore his spirits by asking Sabina to sing. Sabina starts with "Jingle Bells," after which the guests in the home sing "Tenting Tonight" as a group. These guests include Homer, Moses, and several of the Muses, "old women" whom Mrs. Antrobus had earlier described sarcastically as a "singing troupe!" (*Skin* 155). The refrain to "Tenting Tonight" is a plea by soldiers for consolation from the effects of war. The juxtaposition of Homer, Moses, and the Muses with the popular American songs adds to the resonance of these songs. In addition to expressing the hope for relief from war, the songs in this context also pay tribute to Homer, Moses, and the Muses for their ability to provide consolation during times of disaster.

Wilder initiates his pattern of contribution and modifications to the torch race of literature from the start of his 1942 play, beginning with the title of the drama, *The Skin of Our Teeth*, a phrase with Biblical resonances, now reinterpreted through use of the personal pronoun “our.” Reprising the title, the opening monologue by the maid Lily Sabina states: “Don’t forget that a few years ago we came through the depression by the skin of our teeth!” (126).<sup>6</sup> The use of “we” is significant: unlike other mythic survivors of disaster, such as Odysseus who returns alone to Ithaca, since all his companions have perished, George Antrobus brings his family and, in a sense, humanity along with him. The title alludes to a line in the *Book of Job*, where Job reaffirms his faith, despite seemingly being deserted by God and by his friends; in the *King James Version* (1604-11), Job states, “my bone cleaveth to my skin and to my flesh, and I am escaped with the skin of my teeth” (*Job* 19.20). The title of the play thus refers to the sense of having barely survived disaster.

While the Hebrew *Bible*, the Greek *Septuagint*, the Latin *Vulgate*, and the English translations familiar to Wilder differ in their emphases, they all have Job speak in the first person singular. In contrast, Wilder uses the first person plural: “**we** came through . . . by the skin of **our** teeth!” The original Hebrew (Hebrew Interlinear Bible) reads:

19:20	בְּעוֹרִי	וּבְבָשָׁרִי	דָּבָקָה	עֲצָמִי	וְאֶתְחַלֵּטָהּ	בְּעוֹרִי
	b·our·i	u·b·bshr·i	dbqe	otzm·i	u·athmlt·e	b·our
	in·skin-of·me	and·in·flesh-of·me	she-clings	bone-of·me	and·I-am-“escaping	in·skin-of
	שִׁנִּי	:				
	shn·i	:				
	teeth-of·me					

The Greek *Septuagint* translation made by Jewish scholars in Alexandria (late-third to

<sup>6</sup> All citations to *The Skin of Our Teeth* are to the 1957 edition in *Three Plays*.

mid-second centuries BCE) states: ἐν δέρματί μου ἐσάπησαν αἱ σάρκες μου, τὰ δὲ ὀστᾶ μου ἐν ὁδοῦσιν ἔχεται, *en dermati mou esapēsan hai sarkes mou, ta de osta mou en odousin echetai* (Elpenor/greek-texts/septuagint, *Job* 19:20). My literal translation of this passage reads: “My (*mou*, first-person singular pronoun) flesh became rotten within my (*mou*, first-person singular pronoun) skin, and my (*mou*, first-person singular pronoun) bones are held in by the teeth.” The Latin *Vulgate* of Jerome (late fourth century CE), translated directly from the Hebrew, not from the Greek *Septuagint*, presents us with: *PELLI MEAE CONSUMPTIS CARNIBUS ADHESIT OS MEUM ET DERELICTA SUNT TANTUMMODO LABIA CIRCA DENTES MEOS* (*Vulgate, Job* 19:20). My literal translation is: “My (*meum*) bone has stuck to my (*meae*) skin, the flesh having been devoured, and only the lips have been left around my (*meos*) teeth.” The words *meum*, *meae*, and *meos* are all first-person singular possessive pronouns. As pointed out by Lincoln Konkle, Wilder’s use of the first-person plural pronoun “Our” in the titles *Our Town* and *The Skin of Our Teeth* extends the significance of these works from a small town or a single family to a broader world and the human family (*Puritan* 160).

Wilder’s literaryecho chamber for *The Skin of Our Teeth* contains the repetition, amplification, and interaction of classical, biblical, and modern sources, so that a character, theme, dramatic device, or even a name can reverberate with all these influences, as exemplified, for example, by “Antrobus.” With “Antrobus” as the last name of the protagonist, *The Skin of Our Teeth* signals that this production reflects multicultural and multilingual concerns within Western civilization and its Judeo-Christian background. The “echo chamber” metaphor can help the reader or audience member hear simultaneously the Homeric, classical, biblical, and mythological



prototypes of Mr. “Antrobus,” while concomitantly understanding “George” as the deliberate Americanization of these influences. “Antrobus” connotes humankind without gender distinctions (Greek *anthrōpos*), males (Greek *andra*, *andros*), the biblical first man (*anthrōpos* = *Adam*) as well as the use of this term in other passages in the Hebrew scriptures, New Testament references to the “Son of Man,” written in Greek as the “son of *anthrōpos*,” Gnostic texts, Cave Man (Latin *antro* < *antrum*, “cave”), Odysseus as wanderer and hero (*andra* as the first word of the *Odyssey*), Odysseus as survivor of the cave (*antrum*) of the Cyclops, and everyone (Latin *-bus* from *omnibus*). “George” alludes to the first American president and to various Wilder characters in American settings.

The Greek linguistic basis for “Antrobus” reflects humanity as a whole. As pointed out by Donald Haberman, “The family name Antrobus is really the Greek word *anthropos* human being or man, thinly disguised” (*Plays* 82). We should add that the name “Antrobus” is over-determined, with multiple etymologies. While the Greek noun, ἄνθρωπος, *anthrōpos* can mean “man, a male,” it primarily refers to humanity in the sense of any human person, regardless of sex (Liddell-Scott-Jones 141-42). Although many English translations of the Oedipus myth, for example, use the gender-specific word “man” as the answer to the riddle of the Sphinx, Sophocles’ Theban plays provides neither the content nor the wording of the Sphinx’s riddle nor Oedipus’ answer. Apollodorus (first- or second-century CE) writes that Oedipus found the solution to the riddle, answering *anthrōpon*, i.e., the accusative case of *anthrōpos* (348-49). The solution to the riddle is thus “humanity,” not the gender-specific “man.” Writing about the riddle of the Sphinx in his 1939 essay, “Sophocles’s *Oedipus Rex*,” Wilder states that the “answer itself is mankind.” In *The Skin of Our Teeth*, however, Wilder’s language

becomes more inclusive, with Sabina using the term, “the human race” (*Skin* 168). Of additional note is Wilder’s own comment on the difficulty and the appeal of Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* and other classics: “It is our duty to insist on rediscovering it and wrestling with it” (“Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*” 84-87). Through the figure of Mr. Antrobus as a representative of humanity, Wilder addresses the riddle of the Sphinx, rediscovering and wrestling with the significance of ancient Greek literature.

The family name “Antrobus” also alludes to the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, since *Anthrōpos* is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew noun, אָדָם, “Adam,” a word that means “human, mankind, man” (Strong’s Concordance “Adam”). The Greek Septuagint often translates the Hebrew word “Adam” as *anthrōpos* (humanity), not as *anēr*, the Greek word for someone specifically male. For example, in *Genesis* 1.27, the Hebrew has *u • ibra aleim ath – e • adm* [And Elohim is creating Adam/humanity], while the Septuagint reads Καὶ ἐποίησεν ὁ Θεὸς τὸν ἄνθρωπον, *Kai epoiēsen ho theos ton anthrōpon* [and God created humanity (*anthrōpos*)].

Having engaged throughout his life in dialogue with one of the most distinguished New Testament scholars of his time, his brother, the Rev. Amos N. Wilder, Ph.D., and having studied the Bible at Oberlin College, Thornton Wilder was broadly familiar with contemporary biblical scholarship on the word *anthrōpos*, especially in reference to the phrase “the Son of Man,” literally, “the son of Anthrōpos,” ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου, *ho huios tou anthrōpou*.<sup>7</sup> Jesus, for example, refers to himself as the son of man (*anthrōpos*) eighty-one times in the Gospels. Amos Wilder also refers to scholarship in comparative

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<sup>7</sup> Amos Wilder examines the phrase “Son of Man” numerous times in his theological writings, e.g., in *Eschatology and Ethics in the Teachings of Jesus* (95-99), as well as publishing a poem titled “The Son of Man” (75-77).

religion and biblical studies that expand the range of the meanings of *anthrōpos*. He cites, for example, Carl H. Kraeling, a member of his Yale University doctoral dissertation committee, specifically mentioning Kraeling's 1927 book, *Anthropos and Son of Man: A Study in the Religious Syncretism of the Hellenistic Orient* (A. Wilder, "New Testament" 61). The figure of the *Anthropos*, Kraeling argues, eventually became incorporated into creation accounts as the divine element of human nature, understood at times as Soul, Spirit, and Reason (38-54, 74-127, and 187-90).<sup>8</sup>

The family name "Antro-bus" further derives from the Greek words *andra* and *andros*, grammatical forms of *άνήρ*, *anēr* [male, man, husband], reinforcing the identification of George Antrobus as an Odysseus-like figure. Homer's *Odyssey* begins with this word, *andra*, "the man":

*andra mou ennepe, Mousa, polutropon*

Tell me, Muse, of the man (*andra*) of many devices/turns/ways/deceits  
(*polutropon*). (*Od.* 1.1).

With his struggles, devices, turns, ways, and wanderings, Mr. Antrobus is certainly *polutropos*, the standard Homeric epithet for Odysseus.

"Antrobus" additionally suggests *antro*, the dative and ablative singular for the Latin term for cave, *antrum*, cognate to the Greek *άντρον* [cave]. George Antrobus, encapsulating the prehistory of mankind, is thus "Cave Man." As Sabina comments in her opening monologue, being a cave man co-exists with Mr. Antrobus' American identity:

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<sup>8</sup> Kraeling's point of departure is the use of "*the anthropos*," *ὁ άνθρωπος*, in Gnostic literature written in Greek. *Anthropos* is prominent in the systems of Valentinus, the Gospel of Mary, the Poimandres, and Coptic Gnostic documents as both a primordial champion and the progenitor of humanity, a person who, in Kraeling's phrase, is "not removed from ideas of bisexuality."

“the author hasn’t made up his silly mind whether we’re all living back in caves or in New Jersey today” (*Skin* 127). *Antro-* further alludes to the cave-home of Polyphemus, where the cannibal Cyclops attacked Odysseus and his crew, eating many of them. Although the French language had long used “antre” for “cave,” Shakespeare was the first English writer to do so (*OED* 377). In his account of how his narrative of adventures inspired Desdemona to love him, Othello speaks of “antres vast,” linking “antre” to escape from cannibals, thus alluding to Odysseus and the Cyclops:

Wherein of antres vast and deserts idle,  
 Rough quarries, rocks, and hills whose heads touch heaven,  
 It was my hint to speak – such was the process:  
 And of the Cannibals that each other eat,  
 The Anthropophagi (*Oth.* 1.3.141-45).

The *Antro-* of Antrobus thus represents Odysseus and the Antrobus family as survivors of catastrophes, reinforcing the identification of George Antrobus as an Odysseus-like survivor through *andra* [the man], the first word and the subject of Homer’s *Odyssey*. In addition, the suffix *-bus* indicates the Latin dative or ablative plural, as in *omnibus*, “for everyone.” Appendix C summarizes the multiple etiologies of the name “Antrobus.”

Expanding the echo effects of the name of the protagonist by integrating classical, biblical, and American references, Wilder gives the hero’s first name as George, recalling the Greek word for farmer (*georgos*), referring to Vergil’s poem, the *Georgics* [*On Farming*], and alluding to the fact that George Antrobus was once a gardener (*Skin* 123). George Antrobus as President of the Ancient and Honorable Order of Mammals, Human Subdivision suggests the American president George Washington and the beginning of the United States. In addition, “George” is the first name of major characters from Wilder’s previous works, an intratextual link to George Brush from *Heaven’s My*

*Destination* and George Gibbs from *Our Town*, and, eventually, to the theme of father-son violence by George Breckenridge from *The Eighth Day*.

While the Greek, Hebrew, and many other citations and allusions underscore the Homeric, biblical, Roman, and Western European background of the story, Mr. Antrobus is unmistakably American. As David Castronovo has noted, *Our Town* and *The Skin of Our Teeth* are about American families “struggling with implacable fate and their own smallness” (99). The key word is “American.” Wilder himself, in the May 1943 notes prepared for his attorneys, differentiating his play from *Finnegans Wake*, emphasized that his play is essentially American: “my play--thoroughly American in color, and emphasizing the endurance and hopeful character of civilization -- follows an entirely different course from the Joyce novel” (Wiggins and Dana Papers, Folder 26142-5).

Wilder’s references in this drama to place names and to popular poems exemplify his efforts for the Americanization of ancient as well as modern motifs, underscoring that the play is “thoroughly American in color.” A single Latin word, *excelsior*, for example, connects its literal meaning with the play’s theme of ongoing human struggle for progress, as well as pointing to what Wilder considers as fundamental American characteristics. The Antrobus family lives in Excelsior, New Jersey. In Latin, *excelsior* is the comparative form of the adjective *excelsus*, “high,” and thus *excelsior* means “higher, more distinguished, ever upward,” a signpost for the American dream and a one-word indication of progress despite adversity or catastrophe. “Excelsior” is also the motto for the state of New York, where *The Skin of Our Teeth* had its official opening. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow had titled a poem in a small early collection, *Ballads and Other Poems*, “Excelsior,” using the word as a refrain in all the stanzas of this sentimental

ballad in which a traveler attempts to cross a pass in the Alps but dies in the attempt (*Poetical Works* 23-24). What is typically American in citing Longfellow, however, derives from the frequent use of his poems in American schools and in home reading in early and mid-twentieth century. In *The Skin of Our Teeth* Gladys Antrobus comforts her father by saying that she had recited in school that day a Longfellow poem, identified as “THE STAR.” Wilder alludes to additional Longfellow poems in *The Eighth Day* and *Theophilus North*.

Indicating that George Antrobus represents the Americanization of the classical and biblical allusions underlying his name, Wilder describes the protagonist as displaying the traits he finds characteristic of the early European settlers to America: independence, refusal to submit to circumstance, and engagement in self-invention (“American Language” 10-13). Possessing American ingenuity, Mr. Antrobus has invented, among other things, the wheel, the alphabet, beer, the lever, and the multiplication tables. As Donald Haberman has noted, “Antrobus is eternally extricating himself from his ‘ambience’ or reinterpreting it or literally changing it. When the American confronts an ice age, he will invent a more efficient way to heat his house” (*Plays* 121). Mr. Antrobus is also a leader in representative American activities, such as belonging to a lodge, running for elective office in his organization, and enjoying the boardwalk attractions and the Atlantic City beauty pageant. The Announcer provides the details of Antrobus’s home in a typical American setting of the 1940s: “conveniently situated near a public school, a Methodist church, and a firehouse, it is right handy to an A. and P” (*Skin* 123). Lincoln Konkle has also argued that the speeches of George Antrobus, plus many portions of the entire play, represent “American jeremiads,” a New England term for the characteristic

Puritan sermons with illustrative episodes (*Puritan* 155-65). As summarized by Rex Burbank in reference to *The Skin of Our Teeth*, the “main characters are Americans who, like the people of *Our Town*, have hidden in their daily lives the key to the destiny of the human race” (106).

The beginning of the play not only embeds the Antrobus family within global concerns, but also, through Wilder’s early and repeated use of phrase “the skin of our teeth,” situates the actors and actresses in a context of metatheatricity, a prominent means by which he engages with classical, biblical, and other literary motifs. After a slide show of a glacier moving southward, the screen projection continues with an illustration of a modest suburban house in Excelsior, New Jersey and pictures of George, Maggie, Henry, and Gladys Antrobus, and Sabina. Only now does the curtain rise, showing Sabina with a feather duster, while the walls of the house are leaning precariously. Sabina’s opening words, the first words spoken by any character on stage, are: “Oh, oh, oh! Six o’clock and the master not home yet! Pray God nothing serious has happened to him crossing the Hudson River.” Addressing the issue of survival while a portion of a wall starts to disappear, Sabina states: “we came through the depression by the skin of our teeth, — that’s true! — one more tight squeeze like that and where will we be?” (*Skin* 126). Not only does this line recapitulate the title and major theme of the drama, but it also emphasizes the play’s metatheatricity. Sabina’s sentence is a cue line, the signal for another character to appear on stage. Sabina repeats the line, with no effect on the emergence of the other character. After an off-stage voice tells her, “Make up something! Invent something!” Sabina expresses her frustration, stating that she hates “this play and every word in it,” and although she cannot “understand a single word,” she can conclude

that the play is “all about the troubles the human race has gone through.” The Stage Manager intervenes, summoning Miss Somerset, the fictional actress playing Sabina, back to her role as the maid. Sabina then repeats, for the third time, “We came through the depression by the skin of our teeth, — that’s true! — one more tight squeeze like that and where will we be?” This time the cue works, and Mrs. Antrobus emerges on the stage (*Skin* 126-27).

By means a literary echo chamber which includes contemporary social conditions as well as the creation account in *Genesis*, the Cain-Abel narrative, ancient Greek epic, and metatheatricity from modern drama, Wilder is able to pay tribute to Homer and Moses for their literary and law-giving accomplishments, as well as to initiate the motif of the creation of light, a concept that becomes crucial near the conclusion of the drama. After George Antrobus arrives home, two refugees come to the window, and despite protestations by Sabina and Maggie, Mr. Antrobus invites Moses and Homer into the house. The stage directions state that “JUDGE MOSES wears a skull cap. HOMER is a blind beggar with a guitar.” Accompanying them is a crowd containing three or four of the Muses. Homer recites the first three lines of the *Iliad* in archaic Greek, and Moses speaks the first lines of *Genesis*, the beginning of creation, in ancient Hebrew (*Gen.* 1.1-2). Welcoming the refugees, the Antrobuses provide sandwiches. When Moses asks Mrs. Antrobus about her children, stating that he thought she had two sons, he inadvertently causes Mrs. Antrobus to begin this lament, “Abel, Abel, my son, my son, Abel, my son, Abel, Abel, my son” (*Skin* 160). After the refugees move towards Mrs. Antrobus, murmuring words in Greek, Hebrew, and German, Sabina interrupts with a report that Henry has thrown a stone at the boy next door, and it looks to her that he may have killed



the boy. Starting to despair, Mr. Antrobus orders that the fire be put out, but his wife restores his spirits by asking Sabina to sing. Sabina begins with “Jingle Bells,” after which the guests sing “Tenting Tonight,” then resume “Jingle Bells.” As a result of the singing, Mr. Antrobus, feeling restored, decides to rebuild the fire and thereby save the lives of those assembled on stage. Sabina returns with wood, while Mrs. Antrobus tells the story of the beginning of creation from the Bible, repeating in English the same lines (*Gen.* 1.1-2) that Moses had recited earlier in Hebrew. In asking the audience’s help to build up the fire again, Sabina portrays the lives not only of those on stage but also of all humanity as at risk, commanding, “Pass up your chairs, everybody. Save the human race” (*Skin* 168).<sup>9</sup>

Continuing the intertextual references to biblical writings and American life, Act II weaves the Antrobus family dynamics into both the account of the Deluge in *Genesis* and manifestations of American popular culture as epitomized by Atlantic City with its prototypical American activities, including fraternal lodge meetings, boardwalk attractions, and beauty contests.<sup>10</sup> Projected slides depict the anniversary convention of

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<sup>9</sup> Sabina’s appeal to the audience to participate in saving lives recalls J. M. Barrie’s *Peter Pan, or The Boy Who Wouldn’t Grow Up* (first performance, 1904), where Peter urges the audience to clap to save the life of the fairy, Tinker Bell. Wilder often writes of the lasting impact of Barrie’s plays, telling an interviewer, for example: “After my sophomore year at college I worked on a farm and used to declaim to the cows in the stanchions the judge’s speech from Barrie’s *The Legend of Leonora*.” (Parmenter 24). In addition to praising Barrie in letters to his sister Isabel, in 1917 Wilder wrote to his mother that “the only author [other than George Moore] who engrossed me this way is Barrie. And always will” (R. Wilder and Bryer 94). While a teacher at the Lawrenceville School, Wilder also joined several other teachers plus faculty spouses in performing Barrie’s *The New World* (Niven, *Life* 162).

<sup>10</sup> Although Wilder’s deluge in Act II appears to be based on biblical sources rather than on the classical accounts in Hesiod, Ovid, and Apollodorus, the association of Atlantic City with a world deluge perhaps hints at the mythical narrative of Atlantis in Plato’s

the Ancient and Honorable Order of Mammals, with delegations from other concurrent Orders: the WINGS, the FINS, the SHELLS. Having been chosen president of the Ancient and Honorable Order of Mammals, Human Subdivision, Mr. Antrobus appears on screen to give a welcoming speech, announcing that the Ice Age is over, but that the dinosaurs have become extinct. The Announcer broadcasts that President Antrobus has judged the Beauty Contest, awarding “the title of Miss Atlantic City 1942 to Miss Lily-Sabina Fairweather” (*Skin* 175). The curtain now rises, revealing the Atlantic City Boardwalk. Sabina brags that she will steal President Antrobus away from his wife, while the Fortune Teller prophesies a great deluge, with only a handful saved from total destruction. At first deciding to leave his wife for Sabina, Mr. Antrobus finally realizes that the world faces destruction from the Deluge. He reconciles with his wife, who successfully completes a search for her son by shouting out, “Henry! Cain! CAIN!” George then directs his family, Sabina, and the pairs of animals, who had been gathered together for their various conventions, onto a large boat. The Fortune Teller ends Act II with these words, while looking out to sea at the escaping boat: “They’re safe. George Antrobus! Think it over! A new world to make.—think it over!” (*Skin* 214).

George’s journey by boat in order, in the words of The Fortune Teller, to make “a new world,” recapitulates the final sentence and a major motif of *The Cabala*. After bidding farewell to Virgil, Samuele narrates: “The shimmering ghost faded before the stars, and the engines beneath me pounded eagerly toward the new world and the last and greatest of cities” (*Cabala* 134). While Samuele will create an American literature in the new world by integrating classical learning into his writings, Mr. Antrobus will help

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*Timaeus* and *Critias*, with their accounts of multiple world deluges and the destruction of Atlantis.

create a new world by integrating his experiences with biblical, Homeric, and prehistoric prototypes.

The creation account in *Genesis*, metatheatrical influences from Greek and Roman comedies, and Wilder's earlier one-act plays constitute elements of the echo chamber giving rise to Act III, with its motifs of war and father-son violence, and the biblical creation of light. The act begins in almost total darkness, disclosing the walls of Antrobus home as severely damaged by the war. Sabina, "dressed as a Napoleonic camp-follower," is the first character to enter the stage. Announcing that the war is over, she looks for Mrs. Antrobus and Gladys. The Stage Manager, Mr. Fitzpatrick, interrupts the play in order to reassign to the theatre staff the roles of the regular actors who have become ill from possible food poisoning. When the curtain rises again, Mrs. Antrobus and Gladys emerge from the cellar where they had been hiding. Gladys now has a baby (*Skin* 223).<sup>11</sup> Sabina extracts some books that have been hidden for safety. Henry, a general during the war, returns to the home, followed a short time later by Mr. Antrobus, who has led an army on the opposing side. The two men argue vehemently. When Henry advances toward his father to assault him, Sabina jumps between them, saying, "Stop! Stop! Don't play this scene. You know what happened last night. Stop the play." As the men fall back, Sabina says to Henry, "Last night you almost strangled him. You became a

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<sup>11</sup> The play does not identify the father of the baby, and when Sabina asks, "Where on earth did you get it?" she immediately adds, "Oh, I won't ask." Sabina had prefaced her question by exclaiming, "Goodness! Are there any babies left in the world?" Wilder often balances death or destruction with new births, as in Emily's death during childbirth in *Our Town*, and the emergence of baby carriages from the birth portal soon after adults exit through the death portal in the one-act play, *The Long Christmas Dinner* (see Konkle, *Puritan* 144).

regular savage. Stop it!” (*Skin* 237).<sup>12</sup> Talking of his emptiness and his experience of being hated and blocked, Henry ceases his attack against his father, who acknowledges his own contribution to the estrangement. “It’s not wholly his fault,” Mr. Antrobus exclaims, “that he wants to strangle me in this scene. It’s my fault too . . . there’s an emptiness in me . . . work . . . that’s all I do. I’ve ceased to live” (*Skin* 239).

Reprising the motif of ongoing human struggle for progress by “the skin of our teeth,” no matter what disasters have occurred, Wilder now transposes this motif onto a personal, individual level. Despairing, Mr. Antrobus says “Maggie! I’ve lost it. I’ve lost it. . . . The desire to begin again, to start building.” Mr. Antrobus, however, is saved by literature, the tradition exemplified by Wilder’s image of the torch race. Discovering that his books have survived the war, Mr. Antrobus revives. With a book in his hand, Mr. Antrobus says, “All I ask is the chance to build new worlds and God has always given us that. And has given us.” His words are interrupted by a stage direction, *Opening the book* (italics in original), but then he continues with “voices to guide us; and the memory of our mistakes to warn us” (*Skin* 245). Wilder’s stage direction associates the “voices to guide us” with words preserved in books, a dramatic enactment of the relay torch race of literature in which writings remain alive, affecting modern listeners, readers and writers.

The next scene illustrates both the living impact of the literary tradition, and, in a subtle way, the importance of the modern writer in assimilating and changing what he has received, so that Wilder not merely repeats themes, but, after his own modifications, also

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<sup>12</sup> This stepping out of stage roles to comment on the action derives from the ancient Greek comedy of Aristophanes and the Roman plays of Plautus. See, for example, Aristophanes: *Birds* 444-47, *Assemblywomen* (*Ecclesiazusae*) 577-85, and *Peace* 50-53; and Plautus: *Amphitruo* 64-68, *Aulularia* 713-30, and *Casina* 1012-18. The prologues of Terence also address the audience, as in *Andria* 4-27 and *Phormio* 1-34.

carries forward the torch race of literature. George Antrobus recalls that while musing to himself during the war he had given the names of philosophers to the hours of the night. The hours represent Spinoza (9 o'clock), Plato (10 o'clock), Aristotle (11 o'clock) and the Bible (12 o'clock). The theater staff had earlier mentioned that the planets, in addition to the hours, were also supposed to be on stage, but they must now be imagined instead, since the actors who were to play the planets are too sick to participate. The planets are to be imagined as singing (*Skin* 218-22 and 245-47). Although Wilder had used a similar device of the hours and planets in his 1931 one-act play, *Pullman Car Hiawatha*, Wilder quotes different philosophers in the two plays, although Plato occurs as 10 o'clock in both.<sup>13</sup> The passage Plato delivers in *The Skin of Our Teeth*, however, is not an actual quotation from the philosopher but is Wilder's own invention, as he acknowledged, composed to appear as if it came from the unfinished dialogue *Critias*. In addition, the Aristotelian quotation is Wilder's re-working, not a direct quotation, of a section from the *Metaphysics* (McClatchy 847-48).

The account of the creation in *Genesis* and references to Shakespeare echo across each other in the chamber giving rise to the penultimate speech of the play, indicating that while the creation of light includes physical and theological aspects, it also refers to the light of the literary tradition, manifested by the reappearance of light that allows the play to continue. Following the procession of the hours, Mr. Tremayne, George Antrobus' dresser, "himself a distinguished Shakespearean for many years," gives the last quotation from literature, the biblical account of creation of the world, reciting *Genesis*

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<sup>13</sup> Many of the passages recited by the hours and planets in both plays are based on excerpts from Robert Bridges' 1915 anthology, *The Spirit of Man: An Anthology in English and French from the Philosophers and Poets*, compiled during World War One as a response to the massive psychological and social effects of the war.

1.1-2, the same passage that Moses recited in Hebrew in Book I, and that Mrs. Antrobus said near the end of Act I, but now adding verse 1.3. After “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth; and the earth was waste and void; and the darkness was upon the face of the deep,” Mr. Tremayne continues: “And the Lord said let there be light and there was light” (*Skin* 247). With these words, the stage goes dark. Suddenly the lights go up, enacting on stage what was just said aloud, the creation of light. Wilder gives this recitation of the creation of light to the “distinguished Shakespearean.” Even before Mr. Antrobus appears on stage in person in Act I, he sends a telegram to his wife about how to stay warm during the approaching Ice Age, instructing her to “burn everything except Shakespeare,” calling attention to the significance of the English playwright (*Skin* 136). The reappearance of light now allows the production of this drama to continue, and, in a broader context, the light from the torch race of literature, with Shakespeare as a prime example, continues to pass from writer to writer.

Wilder’s use of quotations from the original ancient Greek and Hebrew emphasize the intertextuality of the drama, with the Hebrew passage having special relevance to this scene. Earlier in the play Homer recites the first three lines of *The Iliad* in Greek, and Moses proclaims the beginning of *Genesis* in Hebrew. While the Greek and Hebrew texts are in Wilder’s definitive 1957 edition, the director, Elia Kazan, eliminated these speeches from the original 1942 New York production. Wilder deliberately chose these texts in the original languages for their impact. Prior to the production Wilder stated in a memo: “I earnestly hope you retain the speeches in Greek and Hebrew even if it is bold and may puzzle a portion of the audience, for those who get it, it will be a value so deep-reaching that it will be worth the risk” (Haberman 72). Of special note is the fact

that the passage that Moses recites in Hebrew in Act I ends just prior to the creation of light. The words of the “distinguished Shakespearean,” Mr. Tremayne, complete the passage in English. This literaryecho chamber reverberates with *Genesis*, Shakespeare, and the use of metatheatricity, ringing back and forth, fortifying each with their reflected interactions. Even for those who are unable to “get it,” and very few of us would have noted that the Hebrew quotation does not include the creation of light, the Greek and Hebrew passages signal that the drama is addressing issues found in the Homeric epics and the Hebrew Bible.

The concluding words of the drama reaffirm the ongoing human struggle for progress by “the skin of our teeth” through addressing the audience directly. As light returns, the stage reveals Sabina, who worries that, as at the beginning of Act I, Mr. Antrobus is not yet home. Sabina then addresses the audience for the conclusion:

This is where you came in. We have to go on for ages and ages yet.

You go home.

The end of this play isn’t written yet.

Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus! Their heads are full of plans and they’re as confident as the first day they began,—and they told me to tell you: good night” (*Skin* 247).

Not only will the tradition of human struggle and ingenuity go on, but the literary tradition will also continue. “The end of this play isn’t written yet,” as Sabina says. The torch of literature will pass to future writers.

The literary echo chamber for *The Skin of Our Teeth* includes not only classical, biblical, and mythological themes, as well as modern works, but also Wilder’s summation, recapitulation, and self-quotation of his own earlier work. Intratextuality has joined intertextuality as a hallmark of this drama, an intratextuality encompassing

multiple dramatic techniques as well as motifs. In *The Skin of Our Teeth* these techniques include speeches directly addressing the audience, the role of the stage manager, and the singing of popular songs. The development of these techniques from Wilder's earlier examples is at least partly related to his juxtaposing his previous practice with instances of metatheatricality in Greek and Roman comedy and in modern drama.

Characters stepping out of their stage roles, pervasive from the start of Act I, constitute major examples of metatheatricality, demonstrating the passing of the torch from ancient Greek and Roman comedies to Wilder, with contributions from modern drama. Since the plot is both the story of the Antrobus family and the story of the theater company putting on the drama, numerous characters step out of their stage roles during the play, including Sabina, Mr. Antrobus, and the Stage Manager (Mr. Fitzpatrick). The use of metatheatricality links this play to *Our Town*, to Wilder's earlier one-act plays where he first gave prominence to the role of the Stage Manager, and to the classical Greek and Latin comic playwrights who influenced Wilder: Aristophanes, Plautus, and Terence. In a major soliloquy, Sabina directly addresses the audience at the end of Act I, inviting those present to help "save the human race" by passing chairs on stage to build up the fire. In earlier works, Dolly Levi had made her grand soliloquy to the audience in Act IV of *The Merchant of Yonkers*, and Barnaby had ended that comedy by directly speaking to the audience. In a later play, *The Alcestiad*, both Apollo and Death declaim their soliloquies to the listeners. Although Wilder utilized this technique many times in other plays, the plea for help in Sabina's address to the audience underlines the intertextuality of *The Skin of Our Teeth* with modern drama, such as *Peter Pan*. The



literary echo chamber, with its reverberations from classic authors and earlier works by Wilder, can convey the concepts of both inter- and intratextuality.

Ancient Greek drama, Roman comedy, the plays of Luigi Pirandello (1867-1936), and Wilder's own writings constitute the background for the development of the roles of the Stage Manager in *The Skin of Our Teeth*. While critics have proposed numerous sources and influences for the Stage Manager, including Chinese theater, Pirandello's theatrics, and a Puritan religious sensibility focused on an all-knowing God, the formal characteristics of Wilder's Stage Manager, such as commenting on the action, derive from the chorus and *choregos* (chorus leader) of ancient Greek drama. Two major precursors for the Stage Manager as director of the plot derive from characters in the comedies of Plautus: Cleostrata, the Roman matron in *Casina*, and the clever slave Pseudolus in the play of the same name function partly as Stage Managers, and are both called *poetae* ("poets" or "playwrights") within the texts. I discuss Wilder's first mention of the Stage Manager in print, which occurs indirectly by means of a simile, in Chapter Two of this dissertation, "An American Successor to Vergil: *The Cabala*": "As by the click of some invisible stage-manager Miss Grier entered" (*Cabala* 49). The "Manager," a stage manager-figure, occurs in Wilder's three-minute play, "Proserpina and the Devil," which he had written as a teenager, but did not have printed until 1928 ("Proserpina" 13-15).

Prior to *The Skin of Our Teeth*, Wilder had utilized the Stage Manager in the one-act plays *Pullman Car Hiawatha* (1931) and *The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden* (1931), and the Pulitzer Prize-winning three-act drama, *Our Town* (1938). While *The Skin of Our Teeth* has an identified Stage Manager, Mr. Fitzpatrick or "Fitz," the

functions of the stage manager in this play are spread among numerous characters.

Narrating and commenting on the action and on the merits and the confusing aspects of the play itself, Sabina is a stage manager both in her role as the family maid and her persona as Miss Somerset, the actress playing the maid. Esmeralda the Fortune Teller predicts the future, while George Antrobus calls to off-stage actors to re-enter the scene in order to continue the drama (Konkle, *Puritan* 58).

The echo chamber containing popular songs provides a connection to nineteenth and early twentieth century American culture, and to issues of survival and consolation during wartime. Although not provided in the text of *The Skin of Our Teeth*, the lyrics to “Tenting Tonight” are pertinent. Walter Kittredge, a young New Hampshire musician, wrote the song in 1863, after he had been drafted to fight in the Civil War. The refrain is a plea by soldiers for consolation from the effects of war:

We’re tenting tonight on the old camp ground  
Give us a song to cheer  
Our weary hearts, a song of home  
And friends we love so dear.<sup>14</sup>

James Lord Pierpont (1822-1893), who was born in Massachusetts but later moved to Georgia, composed “Jingle Bells” in 1857; the song became a major hit only after Edison recorded it in 1898. In reference to the songs in *The Skin of Our Teeth*, Donald Haberman has commented that “These songs, like the hymns in *Our Town*, are part of the childhood of the audience. The response to the songs, therefore, is automatically an emotional one.

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<sup>14</sup> Cornelius and Barnaby sing the same lyric, “Tenting Tonight,” in Act II of *The Matchmaker*, when Mrs. Molloy and Minnie demand that the young men sing if they want the women to go out with them. After the men begin singing, Irene and Minnie join in, and “the four of them now repeat the refrain, softly harmonizing” (*Matchmaker* 337-38).

The singing colors whatever happens on stage” (72). Wilder’s handwritten annotations in a presentation copy of the first edition of *The Eighth Day*, which he gave to Otto Klemperer in 1967, comments on several popular songs mentioned in that novel, stating that those songs were often sung by his father at home (TW Papers, Box 103, Folder 2434). The popular songs in *The Skin of Our Teeth*, *The Matchmaker*, and *The Eighth Day* are not only sources of comfort and family solidarity, but are also refrains that echo throughout many of Wilder’s works. The dramatic utilization of popular songs illustrates Wilder’s Americanization of the classics. Going beyond the traditional literary canon, Wilder’s intertextual effects allude to everyday life, including the consolations for common stresses and the details of American family and social experience.

The Antrobus family’s escape from a world deluge provides another major example of Wilder’s intertextuality as an echo chamber, wherein sources from biblical, medieval, and modern literature intersect with one another, so that the ark and the animals derive from the *Hebrew Bible*, but without the sense of the flood being a punishment for sin, while Wilder integrates passages from several medieval English mystery plays with a modern French retelling of the Noah story.<sup>15</sup> The family dynamics between George and Maggie Antrobus in reference to the flood reverse the relationship between Noah and his wife in medieval English mystery plays, and the interactions between George and his son Henry echo Noah’s confrontation with a son as depicted through the writings of the French dramatist, André Obey (1892-1975). The Joyce

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<sup>15</sup> Although Wilder utilizes neither the biblical nor the Roman mythological explanation of the deluge as a punishment for human sin, he has Mr. Antrobus associate the Ice Age in Act I with a possible cosmic response to human violence. When Henry assaults a neighbor boy with a stone, Mr. Antrobus exclaims, “No wonder the sun grows cold” (*Skin* 162).

scholar Adaline Glasheen argues that *The Skin of Our Teeth* is a variation on the medieval English Mystery plays, especially the Chester cycle. Wilder had himself drawn attention to the stories concerning Adam, Eve, Cain, Abel, Lilith, and Noah, as influencing both him and Joyce (R. Wilder and Bryer 413). As Glasheen writes, Wilder's play "and the Mysteries both retell stories from Biblical history and . . . both are works in which the man in the street acts high and sacred roles; both modernize their ancient source, both adapt ancient history to their local habitation—Wakefield, Excelsior, N. J.; both add to Hebrew history the comedy and highjinks of Durham or Excelsior (the highjinks include stage disasters and interplay between actors and audience)" (xvii-xix).

Glasheen's comment that Wilder has created "works in which the man in the street acts high and sacred roles" captures an essential element of Wilder's Americanization of the classics — the bestowal of almost "sacred" significance on everyday people and their experiences. In contrast to the Greek tragedies that typically depict aristocratic families, Wilder privileges and valorizes everyday experience as a key to human meaning. In this manner, his approach is similar to that of his friend, Arthur Miller (1915-2005), who wrote in 1949: "I believe that the common man is as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were." Miller concludes this essay in the *New York Times Book Review* section: "It is time, I think, that we who are without kings, took up this bright thread of our history and followed it to the only place it can possibly lead in our time — the heart and spirit of the average man" ("Tragedy").<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Marino (90-98) delineates a strong impact on Miller by Wilder, who would critique early drafts of Miller's plays, often going to Miller's home after a new Miller play would open, to discuss the drama. The changes from Miller's 1955 one-act version of *A View from the Bridge* to the 1956 two-act play, for example, show Wilder's influence through the expanded portrayal of the town and society, and through emphasizing Carbone's

Wilder's reception of the Chester mystery cycle is complex, involving variants of the original, multiple sources from several distinct cultures, and the addition of his own creative elements. While the Chester version of the mystery plays does feature conflict between Noah and his wife, comedic overtones, and a very prominent procession of the animals into the Ark, the Wakefield revision of the Noah play emphasizes the comedy and the tension between Noah and his wife even further, ultimately providing reconciliation between the two parents (Happé 97-132). In reference to Noah's wife, both Mystery plays are heavily misogynistic, in contrast to Wilder's more sympathetic presentation of Mrs. Antrobus. In the English Mystery plays, Noah's wife, who is not given her own name but is simply called *Noe uxor* [Noah's wife], opposes the building of the Ark and its embarkation, while Maggie Antrobus is the prime mover of George's use of the ship for survival. In addition, neither *Genesis* nor the English mystery plays feature a physical confrontation between Noah and his sons. André Obey, however, whose 1931 drama, *Le viol de Lucrèce* [*The Rape of Lucrece*] Wilder had translated for a Broadway production in 1932, had also written *Noah*, a play about the deluge. In Obey's version Noah and his son Ham fight physically, as do the three sons among themselves (61-67). The physical confrontation between Mr. Antrobus and his son Henry echoes the fight between Obey's Noah and his son Ham. All these sources, *Genesis*, the Chester cycle of mystery plays, the Wakefield cycle, and Obey's *Noah* reverberate and echo, contributing to Wilder's dramatization of the Antrobus family and the flood.

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universal destiny. In addition, Susan Abbotson (189-206) discusses Miller's debt to Wilder in his 1980 play, *The American Clock*, through its episodic structure, jokes and songs, and nonrealistic elements.

### **Sabina as Exemplar of the Literary Echo Chamber**

A detailed examination of Lily Sabina in *The Skin of Our Teeth* elucidates her development in a literary echo chamber, as demonstrated by the influence of Latin and Greek historical sources, with contributions from Roman elegists such as Propertius, the Hebrew legend of Lilith, and modern writers, such as George Bernard Shaw and Stephen Vincent Benét. This complex background contrasts with the published charges that Sabina primarily represents “unacknowledged borrowing” from James Joyce; Wilder’s Sabina does not derive just from one text, but constitutes a rich amalgamation from many sources. Although Joseph Campbell and Henry Morton Robinson do not use the word “plagiarism” in their original *Saturday Review* essay or in the immediate follow-up article, “The Skin of Whose Teeth? The Intention Behind the Deed,” they strongly imply it (16-19). Campbell and Robinson did use the term, however, in a formal protest to the Pulitzer Prize Committee when it awarded Wilder’s play the 1943 Pulitzer for drama: “We protest . . . against the conferring of literary honors on Major Wilder until he has cleared himself of charges of possible plagiarism” (TW Papers, Box 89, Folder 2245). These critics argue, for example, that *The Skin of Our Teeth* takes its circular form from the Joyce work, with Mr. Antrobus being analogous to H. C. Earwicker. Campbell and Robinson also claim that Wilder’s Sabina is primarily based on the housekeeper for the Earwicker family. They write in their 1942 *Saturday Review* article:

[Sabina’s] prototype is the garrulous housekeeper of “Finnegans Wake.” “He raped her home,” says Joyce. “Sabrine asthore, in a parakeet’s cage, by dredgerous lands and devious delts” (p. 197). To this delicious Joycean line Mr. Wilder is apparently indebted for his rape theme and the name of the Antrobus housekeeper (“Skin of Whose Teeth?” 3).

Although Wilder was definitely influenced by James Joyce, Wilder's Sabina derives from multiple sources. Wilder published "James Joyce 1882-1941," in the magazine *Poetry*, summarizing Joyce's writings ("James Joyce" 370-74). Wilder would also devote over twenty years to the study of *Finnegans Wake*, beginning shortly after its publication in March 1939, making numerous annotations on his copy of Joyce's last novel. Appendix D reproduces Wilder's copy of the page in *Finnegans Wake* containing the "Sabrine asthore" passage, with the American playwright's abundant scholia, demonstrating the depth of his scholarly commitment to Joyce (TW Papers, Box 133, Folder 3050). Next to Joyce's phrase in line 21 concerning Sabrine—he raped her home—Wilder adds "to Rome," indicating that the major origin for Joyce's Sabrine, just as for Wilder's Sabina, is the legend of the Rape of the Sabine Women. Wilder corresponded from 1950 through 1975 with the Joyce scholar Adaline Glasheen, discussing passages in *Finnegans Wake* (Burns, ed., *Tour*). In addition, from 1951 through 1953, Wilder organized informal discussion groups on *Finnegans Wake* for Yale Ph.D. students in the Department of English. Professor Harold Bloom, a Yale graduate student at that time, has communicated to me that he attended two such extended seminars at Wilder's home in Hamden, Connecticut. Bloom writes:

We worked our way through all of the *Wake* and then went back again. Everything possible was covered by Wilder including Classical influences and all the other elements that are blended into the *Wake*. Homer necessarily was the center but much was done with Hesiod, Aristophanes, and the Athenian tragedians. Virgil, Horace, and particularly Lucretius were the principal Latin writers before the advent of Dante. It is important though that Shakespeare dominated our discussions as he does the *Wake* (E-mail correspondence 27 July 2105).

Wilder approached Joyce in parallel to the way he composed *The Skin of Our Teeth* — integrating elements from Homer, the Greek tragedians and poets, Lucretius, other Roman poets, and Shakespeare, among others.

Whatever Wilder's debt to Joyce for the character of Sabina, both Mr. Wilder and James Joyce in this instance are certainly indebted to the same classical sources of the legend of the Rape of The Sabine Women, and the European reception of this legend in art and literature. The first mention of the rape of Sabina in *The Skin of Our Teeth*, for example, calls attention to Roman history and geography by using the term "Sabine hills," the location of the historic Sabines. Scolding Sabina early in the play for letting the fire go out during a time of dangerously freezing weather, Maggie Antrobus adds: "I know you. When Mr. Antrobus raped you home from your Sabine hills, he did it to insult me." Sabina counters that she was the one to encourage Mr. Antrobus to make the alphabet (*Skin* 131). Numerous Latin and Greek authors as well as Renaissance and Baroque painters had depicted the abduction (the meaning of *raptus* in Latin) of the Sabine Women and the eventual reconciliation. Both Joyce and Wilder were certainly familiar with the account by Livy (*Ab urbe condita* 1.9-1.13), as well those by Cicero (*De re publica* 2.12-14), Ovid (*Fasti* 3.167-258 and *Ars amatoria* 1.101-34), Vergil in the ekphrasis of the Shield of Aeneas (*Aeneid* 8.635-38), and Plutarch (*Life of Romulus* 14-20), among others. Livy narrates the traditional legend concerning Romulus and the early years of Rome, an inherent part of the Roman political mystique, and, in the words of the classical historian T. P. Wiseman, "the most famous of Roman myths" (*Myths* 204).

Addressing the charge that his character of Sabina derives from Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* since both were "raped home," Wilder writes the following in the May



18, 1943 unpublished document given to his attorney:

Plenty of ridicule could be heaped on C--l and R--n for their charge that my "Sabina raped home" is stolen from Joyce's "He raped her home Sabine ashore." I was indicating that the servant-girl is the modern vestige of the Second Wife, and that in primitive societies wives were captured. "The Rape of the Sabine Women" is a proverbial expression and used a thousand times in modern literature (Wiggins and Dana Papers).

The legendary and linguistic background of the "Rape of the Sabine Women" reinforces Wilder's claim that Sabina in *The Skin of Our Teeth* is not primarily dependent on Joyce's Sabrine. The archaic Roman episode is traditionally dated to *circa* 750 BCE. Needing men to defend the newly-built walls around the city of Rome, Romulus had established an *asylum*, a sacred refuge for anyone who came there, with no questions asked. Seeking women for these men, Romulus asked nearby communities for women to be given to these men in *connubium*, lawful marriage. Having been contemptuously rejected, the Roman king held a festival of games and shows called the *Consualia*, inviting the neighboring peoples. The entire Sabine population, men, wives, and children, attended. When a pre-arranged signal had been given, the Roman youths rushed in different directions for the purpose of carrying off the unmarried women (*signato dato iuventus Romana ad rapiendas virgines discurrit*, Livy 1.9.10). The phrase *ad rapiendas virgines*, "for the purpose of carrying off the unmarried women," is a purpose construction using the gerundive, the gerundive of purpose. The form *rapiendas* is the feminine accusative plural (sharing gender, number and case with *virgines*) of the verb *rapio*, -ere, -ui, *raptum*, whose primary meaning is "to seize and carry off, snatch away" (OLD 1573, def. 1). Additional meanings include "to sack, plunder," "to carry off (and violate), ravish," "to possess oneself of by constraint," "to impel," and "to grasp eagerly"

(OLD 1573-74). Although it is often translated by the English word “rape,” the basic meaning of *rapio* in Livy’s context is “to seize and carry off.” Livy uses another form of this verb in the next sentence: *Magna pars forte in quem quaeque inciderat raptae* [a great number (of the women) were carried off (*raptae*) by those into whose hands they happened to fall by chance] (Livy 1.9.11). The women, according to Livy, moderated their anger and willingly gave their hearts to the husbands. Although later Roman generations might not believe Livy’s rationalization that formal marriage and not sexual rape ensued, the phrase “Abduction” or “Carrying Off of the Sabine Women” might be more accurate than “the Rape of the Sabine Women.” Hansong Dan’s statement in his 2012 book, *To Realize the Universal: Allegorical Narrative in Thornton Wilder’s Plays and Novels*, that “the maid was raped at home by Mr. Antrobus” is inaccurate (160).

Elements of Livy’s and Plutarch’s accounts, not present in *Finnegans Wake*, are prominent in Wilder’s portrayal of Sabina, who, despite mischief-making in some contexts, reflects the peace-making qualities of the Sabine Women. According to Livy, Plutarch, and others, after their young women were seized, the Sabines, led by their king, Titus Tatius, declared war on Rome, and gained the Roman Capitol through the treachery of a Roman woman. In the middle of the final battle, the Sabine Women, with disheveled hair and torn garment (*crinibus passis scissaque veste*) dared to rush into the battlefield despite the flying missiles, in order to part the opposing battle lines and to stop the anger of the combatants, begging their fathers and their husbands not to stain themselves with parricide and the death of relatives. With the ensuing truce, the leaders agreed to unite both nations. Wilder utilizes this legend as told by Livy, Plutarch, and many classical writers, not only in the detail that Sabina was “raped home,” but in the episode of Act III

of *The Skin of Our Teeth* when “suddenly Sabina jumps between” Mr. Antrobus and Henry, preventing Henry’s assault on his father (*Skin* 237). The modern reception of the Rape of the Sabine Women at times emphasizes this peace-making role: e.g., in Jacques-Louis David’s oil painting in the Louvre, *L’intervention des Sabines*.

By including the Latin elegist Sextus Propertius (*circa* 50 – 15 BCE) and a short story by Wilder’s friend and fellow student at Yale University, Stephen Vincent Benét (1898-1943), the literary echo chamber helps incubate the concept of Wilder’s Sabina, who, unlike most accounts of the Sabine Women, is given her own point of view, is humorous and sarcastic, and, at times, becomes an *alter ego* for the playwright. From the standpoint of Sabina, Wilder is among those who prefer Propertius. In contrast to Livy and other Roman and Greek historians who narrate the legend from the focal point of the Roman aggressors, Propertius 2.6 critiques the masculine hegemony of Romulus (and the empire of Augustus) that justifies violence and rape. After complaining of Greek examples of the madness of love leading to jealousy and war, Propertius writes:

*cur exempla petam Graium? tu criminis auctor,  
nutritus duro, Romule, lacte lupae:  
tu rapere intactas docuisti impune Sabinas:  
per te nunc Romae quidlibet audet Amor* (2.6.19-22).

Why should I seek Greek examples? You are the originator of the crime,  
Romulus, having been suckled with the harsh milk of the she-wolf,  
You have taught how to rape the virgin Sabines without punishment;  
Through you Love now dares whatever he pleases at Rome.

The next words of Propertius’ Book 2, Elegy 6 praise Alcestis, identified as *felix Admeti coniunx* [the fortunate spouse of Admetus], and then criticize sexual corruption at Rome. What is significant in reference to Wilder’s Sabina is that Propertius does not share the

point of view of the Roman aggressors, but condemns them for creating an atmosphere where sexual crimes are sanctioned. As noted by Stahl, Propertius even self-identifies with the Sabine women (292).

In this echo chamber, Propertius' view of the Sabine Women reverberates next to Benét's 1937 humorous short story based on the legend of the Sabine Women, called, with a witty change of vowels to emphasize the change of perspective, "The Sobbin' Women." Benét's heroine, humorous, confident, assertive, and inventive, brings about reconciliation between the generations, as does Wilder's Sabina; in the case of "The Sobbin' Women," the reconciliation is between the women's families and the men who have kidnapped the six young women.<sup>17</sup> In their "quiet competition," Wilder and Benét had developed a friendship in which their rivalry brought out the best in each other's writings, as in their competitive spirit while taking Hendry Seidel Canby's advanced course in Literary Composition at Yale (Niven, *Life* 161, 176). In the light of this productive, creative rivalry, "The Sobbin' Women," reinforced by Propertius' *Elegy* 2.6, contributes to Sabina's assertive personality and her sense of humor, as well as being an additional source for Sabina's peace-making role.

Wilder's Sabina is also fundamentally distinct from the housekeeper in *Finnegans Wake* in language, personality, overall importance to the work, influence on plot development, and role as representative of the author. The language Joyce uses to describe the housekeeper, "Sabrine asthore, in a parakeet's cage, by dredgerous lands and devious delts" does not match that of Sabina or of anyone else in *The Skin of Our Teeth*. Although Edmund Wilson identifies Wilder's Lily Sabina and Joyce's

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<sup>17</sup> Benét's short story served as a partial basis for the 1954 musical film, *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*.

Sabrina/Sabrina/Lily Kinsella as manifestations of the Hebrew Lilith, he argues that Wilder's housemaid is of a basically different character than Joyce's Lilith reincarnation. Wilder himself acknowledged the Hebrew legend of Lilith as one of his sources (*Selected Letters* 413). Lilith, a female demon, was Adam's first wife, displaying an independent and often rebellious spirit.<sup>18</sup> In reference to Lilith, Wilder and James Joyce, Wilson states:

[Wilder's] character of Sabina-Lilith seems conventional and even a little philistine in comparison with the corresponding characters both in *Finnegans Wake* and in Bernard Shaw's *Back to Methusaleh*, another work of which *The Skin of Our Teeth*, in certain of its aspects, reminds us. The Lilith of Joyce is Lily Kinsella, who plays the remote and minor role of a woman who is odious to Mrs. Earwicker for having once had designs on Earwicker; but the conception of the Woman as seductress is impossible to identify with any of the individual women [in *Finnegans Wake*] . . . while the Lilith of Wilder is a hussy, parlor-maid, gold-digger, camp-follower (Wilson, "Antrobuses" 542).

The Sabina of *The Skin of Our Teeth* not only represents the integration of various aspects of the narrative of the Sabine Women and the Hebrew legend of Lilith, but also epitomizes the Americanization of these influences, creating contrapuntal resonance. While Sabina partially derives from the seemingly historical accounts of Livy and Plutarch, her assertive presentation of her point of view echoes the poetry of Propertius. The example of the Hebrew Lilith helps provide Sabina's self-assurance and resoluteness,

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<sup>18</sup> Lilith appears at least as early as the *Babylonian Talmud* (third-to-fifth centuries CE), becoming identified with Adam's first wife in the *Alphabet of Ben Sira*, Section 78 (circa 700-1000 CE), then in the *Zohar* and other medieval Jewish mystical writings (Scholem 17-20). Asserting her equality with Adam, Lilith left him because she refused to be subservient and assume the bottom position during intercourse (Jewish Women's Archive, *Alphabet of Ben Sira*).

occasional sarcasm, and her refusal to subordinate herself to men. Wilder combines the peacemaking functions from the legendary accounts of the Sabine Women intervening in the battle between their husbands and their fathers with the peace-making activity, independence, resourcefulness, and sense of humor of the heroine of his friend Benét's story, "The Sobbin' Women." Sabina also manifests a personal trait that Wilder identifies as prototypical of the first settlers in America — being "insubmissive to circumstance, destiny, or God" (Wilder, "American Language" 12). Moreover, as the winner of the Atlantic City beauty pageant, Sabina is "Miss America."

The primary distinction of Wilder's Sabina, however, is that, as the only character in this play to address the audience directly, she is at times an *alter ego* for Wilder. She functions as a source of irony (when she says she does not understand the play), as the proponent of reality testing (when she challenges Mr. Antrobus), and as a stage manager, usually in the persona of Miss Somerset, the fictional actress playing the fictional Sabina. As Miss Somerset, she influences other characters not only through the plot but also by directly speaking to them in their personae as actors playing fictional roles, as when she intervenes in the physical fight between Henry Antrobus and his father. The last words of the play, like the first words when the curtain rises, are Sabina's, directly addressing the audience. Despite, and because of, being ignorant, scheming, selfish, and self-righteous, Sabina is also a peace-maker, who through her questioning stance, irony, and persona as Miss Somerset represents the playwright.

### **The Splendor of Influence**

The metaphor of a torch race serves to distinguish Wilder's intertextuality from an "Anxiety of Influence," the attempt to outdo a literary predecessor. Harold Bloom, who

had attended Wilder's informal seminars on *Finnegans Wake*, published his groundbreaking *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* in 1973, claiming that poets (and by extension novelists and playwrights) become writers by reading and reacting to another author's work. If the new writers produce work that is derivative, they are "weak" poets; if they develop an original poetic vision and thus become "strong" poets, they do so by means of struggling with the anxiety of influence from their precursors through six strategies which Bloom calls "revisionary ratios."<sup>19</sup> These strategies, given Latin- and Greek-based names, consist of swerving away from the precursor (*clinamen*); using completion and antithesis (*tessera*); emptying oneself of the predecessor (*kenosis*); the intrusion of the numinous, *i.e.*, the idea of the Holy (*daemonization*); and self-purgation of the precursor's endowment (*askesis*). There follows, however, a return of the dead (*apophrades*), in which the later writer makes the conscious effort of holding the new work open to that of the precursor (Bloom, *Anxiety*).

Although brilliant and provocative, Bloom's arguments do not apply well to the work of Thornton Wilder, who deliberately assimilated and transformed numerous sources from multiple languages rather than reacting primarily to a single forerunner-rival, and who depended profoundly on female writers and sages. *The Anxiety of Influence* focuses instead on individual poets influencing other individual writers within the same general cultural and linguistic sphere. In respect to influence from a precursor writing in a different language, however, almost forty years after his original book Bloom

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<sup>19</sup> Although Bloom defines and gives examples of the six terms he uses for these "revisionary ratios," the word "ratio" remains unclear: is it a comparison, as in an arithmetical ratio, is it the Latin word *ratio*, denoting "the faculty of reason" but also meaning "calculation," "account," and "motive," or does it contain all of these connotations?

acknowledged that “between languages it [influence] never induces anxiety” (*Anatomy* 235). Bloom’s examples in *The Anxiety of Influence*, moreover, are all male writers; despite his classical erudition, he ignores Sappho and in this book disregards any critical engagement with female poets. The metaphor of a literary echo chamber containing reverberations of many distinct voices from various cultures and languages captures Wilder’s intertextuality more accurately than Bloom’s concept of the anxiety of influence focused on a single major precursor writing in the same language. Instead of primarily being a struggle with his numerous antecedents, Wilder’s *The Skin of Our Teeth* is a grand homage to these precursors. The play’s allusions to Shakespeare, Homer, the Bible, the survival of books despite disasters, and always having “voices to guide us” represent a creative reworking of the sources, not an Anxiety, but the Splendor, of Influence.

Although Wilder demonstrates some of the approaches that Bloom identifies as “revisionary ratios,” these strategies are part of his overall approach to intertextuality, not an engagement in Oedipal rivalry with his precursors. While Wilder certainly swerves (Bloom’s *clinamen*), moving away from his sources, this is because he changes genre, characterization, plot and emphases, *e.g.*, from Terence’s *Andria*, to fit his creative needs. Wilder suggests and depicts the numinous (*daemonization*), *e.g.*, in the role of Apollo in *The Alcestiad*, but the appearance of the Holy in Wilder’s work is not an intrusion, as Bloom describes, but a deliberate choice to address the complexity and ambiguity of human life in relation to an idea of the divine. There is a return of the dead (*apophrades*), as demonstrated, among other passages, by the appearance of Vergil and the words of Creusa’s ghost in *The Cabala*, by Dolly Levi’s monologue in *The Matchmaker*, and in the graveyard scene in *Our Town*. This return of the dead is complex, serving not to come to



terms with a precursor, but to provide wisdom and to express the moral imperative of fully loving everyday life, in all its joys and its sorrows.

Wilder's attitude concerning his literary influences and precursors is suggested by the 1946 introduction he had written to an English translation of *Jacob's Dream*, a drama by the Austrian-Jewish playwright Richard Beer-Hoffmann (1865-1945). Discussing the playwright's use of mythology, Wilder writes:

There are three pitfalls in the way of writers who undertake to retell a myth: they may seek to transpose it into rationalistic and realistic terms; they may seek to make it the vehicle of autobiographic identification; and they may rely solely upon its antiquity and accumulated authority for force, without convincing us that they have wrestled with the basic ideas inherent in the story and found their authority within their own creative vision ("Beer-Hoffmann's *Jaakobs Traum*" 131).

Wilder's choice of the phrase "wrestled with the basic ideas" in relation to mythology recalls his 1939 essay on Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*: in reference to the difficulty of this text, "it is our duty to insist on rediscovering it and wrestling with it" ("Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*" 84-87). For Wilder, "wrestling" with the difficulties of ancient thought constitutes an imperative for the writer. Avoiding the three pitfalls "of writers who undertake to retell a myth" or to re-envision a classical motif, Wilder wrestles, not in rivalry with a precursor, but with the themes and images of traditional mythology and previous literary works, transfiguring all these influences into his own creative vision.

*The Skin of Our Teeth* is representative of Wilder's utilization of biblical, classical, medieval, and modern literature: he passes the torch of literature, not to a single recipient or in one direction only, but sends it back and forth, to his contemporaries and then again to himself, imbuing his reception of literature with an unmistakably American

character. While the title of the play derives from the biblical *Book of Job*, it now becomes “our teeth,” not the “my teeth” of the Hebrew, Septuagint Greek, Latin Vulgate, or English versions. The phrase “the skin of our teeth” also functions metatheatrically, as a cue for actors and actresses. Reflecting Homeric, ancient Greek, Latin, biblical, mythological, and Shakespearean associations, the name of the protagonist, George Antrobus, also indicates the Americanization of these influences. The play links the Antrobus family to ancient prehistory and history, classical Greek literature and mythology, the Hebrew Bible, and American popular music. The maid, Lily Sabina, integrates ancient Roman legend and literature with Hebrew mythology, and with the modern reception of the narrative of the Sabine Women. Wilder also influences himself through that aspect of the torch race that can be compared to a literary echo chamber. Through influences from Aristophanes, Plautus, and Terence, as well as from modern drama, Wilder modifies his previous dramatizations of the Stage Manager. *The Skin of Our Teeth* represents human struggle for progress in the face of natural disasters, war, and family violence. Moreover, *The Skin of Our Teeth* demonstrates, through Wilder’s assimilation of literary and mythological sources, that the tradition of the torch race of literature is essential for this struggle and for human survival.

Developing a complex inter- and intratextuality, Wilder’s writings constitute a specialized, literary echo chamber, analogous to a continual procession of torches, where these writings resound, reverberate, and influence one another. Rather than being a furious disputant, a fierce competitor with other writers, or even a plagiarist, Thornton Wilder fashions himself as part of a living tradition, passing on to other writers and to us the torches of life and of letters, dealing creatively with philosophical and social issues,

and transforming our understanding of ancient Greek and Latin writings and of modern literature in the process.

## Appendix C: The name “Antrobus”

<i>anthrōpos</i>	Greek ἄνθρωπος, “human being” or “mankind”	<p>Answer to the riddle of the Sphinx: <i>anthrōpos</i>, the collective for human being, not specifically branded male or female. Wilder (1939): “The answer [to the riddle] itself is mankind.”</p> <p>Used in the <i>Septuagint</i> (3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE) as translation for Hebrew אָדָם, “Adam.”</p> <p>Jesus uses “Son of Man” [<i>ho huios tou anthrōpou</i>] 81 times in the four gospels.</p> <p>Gnostic writings (1<sup>st</sup> – 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries CE): <i>anthrōpos</i> as primordial champion.</p>
<i>andra</i>	Greek ἄνδρα < <i>anēr</i> , ἀνὴρ, “male, husband”	<p>Beginning of Homer’s <i>Odyssey</i>: <i>andra mou ennepe, Mousa, polutropon</i>: “Tell me, Muse, of the man (<i>andra</i>) of many devices/turns/ways/deceits (<i>polutropon</i>).”</p> <p>George Antrobus is also <i>polutropon</i>.</p>
<i>antro-</i>	<p>Latin dative and ablative case for <i>antrum</i>, “cave.”</p> <p><i>Othello</i>: <i>antre</i></p>	<p>Antrobus is a Cave Man.</p> <p>Allusion to the cave where the Cyclops attacked Odysseus and his crew, eating many of them.</p> <p>“Antrobus” alludes to Odysseus as the survivor of catastrophes.</p> <p>“cave,” with an allusion to cannibals.</p>
<i>-bus</i>	Latin dative or ablative plural,	as in <i>omnibus</i> , “for everyone.”

(1) <sup>18</sup> <sup>19</sup> <sup>20</sup> <sup>21</sup> <sup>22</sup> <sup>23</sup> <sup>24</sup> <sup>25</sup> <sup>26</sup> <sup>27</sup> <sup>28</sup> <sup>29</sup> <sup>30</sup> <sup>31</sup> <sup>32</sup> <sup>33</sup> <sup>34</sup> <sup>35</sup> <sup>36</sup> <sup>37</sup> <sup>38</sup> <sup>39</sup> <sup>40</sup> <sup>41</sup> <sup>42</sup> <sup>43</sup> <sup>44</sup> <sup>45</sup> <sup>46</sup> <sup>47</sup> <sup>48</sup> <sup>49</sup> <sup>50</sup> <sup>51</sup> <sup>52</sup> <sup>53</sup> <sup>54</sup> <sup>55</sup> <sup>56</sup> <sup>57</sup> <sup>58</sup> <sup>59</sup> <sup>60</sup> <sup>61</sup> <sup>62</sup> <sup>63</sup> <sup>64</sup> <sup>65</sup> <sup>66</sup> <sup>67</sup> <sup>68</sup> <sup>69</sup> <sup>70</sup> <sup>71</sup> <sup>72</sup> <sup>73</sup> <sup>74</sup> <sup>75</sup> <sup>76</sup> <sup>77</sup> <sup>78</sup> <sup>79</sup> <sup>80</sup> <sup>81</sup> <sup>82</sup> <sup>83</sup> <sup>84</sup> <sup>85</sup> <sup>86</sup> <sup>87</sup> <sup>88</sup> 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## Chapter Five. Our Tears: *Lacrimae Rerum* in *The Matchmaker*, *The Ides of March*, and *Our Town*

*sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt* [Here are the tears of the world, and human matters touch the heart.] (Vergil: *Aeneid* 1.462).

Inspired by the Latin and Greek literary tradition, Thornton Wilder explores creative human responses to Vergil's *lacrimae rerum*, "the tears of the world," through the characters of Dolly Gallagher Levi in *The Merchant of Yonkers* (1938), revised as *The Matchmaker* (1954), Emily Webb in *Our Town* (1938), and Julius Caesar in *The Ides of March* (1948). Although these three personages, all of whom are in part *alter egos* for Wilder, emphasize observing and loving life with its joys and its sorrows, each demonstrates a different facet of approaching everyday life with wisdom. Julius Caesar not only praises the world despite its sorrows, but also advocates the reading of time-honored celebrated works of Greek and Latin literature as a means for the dying to reconcile with leaving this life. Through Caesar Wilder explicitly includes classical literature as a part of a response to the tears of the world; by means of intertextuality Wilder also includes Greek and Latin writings in the responses of Dolly Levi and Emily Webb, integrating them with examples of modern literature. Dolly, for example, is the incarnation in an American setting of the traditional Roman and Greek New Comedy figure of the *parasitus*, the manipulating free-loader, but this time as a life-affirming and joy-spreading figure, whose most famous saying, "money . . . is like manure; it's not worth a thing unless it's spread about encouraging young things to grow" (*Matchmaker* 409), alludes to Cato the Elder, Cicero, and Vergil, while adding a quotation from Francis Bacon. Within *Our Town*'s homage to such quintessential elements of American life as

the family farm, local newspapers, baseball, and political elections, Emily Webb champions the observation and love of everyday details, echoing, but transforming, the literary models of Chrysis in *The Woman of Andros*, the prototypical ancient Greek war hero, Achilles, and the letters and poems of Emily Dickinson.

Despite their well-developed expressions of individuality, Dolly Levi, Julius Caesar, and Emily Webb address “the tears of the world” through community and interpersonal efforts, making *lacrimae rerum* “our tears.” With the image of manure, Dolly Levi advocates a return to a fuller life after a period of desiccated existence by transforming into life-nurturing elements those aspects of everyday life often seen as degraded, ridiculous, or unworthy. The image of manure in this play not only represents the proper use and value of money, but also serves as Wilder’s vehicle to indicate the multiple transformations in the play: of the parasite into the nurturer of life, of farce into carnival, of middlebrow entertainment into enduring literature, and of literary influence into a spirit of collaboration. Soothing the frantic Catullus in *The Ides of March*, Julius Caesar praises the world which the dying man is leaving, because he believes that Catullus’ worst fear is that life, with its pains and its sorrows, was not worth the effort. Caesar also comforts Catullus with lines from the chorus in Sophocles’ *Oedipus at Colonus*. Since Wilder had earlier written about this chorus in terms of offering reconciliation and hope at the end of life, Caesar suggests the works of Sophocles as another response to sorrows of life. Emily Webb’s graveyard scene in *Our Town* is the most penetrating exploration of Wilder’s motif of “tears for the beauty of the world.” Attempting to re-visit the world of the living, Emily is filled with wonder and emotion, crying out, “Oh, earth, you’re too wonderful for anybody to realize you” (*Our Town* 100).

Her experience tells the audience that each life can be wonderful, each moment can be precious, if we love everyday life to the fullest.

By being filled with a sense of wonder that often results in tears Dolly Levi and Irene Molloy in *The Matchmaker*, Emily Webb in *Our Town*, and Julius Caesar in *The Ides of March* all exemplify Wilder's understanding of Vergil's phrase *lacrimae rerum* as "tears for the beauty of the world," an organizing motif in Wilder's work.<sup>1</sup> The milliner Irene Molloy in *The Matchmaker*, for example, cries in front of her friends because "the world is full of wonderful things" (338). Similarly, Emily Webb in *Our Town* is struck by the wonder and beauty of the everyday world. Wilder, as he states in a letter, also makes Julius Caesar "a great weeper — but over the wonder of life, not over life's much-advertised pathos, and that's what I like best about him" (Harrison 253). In *The Ides of March*, for example, after each participant quotes an excerpt of poetry at a dinner party, the narrator of this segment continues: "There was a prolonged silence while we waited for Caesar to take his turn and I knew that he was struggling against the tears which so frequently overcame him." (77). Caesar, "a great weeper . . . over the wonder of life," becomes emotionally overwhelmed by the wonder and beauty of great literature.

### **The Spread of Manure in *The Matchmaker***

*The Matchmaker*, particularly through its protagonist, Dolly Gallagher Levi, represents Thornton Wilder's attempt to call the other characters, and the audience as well, into a fuller life by valorizing aspects of life often seen as unworthy or ridiculous, such as manure. Wilder succeeds in doing so by transforming elements and dramatic

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<sup>1</sup> See Chapter Two, "*An American Successor to Vergil: The Cabala.*"



techniques often scorned as inferior, unsophisticated, or ridiculous, such as farce, so-called middlebrow entertainment, and the figure of the *parasitus*. As Julia Kristeva has noted, the life-giving spirit of carnival is marked by structural dyads such as high/low, *food/excrement*, laughter/tears, etc. (Kristeva 48-51).<sup>2</sup> Wilder played the role of the parasite in a 1916 college dramatization of Plautus' *Menaechmi*, which was first performed circa 205 - 184 BCE (Playbill, *Menaechmi*, 11 Nov. 1916, TW Papers, Box 127, Folder 2918). He later transforms this stock character of ridicule from Roman and Greek New Comedy into the life-affirming Dolly Levi. Wilder also urges the development of harmony and balance through the final words of *The Matchmaker*, where Barnaby speaks to the audience directly, hoping that they will have just the right amount of sitting quietly at home, and just the right amount of adventure (415). This address reflects the phrase carved on the temple of Apollo at Delphi, μηδέν ἄγαν, *mēden agan* [nothing in excess].

The central image for the development of wonder and beauty from what is generally scorned occurs in Dolly's great monologue at the end of Act 4 of *The Matchmaker*, where, alluding to a phrase of the English essayist Francis Bacon (1561-1626), she states: "Money, I've always felt, money — pardon my expression — is like manure; it's not worth a thing unless it's spread about encouraging young things to grow" (396). Wilder expands the dramatic importance of this simile of money as manure through the various incarnations of the drama. The sequential versions of *The Merchant of Yonkers* (first performed 1938, printed 1939), revised as the play *The Matchmaker* (1954), filmed as the movie *The Matchmaker* (1958), and adapted as the Broadway

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<sup>2</sup> Italics mine.

musical, *Hello, Dolly!* (Broadway production, 1964, movie 1969) demonstrate the further application of this maxim: the manure simile itself spreads in each successive incarnation. Wilder creatively uses what is considered the waste in order to fertilize and shape the final product of genius.

In each successive artistic version, not only does the manure simile itself spread more widely and become of greater significance to the overall narrative, but also, concomitantly, richness of character unfolds. In the 1938 *Merchant of Yonkers* for example, Dolly addresses her dead husband, then speaks about the appropriate value of money and her wish to rejoin the human race, but without incorporating the manure simile in this monologue (171-74). The manure simile does occur earlier in the play in the 1938 *The Merchant of Yonkers*, as part of Dolly's dialogue with Ambrose Kemper, the poor young artist who wants to marry Horace's niece; the statement here has less importance to the plot, and is not connected to Dolly's marriage (30).<sup>3</sup> In the 1954 revision as *The Matchmaker*, Dolly adds the detail of an oak leaf falling out of a Bible as provoking the insight that she had become as dry as the dead leaf, and must start to live again. Near the very end of the new 1954 monologue, she provides the manure simile, so that this comparison occurs within a comprehensive exposition of the uses and abuses of money, and is integrated into an overall philosophy of living life to the fullest.

Although Wilder did not collaborate on the 1958 movie version of *The Matchmaker* nor the 1964 Broadway musical and 1969 movie *Hello, Dolly!* the manure

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<sup>3</sup> In *The Merchant of Yonkers* Dolly tells Ambrose: "I am very interested . . . in Mr. Vandergelder and all that idle frozen money of his. I don't like the thought of it lying in great piles, useless, motionless, in the bank . . . Pardon my expression: money's like manure, which isn't worth anything until it's spread about encouraging young things to grow."

simile nevertheless continues to expand in these works. In *The Matchmaker* movie, Dolly starts a monologue about the proper value and use of money near the very beginning of the action, but keeps the soliloquy about rejoining the human race and the manure analogy until the later part of what would correspond to Act Four of Wilder's play (Anthony and Hayes). The Broadway musical *Hello, Dolly!* presents Dolly's monologue on rejoining the human race earlier in the play (Stewart and Herman, Act I, Scene iii), establishing a motive for her actions beyond that of the motives of the selfish classical parasite. The musical develops the manure simile as a prominent theme, attributing it first to Dolly and, later, to Horace Vandergelder. In reference to the manure imagery, the 1969 movie version of *Hello, Dolly!* (Kelly and Lehman) is essentially the same as the Broadway musical. In the progression from *The Merchant of Yonkers* to *Hello, Dolly!* "money is like manure" goes from an early mention (*The Merchant of Yonkers*, 1938), to an integral part of Dolly's grand monologue at the end of Act Four (*The Matchmaker*, 1954), to a hint at the beginning but full development near the end (*The Matchmaker* movie, 1958), to preparation earlier in the musical plus major development by Dolly and by Horace toward the conclusion (*Hello Dolly!*, Broadway performance 1964, movie 1969).

The progressive use of the simile that money is like manure is thus an expansion of what Donald Lateiner calls "syntactic enactment or mimetic syntax," in which the sentence structure or word placement mimics the sense of what is being stated (204-37). Examples include the spatial separation of words that themselves indicate separation, the interlocking of words to reinforce the concept of weaving, and the long separation of logically connected words symbolizing corrupt speech. In *The Matchmaker* in its various

forms, it is not the sentence structure or word placement, but the changes in the transmission history from *The Merchant of Yonkers* to the play *The Matchmaker*, then to the movie version of *The Matchmaker*, and finally to *Hello, Dolly!* that mimics the action of the spread of manure. The manure simile, like manure itself, is better if it is spread around, and spread even earlier and more consistently throughout the play. This is semantic enactment on a grand scale.

The comparison of money and manure has rich literary antecedents. Although Wilder states in a 1940 letter that he took the manure simile from the *Essays* of the English statesman Francis Bacon (1561-1626) (*Selected Letters* 382), Bacon uses similar phrases in two other works. In his 1625 essay, “Of Seditions and Troubles,” Francis Bacon had written: “And money is like muck, not good except it be spread” (“Seditions”). Bacon apparently first used this phrase in a 1612 memorandum for King James I, “Advise to the King touching Sutton’s Estate”: “the mass of wealth that was in the owner little better than a stack or heap of muck, may be spread over your kingdom to many fruitful purposes” (Abbott 172). In his 1625 volume, *Apophthegmes New and Old, Collected by the Right Honourable, Francis Lo. Verulam, Viscount St. Alban*, Bacon gives a clue about a possible origin for this expression: “Mr. Bettenham, reader of Grays-Inn, used to say, that riches were like muck; when it lay upon an heap, it gave but a stench and ill odour ; but when it was spread upon the ground then it was cause of much fruit” (210). A 1650 book of aphorisms, *Regales Aphorismi [Royal Aphorisms]: or A Royal Chain of Golden Sentences, Divine, Morall, and Politicall*, attributes this saying, however, to King James I of England (112). Robert Masters Theobald (1829-1914) associates Bacon’s phrase with Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus* (1608), where Cominius

comments on the statesman Coriolanus' refusal to amass riches:

Our spoils he kicked at,  
And looked upon things precious, as they were  
The common muck of the world (*Cor.* 2.2.124-27).

Additional seventeenth century variations of this maxim occur in the works of Henry Edmundson (1658), the 1660 *Lexicon Tetraglotton*, and the writings of the poet and dramatist Richard Flecknoe (1675) ("Muck"). The simile of money and manure had spread widely in British seventeenth-century literary culture.

While comparisons of money and manure are prominent in Bacon and other English writers, the earliest precursors occur in the Latin writers Marcus Porcius Cato, known as Cato the Elder (239-149 BCE), Marcus Tullius Cicero (106-43 BCE), and Vergil. Allusions to money, fertility, happiness, and even theater audiences are inherent in the classical examples of the spread of manure. Enriching the soil through manure characterizes several agricultural maxims in Cato the Elder's *De agri cultura* (circa 160 BCE), with Cato using such phrases as *stercorandum* ("manure must be spread"), or *stercus . . . spargere* ("to sprinkle, or to scatter, manure").<sup>4</sup> Of particular significance to Wilder's simile of the spread of manure is that the etymological root of the Latin word *laetitia*, "happiness," refers to the fertility of the soil (*Oxford Latin Dictionary*, 969b); the

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<sup>4</sup> Among Cato's recommendations for manure are the following: If the weather is rainy the slaves can still clean farm buildings, carry the manure outdoors, and make a manure-heap (*stercilinum*, *De agri cultura*, 2). Using the future imperative, Cato allocates the manure as follows (*stercus diuidito sic*, 29): one-half to the fields growing fodder, one-quarter to trenches around olive trees, one-quarter for the pasture when the moon is "*silens*" (*luna silenti*; the adjective *silens*, "quiet, silent," when applied to the moon means "not shining," and refers to the period just before the new moon (*OLD*, 1760). In chapter 50, he repeats that the pastures are to be manured (*stercerato*) in spring when the moon is not shining (*luna silenti*). The references to the phases of the moon appear to be Cato's placement of his practical agricultural device within a culture of magic encouraging fertility.

related verb *laetifico*, “to make happy, to enrich the land” derives from *laetus*, “well-manured.”

The late Roman republican statesman Cicero expands Cato the Elder’s valuation of manure in *Cato Maior de Senectute* [*Cato the Elder On Old Age*, 44 BCE], adding comments on old age and moderation that are pertinent to *The Matchmaker*. Cicero presents Cato, age 84 in 150 BCE, as discussing old age with the military hero Scipio Africanus and with C. Laelius Saepiens. Cato, the main speaker in the dialogue, says: “What should I say about the advantage of spreading manure? (*quid de utilitate loquar stercorandi?*).” Complaining that Hesiod’s poem on farming does not emphasize the importance of manure, Cato lauds Homer, who portrays Laertes, the father of Odysseus, as finding relief from the longing for the return of his son by cultivating his farm and spreading manure” (*colentem agrum et eum stercorantem fecit*) (53-54). Cicero’s comments on the possibilities of development and fulfillment in later life apply to the transformation of Horace Vandergelder’s personality from miser to someone who accepts love and generosity. In this dialogue Cato advocates the cultivation of inner virtues and friendships, as well as physical exercise and a lifetime of moderation as the best preparation for old age. Creativity, Cato argues, still exists in old age, and a person can continue to cultivate the accustomed, and even develop new intellectual and aesthetic pleasures; for example, Cato states: “I myself learned Greek literature as an old man (*litteras Graecas senex dedici*), which I seized as greedily as if I were eager to satisfy fully a long-existing thirst.” Horace Vandergelder also exemplifies the clause, *nemo enim est tam senex qui se annum non putet posse vivere* [no one is so old that he does not think himself able to live another year] (67-69). The moderation and balance advocated in

Cicero's dialogue finds its dramatic expression in the final words of *The Matchmaker*, given by the youngest person in the play, Barnaby.

The *locus classicus* of Wilder's simile appears to be Vergil's *Georgics* (circa 29 BCE), especially Vergil's imperative, *sparge fimo pingui* [spread the rich manure], which occurs in a context that recalls Dolly's phrase of "encouraging young things to grow." Demonstrating his familiarity with Vergil's *Georgics*, Wilder quotes from memory another phrase from this poem in an August 10, 1935 letter to Gertrude Stein (Stein, *Letters* 43).<sup>5</sup> Vergil's section on the role of manure in farming begins: "What is more, whatever cuttings [corresponding to Dolly's "young things," within the agricultural simile], you plant in your fields, sprinkle them with rich dung" (*sparge fimo pingui*) (2.346-67). Each of the three words in Vergil's phrase is pertinent to Wilder's image of the spread of manure. The imperative *sparge* is from the verb *spargo*; while the *Oxford Latin Dictionary* gives as its first definition "to scatter, sprinkle" (*OLD* 1796.1.a), the *OLD* also provides the meanings "to scatter money, presents, and the like to audiences in the theatre" (1796.1.c), and "to distribute in various places or positions over a wide area," (1979.6), *i.e.*, what Dolly would call "to spread." In *The Matchmaker*, the play spreads a carnival atmosphere, which Wilder wanted the audience to take home with them. Vergil's noun *fimo* comes from *fimum*, -i in classical Latin, later *fimus*, -i in Late Latin. *Fimum* is not simply dung or excrement, but especially connotes dung as used for manure or fuel (*OLD* 702), that is, dung as enriching and beneficial to others. In addition, the *OLD* first defines Vergil's adjective *pinguis* as "fat, plump" (1381.1.a), but, in reference to persons,

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<sup>5</sup> Wilder wrote to Stein: *sic parva licuit componere magnis* [thus it has been permitted to compare small things to great], combining phrases from Vergil's *Georgics* 4.176 with two words from a similar statement in Vergil's *Eclogues* 1.23. For Wilder's quotations of Vergil from memory see Chapter One, "Poeta Doctus."

adds that this adjective is “especially used as a sign of prosperity or well-being” (*OLD*, 1381.1.b). Similar to Dolly’s maxim, Vergil’s *sparge fimo pingui* can also connote “spread manure/adventure/something enriching to the theater audience/young people to encourage them to achieve well-being.”

Relying on his classical sources who praise the enrichment that comes from manure, Wilder makes the spread of manure life-affirming with Dolly Levi, integrating it into the meaning of the play: “Money . . . is like manure; it’s not worth a thing unless it’s spread about.” Dolly, no longer a dead leaf, comes back to life, deciding to marry Horace Vandergelder in order to spread his money around, creating happiness. Horace not only proposes marriage to Dolly, but also, in a departure from his stingy, money-hoarding behavior, makes Cornelius his business partner. Three marriages will ensue: that of Dolly and Horace; that of Horace’s niece, Ermengarde, and her artist boyfriend, formerly scorned by Horace because of his lack of money; and that of Cornelius and Irene.

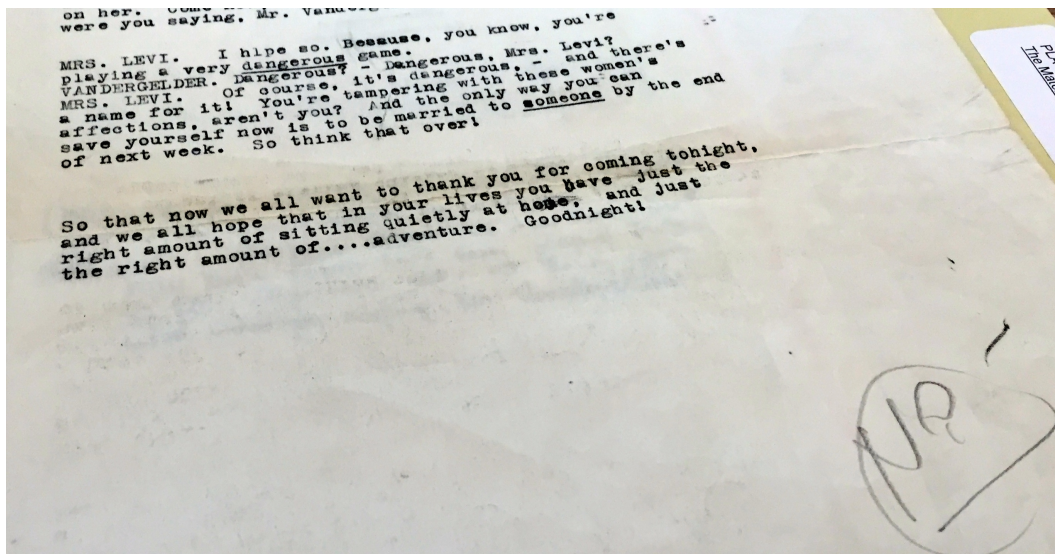
The conclusion of the play reflects Wilder’s emphasis on harmony and balance, what Wilder wished the audience to take home with them.<sup>6</sup> Although Wilder rewrote this

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<sup>6</sup> Wilder may have prepared the way for a message of harmony and balance by naming the restaurant where multiple misidentifications occur “Harmonia Gardens.” There is a similar scene of farcical entanglement in Wilder’s precursors, Oxenford and Nestroy. In Oxenford the episode occurs in a room in an unnamed inn. Nestroy introduces the restaurant in a paragraph titled “Verwandlung” [in context, “change of scene,” but with the literal meaning of “transformation,” which then occurs]. He describes it as an “Eleganter Garten-Salon in einem Gasthaus” [an elegant garden-salon in an inn], and although mentioning it three times in two lines, he does not give it a name (*Einen Jux* 405). In the 1939 *The Merchant of Yonkers*, Dolly connects the proper use of money with harmony and balance through Harmonia Gardens. Soon after stating her simile connecting money and manure, Dolly tells Ambrose: “I want you to see that it [Vandergelder’s money] starts out flowing in and around a lot of people’s lives. And for that reason I want you to come with me to the Harmonia Gardens Restaurant tonight” (*Merchant of Yonkers* 31). In addition, while “Harmonia Gardens” is an homage to the elegance of Nestroy’s Vienna, it also has strong mythological associations to the presence



scene numerous times, in all versions one of the actors on stage addresses the audience. In the manuscript and published versions of *The Merchant of Yonkers*, Dolly refers to the change effected in the characters by traveling from Yonkers to New York City by saying to the audience: “There isn’t any more coffee; there isn’t any more gingerbread. But with a little encouragement, and — Heaven helping us! — continued freedom, we’ll come down the Hudson again in search of a change” (*Merchant of Yonkers* 180). In revising this play to create *The Matchmaker*, however, Wilder at first has Barnaby Tucker, the younger of Horace’s clerks, “address the public,” but the text of his speech is not given (TW Papers, Box 74, Folders 1995-96). In a later manuscript Dolly concludes: “So that now we all want to thank you for coming tonight, and we hope that in your lives you have just the right amount of sitting quietly at home, and just the right amount of....adventure. Goodnight!” Wilder has annotated this page with a large, handwritten and encircled “No —” (Box 74, Folder 2004).




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of the divine in celebrations, since Cadmus, the founder of Thebes, married Harmonia, the daughter of Zeus, in only one of the two wedding ceremonies involving humans that the gods attended.

The final change Wilder made to this scene in *The Matchmaker* reflects his own goals for the play, emphasizing the idea of “just the right amount.” In her address to the audience a few minutes prior to the end of the play, Dolly comments on the proper balance of money — not too little, but nothing in excess as well: “The difference between a little money and no money at all is enormous—and can shatter the world. And the difference between a little money and an enormous amount of money is very slight—and that, also, can shatter the world” (409). At the conclusion, Dolly now urges the youngest member of the *dramatis personae*, Barnaby, to tell “the moral of the play.” Barnaby reluctantly speaks directly to the audience, giving the last words of the drama. As printed in the *Three Plays* edition of *The Matchmaker*, Barnaby states: “we all hope that in your lives you have just the right amount of — adventure!” (415). The cast no longer sings “Old Father Hudson,” as in *The Merchant of Yonkers*, while the curtain falls. In an April 17, 1968 letter to the biographer Richard Goldstone, Wilder stated that this printed version was a typist’s error, and that the correct ending is: “we all hope that in your lives you have just the right amount of sitting quietly at home and just the right amount of adventure!” (Goldstone 234). As Jauss has commented, once a reception has occurred, even if it is erroneous, it is very difficult to modify it (189-94). Subsequent editions by Harpers and the Library of America have repeated this reading, although the Library of America acknowledges the error, not in the individual notes, but in a separate section, “Note on the Texts,” at the end of the book (McClatchy, “Notes on the Text” 836).

Barnaby’s speech summarizes Wilder’s hopes for *The Matchmaker*, as enunciated in his 1957 “Preface” to *Three Plays*: “My play is about the aspirations of the young (and not only of the young) for a fuller, freer participation in life” (xiii). While the original

draft reading of “just the right amount of sitting quietly at home and just the right amount of adventure” is more emphatic, Barnaby’s speech, even as printed in its slightly truncated form, reiterates the motto on the temple of Apollo at Delphi, μηδὲν ἄγαν, *mēden agan* [nothing in excess]. Thus what Wilder ultimately spreads, and what Wilder wants the audience to take home, is the love of life, a balanced life, with moments of adventure, times of “sitting quietly at home,” a life of joy as well as sorrow, a life in which despised objects can become the vehicles for joy and adventure.

While the image of manure is the central symbol for the life-affirming Dolly Levi in *The Matchmaker*, this simile not only represents the proper use and value of money, but also serves as Wilder’s vehicle to effect a major transformation of his sources, that of the parasite-figure into the nurturer of life. On the copyright page to the print publication of *Merchant* in 1939, Wilder wrote: “This play is based upon a comedy by Johann Nestroy, *Einen Jux will er sich Machen* (Vienna, 1842), which was in turn based upon an English original, *A Day Well Spent* (London, 1835) by John Oxenford.”<sup>7</sup> Both *A Day Well Spent* and *Einen Jux will er sich machen* are influenced by Greek New Comedy and Roman comedy in the plot device of the hero’s suddenly obtaining wealth, enabling his

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<sup>7</sup> *Einen Jux will er sich machen* was Nestroy’s greatest success, but unlike Wilder, Nestroy did not give credit to Oxenford, on whose farce Nestroy’s play was clearly based (Alter 32-42). The 1957 *Three Plays* edition makes another typographical error, probably due to the new typist, which has not yet been noted. This edition has Wilder cite Nestroy’s play as *Einen Jux will es sich Machen*, instead of *Einen Jux will er sich machen*. The erroneous substitution of the neuter pronoun *es* (“it”) for the masculine pronoun *er* changes the meaning of the title. When the subject pronoun is a person (*er*, “he”), the phrase *Jux machen* is colloquial German for “to go on a spree.” *Jux* with the pronoun *es* (“it”) or by itself means “joke,” “jest,” especially a “practical joke.” An English translation of the correct title of Nestroy’s farce would be *He Will Go on a Spree*, although it is sometimes given as *A Rollicking Good Time*. A translation of the incorrect wording would be *It Will Make Itself into a Practical Joke*, or *It Will Make for Itself a Practical Joke*. In contrast, Wilder uses the correct title in his correspondence and in *The Merchant of Yonkers*.

marriage.<sup>8</sup> In addition to eschewing this development of the hero becoming *dives* [wealthy] *ex machina*, the major change Wilder made to his named sources, Nestroy and Oxenford, was to introduce the person of Dolly Gallagher Levi, the matchmaker. Dolly derives from the Greek and Roman figure of the parasite (Latin *parasitus* < Greek παράσιτος, *parasitos*) — someone trying to sit next (*para*) to a host for a dinner (*sitos*). Wilder was acquainted early with this archetype. As he wrote proudly to his mother while he was a young college student, he himself had played the role of “the Sponge, the Parasite,” Peniculus, in an Oberlin College dramatization of a translation of Plautus’ *Menaechmi* (Niven, *Life* 120). Peniculus is focused on getting a meal by scheming. He manipulates the other characters, threatens, blackmails, and then exposes one of the rich old men, eventually playing a major role in bringing about a happy ending.

Wilder transforms the *parasitus*, usually a figure of ridicule, into the life-affirming and enjoyment-spreading Dolly Levi. Prominent in Greek New Comedy and Roman comedy, the *parasitus*, often an impoverished member of the aristocracy, was a schemer and manipulator, an instigator of lawsuits, and sometimes a matchmaker, but always male. The parasite tries to obtain money in any way he can but especially strives to obtain invitations to dinner. In many ways Dolly resembles the ancient Greek and Roman figure of the parasite featured in Wilder’s classical sources: the Greek Menander (*circa* 344 - 292 BCE); the Italian provincial Plautus (*Aulularia*, “Pot of Gold, 205-184 BCE); and the North African playwright Terence, originally brought to Rome as a slave (Ziolkowski 549-60). Dolly tries to arrange a marriage using an imaginary woman, for example; she

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<sup>8</sup> The other plot element that enables the hero’s marriage in ancient comedy is the sudden discovery that the heroine is respectable, either through being an Athenian citizen and not a slave, or through the discovery that her pregnancy is not due to acting unchastely but to being raped by the protagonist when he was intoxicated.

also attempts to get free dinners, threatens a lawsuit, and arranges the marriages at the conclusion. As the director of the plot, Dolly also channels *personae* from Roman comedy identified as *poetae* [poets, playwrights], especially those by Titus Maccius Plautus, the clever slave Pseudolus and the Roman matron Cleostrata in *Casina*.<sup>9</sup>

Dolly fundamentally diverges, however, from the classic Greek and Roman template of a parasite by having a solid core of character, and by sincerely wishing and striving to improve the well-being of others. Plutarch (*Education of Children* 5B, circa 46-120 CE) describes the personality of the parasite, often using the Greek terms *parasitos* and *kolax* [flatterer] as synonymous, as does Athenaeus (Brown 99-101). For Plutarch, the parasite or flatterer treats his acquaintances as victims to be exploited, has no fixed place or home of character (literally, no ἑστίαν, *hestian*, “hearth” of character, from Hestia, goddess of the hearth), but modeling himself after another’s pattern, like water poured from one container into another, always in a state of flux, he assumes different appearances, accommodating himself to the fashion of those who entertain him

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<sup>9</sup> In Titus Maccius Plautus’ *Pseudolus* the eponymous slave compares his situation with that of a poet/playwright:

*sed quasi poeta, tabulas cum cepit sibi,  
quaerit quod nusquamst gentium, reperit tamen,  
facit illud veri simile quod mendacium est,  
nunc ego poeta fiam* (Plaut., *Pseud.* 401-04).

but just like a poet, when he took up the tablets for himself, seeks for what is nowhere in the world, yet discovers it and makes what is a lie like that of the truth, I will become a poet now!

In Plautus’ *Asinaria*, Diabolus tells the unnamed parasite, who has written a letter as part of a manipulative scheme, that he is a unique poet (*tu poeta es . . . unicus*) (Plaut., *Asin.* 748). Dolly Levi also displays strong affinities with the Roman matron in *Casina*, Cleostrata, who arranges many of the plot devices. Her neighbor Myrrhina tells Cleostrata that “no poet/playwright ever contrived a more skillful deceit (*nec fallaciam astutotem ullus fecit/ poeta*) than was skillfully contrived by us” (Plaut., *Cas.* 860-61).

(Plutarch, *How to Tell a Flatterer* 52-53). Dolly, however, despite her manipulations, has a solid character core as a generous, life-affirming person, does not victimize her acquaintances, but endeavors to spread joy, adventure, and a life-affirming spirit.

In contrast to most examples from Roman and Greek New Comedy, the parasite Phormio in Terence's *Phormio* (161 BCE) is life-affirming and even life-saving. Although Phormio is manipulative and sycophantic, bragging of beating citizens and foreigners almost to death without getting charged with assault (Ter., *Phorm.* 325-29), he is also in some sense the central character. Terence signals the parasite's importance and positive impact from the start of the play. The prologue states that the comedy is called *Phormio* "because he who will act the leading roles will be the parasite Phormio, through whom the greatest part of the action will be directed":

*quia primas partis qui aget, is erit Phormio*

*parasitus, per quem res geretur maxime (Phorm. 326-27).*

Phormio assumes the role of the "poet" and devises several plots to save the two young men from death by curing their love sickness, winding up with a dinner invitation at the conclusion (Frangoulis 281-94). Phormio is also distinguished by powers of imagination and vivid, occasionally flowery language (Arnott 38). Terence is a major influence on Wilder, who directly states, for example, that he has based his 1930 novel, *The Woman of Andros*, on a play by Terence, the *Andria*. As John Ziolkowski ("Dolly Levi" 560) has demonstrated, many of the stock personages in *Phormio* directly correspond to characters in *The Merchant of Yonkers/ The Matchmaker*: the rich old man or men (*senex* = Horace Vandergelder), the young men looking for brides (*adulescentes* = the clerks Cornelius Hackl and Barnaby Tucker), the unacceptable mates (Phanium = the milliner Irene

Molloy, and Ernestina Simple, falsely proposed as a bride by Dolly), the nurse (the *nutrix* Sophrona = the aunt Flora Van Huysen), and the *parasitus* (Phormio = Dolly Levi).

In addition to Terence's *Phormio*, Wilder relied on Plautus' comedy *Aulularia* (*The Pot of Gold*), which not only presents on stage another rich old man unwilling to part with his money or consent to a marriage, but was itself a direct source for Molière's *L'Avare* [*The Miser*, 1668]. Wilder incorporated Act II, Scene v of *The Miser* into *The Merchant of Yonkers*. In this scene, the schemer and marriage broker Frosine praises the rich miser, Harpagon, for being handsome, tries to borrow money from him, and states that she will arrange Harpagon's marriage with a rich, practical-minded woman, although this prospective bride is purely a product of Frosine's imaginative scheming. Wilder borrowed this passage, almost word-for-word, for the scene in which Dolly Levi praises Horace for being handsome, and states that she has found him the perfect wife, the imaginary Ernestina Simple.<sup>10</sup> In his later personal correspondence, Wilder expressed surprise that no critic had yet noticed that he had borrowed this scene from Molière (*Selected Letters* 382).

Wilder's personal correspondence and manuscripts illustrate how he absorbed and modified his sources, the prominent role of collaboration in the genesis of this play, and his efforts to instill life and balance into the audience. Shakespeare also enters into the genesis of Wilder's comedy, since the farcical mix-up of identities and switching of lovers, as well as the plans for three weddings at the conclusion echo *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. (See Appendix E for a summary of the sources and transmission history

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<sup>10</sup> Haberman (1967: 127-36) provides a line-by-comparison of Molière's French text with the corresponding scene in *The Merchant of Yonkers*. For a correspondence of passages in Molière's *L'Avare* with Plautus' *Aulularia* see Lawall and Quinn, "Passages for Comparison" 75-99.

of *The Matchmaker*). From the very beginning of his work on *The Merchant of Yonkers*, Thornton Wilder signaled that he was indebted to other authors, and offered a broad perspective on their influence. Wilder began work on this play in approximately April or May, 1937. In a letter at this time to his brother Amos, Thornton Wilder is explicit that the play is based on Nestroy's comedy, and that he had spliced a brilliant scene from Molière into the first act (Niven, *Life* 420). The English dramatist John Oxenford's comedy, *A Day Well Spent* (1836), is a one-act light farce, without songs or noticeable social or psychological commentary. Keeping Oxenford's basic plot, the Austrian playwright Johann Nestroy's 1843 play, *Einem Jux will er sich machen* [*He Will Go on a Spree*] expands it, adding music, songs, and social commentary.<sup>11</sup> Wilder expands the plot further, making it, "**They** will go on a spree."<sup>12</sup> Over the next year, which Wilder spent writing in relative isolation in Arizona, free from other responsibilities, he drafted numerous revisions. After initial frustrations with the Fourth Act, Wilder experienced a breakthrough in March 1938, writing to his mother and his sister, "All my plots - count 'em - and idea-themes all come to a head at the right moment, with Mrs. Levi ruling the Roost" (Niven, *Life* 458). By May 1938 the name of the male protagonist changed from Geyermacher to Vanderguildern to Vandergelder.<sup>13</sup> Wilder also incorporated suggestions

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<sup>11</sup> Tom Stoppard also adapted Nestroy's *Einem Jux will er sich machen* for his 1981 comedy, *On the Razzle*. "Razzle" is British slang for "a spree" or "about to go on a spree."

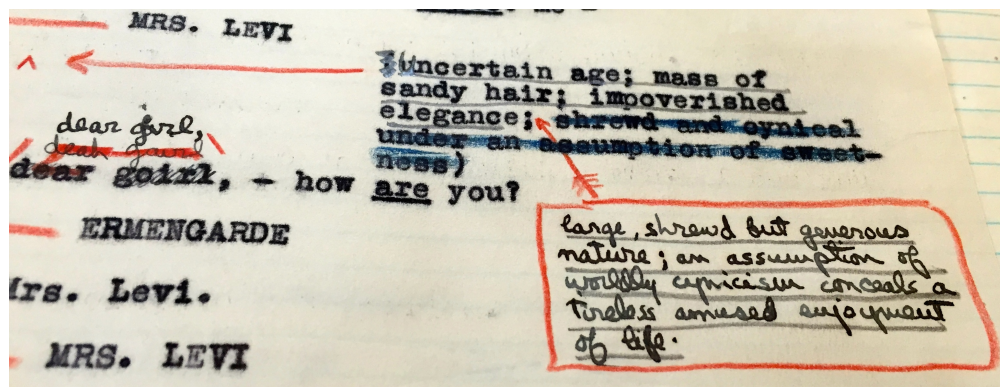
<sup>12</sup> The titles of two separate German reviews of Berlin performances of *The Matchmaker* in 1954 include the phrase, "Wilder macht sich einen Jux" ["Wilder goes on a Spree"]: (Gatter, qtd. in Williams 311; Luft 7).

<sup>13</sup> "Geyermacher" emphasizes "greed," since in German *Geyer* connotes a greedy and rapacious person, from *der Geier* [vulture], while Vandergelder emphasizes money (*das Geld*), which can be presumably be used for purposes other than mere accumulation, such as "spreading around."



from the great Austrian director Max Reinhardt, and expanded the monologues given to Dolly Gallagher Levi.

Dolly exemplifies a major expansion of the traditional character of the parasite; while she loves food, dinner invitations, scheming, and managing things, as in the classical models, she also wants others to enjoy food and to live life fully as well. In the description of Dolly in his typed manuscript, Wilder had crossed out the words, “shrewd and cynical under an assumption of sweetness,” inserting instead: “large, shrewd but generous nature; an assumption of worldly cynicism conceals a tireless amused enjoyment of life” (TW Papers, Box 74, Folder 1988).



In sharp contrast to the parasite who acts for his own private enjoyment, Dolly evokes what Mikhail Bakhtin calls the banquet image in medieval popular-festive tradition and in Rabelais. In contrast to “private gluttony and drunkenness . . . [which] express the contentment and satiety of the selfish individual,” [medieval feasts, and Dolly, elicit] “a banquet for all the world” (301-02). Dolly is the character who is able to call the other characters to life. Since this is also the role of the playwright, Dolly is the *alter ego* for Wilder, who wrote that “My play is about the aspirations ... for a fuller, freer

participation in life” (“Preface” xii). Through her schemes, her encouragement of others, and her own character development after her decision to rejoin the human race, Dolly indeed “rules the Roost.”

Opening on Broadway in December 1938 to mostly disastrous reviews, *The Merchant of Yonkers* closed after only thirty-nine performances, lacking commercial success and sympathetic critical attention. Interpreting *The Merchant of Yonkers* as light farce only, contemporary drama critics, including Wilder’s friend Alexander Woollcott, tended to dismiss the play as not being a serious work worthy of attention, and even being boring (Blank 22-42). Attaching great importance to the collaboration between playwright and actors and actresses, Wilder had written the part of Dolly specifically for his friend, the actress Ruth Gordon, shaping the characterization and the dialogue to fit her acting style and stage presence. Gordon declined the part at this time, however, because she did not wish to work under the director Max Reinhardt, at least in part because he provided his direction in German, using an English language interpreter. The performance by Jane Cowl as Dolly and the direction by Reinhardt contributed to the failure (Blank 161-63). The major issue of contention between Wilder and Reinhardt in the pre-production period was the introduction of music. Reinhardt vigorously argued for music, singing, and dancing. Wilder was opposed at first, but eventually agreed with the recommendation, concluding that the music would add to the “veiled pathos and sweetness of 15 lovable people out for a holiday” (Niven, *Life* 470). Music would later be essential in the immortalization of the play as *Hello, Dolly!*, where the musical finale provides a carnival atmosphere for the audience to take home. The print version of the play appeared in 1939 as *The Merchant of Yonkers: A Farce in Four Acts*, published by

Harper and Brothers. The subtitle, *A Farce in Four Acts*, is also an allusion to Nestroy's subtitle, *Posse mit Gesang in vier Aufzügen* [*Farce with Singing, in Four Acts*].

Almost twenty years after the initial failure, Wilder transformed *The Merchant of Yonkers* into a major success with *The Matchmaker*, through encouragement and specific recommendations from the actress Ruth Gordon (now fulfilling Wilder's original plan by playing the lead) and the director Tyrone Guthrie. After having revised extensively, Wilder returned to most of the original text, now only slightly modified, "cut, trimmed, original, touched up" (Niven, *Life* 625). The major changes from the 1938 play are the new title which emphasizes the role of Dolly Levi, more explicit stage directions, the change of the concluding address to the audience from Dolly's "There isn't any more ginger-bread . . ." to Barnaby's wishing the audience to have "just the right amount of sitting quietly at home and just the right amount of adventure," and, most importantly, the addition of lines given to Dolly, including the further development of the simile of money and manure. *The Matchmaker* debuted in Edinburgh, Scotland on November 4, 1954, and was already an international success in other venues in the United Kingdom and in Berlin by the time it opened in the United States on August 12, 1955, and on Broadway on December 5, 1955. During a run of 486 performances on Broadway, *The Matchmaker* received ecstatic reviews, being hailed as a masterpiece of comedy, although most audiences at the time did not focus on the play's serious undercurrents (Blank 68-69). *The Matchmaker* then continued to dazzle audiences in regional, university, and summer stock productions.

Wilder's adaptation of his sources and his revisions throughout the various incarnations of *The Matchmaker* display a common theme, transformation of something

conventionally considered to be low or ridiculous into something life-giving instead. He transforms the often despised figure of the parasite into the individual who calls the others into a fuller life. Wilder transmutes the supposedly unsophisticated genre of low farce into the life-giving spirit of carnival. Although some critics had viewed the original *The Merchant of Yonkers* as only farce, such an attitude gives short shrift to the social issues and depth of characterization portrayed, both in *The Merchant of Yonkers* and in *The Matchmaker*. David Castronovo, in contrast, calls attention to *The Merchant's* critique of capitalism, writing:

But for all its buoyancy, *The Merchant of Yonkers* deals with the darker side of human nature—capitalistic greed, exploitation, denial of vital possibilities, and neurosis. . . . Vandergelder embarks on a cautious search for a wife-employee, . . . “a bribe to make a housekeeper think she’s a householder.” The crudity of this theory of relationships is a parody of the way hard-bitten capitalists of the thirties . . . regarded those who own nothing but their labor (94-95).

Wilder had transcended farce even in the first iteration of *The Merchant of Yonkers*. In both the earlier play and *The Matchmaker*, the playwright has transmuted farce and middlebrow entertainment into enduring literature.

*The Matchmaker* also engages the audience in active participation, and transforms borrowings from other playwrights into sources of enrichment. As Wilder told an interviewer, it is the active collaboration of the audience that marks the eras of great literature (Jungk 147-48). The conclusion of *The Matchmaker* (and of *Hello, Dolly!*) creates, with imaginative collaboration by the audience, the atmosphere of carnival and wisdom for the audience to take home. Wilder upgrades the use of literary predecessors and even the charges of plagiarism that were sometimes leveled against him into a spirit

of collaboration. In a 1940 letter to a friend, Wilder had written about his “thefts” from Molière and others in *The Merchant of Yonkers*. Comparing himself to a recent news account of a woman arrested for shoplifting, he quotes the shoplifter as saying “I only steal from the best,” applying this statement to himself (*Selected Letters* 382).

Indebtedness does not have to be plagiarism, but a source of enrichment, and part of the formation of an enduring tradition. Wilder recognizes earlier playwrights and other sources — the director, actors, actresses, and the audience — as full collaborators in the work of art. The epitome of all these changes finds its focus in the image Wilder’s Dolly applies to money: the transformation of a despised material, manure, into a source of enrichment.

### **Caesar’s Praise of the World and Debt to Sophocles in *The Ides of March***

Through the character of Julius Caesar in *The Ides of March* (1948) Wilder explores another response to the “tears of the world”: praising the world, with all its sorrows and disappointments, while at the same time exploring the value of great literature and its relation to the divine. As a result, Caesar comforts the dying Catullus with poetry suggesting reconciliation with fate. *The Ides of March* is a work of vast erudition and literary allusions.<sup>14</sup> Utilizing distorted time sequences and deliberate anachronisms, *The Ides of March* is a “fantasia upon certain events and persons of the last days of the Roman republic.” It is constructed as a series of documents “from the author’s imagination with the exception of the poems of Catullus and the closing entry which is from Suetonius’s *Lives of the Caesars*” (vii-viii). Arranged into four books, each of

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<sup>14</sup> Chapter Three, “*Sapphica puella Musa doctior*: The Female Sage,” discusses *The Ides of March* in reference to the poetry of Catullus, and to Cytheris and Sappho as female sages.

which begins earlier and ends later in time than the one that precedes it, the documents include letters, journal entries, broadsheets, poems, and police reports, told from multiple perspectives, *e.g.*, documents by Caesar, Clodia, Cicero, *etc.* The first book covers September, 45 BCE; the second book begins in August and ends in October, 45 BCE, and so forth. Events which occurred in 62 BCE are transposed to 45 BCE. Catullus, who lived *circa* 84-54 BCE, now expires with Caesar present at his deathbed, some months before the Ides of March, 44 BCE. Famous historical persons, including Cicero, Cleopatra, Marc Antony, Brutus, the notorious Clodia and her brother Publius Clodius interact with purely fictional characters.

At times an *alter ego* for Wilder, Julius Caesar emphasizes the motif of great poetry for its ability to praise the world and its possible connection to the divine. Wilder had shown fascination with Caesar at least since his sixth grade schoolboy essay at age 11 (TW Papers, Box 127, Folder 2911). As preparation for *The Ides of March* Wilder deliberately tried to increase his identification with Caesar and with Cicero. “For months I jotted down letters and reports,” Wilder told an interviewer, “and signed them ‘Caesar,’ or ‘Cicero,’ until it became as casual as signing my own name” (Van Gelder 43). Early in *The Ides of March* Julius Caesar states, in an echo of Wilder’s lectures on Greek tragedy at the University of Chicago, that Greek literature is of paramount importance. In the novel, for example, Caesar frequently corresponds with his friend, the fictional Lucius Mamilius Turrinus, who functions as his philosophical sounding board. In Book I Caesar writes to Turrinus: “I am ransacking the world now for a correct text of Aeschylus’s *Lycurgeia*. It took me six years to put my hand on *The Banqueters* and *The Babylonians* of Aristophanes” (the titles are not in italics in the original). This statement is

immediately followed by a reference to “new masterpieces,” poems by Catullus, and soon thereafter by a distinction between ordinary poetry and great poetry: “poetry is indeed the principal channel by which all that most weakens man has entered the world . . . but great poetry, is that merely the topmost achievement of the man’s powers or is that a voice from beyond man?” (32-40). Caesar inextricably links great poetry with the sense of the divine and with classic Greek literature.

A dinner given by the notorious Clodia, the Lesbia of Catullus’ poems, serves to introduce to a sophisticated audience the question of the relationship of great poetry to the divine. Clodia gives this party for Catullus, Cicero, the historian Asinius Pollio, and for Caesar, although Cicero, who has disparaged modern poetry, leaves early, as soon as he hears about an assassination attempt on Caesar. The dinner party represents a Greek-style symposium, in which Caesar, as the King of the Banquet, proposes the subject for discussion: “whether great poetry is the work of men’s minds only, or whether it is, as many have claimed, the prompting of the Gods.” Immediately after announcing the theme of the symposium, Caesar asks the participants to “recite some verses that we may be reminded of the matter before us.” While Asinius Pollio, Clodia and Catullus recite poetic excerpts, Caesar is silent for a prolonged time, “struggling against the tears which so frequently overcame him” (77). Despite the wonderful speeches, Caesar’s epileptic fit interrupts the dinner during Catullus’ telling of the narrative of Alcestis and her return from the dead, so that the symposiasts reach no conclusion to the question of the nature of great poetry.

In Book Three of *The Ides of March*, Caesar is the only person who can comfort Catullus on his deathbed, doing so through great poetry and through praise of the world

that the dying man is leaving behind. Having befriended the poet Catullus, who has been lampooning him viciously, Caesar, nevertheless, is able to soothe the frantic Catullus, who is despondent that he had wasted his life. Caesar's efforts include praise for Catullus' former lover, the notorious Clodia. Caesar praises the world because he believes that the dying often fear that life was not worth the efforts that it had cost them. But Caesar also states that his words to the dying Catullus fulfilled an old debt: "During this last hour [at Catullus' deathbed], I have paid an old debt. . . . I wished to communicate all that I owed . . . to Sophocles" (183-86). This is not the only time that the theme of "paying a debt" occurs. Writing an account of the events of Clodia's dinner for Vergil and Horace fifteen years later, Asinius Pollio states that he is writing this letter so that he will "have acquitted myself of a debt which I have been owing my friends" (88). In another section of Book Three, moreover, Alina, wife of Cornelius Nepos, relates that Caesar soothed Catullus by "talking about Sophocles! Gaius [Catullus] died to a chorus from *Oedipus at Coloneus*" (183).<sup>15</sup>

The theme of owing a debt and paying it before one dies, sometimes even at the moment of death, perhaps derives from Sophocles' three extant plays about the family of Oedipus. In *Antigone*, for example, the heroine justifies her defiance of Creon's command in burying her brother, dying after paying her debt to her brother:

I did not think that your decrees had such power that you, a mere mortal,

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<sup>15</sup> *Coloneus* is a Latin adjective, not a noun, so that while the Latin title for the play is *Oedipus Coloneus*, the English title is *Oedipus at Colonus*, not *Oedipus at Coloneus*. Having noted this mistake and other errors in Latin citations in an "Errata List," marked "London 1948," Wilder requested that his publishers make corrections (TW Papers, Box 108, Folder 2489). The first British edition, published a few months after the first American edition, uses the name *Oedipus at Colonus*, as does the second Harper and Row American edition (1950). The Harper Perennial and the Library of America editions, however, revert to *Oedipus at Coloneus* and to the errors in the Latin quotations.



Would be able to trample the unwritten and unfailing rules of the gods,  
For their laws live, not today and yesterday,  
But forever without end,  
And no one knows when the laws were first revealed.

I did not intend, from fear of any man's arrogance, to pay the penalty  
Before the gods for not obeying their decrees. (Soph. *Ant.* 454-60)

Sophocles also presents Oedipus as someone who will fully pay his debt and fulfill his destiny, and who, like his daughter Antigone, does not fear the curses of humans. As Oedipus tells the chorus: "He who has no terror for the deed will not fear the word [of a curse]." (Soph., *Oedipus Rex* 296)

Emphasizing reconciliation and hope, Wilder signals the importance of Sophocles' tragedies to his own writing in the introduction he wrote to a translation of *Oedipus Rex* by Francis Storr. Written in 1939, the essay was not published until 1955 by the Heritage Press, then reprinted in 1979 in a collection of Wilder's essays, *American Characteristics and Other Essays*. Wilder's work examines all three Theban plays by Sophocles, as well as Greek tragedy as a whole. Wilder's overall comment on these plays is striking, indicating the effects of these plays on his literary art and on him personally. In reference to Greek tragedy he writes, "the two most notable contributions to the form, Aeschylus' trilogy dealing with Agamemnon and his children, and the two plays of Sophocles dealing with Oedipus, both conclude in a spirit of reconciliation and hope" ("Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*" 77-87). Although in *The Ides of March* Wilder does not cite the specific lines that Caesar recited to Catullus on his deathbed, the final comments by the chorus in the Greek play, at lines 1720 *ff.*, call on the survivors of Oedipus to cease their grieving. Oedipus has died in happiness, and in a godsent fashion. The chorus sings to Oedipus' daughters: "But since he released the end of his life in happiness, friends, leave off this

grieving; for no one is immune against evils.” (Soph. *Oed. Col.* 1720-23).

Julius Caesar states that he is paying his life-long debt to Sophocles by quoting him to comfort someone who is dying. The earlier context of Clodia’s dinner party suggests that this life-long debt to Sophocles may also be a clue to the question posed at that time by Caesar: “whether great poetry is the work of men’s minds only, or whether it is ... the prompting of the Gods.” *Oedipus at Colonus* distinguished itself among the plays by Sophocles by most powerfully emphasizing the role of reconciliation, especially reconciliation at the end of life, and the redeeming force of finding meaning in life. Wilder’s essay on Sophocles demonstrates that we must give equal weight to individual poetic lines and to the tragedy seen as a whole. Wilder highlights the characterization of Oedipus through both large-scale draftsmanship and through specific details, the masterly portrayal of inner turmoil, and the depiction of significant human conditions. Both Oedipus and Caesar know things about their destiny that the rest of the characters do not understand. This prescience helps lead both to acceptance; both express the beauty and significance of literature in an almost mystical way.

Wilder thus pays his own debt to Sophocles. He uses Julius Caesar as a Sophoclean chorus to address issues related to the search for a meaningful life, to attempt personal reconciliation, to find the proper balance between affairs of state and personal values, and to answer, for Wilder himself, the question posed by Caesar at Clodia’s dinner. Not only are the plays of Sophocles powerful poetry, but, in addition to stressing religious, family and patriotic themes, the chorus in *Oedipus at Colonus* also emphasizes the sacred and redeeming character of poetry. Responding to Oedipus, the chorus sings: “Your art of reasoning, old man, wholly compels us to stand in awe; for your thoughts have been

expressed in no light words.” (Soph. *Oed. Col.* 292-95). The litotes of “no light words” is an understatement for “powerful words,” for the puissance of poetry and literature.

This is Caesar’s and Wilder’s debt to Sophocles: even if it is the product of human imagination, immortal literature partakes in the divine, and as Wilder wrote about Greek tragedy in 1939, can provide “reconciliation and hope,” and when communicated to another person is a powerful response to the “tears of the world.” Caesar and Wilder can reply to the central question of Clodia’s dinner party, “whether great poetry is the work of men’s minds only, or whether it is, as many have claimed, the prompting of the Gods.” They would say that, indeed, immortal poetry, the tragedies of Sophocles, and, as we would add, the writings of Thornton Wilder, speak in the language of the gods.

### **Emily Webb’s Tears for the Beauty of the World**

A complex character incorporating multiple literary sources and motifs, classical and modern, Emily Webb in *Our Town* (1938) continues Wilder’s exploration of the female sage, responding to the “tears of the world” with the moral imperative to notice the beauty and wonder of the world and to live everyday life fully. Like Aspasia in Plato’s *Menexenus*, Emily has a talent for making speeches; like Chrysis in Wilder’s *The Woman of Andros*, Emily desires the full right to education and citizenship; like the spirit of Vergil channeling the ghost of Creusa in *The Cabala*, Emily speaks from beyond the grave. Perhaps named for Emily Dickinson, master of intertextuality, Emily Webb speaks in a rich and complex intertextuality.

Wilder’s most profound expression of “tears for the beauty of the world” occurs in the graveyard scene of *Our Town*, in which the pathos, beauty, and emotional impact

owe much to Emily's experience of being overwhelmed by the wonder and beauty of the world. Having died while giving birth, Emily, dressed in white, enters the graveyard in the rain.<sup>16</sup> Emerging from behind the mourners, she joins her fellow townspeople who are buried there, and starts questioning what it means to live and die. Engaging in conversation with her deceased mother-in-law, Emily says "one can go back there again . . . into living." Mrs. Gibbs answers, "Yes, of course you can," then adds, "All I can say is, Emily, don't." Although the Stage Manager cautions that "some have tried—but they soon come back here," Emily chooses to revisit her twelfth birthday (100). On returning to life, she now sees her parents as young and beautiful, noticing numerous details of everyday life with a new sharpness and awareness. Birthday presents, breakfast, clothing, postcards all have vibrancy and novelty.

For Emily, the impact of seeing these details comes not only from the sharpness and newness of her vision, but also from the comparison she makes with later events (*e.g.*, knowledge that a person has died), and especially from her insight and her emotional cathexis to her loved ones. Donald Haberman has noted in his monograph on *Our Town*:

Like Emily, the audience should see breakfast at the Webbs as though they had never seen it before.<sup>17</sup> It is painful in its newness, and in its beauty. Wilder is convinced the American hangs on to life, not by clinging to the event but by trying to know his relation to the event and by greeting as

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<sup>16</sup> "A cemetery under rain is the saddest sight in the world, because the rain reminds of tears" (Wilder, *Eighth Day* 400).

<sup>17</sup> In David Cromer's direction of *Our Town* off-Broadway in 2009, Act II displays a realistic kitchen with a fully functional stove, the smell of bacon being cooked permeates the theater, and the characters wear period-era clothing. In the words of Lincoln Konkle, the audience, especially those familiar with the tradition of minimal props for this scene, now experience "not only *what* Emily was seeing, but also the *way* she was seeing it: *as if for the first time*" (Konkle, "Wilder Towns" 45; italics in original).

many subsequent events as possible with the same freshy [*sic*] intensity.

Wilder's American struggles to keep the door open to experience. To live in the present now with awareness (Haberman, *Our Town* 74).

While Emily revisits her twelfth birthday with full awareness, the people she encounters do not display the same intensity.

Emily's experience in her return to life echoes the narrative told by Chrysis in *The Woman of Andros* concerning a hero, granted the power by Zeus to return to the world of the living for one day. Similar to the protagonist of Chrysis' parable, Emily notices that her mother and father are so deeply involved in their tasks that they fail to notice the wonder and beauty of life around them. Emily herself comes to the realization that she had not fully appreciated the wonder of everyday life: "I didn't realize. So all that was going on and we never noticed. Take me back—up the hill—to my grave." Asking the Stage Manager to wait, however, she first says good-bye to all the wonders before her — the world, Grover's Corners, Mama and Papa, clocks ticking, Mama's sunflowers, food and coffee, new-ironed dresses and hot baths, sleeping and waking up. Reprising the emotions of the spirit of Vergil when he returns to the Mediterranean at the conclusion of *The Cabala*, Emily cries out, "Oh, earth, you're too wonderful for anybody to realize you" (110).<sup>18</sup>

Having likened Emily's graveyard speech in *Our Town* to that of Homer's Achilles in the Underworld (*Odyssey* 11.487-91), where Achilles praises things he had

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<sup>18</sup> Emily's epiphany is also similar to Harriet's dying words to the angel Gabriel in Wilder's 1931 one-act play, *Pullman Car Hiawatha*, saying goodbye to everyday places and items, concluding with "I see now. I understand everything now" (56-58).

valued on earth,<sup>19</sup> Wilder makes the cemetery not a depiction of purgatory but an occasion for the message that we must live everyday life fully. Wilder's reference to Achilles underlines this point. Odysseus returns to the world of the living and talks about his experience so that it becomes part of the epic, just as Emily speaks to the Stage Manager and thus to the audience. Years later Wilder used the figure of Achilles to demonstrate that strong men fully experience the tears of the world, and to advocate living a vibrant life. In *The Eighth Day* (1967), John Ashley tells George Breckenridge, his friend's son, that men are allowed to cry just as Achilles had cried after the death of Patroclus (334-35).<sup>20</sup> In *Theophilus North* (1973), the eponymous protagonist chooses to identify with Achilles: "Persons . . . are offered and must accept the choice of Achilles: a brief but buoyant life as against a bland and uneventful one" (8). The emphasis of Emily's farewell to the world is similar to Achilles' valuation of the world and his choice of a "buoyant life" despite sorrows and losses. As Wilder wrote on July 30, 1968 to the director E. Martin Browne who was planning a production of *Our Town*: "God grant you can find an actress who can say Emily's farewell to the world not as 'wild regret' but as love and discovery" (*Selected Letters* 659-61). *Lacrimae rerum*, as developed by Wilder, leads to "love and discovery."

"The love and discovery" that Emily experiences is that each life can be wonderful, each moment can be precious, but most humans do not fully appreciate this while they live these moments. In response to her question whether any human beings

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<sup>19</sup> "Did you recognize," Wilder wrote in a letter to the English director E. Martin Browne, "that that speech is stolen from the Odyssey—Achilles in the underworld remembers "sleeping<?> and wine and fresh raiment" (*Selected Letters* 659-61).

<sup>20</sup> "And we were just reading aloud the other night about how Achilles cries—you couldn't find a braver man than Achilles. The book said that great tears fell on his hands."

ever do realize this, the Stage Manager replies, “No,” pauses, then adds, “The saints and poets, maybe—they do some” (110). In particular, as Wilder writes in an unpublished manuscript fragment, Emily “learns that each life—though it appears to be a repetition among millions—can be felt to be inestimably precious. Though the realization of it is present to us seldom, briefly and incommunicably. At the moment there are no walls, no chairs, no tables: all is inward. Our true life is in the imagination and in the memory” (Niven, *Life* 425).

Emily Webb’s insights resonate with those of Julius Caesar praising the world to a dying man and with those of Alcestis, who had chosen to die in the place of her husband, but whom Hercules rescues from the underworld. Over the course of three decades Wilder worked on the Greek legend of Alcestis. His play, and later, the opera for which he wrote the libretto, *The Alcestiad*, expands the ancient narrative to cover the years after Alcestis’ rescue from death. Displaying affiliations to many ancient texts, *The Alcestiad* not only stems from Euripides’ play, *Alcestis*, but also owes large debts to Euripides’ tragedies, *Hippolytus* and *Bacchae*, to Aeschylus’ *The Libation Bearers*, to the reference to Alcestis in Plato’s *Symposium*, and to Apollodorus’ *Library*, a first-to-second-century CE compendium of Greek mythology, as well as to two of Wilder’s own novels, *The Ides of March* and *The Woman of Andros*.

In Wilder’s re-telling, Alcestis both reinforces and diverges from Emily’s experience. Unlike Emily Webb, Alcestis remains in the world of the living for twelve years, suffering further tragic events, including the murder of her husband and being forced into slavery by the usurper, King Agis. Near the conclusion of the play Alcestis tells Agis that “the last bitterness of death . . . is the despair that one’s life has been

without meaning. That it has been nonsense; happy or unhappy, that it has been senseless.” Pointing to the entrance to the underworld, shortly before she is beckoned by Apollo to follow him, she states: “All those millions lie imploring us to show them that their lives were not empty and foolish” (*Alcestiad* 240-41). Although Wilder has written about *The Alcestiad* as exploring the motif of the difficulty of communication with the divine, these words of Alcestis to King Agis find an echo in Emily’s graveyard experience. Focusing on the “return from the dead” (*die Rückkehr von den Toten*) as a principal theme (*Hauptmotiv*) in Wilder’s writings, the German scholar Helmut Viebrock (1912-1997) compares Emily to the mythological Persephone and Eurydice and to Wilder’s own literary creations, such as Alcestis. Viebrock argues that Wilder, as he announced in his 1957 Frankfurt address delivered in German, “Kultur in einer Demokratie” [“Culture in a Democracy”], sees the task of contemporary democracy as creating new myths and metaphors for modern humanity (73).<sup>21</sup> Committing himself to this goal, Wilder is an impassioned scholar, a teacher of wisdom by means of his dramatic literature, and an explorer of symbols, myths, and archetypal figures. Viebrock concludes: “It seems to us, however, that both [*Our Town* and *The Alcestiad*] are new, new through the art of Thornton Wilder, in which art the ancient Greek and Christian themes have been twinned [*i.e.*, integrated together], just as both female archetypes, Alcestis and Emily, are manifested to us as an allegory of a twinned Old and New World” (Viebrock 363).<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> “Democracy has a large task: to find new imagery, new metaphors, and new myths to describe the new dignity into which man has entered.”

<sup>22</sup> “Uns scheint aber, daß beide neu sind, neu durch Kunst Thornton Wilders, in der griechische und christliche Motive sich verschwistert haben, so wie die beiden



The dialogue among the dead prior to Emily's brief return to the world incorporates allusions to Dante's *Purgatorio* and to several poems by Emily Dickinson, underlining Wilder's classical reception of Vergil, and reinforcing earlier indications that Emily Webb is based partly on Emily Dickinson. While Emily's return to the world of the living has garnered much critical acclaim, scholars and audiences have given somewhat less attention, in general, to her preceding interactions with the dead.<sup>23</sup> Like Dickinson, Emily Webb is a creative writer, composing the class poem at the high school graduation exercises (*Our Town* 95).<sup>24</sup> In reference to the graveyard scene, Wilder's "Preface" to *Three Plays* states that he is not trying to speculate about the conditions of life after death, but "that element I merely took from Dante's *Purgatory*" (xii). Within two months of the Broadway opening, Wilder elaborated this reference in a letter to Christina Hopkinson Baker:

I suppose I got it from Dante. I had to teach the Inferno and the first half of the Purgatorio at Chicago. I had in mind especially the Valley of the repentant Kings in about the 8<sup>th</sup> Canto of the Purgatorio. Same patience, waiting; same muted pain; same oblique side glances back to earth. Dante has an angel descend nightly and after slaying a serpent who tries to enter the Valley every evening, stands guard the rest of the night: Most commentators agree that the allegory means: from now on the Dead must be guarded from memories of their earthly existence and from irruptions of the old human nature associations (*Selected Letters* 341-42).

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Fraueengestalten, Alkestis und Emily, uns wie eine Allegorie der verschwisterten Alten und Neuen Welt erscheinen."

<sup>23</sup> Wilder's early three-minute play, "And the Sea Shall Give Up Its Dead," also features a dialogue among the dead (49-52).

<sup>24</sup> Wilder composed the "Ivy Ode," in Latin, for the 1920 Yale University Commencement.

Wilder is here citing from memory; Cantos 7 and 8 of the *Purgatorio* depict the Valley of the Repentant Kings. While in these cantos the poet Sordello talks to Vergil, praising the glory of Vergil as the master of the Latin language, and Nino de' Visconti talks to Dante, the repentant kings and emperors do not talk to each other (*Purgatorio*, Cantos 7-8).<sup>25</sup> Noting that the tone of the graveyard dialogue does not match that of these cantos of the *Purgatorio*, Lincoln Konkle argues that this *Our Town* scene bears more resemblance, instead, to the dialogues among the dead in American literature, especially Emily Dickinson's poems (*Puritan* 146-47, footnote 41).

Konkle's insight is to identify the graveyard conversation as related to Emily Dickinson's poems # 449, "I died for Beauty," and # 976, "Death is a dialogue between."<sup>26</sup> Although Wilder was aware of Dickinson's re-writing her poems in fascicles and of the existence of numerous textual alternatives, at the time when *Our Town* was first performed he had access to only the published forms of the poems as of 1938, not to the *Variorum* editions or the *Manuscript Books*. In the poems as printed by 1938 the lineation was often regularized, and the capitalization and punctuation did not always

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<sup>25</sup> The allusion to Dante's *Purgatorio*, nevertheless, is pertinent to the Wilder's reception of Vergil. Samuele's invocations of Vergil in *The Cabala* as "prince of poets" and "greatest of the Romans" echo Sordello's greeting of the Latin poet in *Purgatorio*, Canto 7. Vergil's command to Samuele to "give heed to your Latin" balances Sordello's apostrophe of Vergil as *O gloria di Latin, disse, per cui / mostrò ciò che potea la lingua nostra* [O glory of the Latins, he said, through whom / Our language shows what it is able to do]; and Wilder's Vergil vigorously contradicts what Dante's Vergil says to Sordello, that *per null' altro rio/ lo ciel perdei che per non aver fè!* [and for no other failing/ did I lose heaven but through not having faith!] (Dante, *Purgatorio* 7.7-8 and 16-17).

<sup>26</sup> Konkle cites Dickinson's poems in the numeration of Johnson's edition, which differs slightly from that in Franklin's edition, which many scholars now use. "I died for Beauty" is Johnson's #449, (but Franklin's #448. Similarly, while "Death is a dialogue between" is Johnson's #976, it constitutes Franklin's #973.

reflect Dickinson's holograph versions. Here is "I died for beauty" as printed in *The Collected Poems* of 1924:

I DIED for beauty, but was scarce  
Adjusted in the tomb,  
When one who died for truth was lain  
In an adjoining room.

He questioned softly why I failed?  
"For beauty," I replied.  
"And I for truth,—the two are one;  
We brethren are," he said.

And so, as kinsmen met a night,  
We talked between the rooms,  
Until the moss had reached our lips,  
And covered up our names. (*Collected Poems* 185)

What is significant is that the graveyard conversation results in greater understanding on the part of the newly dead in both Emily Dickinson's poem and in Emily Webb's experience.

The 1924 *Collected Poems* prints "Death is a dialogue between" as two quatrains:

DEATH is a dialogue between  
The spirit and the dust.  
"Dissolve," says Death. The Spirit, "Sir,  
I have another trust."

Death doubts it, argues from the ground.  
The Spirit turns away,  
Just laying off, for evidence,  
An overcoat of clay. (*Collected Poems* 196-97).

In contrast, the manuscript version at Houghton Library, Harvard University, displays the poem as two stanzas of six lines each, with the second line from the top and the second line from the bottom consisting of a single word each, and a + sign in line 8 indicating an alternative reading of “Reasons” for “Argues.”

Death is a Dialogue  
between  
The Spirit and the Dust.  
“Dissolve” says Death.  
The Spirit “Sir  
I have Another Trust.”

Death doubts it —  
+ Argues from the ground-  
The Spirit turns away  
Just laying off for  
evidence  
An Overcoat of Clay.

+ Reasons (Houghton Lib., Packet XXXIV, Fasc. 21 = *Manuscript Books* 1189).

Dickinson’s poems correspond to Emily’s dialogue with the dead from the standpoint that they both show the recently deceased as questioning the meanings of life and death, and as benefiting from interchange with other dead individuals. The manuscript version of “Death is a Dialogue” reinforces this similarity by placing the preposition “between” in a line of its own, suggesting that it is the interpersonal aspect of the dialogue, as much as the content of what is said, that is important to the newly dead.

Thornton Wilder had lectured on Emily Dickinson as part of the prestigious Norton Lectures at Harvard University on November 29, 1950, then, on January 13, 1951, he read some of her poems as part of another lecture on Dickinson at the 92<sup>nd</sup> Street Y Poetry Center. Wilder revised his lecture for publication in 1952 in *The Atlantic Monthly*. These lectures and his 1952 essay on Dickinson emphasize her letters as much as her poems. Although publication of Dickinson's *Complete Letters* did not occur until 1958, selected letters were available to Wilder through a 1924 edition by Martha Dickinson Bianchi and a 1931 volume edited by Mabel Loomis Todd. Wilder may have had additional access to Dickinson's correspondence through his sister, Janet Wilder Dakin (1910-1994), who taught biology at Mt. Holyoke College and lived for years in Amherst, Massachusetts.

Wilder especially valued Dickinson's exploration of interpersonal relationships, and the motif of literary immortality. Wilder identifies the tone of Emily Dickinson's letters, and many of her poems, as one of effusive affection, combined with ostentatious humility, as well as a misplaced coquetry, that he attributes to "women who in childhood have received too heavy an impress from their fathers." He further notes that in her letters Emily indulges in the fantasy that her loved ones are dead. These qualities, however, also apply to Wilder. Both Dickinson and Wilder were significantly influenced by religious fathers and grew up entrenched in the New England Puritan tradition. Wilder's father, for instance, compelled Thornton at an early age to take a pledge of abstinence from alcohol, and continued to arrange his schooling and job placements until Thornton was in his 30s. Wilder developed what he sees as Emily Dickinson's fantasy that her loved ones are dead

into the theme of children imagining the death of their parents in his one-act play, “Childhood: A Comedy,” from the unfinished series, *The Seven Ages of Man* (250-69).

Wilder declaimed, passionately, four poems by Emily Dickinson in his 1951 lecture at the 92<sup>nd</sup> Street Y Poetry Center: “The wind took up the northern things”; “Troubled about Many Things,” now known by its first line, “How many times these low feet staggered”; “They put us far apart”; and “Wild nights.”<sup>27</sup> Although he mentions the titles of many other poems in his published essay, “Emily Dickinson,” Wilder specifically recited lines from only these poems in the 1951 lecture. The common threads in the recited poems include an emphasis on overcoming difficulties, especially in interpersonal relationships, and the motif of literary immortality. Wilder’s suggestion in his 1951 lecture at the 92<sup>nd</sup> Street Y that “Wild nights” concerns erotic relationships or erotic fantasies has been confirmed and amplified in Martha Nell Smith’s book, *Rowing in Eden: Reading Emily Dickinson*. Smith is convincing in arguing that not only is Emily directly identifying herself with the erotic raptures of the “Wild Nights,” but also that the poem is addressed to a particular person, Emily’s sister-in-law Susan.

Identifying with Emily Dickinson, especially through the content of her correspondence, although not ignoring her poetry, Wilder demonstrates his debt to her through his lectures and writing, and through elements of intertextuality. Both explored the challenges of achieving religious experience without being orthodox, fully-committed believers or active practitioners in the Protestant religion of their youth. Wilder and Dickinson place emphasis on observing the small details of life while addressing themes found in a wide range of Western authors. In the concluding words of Wilder’s essay on

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<sup>27</sup> An audio recording of most of the lecture is available at:  
<<http://92yondemand.org/thornton-wilder-on-emily-dickinson/>>.

Dickinson, both made their distinctive literary marks “by loving the particular while living in the universal” (“Emily Dickinson” 63).

Emily Webb alludes to Emily Dickinson in her dialogue with her mother in Act One of *Our Town*. When Mrs. Webb asks her daughter to help “string beans for the winter,” Emily complies, but soon changes the conversation, saying, “I made a speech in class today and it was very good.” Responding to her mother’s question, “What was it about?” Emily says, “The Louisiana Purchase. It was like silk off a spool. I’m going to make speeches all my life.” The conversation, however, returns to stringing beans and whether or not Emily is pretty, and does not address the topic of speeches again (32-33). The New Hampshire Emily wishes to make speeches — and thus implicitly wishes for an advanced education and a career that would enable her to do so — but her mother, Mrs. Webb, does not follow through on Emily’s talent or desire to “make speeches all my life.” Similarly, Emily Dickinson, in a June 11, 1852 letter to her friend Susan Gilbert (later to be her sister-in-law, Mrs. Austin Dickinson), then residing in Baltimore, states that she wishes to participate in public affairs by attending the Whig political convention in Baltimore: “Why cant I be a Delegate to the great Whig Convention? — dont I know all about Daniel Webster, and the Tariff, and the Law? Then, Susie, I could see you, during a pause in the session.” Dickinson ends the letter with a Latin phrase recalling Cato the Elder<sup>28</sup>: “Delenda est America, Massachusetts and all!” (Bianchi, *Life* 27).<sup>29</sup> She thereby indicates that because she cannot be a delegate to the convention, owing to her lack of opportunities, then America must be destroyed (*delenda est*). While Emily Webb

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<sup>28</sup> Cato the Elder was reputed to have ended every speech in the Roman Senate, no matter what the topic, with *Carthago delenda est* [Carthage must be destroyed].

<sup>29</sup> Fuller text in *Letters of Emily Dickinson* (90-91) and Hart and Smith (34).

is milder than Emily Dickinson in her imprecations, both want a broader education and a greater public role. This conversation during *Our Town* may well, therefore, pay homage to Emily Webb's Massachusetts namesake.

Versions of *Our Town* prior to Wilder's 1957 revision for its publication as part of *Three Plays* strengthen the comparison of Emily Webb and Emily Dickinson, as well as the association of Emily Webb with the Aspasia of Plato's *Menexenus*. The publisher Coward-McCann set into type the first 1938 edition of *Our Town* (here denoted as *Our Town* 1938a) before rehearsals began and thus before changes were made based on these rehearsals. Later that year the same publisher, in cooperation with the publishing company of Samuel French, released *Our Town, Acting Edition* (*Our Town* 1938b), based on the subsequent prompt book for the original Broadway production (Bucker 133). In the 1938a pre-production edition, the Stage Manager, commenting on Emily and George's wedding, talks about Nature's attempt to make a perfect human being: "Maybe she's tryin' to make another good Governor for New Hampshire" (89). In the *Acting Edition* of *Our Town*, which reflects the text of the Broadway performance, this passage occurs earlier in Act Two, and the Stage Manager speaks an additional sentence, specifically referring to Emily. The text now reads: "Maybe she's trying to make another good Governor for New Hampshire. That's what Emily hopes" (58).

As printed in both 1938 versions, the identity of the future "good Governor for New Hampshire" is left ambiguous, so that it could refer to the position that Emily dreams of filling herself. Talking to Emily in an earlier scene about his hopes for some type of election, George does not specify what office he might seek, saying, "You see I'm not only going to be farmer. After a while maybe I'll run for something to get elected"



(*Our Town* 1938a, 77). Whether the potential governor is George or Emily, Emily's "trying to make another good Governor" fulfills in part Emily Webb's wishes to make speeches, echoing Emily Dickinson's desire for full participation in political conventions and the electoral process. Emily Webb's wishes also reflect the interests of Thornton Wilder's first sage, his mother Isabella, the talents of his mother's sister, Charlotte Niven (1882-1979), and his own oratorical abilities. In addition to her literary efforts, Isabella Wilder had long wanted a more public role, eventually becoming the first woman elected to a public office in Hamden, Connecticut in the 1920s, as a member of the Hamden School Board for 1921-1923 (Electronic communications, 10-17 May, 2016). His aunt Charlotte, his mother's sister (1882-1979), whom Thornton admired, made numerous public speeches in the United States and Europe on behalf of the YWCA's international programs. Thornton Wilder was a gifted speaker in numerous languages, and, despite being raised as a Republican, made radio speeches (once in concert with Eleanor Roosevelt) on behalf of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's reelection campaign.

Although Wilder eliminated "tryin'/trying to make another good Governor for New Hampshire" in his 1957 revision, Emily's talent for making speeches and her wish to do so all her life remain in all editions of the play. Even "another good Governor for New Hampshire" survives in the 1965 reprint of the *Acting Edition* of *Our Town*. Through Emily's wish to make speeches Wilder further links Emily Webb with Emily Dickinson and with Aspasia in Plato's *Menexenus*, who composed political and funeral speeches even if she could not deliver them in the public arena herself.

In addition to Emily Webb's allusions to Emily Dickinson, classical mythological heroines, and historic Greek figures such as Aspasia, *Our Town* as a play reflects the

structure of ancient Greek tragedies. Comparing *Our Town* to Greek tragedies and to Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* in particular, Arthur Ballet views Emily Webb as a modern-day Oedipus, as "a tragic figure of enormous dimensions . . . [who] gains the true ability really to see and understand." Paralleling a classic trilogy, Act I of *Our Town* focuses on "The Daily Life," Act II on "Love and Marriage," and Act III expands the first parts of the trilogy into a complex of eternity where the mystery of life is culminated in death.

Critics have provided a wide range of sources for the Stage Manager, one of Wilder's most widely-recognized creations, usually understanding the character as indebted to modernist playwrights such as Pirandello or to the influence of Chinese and Japanese drama (Mansbridge 209-35). Niven, for example, writes that during his stay at Rome Wilder attended a performance of the original 1921 stage run of *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore* [*Six Characters in Search of an Author*] by Luigi Pirandello (1867-1921). Niven adds that in this play "the audience is greeted by a dark, empty stage with curtain raised, and one character is the Manager—the manager of the theater. Thornton would experiment with some of these concepts later in his own plays" (*Life* 192). Bigsby also sees the Stage Manager as indebted to Pirandello, but adds, "Wilder's figure is more flexible. He plays more roles, occupies a more detached and a more involved position alternately, both observing and participating in the action" (260). Burbank notes that the Stage Manager also acts like the property man in Chinese drama, placing the few properties on stage (89). As Lifton has noted, the Chinese property man performs his duties unobtrusively, in contrast to Wilder's Stage Manager, so that the audience is barely aware of his presence (Lifton, *Vast* 193). Haberman traces the Stage Manager to Gertrude Stein's idea of narration, which is responsible for the presentation in *Our Town* of a series

of small glimpses of life, each without beginning or ending, so that the character of the Stage Manager becomes necessary for some continuity between one event and the next (Haberman, *Plays* 91-92).

While the insights concerning Pirandello and Gertrude Stein enrich our understanding of the Stage Manager, these theories are limited in their application to complex role of Wilder's Stage Manager and its prominence over the course of many decades. As Konkle has noted, Pirandello's dark, empty stage is a realistic setting for *Six Characters*, since the action represents the rehearsal of a play to be performed, so that lack of scenery and of props is appropriate. Pirandello's "Manager" is a realistic character who never steps out of this role to address the audience directly. In contrast, Wilder's empty stage does not realistically represent the setting of the play, and the Stage Manager, whose presence is not explained within the text of the play, unlike Pirandello's "Manager," constantly steps out of the dramatic role (Konkle, *Puritan* 104-05). Wilder's Stage Manager pre-dates Pirandello's *Six Characters*. Wilder introduced the "Manager," a Stage Manager-figure, in the three-minute play, "Proserpina and the Devil," written in 1915, but not published until 1928. As observed, his first published use of the Stage Manager occurs in the 1926 *The Cabala*, not in the form of an actual person, but as a simile: "As by the click of some invisible stage-manager Miss Grier entered" (*Cabala* 49). In addition, prior to Gertrude Stein's influence on the 1938 *Our Town*, Wilder utilized the Stage Manager as a crucial character in the 1931 one-act plays *Pullman Car*, *Hiawatha* and *The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden*.

Not only is the Stage Manager one of Wilder's most brilliant creations, this personage serves as an epitome for Wilder's Americanization of the Greek and Roman

classics. The Stage Manager allows Wilder to bend literary genres while he simultaneously breaks the rules of classical drama, just as he changes Terence's *Andria* from a dramatic comedy to a narrative tragedy. As the critic Donald Malcolm has noted, "the invention of the Stage Manager permits Mr. Wilder to graft onto the stage many of the virtues of the novel — flexibility, a freedom of movement in space and time, a running commentary on the action, and a viewpoint that belongs to the author and is independent of his characters" (Malcolm 80, 82). Wilder treated the classical tradition with this flexibility and freedom. The role of the Stage Manager in commenting on the action primarily derives from the chorus and *choregos* (chorus leader) of ancient Greek tragedy and comedy. Greek Old Comedy, *e.g.*, the plays of Aristophanes, includes a section called the *parabasis*, in which the chorus addresses the audience directly. Wilder's omniscient Stage Manager also narrates past events (like the messenger speeches in ancient drama), and provides examples pertinent to current issues (like the choral odes in Greek tragedy). To the examples of metatheatricity, the chorus, and the *choregos* from ancient tragedy and comedy, Wilder adds the influence of modernist drama to result in this memorable persona.

The Stage Manager is thus analogous to the Greek chorus, explaining and interpreting, but also, in his biases, sympathy, and concern, representing the observing community, and introducing a note of patience and understanding. "Tragedy, in its finest sense," Ballet writes, "need not be and should not be 'sad.' It should rather be elevating, should point the way to a higher level of understanding of man as a creature revolving in the cosmos. By these Aristotelian standards, then, *Our Town* approaches significance as a tragedy" (Ballet 243-49).

Through Emily Webb, Thornton Wilder makes this tragedy into a humanistic response to the tragedies of everyday life. Emily becomes another incarnation of the female sage, with her words from the graveyard indicating a response to the joys and sorrows of the world. Reflecting the first-person plural pronoun of the title of the play, Emily is overcome in her attempt to return to the living, saying, “We don’t have time to look at one another.” As Viebrock (361) writes, “Emily, to whom a slow process of forgetting and waiting is still unknown, also learns, as she is confronted with death, that the mysterious depth of reality can be fully plumbed only here and now, in the world and in life.”<sup>30</sup> This is Emily’s role as a sage, and her message to the audience. We can confront the mysteries of reality, the joys and sorrows of life, and the significance of death only in this life, by observing the beauty of everyday life and of our interactions with other people with wonder, loving each and every particular of our experience. Once again, Emily Webb echoes Emily Dickinson, who wrote “Drama’s vitallest expression is the common day” (Franklin #776, Johnson #741). Conveying this message through her interaction with the Stage Manager, Emily thus projects it out to the audience. Wilder has re-interpreted Vergil’s *lacrimae rerum* as “tears for the beauty of the world,” making it the basis of a moral imperative. Juxtaposing the “tears of the world” with scenes depicting the beauty of the world and the resulting sorrow when individuals recognize this too late, Wilder exhorts us, the residents of “Our Town,” to observe lovingly and to live everyday life fully while on earth, bestowing meaning on “Our Tears.”

## Conclusion

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<sup>30</sup> “Auch sie lernt, als sie mit dem Tode konfrontiert wird, der ein langsames Vergessen und ein Warten noch Ungewußtes ist, daß die geheimnisvolle Tiefe der Wirklichkeit nur jetzt und hier, in der Welt und im Leben, angelotet werden kann.”

*The Matchmaker*, *Our Town*, and *The Ides of March* exemplify Thornton Wilder's role as a *poeta doctus*, a "learned writer," assimilating Greek, Latin, Renaissance, early modern, and modern writings, placing himself within the "Torch Race of Literature" in order to portray the value of observing and loving all of life with its joys and its sorrows. As argued in Chapter Four, "The Torch Race of Literature and *The Skin of Our Teeth*," Wilder understood literature to be a relay race involving cooperation, rather than a competition among writers, and that this torch race moves in an ever expanding circle. These three works also exemplify the metaphor of the literary canon as an echo chamber, a mechanism for reverberating, amplifying, and preserving words and sounds, so that an individual can, more distinctly, hear others as well as herself or himself. The responses of Dolly Levi, Emily Webb, and Julius Caesar to the "tears of the world" reverberate in a literary echo chamber with the spirit of Vergil in *The Cabala*, the fable of the hero returning to life as told by Chrysis in *The Woman of Andros*, and the experience of Alcestis in *The Alcestiad*, as well with the journey to the Underworld in the *Odyssey*, the *Purgatorio* of Dante, numerous Greek tragedies and comedies, Vergil, Cato the Elder, Cicero, Plautus and Terence. In transforming his classic sources, Wilder also makes the classical motifs and mythology distinctly American. *The Matchmaker* and *Our Town*, and as Chapter Four demonstrates, *The Skin of Our Teeth*, are suffused with numerous references to American culture and history.

The three works that are a focus of this chapter add nuances, previously expressed but now more fully developed, to the metaphors of the torch race and the literary echo chamber: the audience and readers join the directors, actors, actresses, and literary influences as active participants in the echo chamber of literature. Although Wilder

considers all literary works to be collaborative in nature, he is emphatic that collaboration is of the utmost importance for drama. In an interview Wilder states:

A dramatist is one who believes that the pure event, an action involving human beings, is more arresting than any comment that can be made upon it. A novelist selects words so far as possible to create a precise image in the mind of the reader. A dramatist writes blank checks for the collaboration of others. (*Conversations* xiv).

This collaboration includes that with his literary predecessors and contemporaries, with his musical influences, including music from Protestant hymns, with his artistic inspirations, including Cézanne, and even Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers (Niven, *Life* 420), and with his many friends and correspondents (family members, former teachers, Jean-Paul Sartre, Sigmund Freud, numerous actors and actresses). In a 1937 letter to Gertrude Stein, for example, Wilder described his composition of Act III of *Our Town* as “based on your ideas, as on great pillars, and whether you know it or not, until further notice, you’re in a deep-knit collaboration already” (Niven, *Life* 440).

Collaboration with the audience and the readers is paramount for Wilder. In his hopes for drama, as he wrote to the Austrian dramatist and poet Richard Beer-Hofmann in 1940, “I call upon still free-er use of the stage, as to scenery, time, abstraction and audience collaboration” (*Selected Letters* 378). In a 1938 interview with the drama critic John Hobart of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Wilder argued for drama as the greatest of all literary forms: first because it takes place in the present; secondly, because the character’s words seem to come directly from that character, not from the author, with the same air of possibility, of uncertainty and mystery as in real life; thirdly, because of the artistry of the actors and actresses. He concludes: “But the real justification of the theater lies far deeper than this. . . . because of the collaborative imagination of an audience . . .

In its great heydeys, the drama has always capitalized on this willingness of an audience to contribute its own imagination to the story” (Hobart 17, 21). Dolly Levi, and Barnaby at the conclusion, address the audience in *The Matchmaker*, and Emily’s return to the world of the living invites the audience to view what she is seeing with the same intensity that she does, as if they had never experienced these everyday matters before.

Utilizing the pattern in the Roman comedies of Plautus and Terence in which a cast member directly addresses the audience at the conclusion of the play, Wilder vastly transforms this convention: Wilder’s dramas provide wisdom, rather than merely ask for applause, and Wilder ennobles this technique by using it in tragedy. As Northrop Frye has observed, “Tragic actors expect to be applauded as well as comic ones, but nevertheless the word ‘plaudite’ [‘Applause,’ in the imperative plural] at the end of a Roman comedy, the invitation to the audience to form part of the comic society, would seem rather out of place at the end of a tragedy” (Frye 164). Wilder’s *Our Town*, in contrast, concludes with the Stage Manager’s talking directly to the audience. Roman comedy at times ended with an invitation to the audience to attend a future performance or participate in an imaginary banquet or drinking party in the future, as in Plautus’ *Rudens*. Wilder’s dramatic comedies, *The Matchmaker* and *The Skin of Our Teeth*, and his dramatic tragedy, *Our Town*, in contrast, end with an invitation to the audience to collaborate with the spirit of enjoyment or the experience of tragedy, to consider mindfully a sense of meaning, and to experience the full joys and sorrows of life.

For Wilder, the active collaboration with the audience is a requirement for a golden age of literature. Elizabethan drama and Greek tragedy manifested this audience collaboration that Wilder sought to recapture. In a 1956 interview given in German for



*Das Neue Forum*, Darmstadt, Wilder compared contemporary culture with the great ages of Shakespeare and Greek drama:

The spectator or rather the listener to my play will have to change his attitude, will have to cooperate. It is this cooperation that I seek. We live today in an era of intellectual and spiritual passivity. . . . Film-makers, stage directors, radio and television producers, photojournalists, editors and advertising illustrators have created a monopoly in the realm of imagination . . . sharply honed slogans and typecast characters have cut off the sources of individual imagination as well as the imagination of a whole people (Jungk 147-48).<sup>31</sup>

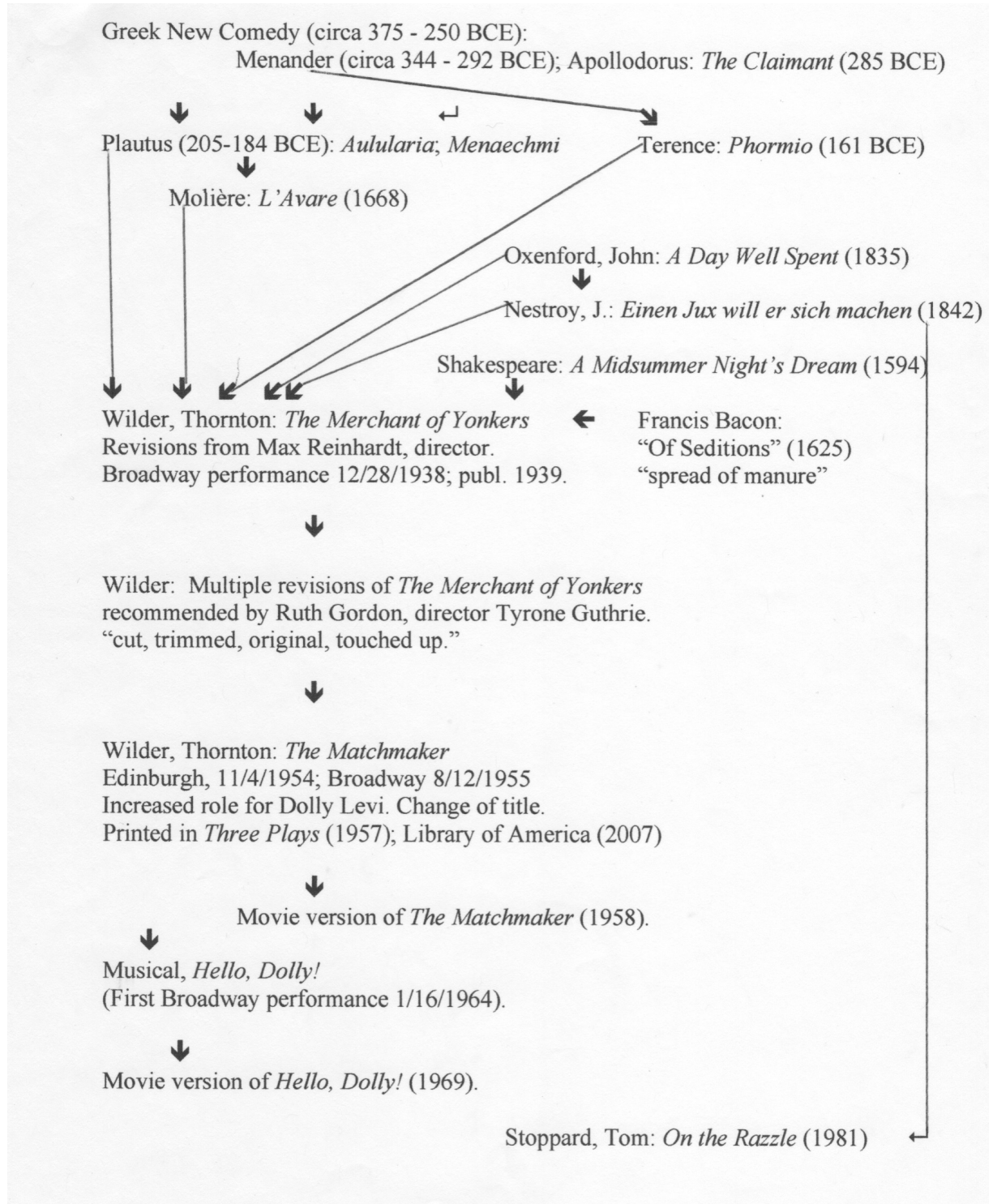
Wishing to guide the imagination of each theatergoer back to his own resources, Wilder advocates that the artist and the poet “probably will have to become prophets again, and our audience will have to rediscover the art of imaginative empathy which cannot be learned with spotlights and other optical exclamation points, but by deep contemplations of the widening rings on the dark waters of the psyche caused only by true poetic insight” (Jungk 147-48). Thornton Wilder, a *poeta doctus* for modern America, reinterprets Vergil’s *sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt* as “tears for the beauty of the world,” using scenes depicting the beauty of the world and the resulting sorrow when individuals recognize this too late. Saturating his oeuvre with the spirit of antiquity, Wilder exhorts us to observe lovingly and to live life fully while on earth. Wilder, through Dolly Levi, Julius Caesar, and Emily Webb, transforms Vergil’s *lacrimae rerum* into “Our Tears.”

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<sup>31</sup> The English translation in *Conversations with Thornton Wilder* mistakenly prints the title of the journal *Das Neue Forum* as *Das Neue Form*.

## Appendix E

### Transmission and Sources of Thornton Wilder's *The Matchmaker*





*et quasi cursores vitae lampada tradunt*

and like runners, they pass on the torches of life

Lucretius, *De rerum natura*, 2.79

Sculpture on Portico, Flower Street Façade, Goodhue Building,

Los Angeles Public Library

Façade completed 1926

Sculptor Lee Lawrie (1877-1963)

Architect Bertram Grosvenor (1869-1924)

Photo credits: <https://www.lapl.org/branches/central-library/art-architecture/sculpture>

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