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SF PERUSALS

In Shakespeare and the Bible

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

SAMUEL FRENCH
FOUNDED 1830

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FOREWORD TO WILDER'S *IN SHAKESPEARE AND THE BIBLE*

The Sin of Wrath

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. *In Shakespeare and the Bible* represents "Wrath" in Wilder's projected cycle on the Seven Deadly Sins.

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

MARGET, a maid

JOHN LUBBOCK, a young attorney, twenty-seven, Katy Buckingham's fiancé

MRS. MOWBREY, Katy Buckingham's aunt, late fifties

KATY BUCKINGHAM, twenty-one

SETTING

An oversumptuous parlor, New York, 1898.

(All we need see are three chairs, a low sofa and a taboret. Two steps descend from the hall at the back into the room. A Swedish maid, **MARGET**, *introduces* **JOHN LUBBOCK**, *twenty-seven, self-assured; face and bearing under absolute control.)*

LUBBOCK. Mrs. Mowbrey wrote me, asking me to call. My name is Lubbock.

MARGET. Yes, sir. Mrs. Mowbrey is expecting you. She will be down in a moment, sir. She says I'm to bring you some port. I'll go and get it.

(Exit **MARGET**. **LUBBOCK**, *hands in his pockets, whistling under his breath, strolls about examining closely, one by one, the pictures hanging on the wall invisible to us.* **MARGET** *returns bearing a small tray on which are two decanters and two goblets. She puts them on the taboret.)*

There's port in this one, sir, and sherry in this. Mrs. Mowbrey says you're to help yourself.

LUBBOCK. Thank you. *(still examining the pictures)* These are relatives and ancestors of Mrs. Mowbrey?

MARGET. Oh, yes. Mrs. Mowbrey comes of a very fine family. I've heard her say that that is her father. As you can see, a clergyman.

LUBBOCK. *(casually)* She lives alone here?

MARGET. Oh, yes. She's a widow, poor lady. And very much alone. Would you believe it, if I said that no one's come to the house to call for the whole time I've been here, except her lawyer man. And, oh yes, the minister of her church.

LUBBOCK. For several months.

MARGET. Oh, I've been here about a year. But today we're going to have two callers – you, sir, and a young lady that's coming later. Yes, and I mustn't forget when the doorbell rings for the young lady, I'm to take out the decanters before I open the door. Now I mustn't forget that. And then I'm to bring in the tea. Now, you'll help yourself, won't you?

*(***MARGET** *goes out.* **LUBBOCK**, *thoughtfully, pours himself a considerable amount of sherry and, sipping it, returns to his examination of the room and the pictures. Enter* **MRS. MOWBREY**, *late fifties, handsome, florid, powdered. She wears a black satin dress covered with bugles and jet. She addresses* **LUBBOCK** *from the hall before descending into the room.)*

MRS. MOWBREY. Mr. Lubbock, I am Mrs. Mowbrey.

LUBBOCK. Good afternoon, ma'am.

MRS. MOWBREY. You don't know who I am?

LUBBOCK. No, ma'am. I got your letter asking me to call.

MRS. MOWBREY. *(coming forward)* Won't you sit down?

(They sit, **MRS. MOWBREY** *behind the taboret.)*

Mr. Lubbock, I had two reasons for asking you to call today. In the first place, I wish to engage a lawyer. I thought we might take a look at one another and see if we could work together. *(She pauses. He bows his head slightly and impersonally.)* I mean a lawyer to handle my affairs in general and to advise me. *(same business)* My second reason for asking to see you is that I am your fiancée's aunt.

LUBBOCK. *(amazed)* Miss Buckingham's aunt! She never told me she had an aunt.

MRS. MOWBREY. No, Mr. Lubbock, she wouldn't. I am the black sheep of the family. My name is not mentioned in that house. – Will you pour me some port, please. I am glad to see that you have helped yourself…Thank you…Yes, I am your future mother-in-law's sister.

(He is standing up, holding his glass – waiting.)

MRS. MOWBREY. *(cont.)* Our lives took different directions.

(He sits down.)

But before we get into the legal matter, let's get to know one another a little better. – Tell me, I haven't seen my niece for fifteen years. Is she a pretty girl?

LUBBOCK. Yes – very.

MRS. MOWBREY. We're a good-looking family.

LUBBOCK. *(indicating the pictures on the wall)* And a distinguished one. Miss Buckingham would be very interested in seeing these family portraits.

MRS. MOWBREY. Yes. *(she sips her wine, then says dryly, without a smile)* It's not hard to find family portraits, Mr. Lubbock. There are places on Twelfth Street, simply full of them. Bishops and generals – whatever you want.

LUBBOCK. *(continuing to look at them, also without a smile)* Very fine collection, I should say.

(She takes another sip of wine.)

MRS. MOWBREY. Mr. Lubbock, I've made some inquiries about you. You are twenty-seven years old.

LUBBOCK. Yes, I am.

MRS. MOWBREY. You took your time finding yourself, didn't you? All that unpleasantness down in Philadelphia. What happened exactly? Well, we won't go into it. Then you gave yourself a good shaking. You pulled yourself together. Law school – very good. People are still wondering where you got all that spending money. It wasn't horse racing. It wasn't cards. No one could figure it out. Apparently it was something you were doing up in Harlem. – Certainly, your parents couldn't afford to give you anything. In fact, you were very generous to them. You bought them a house on Staten Island. You were a very good son to them and I think you'll make a very good family man.

LUBBOCK. *(with a slight how and a touch of dry irony)* You are very well informed, ma'am.

MRS. MOWBREY. Yes, I am. *(She takes another sip of wine.)* On Saturday nights you often went to 321 West Street "The Palace," you boys called it. Nice girls, everyone of them, especially Dolores.

LUBBOCK. *(mastering violence; rises)* I don't like this conversation, ma'am. I shall ask you to let me take my leave.

MRS. MOWBREY. *(raising her voice)* You and I have met before, Mr. Lubbock. You knew me under another name. I owned The Palace.

LUBBOCK. Mrs. Higgins!!

MRS. MOWBREY. My hair is no longer blond. *(She rises and crosses the room.)* You may leave any moment you wish, but I never believed you were a hypocrite.

LUBBOCK. *(after returning her fixed gaze wrathfully; then sitting down again)* What do you want?

MRS. MOWBREY. Yes, I owned The Palace and several other establishments – refined, very refined in every way. I've sold them. I've retired. I see no one – no one – whom I knew in those days. Except today I am seeing yourself. Naturally, I am never going to mention these matters again. I am going to forget them, and I hope that you will forget them, too. But it would be very valuable to me to have a lawyer who knew them and who was in a position to forget them. – I'll have a little more port, if you'll be so good.

*(***LUBBOCK** *takes the glass from her hand in silence, fills it at the taboret and carries it to her. She murmurs: "Thank you." He returns and stands by the taboret, talking to her across the length of the stage.)*

LUBBOCK. I don't believe you asked me here to engage me as your lawyer. There's something else on your mind. will you say it and then let me take my leave?

MRS. MOWBREY. You were always like that, Jack.

LUBBOCK. *(loud)* I will ask you not to call me Jack.

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