Youth

by Thornton Wilder

This play became available through the research and editing of F.J. O'Neil, of manuscripts in the Thornton Wilder Collection at Yale University.

A Samuel French Acting Edition

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FOREWORD TO *YOUTH*

The Third Play in Thornton Wilder's *Ages of Man* One-Act Play Cycle

From the time he began dreaming up plays as a boy Thornton Wilder's vision of the theater transcended conventional boundaries, and to the end of his life his vision continually evolved and expanded. In 1956, he began work on what grew into an extravagantly ambitious project: two cycles of seven one-act plays based on the Deadly Sins and the Ages of Man. *Youth* is the third play in Wilder's series on the Ages of Man.

In what would prove to be his final dramatic works, Wilder sought not only to explore the theatrical possibilities inherent in the Sins and Ages, but (as he phrased it in his private journal on Christmas Day 1960) to "offer each play in the series as representing, also, a different mode of playwriting: Grand Guignol, Chekhov, Noh play, etc., etc." In short, he envisioned nothing less than a tour de force of dramatic theme and form encapsulated in the economy and intensity of the one-act play.

Wilder did not complete the challenge he set for himself, but he came close. The surviving work enriches his dramatic legacy and deserves to be remembered as more than a footnote to his lifelong conviction (written soon after *Our Town* opened on Broadway in 1938): "The theater offers to imaginative narration its highest possibilities."

The Sins and Ages Then and Now

A brief overview of the history of these plays will help readers place them in Wilder's career as a dramatist. Two Sins, *Bernice* (Pride) and *The Wreck on the 5:25* (Sloth), premiered in English at a special event in Berlin in 1957 (with Wilder performing in *Bernice*). For reasons that have never been clear, for he enjoyed the experience and felt that plays did well, he withdrew them. That same year a third Sin, *The Drunken Sisters* (Gluttony), written as the satyr play for Wilder's full length drama, *The Alcestiad*, proved successful in its premiere on the stage of Zürich's fabled Schauspielhaus.

Five years passed before the continuation of his ambitious scheme appeared on a stage in the United States. In January 1962, two new Ages, *Infancy* and *Childhood,* and a new Sin, *Someone From Assisi* (Lust), opened at Circle in the Square, then located off-Broadway on Bleecker Street, to the reported largest pre-opening advanced sale in that stage's then 11-year history. Billed as "Plays for Bleecker Street," the show of ran for 349 performances.

Then silence. After "Plays for Bleecker Street" closed, no more Sins or Ages appeared. When Thornton Wilder died in 1975 the public record of his 14-play scheme contained only four plays – two Ages (*Infancy* and *Childhood*) and two Sins (Lust and Gluttony).

Today, eleven of Wilder's Sins and Ages are available for production: a completed cycle of the seven Deadly Sins and four of seven Ages of Man. The source of the seven "new" plays is no secret. The missing pieces were found in Thornton Wilder's archives at Yale[1]. From this source, starting in 1995, his literary executor and family released the two plays withdrawn in 1957, *Cement Hands* (Avarice), and four additional titles (*Youth*, *The Rivers Under the Earth* [Middle Age][2], *A Ringing of Doorbells* [Envy] and *In Shakespeare and the Bible* [Wrath]) recovered and completed by the actor, director and friend of Wilder's, F.J. O'Neil. (Mr. O'Neil's valuable notes on the origin of each of these missing links follow the text of each play.)

The public reception of Thornton Wilder's long lost and new plays was gratifying. *The Wreck on the 5:25* was selected as one of the Best American Short Plays of 1994-95. In 1997, the Centenary of the playwright's birth, Kevin Kline starred in a premiere reading in New York of *Cement Hands*, and the works recovered by Mr. O'Neil served as the centerpieces of Actors Theatre of Louisville's 13th Annual Brown-Forman Classics in Context Festival. Finally, as the capstone to the Centenary celebration, TCG Press in 1997 published the 11 Sins and Ages in Volume I of *The Collected Short Plays of Thornton Wilder.*

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[1] No additional one-acts remain to be discovered in Thornton Wilder's archives at Yale.

[2] We believe Wilder intended *The Rivers Under the Earth* to represent Middle Age.

Wilder never followed conventional theatrical practice. As a young writer in his "Classic One Act Plays" of 1931, he swept away scenery and played provocative games with time and place. In the Sins and Ages, his farewell as a playwright, he is no less adventurous by way of settings, techniques, stage-craft and themes. One artistic trend of the day especially "fired his imagination" where these plays are concerned: his passionate belief in the value of the arena stage. "The boxed set play," he wrote in 1961, "encourages the anecdote…The unencumbered stage encourages the truth in everyone." Wilder felt so strongly that audiences should be seated as close to the actors as possible that Samuel French, for several years, was only permitted to license these plays to companies agreeing to perform them on a three-sided thrust or arena stage.

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As part of its celebration of Wilder's one-act plays, Samuel French and the Wilder family take great pleasure in issuing new acting editions for the Sins and Ages long in print and, for the first time, acting editions of the seven new Wilder works. We invite those performing or teaching these plays to visit www.thorntonwilder.com for additional information.

– *Tappan Wilder,*
Literary Executor for Thornton Wilder

CHARACTERS

LEMUEL GULLIVER – a shipwrecked sea captain, forty-six
MISTRESS BELINDA JENKINS – a commoner, eighteen
LADY SIBYL PONSONBY – a noble lady, twenty-four
THE DUKE OF CORNWALL – the island's governor, twenty-eight
SIMPSON – a commoner and builder, twenty
TWO BOY GUARDS – fifteen

SETTING

A tropical island.

(At the back, an opening through a thicket leads to the principal town. Forward on the stage is a palm-thatched summer house without walls. Under its roof is a rustic table and bench; on the table some worn books. On the floor at one side of the stage is a piece of glass, fringed with moss; this represents a spring.)

*(***GULLIVER***, forty-six, drags himself on in the last stages of hunger and exhaustion. He sees the spring and avidly laps at it with hand and tongue. Somewhat refreshed, he lies down and closes his eyes. Then rising to a sitting position, he becomes aware of the summer house. He goes to it and opens one of the books. In great amazement he murmurs: "English! In English!")*

(In the distance a young woman's voice is heard lilting a kind of yodel. It ceases and is resumed several times.)

*(***GULLIVER** *makes a shell of his hands and call:)*

GULLIVER. Anyone?…Is anyone there?

BELINDA'S VOICE. What?…Wha…a…t?

GULLIVER. Is anyone there?

VOICE. *(nearer)* 'Oo are *you?*

GULLIVER. *(still calling)* I am an Englishman, madam, shipwrecked on this island.

VOICE. 'Oo?…'Ooh?

GULLIVER. I am Captain Gulliver, at your service, madam.

VOICE. 'Ooh?

GULLIVER. Captain Gulliver – Lemuel Gulliver of the fourmaster *Arcturus,* Port of London, at your service, madam.

VOICE. Oh! Lord. 'Ow old are you? *(***GULLIVER***, nonplussed, does not answer.)* 'Ow *old* are you?

GULLIVER. I'm forty-six years of age.

VOICE. *(just offstage)* No!! No!! *Forty*-six! 'Ow did you get here?

GULLIVER. I was shipwrecked, madam. I have been in the sea for three days, pushing a spar. I am sorely in need of food and am much dependent on your kindness.

(Enter **MISTRESS BELINDA JENKINS**, *eighteen. She gazes at* **GULLIVER** *with growing abhorrence, covers her face with her hands and turns to the entrance through which she came.)*

BELINDA. Oh, Lady Sibyl! 'Ow 'ideous! 'Ow unbearable!

(Enter **LADY SIBYL PONSONBY**, *twenty-four. Both are charmingly dressed as of the eighteenth century in some textile-like tapa cloth.* **LADY SIBYL** *is a great lady, however, and carries a parasol tufted with seagulls' feathers.)*

LADY SIBYL. *(staring at* **GULLIVER**, *but with more controlled repulsion; as though to herself.)* It's hall true! Then it's hall true, wot they say! *(pronounced "si")*

BELINDA. *(to* **GULLIVER**, *spitefully)* Turn your fice awigh! How can you look at Lady Sibyl?

LADY SIBYL. *(with authority)* 'Old your tongue, Jenkins.

BELINDA. *(pointing)* But he's terrible! He's terrible!

LADY SIBYL. *(coldly)* Yes. – You are 'ideous to behold.

GULLIVER. I'm a plain man, madam; and in addition I have been without food and drink for three days – and with very little sleep.

LADY SIBYL. *(again as though to herself)* I have never seen an old man before. *Forty*-six, you say? It's hall true, too true.

BELINDA. *(peeking from behind* **LADY SIBYL***)* The wrinkles, your ladyship. Nobody could count them! – Can he see? Can he hear?

LADY SIBYL. *(from curiosity, not kindness)* You must be suffering in every part of your body?

GULLIVER. I have suffered, madam, principally from thirst until I found this spring here; and I would be most beholden to you if *you* could also graciously give me something to eat.

LADY SIBYL. I shall never forget this moment. You are, indeed, a most pitiable spectacle.

GULLIVER. *(with dignity)* I shall turn my face away if it distresses you, madam.

BELINDA. All of you is as repulsive as your face.

GULLIVER. I am as God made me and the hardships I have endured. – If you would graciously provide me with the means I could catch fish to [assuage] my hunger. I have been shipwrecked before and have sustained myself in many ways.

LADY SIBYL. *(musing)* At your age everything must be painful – exceedingly – breathing…and walking…

GULLIVER. *(loud)* Young woman, are you indeed deaf *(pronounced "deef")* or do you lack humanity? I am starving.

BELINDA. "Young woman!" You are talking to Lady Sibyl Ponsonby.

LADY SIBYL. Be quiet, Jenkins. – Old man, you will be given something to eat. There have been other old men on this island. They were given something to eat before they departed.

GULLIVER. I hope that will not be long.

LADY SIBYL. That will not be long.

GULLIVER. Did I understand you, madam, did I hear correctly: that you have never seen a man of forty-six before?

BELINDA. Forty-six! No one has ever seen anyone older than twenty-nine – except one that floated up from the sea, like yourself. There is no one on this island older than twenty-nine and there never will be.

GULLIVER. Merciful Heavens! What do you do with your older persons?

LADY SIBYL. I will now go and call someone to attend to your needs. You will not follow me! You will not leave this place. Today is a day of festival and it is of the highest importance that no one sees you – that is, as few as possible see you. – Jenkins, stay near him.

BELINDA. I, your ladyship!!

LADY SIBYL. Do not enter into conversation with him. *(appraising him coldly)* I do not think he could progress far.

BELINDA. *(becoming hysterical)* Oh, your ladyship, your ladyship – do not leave me alone with him. I will become ill with the sight. *(She falls on her knees, clinging to* **LADY SIBYL***.)* I will become ill. I will become ill.

LADY SIBYL. Get up, Jenkins! – Very well, I will stay with this man. Go to the Duke of Cornwall. Draw him aside and speak to him in a low voice. Tell him that we have come upon this…foreigner. 'E will know what to do.

GULLIVER. *(gesturing as though bringing food to his mouth)* And tell him –

LADY SIBYL. Tell him the old man is hungry. – But, Jenkins, hold your tongue. Do not speak of it to anyone else.

BELINDA. To think that this should happen today – of all days! *(She sidles up toward* **GULLIVER** *and examines him intently. Softly.)* Think of all the years he has lived!

LADY SIBYL. Jenkins!

BELINDA. *(Still scanning* **GULLIVER***; half answering.)* Yes, milady.

LADY SIBYL. Jenkins! Do as I tell you!

BELINDA. Yes, milady; but I shall never see an old man again. I want to look at him… *(lower)* …he is not as abominable as he was at first. One gets used to him, a little. – Old man, have you wives…and children?

LADY SIBYL. Belinda! I shall have you jailed!

BELINDA. *(turning to her, with spirit)* Your ladyship, with all due respect to your ladyship, your ladyship has been extremely severe with me for many weeks. I care not if I go to jail. As I was the first person to see this old man I ask to be permitted to have a few words with him.

LADY SIBYL. Two minutes, Belinda…No more.

*(***LADY SIBYL** *turns her back on them and moves to the rear of the scene, striking her parasol on the floor.)*

GULLIVER. Yes, Mistress Jenkins, I have a wife Mary, a son John, and a daughter Betsy.

BELINDA. *(slowly, scarcely a question)* And are you very cruel to them?

GULLIVER. Madam?

BELINDA. *Old* men are cruel and nasty tempered. Everyone knows that.

*(***GULLIVER** *gazes deep into her eyes with a faint smile, slowly shaking his head. She continues, as if to herself.)*

Your eyes are different from our eyes. Maybe some old men are a *little bit* kind.

*(***GULLIVER**, *as though in friendly complicity, rubs his stomach with one hand and conveys the other to his mouth.)*

Yes, I will hurry. – I am going, your ladyship.

LADY SIBYL. And remember, no blabbing. *(She looks toward the sun, almost directly overhead.)* The games are about to begin. When you have delivered your message, take your place in silence.

BELINDA. *(curtsies)* Yes, your ladyship.

*(***BELINDA** *goes out.* **LADY SIBYL** *starts strolling about with great self-possession.)*

GULLIVER. Surely, I did not hear correctly – *no* older men?

LADY SIBYL. I have no wish to enter into conversation with you.

GULLIVER. *(After a short pause, no longer able to contain himself.)* By God's body, madam, you cannot be of stone! You are not a child! I have not hitherto been regarded as a contemptible being. I have been received by kings and queens and have been their guest at meat…I am Captain Lemuel Gulliver. I am not a dog.

LADY SIBYL. I have never seen a dog, but I think you must greatly resemble one.

GULLIVER. Madam, you have seen nothing but one small island. You are not in a position to say that you have seen anything. I am astonished that you have no questions to put to me about the world that surrounds you.

LADY SIBYL. *(lofty smile)* What questions would those be, Captain Gullibo?

GULLIVER. Madam, ignorance is a misery, but there is one still greater: a lack of any desire to increase one's knowledge.

LADY SIBYL. But I have learned much from you in this short time. You have come from that world out there *(She indicates it lightly with her parasol; her voice turns suddenly vindictive.)* and you have brought its poisons with you. Your visible infirmities are also marks of the country from which you came. They must be as painful for you to bear as for us to behold. However, you will not have to bear them much longer.

*(***GULLIVER** *gives up trying to understand her. He sinks down on the bench by the table. He is about to fall asleep.)*

Captain, it is not our custom for a commoner to be seated in the presence of the nobility.

*(***GULLIVER***, uncomprehending, raises his head.)*

I see; you are deaf. *(pronounced "deef")* I said: it is not the custom for a commoner to be seated in the presence of the nobility.

GULLIVER. *(dragging himself to his feet; with ironic deference)* Oh…oh…your ladyship will forgive me…my fatigue… and my hunger.

*(***LADY SIBYL** *puts her hand into her reticule and brings out some lozenges, which she places on the table.)*

LADY SIBYL. While you are waiting, here are some comfits which I have been keeping…for my children.

GULLIVER. For your children, Lady Sibyl?

LADY SIBYL. Our children on this island live in a village of their own. They are well tended. They are happy. That is our custom here.

(In astonishment, **GULLIVER** *is about to ask a question. He corrects himself, and, bowing, says in a low voice.)*

GULLIVER. I thank your ladyship.

(He puts two into his mouth ravenously; then takes one out for decorum's sake. A musical sound, like a rolling chord from many harps, is heard from the city. **GULLIVER** *listens in astonishment.)*

May I ask your ladyship the source of that music?

LADY SIBYL. You forget everything you are told. Today is a day of great festival. *(She looks at the sun.)* It is beginning with the children's Morris Dance and –

GULLIVER. Oh, milady, I would greatly wish to see this festival –

LADY SIBYL. *(slight laugh, "how unthinkable")* These will be followed by the Hoop Dance and the Dagger Dance. The Duke of Cornwall – who will be here in a moment – is the greatest victor in the Hoop Dance that has ever been known. He has won eight garlands. Moreover, he is the only man who has ever kept a kite in the air for an entire day.

GULLIVER. Ah!! He must indeed be remarkable!…An entire day!…I trust that the duke is of mature years?

LADY SIBYL. *(sharply)* I did not hear you correctly. *(***GULLIVER** *does not repeat the question.)* He is naturally of mature years. He is our governor. He is twenty-eight *(pronounced "'ite").*

GULLIVER. *(stares at her; then with dawning horror)* Great Heavens, girl! What do you do with your older persons?

LADY SIBYL. Captain Gullibo, there is no profit in pursuing a conversation on matters you are not capable of understanding.

GULLIVER. *(shouting)* You kill them. You murder them when they reach the age of twenty-nine?

LADY SIBYL. How dare you address me in that manner? – Vulgar brutish Englander! Barbarian! How could you understand customs that are based on wisdom and reason.

GULLIVER. I dread to hear them! *(louder)* Are you able to answer me: what do you do to those who reach the age

of twenty-nine?

LADY SIBYL. *(slowly; with serene assurance)* We drink the wine. We sleep. We are placed in a boat. The current carries us away.

GULLIVER. Thunder! This is hellish!

LADY SIBYL. *(putting a hand delicately on her ear)* Restrine your senile violence, Captain Gullibo.

GULLIVER. And *you*, your ladyship – are you going to drink that wine and go to sleep in that boat?

LADY SIBYL. When I am old – readily, gladly. I have four years to live. That is a very long time.

GULLIVER. And no one ever rebels? No one twenty-nine years old ever wishes to live longer?

LADY SIBYL. Captain Gullibo, you prate. You rive. You forget that you are old – very old. What I have told you is the custom of this island! Do you understand the word "custom"?…Would any of us *wish* to be…

GULLIVER. *(hand to head)* Your ladyship must permit me to sit down. *(he does)*

LADY SIBYL. *(strolling about and fanning herself)* It is understandable that the duke is occupied today. *(severely)* Your arrival is most inopportune.

GULLIVER. The matter was beyond my control, Lady Sibyl. Little did I know that I was arriving on this happy island on the great day of the Hoop Dance. On future occasions I shall arrange it with greater propriety.

LADY SIBYL. *(looks at him and raises her eyebrows)* Future occasions, Captain Gullibo? At your age, Captain, you cannot speak with certainty of future occasions.

GULLIVER. *(returning her glance; in a low voice)* Lady Sibyl, I am thinking of your children. You will never know the joys of seeing them grow into young manhood and womanhood. You will never hold grandchildren on your knees.

LADY SIBYL. You are tedious, Captain Gullibo. I have read of those things in books.

GULLIVER. Ah, madam. – You have books, I see.

LADY SIBYL. We have one hundred and twenty-seven books, Captain.

GULLIVER. *(lowers his head in admiration; after a pause, suddenly humble and earnest)* Lady Sibyl, let me throw myself upon your mercy. You are a woman, and women in all times have tempered this rough world with mercy and compassion. I have arrived a stranger and an interloper here; I do not wish to intrude upon this happy existence. I can see that you have much influence on this island; graciously exert it on my behalf. I saw that there were boats drawn up along the shore. I am a seaman of experience. When I have been given some food to stay my hunger, be my advocate with this Duke of Cornwall –

LADY SIBYL. *(purest amazement)* Where would you go?

GULLIVER. *(pointing)* …That island or continent…those mountains…

LADY SIBYL. *(harshly)* I have nothing to do with such matters. Those fishing boats and their sails are fixed to the shore. They are locked with thongs that only a few nobles can undo. – You forget that you are old – very old. Your life is over. Anyone can see that.

(She turns away.)

GULLIVER. I have a wife and children. – You said you have children?

LADY SIBYL. Naturally I have children.

GULLIVER. Look in your heart. Enable me to –

LADY SIBYL. Be silent!

GULLIVER. *(sinking onto the bench; to himself, in despair)* Yes… yes…Humanity is the last thing that will be learned by man. *(He puts his head on his arms and is about to fall asleep.)*

LADY SIBYL. *(walking up and down, loftily)* You may be certain that nothing will be done here that is not for the wisest and the best. We are enlightened here; and we are Christians. That strain of music you heard came from Westminster Abbey. The Archbishop of Canterbury is

addressing the contestants in the games. If you were a *young* man we would be proud to show you how happy our existence is, and how perfect our institutions. This perfection is rendered possible by the fact that here we have no –

*(***GULLIVER** *has fallen asleep.)*

GULLIVER. *(mumbling)* …steep…the steep streets… Redriff, home!…Mary – Polly!…Polly, forgive me….

(He falls silent. **LADY SIBYL** *gazes at him for a moment with repugnance, then draws nearer and scans his face intently – a long gaze. When he stirs and seems about to wake, she moves away and, opening her parasol, strolls off the stage.)*

(In deep stupor **GULLIVER** *slips off the bench and rolls under the table.)*

*(***LADY SIBYL** *returns hurriedly; there is a suggestion of walking backward as though royalty were approaching. Enter the* **DUKE OF CORNWALL**, *twenty-eight, very splendid in festival dress. To the early eighteenth-century costume have been added feathers and colored shells, etc. He is followed by* **SIMPSON**, *twenty, a commoner, carrying a tray of food. The* **DUKE** *gazes fixedly at* **GULLIVER.***)*

LADY SIBYL. He has fallen into a swound, your grace.

DUKE. Simpson – throw some water on his face.

*(***SIMPSON** *scoops some water from the mirror pool and throws it on* **GULLIVER***'s face.* **GULLIVER** *recovers consciousness, stirs and cumbrously extricates himself from under the table. Finally, he grasps the situation and, standing erect, confronts the* **DUKE**, *eye to eye.)*

Who are you?

GULLIVER. Lemuel Gulliver, your grace, captain of the fourmaster *Arcturus*, Port of London.

DUKE. How old are you?

GULLIVER. I am in my middle years; I am forty-six.

DUKE. They tell me you have been three days without food – Simpson, place the food on the table. Eat!