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SF PERUSALS

The Drunken Sisters

by Thornton Wilder

A Samuel French Acting Edition

SAMUEL FRENCH
FOUNDED 1830

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FOREWORD TO WILDER'S *THE DRUNKEN SISTERS*

The Sin of Gluttony

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. *The Drunken Sisters* represents "Gluttony" in Wilder's projected cycle on the Seven Deadly Sins. It is also the satyr play that followed *The Alcestiad*, Wilder's adaptation of the ancient Greek "Alcestis" story.

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

CLOTHO – (pronounced KLO-tho) one of the *Three Fates*
LACHESIS – (pronounced lay-KEY-sis) one of the *Three Fates*
ATROPOS – (pronounced AA-tro-pos) one of the *Three Fates*
APOLLO – God of the Sun

SETTING

The time of Admetus, King of Thessaly.

(The only objects necessary for the setting of this play are a platform about two feet high on which the **THREE FATES** *are seated, and the bench beneath them. The bench is largely hidden by their voluminous draperies. They wear the masks of old women, touched by the grotesque but with vestiges of nobility. Seated from the players' Right to Left are* **CLOTHO** *with her spindle,* **LACHESIS** *with the bulk of the thread of life on her lap, and* **ATROPOS** *with her scissors. The designer should resort to every device in order to make them appear enormous and of wide knee-span. They rock back and forth as they work, passing the threads from right to left. The audience watches them for a time in silence, broken only by a faint humming from* **CLOTHO**.*)*

CLOTHO. What is it that goes first on four legs, then on two legs? Don't tell me! Don't tell me!

LACHESIS. *(bored)* You know it!

CLOTHO. Let me pretend that I don't know it.

ATROPOS. There are no new riddles. We know them all.

LACHESIS. How boring our life is without riddles! Clotho, make up a riddle.

CLOTHO. Be quiet, then, and give me a moment to think… What is it that…What is it that…?

(Enter **APOLLO**, *disguised. He wears a cone-shaped straw hat with a wide brim to conceal his face. Three flagons are hanging from a rope around his neck.)*

APOLLO. *(to the audience)* I am Apollo. In the disguise of a kitchen boy. I hate disguises. And I hate drunkenness – but see these bottles I have hanging around my neck? I hate lies and stratagems; but I've come here to do crookedly what even Allfather Zeus could not do without guile. These are the great sisters – the

Fates. Clotho weaves the threads of life; Lachesis measures the length of each; Atropos cuts them short. I have come to do a thing which has never been done before – to extend human life; to arrest the scissors of Atropos. Oh, to change the order of the universe.

ATROPOS. Sister! Your elbow! Do your work without striking me.

LACHESIS. I can't help it – this thread is s-o-o l-o-o-ong! Never have I had to reach so far.

CLOTHO. Long and gray and dirty! All those years a slave!

LACHESIS. So it is! *(to* **ATROPOS***)* Cut it, dear sister. *(***ATROPOS** *cuts it – click!)* And now this one; cut this. It's a blue one – blue for bravery, blue and short.

ATROPOS. So easy to see!

(click)

LACHESIS. You almost cut that purple one, Atropos.

ATROPOS. This one? Purple for a king?

LACHESIS. Yes; watch what you're doing, dear. It's the life of Admetus, King of Thessaly.

APOLLO. *(aside)* Aie!

LACHESIS. I've marked it clearly. He's to die at sunset.

APOLLO. *(to the audience)* No! No!

LACHESIS. He's the favorite of Apollo, as was his father before him, and all that tiresome house of Thessaly. The queen Alcestis will be a widow tonight.

APOLLO. *(to the audience)* Alcestis! Alcestis! No!

LACHESIS. There'll be howling in Thessaly. There'll be rolling on the ground and tearing of garments…Not now dear; there's an hour yet.

APOLLO. *(aside)* To work! To work, Apollo the Crooked! *(He starts the motions of running furiously while remaining in one place, but stops suddenly and addresses the audience.)* Is there anyone here who does not know that old story – the reason why King Admetus and his queen Alcestis are dear to me? *(He sits on the ground and continues talking with raised forefinger.)* Was it ten years ago? I am

little concerned with time. I am the god of the sun; it is always light where I am. Perhaps ten years ago. My father and the father of us all was filled up with anger against me. What had I done? *(He moves his finger back and forth.)* Do not ask that now; let it be forgotten…He laid upon me a punishment. He ordered that I should descend to earth and live for a year among men – *I*, as a man among men, as a servant. Half hidden, known and not known, I chose to be a herdsman of King Admetus of Thessaly. I lived the life of a man, as close to them as I am to you now, as close to the just and to the unjust. Each day the King gave orders to the other herdsmen and myself; each day the Queen gave thought to what went well or ill with us and our families. I came to love King Admetus and Queen Alcestis and through them I came to love all men. And now Admetus must die. *(rising)* No! I have laid my plans. I shall prevent it. To work. To work, Apollo the Crooked. *(He again starts the motions of running furiously while remaining in one place. He complains noisily.)* Oh, my back! Aie, aie. They beat me, but worst of all they've made me late. I'll be beaten again.

LACHESIS. Who's the sniveler?

APOLLO. Don't stop me now. I haven't a moment to talk. I'm late already. Besides, my errand's a terrible secret. I can't say a word.

ATROPOS. Throw your yarn around him, Lachesis. What's the fool doing with a secret? It's we who have all the secrets.

(The threads in the laps of the Sisters are invisible to the audience. **LACHESIS** *now rises and swings her hands three times in wide circles above her head as though she were about to fling a lasso, then hurls the noose across the stage.* **APOLLO** *makes the gesture of being caught. With each strong pull by* **LACHESIS**, **APOLLO** *is dragged nearer to her. During the following speeches* **LACHESIS** *lifts her end of the strands high in the air, alternately pulling* **APOLLO** *up, almost strangling him, and flinging him again to the ground.)*

APOLLO. Ladies, beautiful ladies, let me go. If I'm late all Olympus will be in an uproar. Aphrodite will be mad with fear – but oh, already I've said too much. My orders were to come immediately, and to say nothing especially not to women. The thing's of no interest to men. Dear ladies, let me go.

ATROPOS. Pull on your yarn, sister.

APOLLO. You're choking me. You're squeezing me to death.

LACHESIS. *(forcefully)* Stop your whining and tell your secret at once.

APOLLO. I can't. I dare not.

ATROPOS. Pull harder, sister. Boy, speak or strangle.

(She makes the gesture of choking him.)

APOLLO. Ow! Ow! – Wait! I'll tell the half of it, if you let me go.

ATROPOS. Tell the whole or we'll hang you up in the air in that noose.

APOLLO. I'll tell, I'll tell. But – *(He looks about him fearfully.)* – promise me! Swear by the Styx that you'll not tell anyone, and swear by Lethe that you'll forget it.

LACHESIS. We have only one oath – by Acheron. And we never swear it – least of all to a sniveling slave. Tell us what you know, or you'll be by all three rivers in a minute.

APOLLO. I tremble at what I am about to say. I…ssh…I carry…here…in these bottles… Oh, ladies, let me go. Let me go.

CLOTHO & ATROPOS. Pull, sister.

APOLLO. No! No! I'll tell you. I am carrying the wine for… for Aphrodite. Once every ten days she renews her beauty…by…drinking this.

ATROPOS. Liar! Fool! She has nectar and ambrosia, as they all have.

APOLLO. *(confidentially)* But is she not the fairest?… It is the love gift of Hephaistos; from the vineyards of Dionysos;

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