

“Putting on Her White Hair”: The Life Course in Wilder’s *The Long Christmas Dinner*

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Thornton Wilder’s *The Long Christmas Dinner* (1931) holds a unique place in American drama, as it covers ninety years in the history of one family. The one-act play captivated composer Paul Hindemith, who collaborated with Wilder to adapt *The Long Christmas Dinner* as a 1961 short opera by the same name. Analyses of both works overlook the representation of age and aging on stage. Actors perform the aging of characters from young adulthood to death in just a few minutes of stage time, challenging the “difference” of age by suggesting the stability of human identity over the life course. One element of ageism is the perception that changes of age entail changes in identity. In Wilder’s play, although the actors use props that stereotype the changes of age, such as a white wig or wheelchair, no major transformation of identity is evident. The play is short enough that the audience never forgets that one actor embodies a character from young adulthood through death. Thus, the onstage life course becomes a natural continuum marked by milestones of experience, rather than an Othering of the aged. Each character who grows old remains central to the family until death. As age studies activists and scholars look to the arts for reflections of social age construction and for potential models of age equality, they may find useful this artistic vision of age as performative.

Thornton Wilder’s *The Long Christmas Dinner* (1931) holds a unique place in American drama, as it covers ninety years of the history of one family in one act, without a pause in the action. Few plays are crafted on such an epic scale, tracing life course after life course until greater patterns emerge. Aside from the iconic *Our Town*, Wilder’s work has not attracted the sustained critical attention it merits, perhaps because some productions of his plays suffer from sentimentalism, distracting scholars from Wilder’s strength in offering overarching insights into the

human condition. In the foreword to a recent biography of Wilder, Edward Albee writes: “Whenever I’m in a theater group and the discussion turns to the essential American playwrights—the ones whose accomplishments define our culture—I’m always startled and confused that Thornton Wilder’s name comes to the fore so infrequently” (xi). Another Pulitzer-Prize-winning playwright, Paula Vogel, also asserts that Wilder deserves greater contemporary attention for his influence: “For an American dramatist, all roads lead back to Thornton Wilder” (viii). She adds, “I am astonished each time I read him, at the force of his work, at the subtle blend of humor and pathos, and his masterful balancing act of abstraction and empathy” (ix). Those qualities are evident in *The Long Christmas Dinner’s* unusual telescoping of time, which prefigures the manipulation of life-span representation that is a hallmark of *Our Town*. The short work captivated noted composer Paul Hindemith, who collaborated with Wilder to adapt *The Long Christmas Dinner* as a 1961 one-act opera by the same name.

Analyses of the play and opera tend to focus on their manipulation of time, overlooking the representation of age and aging on stage. Actors perform the aging of characters from young adulthood to death in just a few minutes of stage time, with little or no physical alteration. An age studies approach to this portrayal of ninety Christmas dinners reveals central thematic issues regarding the stability of human identity over the life course. Conversely, examining both versions of *The Long Christmas Dinner* offers new perspectives to scholars who study age as performance. Too often, consideration of aging in dramatic form is limited to textual themes regarding older characters, and occasionally to issues of casting. As actors in *The Long Christmas Dinner*—both the play and the opera—portray ages across the full adult lifespan, their performances question the construction and sense of stability of the aging self. While this article will focus primarily on the original play version rather than the opera adaptation, these two versions of one story draw attention to the relationship between actor’s age and character’s age that is inherent, but often overlooked, in drama. *The Long Christmas Dinner* points

to age as a performative, a reality being created by repeated performance, and its insistence on continuity during the life course provides ammunition in the fight against ageist attitudes.

Many aspects of the play version of *The Long Christmas Dinner* accentuate stereotypical markers of the life cycle: The set is designed so that characters enter when they are born through a portal decorated with fruit and flowers, at stage left, and exit through another portal “hung with black velvet” at stage right when they die; an upstage door leads to the hall to indicate when characters leave home (61). The stage directions for the play detail how characters’ ages will progress:

The actors are dressed in inconspicuous clothes and must indicate their gradual increase in years through their acting. Most of them carry wigs of white hair which they adjust upon their heads at the indicated moment, simply and without comment. The ladies may have shawls concealed beneath the table that they gradually draw up about their shoulders as they grow older. (61)

While much of the play’s action is indicated simply, through mime, the stage directions single out the portrayal of aging and employ highly stereotypical markers of age, which have gone unquestioned in responses to the play. Margaret Gullette warns that as “ageism” continues to be an umbrella term broadly applied, it remains too easy to deny or dismiss its many specific manifestations (7). It is thus imperative that age critics point out and contradict the narrative of physical decline and decay that underlies some artworks that have been canonized based on other criteria. That narrative can be found in this play, where old age is indicated by characters’ illness and wheelchair use, projecting decline and disability. An initial age critic’s reaction to the use of such Othering markers, particularly the repeated appearance of white wigs, may be that they strongly reinforce ageist attitudes, as the play purposefully delineates old age apart from the supposed prime of adulthood.

However, the theatre traditionally has served as a space for first exposing and then challenging social norms. As Elin Diamond argues, performance “is precisely the site in which concealed or dissimulated

conventions might be investigated” (5). Wilder’s portrayal of aging is more complex than the markers may at first indicate, as he was deliberate about stage conventions. “The theater longs to represent the symbols of things, not the things themselves,” he asserts in a preface for *Our Town*, continuing, “The theater asks for as many conventions as possible,” defining a convention as “an agreed-upon falsehood, an accepted untruth” (658). The major difference between a white wig as an ageist marker in a traditional play and its use here is that the characters of *The Long Christmas Dinner* are born, grow old, and die within just a few minutes. Although the actor dons a wig or a shawl, there is no major transformation of identity; the audience cannot possibly forget that the same actor embodies a character from young adulthood through death, as that actor is on stage for such a short time. The onstage life course—from birth through old age—then becomes a natural continuum marked by a few milestones rather than an Othering of the aged. Without ever exiting the stage, the character becomes aged and remains central to the family unit until death, a departure from the typical theatrical presentation of an aged character who already is a marginalized member of society. As age studies activists and scholars look to the arts for reflections of social age construction and for potential models of age equality, they may find useful this artistic vision of age as performative.

Critics (e.g., Lipscomb and Marshall; Swinnen and Stotesbury) have begun to adapt theories of performativity and performance for age studies; much remains to be done in this vein. Anne Basting lays the foundation for age scholars by pointing to both Richard Schechner’s performance theory and Judith Butler’s notions of performativity (7-8). Schechner defines performance as “twice behaved behavior,” applicable to analyses both of everyday performance and of the stage. Butler’s theorizing of gender as performative rests on constant iteration that creates reality, the doing that constitutes being. As Basting notes, Butler’s emphasis on the impossibility of exactly repeating each iteration suits aging studies better than Schechner’s model, as it begins to accommodate the continuous physical aging of the self over time (8).

Although the concept of performativity arose from speech theory as well as from the theatre, Butler turned to a theatrical example, the drag act, as a method for interrogating cultural gender constructions. She notes that a transvestite transgressing norms on stage garners applause, while that same transvestite simply traveling on a public bus may suffer verbal abuse and even physical assault (278). The stage, then, offers a site that is not-quite reality, where everyday performance safely may be scrutinized. Of particular interest to age critics has been the transformative potential of viewing age as a conscious performance and/or unconscious performative. Theatre here provides a unique perspective on enacting aging: In addition to interrogating the nature of aging by portraying older characters, actors frequently play against their own chronological ages, a convention that calls attention to how age is performative and socially constructed. In turn, the recognition of social construction can lead to social change.

The Long Christmas Dinner offers an intriguing contribution to the conversation about age precisely because the performance of age is so purposefully marked here, so that the conscious age performance on stage raises awareness in the viewer about age as an unconscious performative offstage. How much does our perception of performing age rely on physicality? Does the physical aging of the body transform the sense of a continuous, stable self? Plays that perform aging so noticeably can reveal social discomfort with the performativity of age. Just as Butler points out that gender norms exist on a temporal basis, so age critics who deal with the performative note that age norms are inescapably temporal. Age is enacted with each iteration of performance, yet as the body ages minute by minute, each iteration is one step closer to being stigmatized as elderly, one step closer to confronting mortality. The constant reiteration of age performance provides the illusion of stability, while the self understands on some level that each performance of age is just slightly altered, that the body has changed. This construction of the everyday performative may be resisted or rejected, so that the performance of age on the contemporary stage may evince a pushing away of advancing age,

a longing for an essential sense of self that is stable and ageless. Wilder's play adds to the debate over the performance of age as it is easier to acknowledge and accept physical changes over long spans of time, such as the ninety years portrayed in *The Long Christmas Dinner*. The telescoping of time central to the play forces the audience to contemplate the full life span all at once, emphasizing both the inevitability of change and the feeling of stable identity.

THE LONG CHRISTMAS DINNER AS ONE-ACT PLAY: EMPHASIZING THE MARKERS OF AGE

In the play version of *The Long Christmas Dinner*, issues of aging and time come to the fore immediately as the continuous Christmas dinner begins at Lucia and Roderick Bayard's brand-new house. Roderick's mother is in a wheelchair, a device that becomes a recurring sign of age. While the focus of her character could have been only the physical limits that a wheelchair indicates, "Mother Bayard" displays a sharp mind that keeps track of the family history and of time passed. She tells the family (just a few moments after they begin their dinner) that they have been in the home five years, which provides the first indication of how quickly time will pass. In another moment, her wheelchair heads toward the "dark portal" as she continues relating stories of her youth, and she exits. Despite the stereotypes of old age, Mother Bayard embodies senescence while recounting girlhood, exhibiting an awareness of the complete life span in just a few minutes of stage time. Her last speech is unfinished, highlighting the life-course continuum as she tells her family to go right on having dinner, and the last line about her youth trails off as she heads through the dark portal: "I was ten, and I said to my brother—" (64). Her passing is marked with a "very slight pause" that begins a new segment of action (64). Lucia and Roderick grieve for her for just a moment as the scene continues on the next Christmas Day after the death, then resume the progression of life with small talk about a friend's chronic ailment and a reference to an expected birth. Numerous points on the life course arise in conversation during the first few minutes of action.

This pattern of exit/death, pause, and resumption of life accompanies

the deaths of most of the characters, establishing a focus on the natural course of life and the swift passage of time. By including the mother's death early, the play portrays the end of the life cycle first, establishing an ongoing repetition—she is the first of three women in the play who age to become “Mother Bayard.” Age critics may object to this labeling of older women only by their place in the family; the male characters do not become “Father” as they age, and the last of the three women complains that the label is applied “as though she were an old lady” (78), as if such an identification were an undesirable option. However, the play offers a positive view of extended families and reflects longevity patterns; the female characters tend to outlive the males, thereby becoming the representatives of the oldest generation at any point in the action. The stronger voice of the play is the unifying message that all humans are equally subject to a life course that moves from youngest to oldest in the blink of an eye.

As one life ends, another begins, when Lucia soon gives birth twice, each time represented by a nurse wheeling a buggy through the birth portal. The play follows the full life course of these characters, Genevieve and Charles, who then enter as young adults. A moment later, Charles switches places with his father at the head of the table, and shortly thereafter, their father heads for the dark portal, dying prematurely (indicated by his not having donned his white wig) because he drank too much. This plot development breaks the connection between old age and death, reminding the audience that people of all ages die. The family grieves Roderick's early death, after which Lucia puts on her white hair and reminisces about Mother Bayard's sitting at that table twenty-five years earlier. In a more typical realist play, this reminiscence could be interpreted as an ageist portrayal of the older generation's living in the past, but here the compressed action results in the speech's simply recording the remarkably fast passage of time, as the audience has just witnessed the first Christmas dinner a few minutes earlier. Likewise, when Charles leads in his new wife, Leonora, she repeats the same lines about the Christmas Day weather that the audience has just heard Lucia say as a young bride: “Every last twig is encircled with ice. —You never see that”

(69). As Radavich notes, the line is repeated “in a way that indicates how much the characters assume (wrongly) their experience is unique” (45). By this point, the dialogue has conveyed that even those elements of life that we believe are special are actually just part of the ongoing life cycle.

The joy and sadness of the life cycle intermingle throughout the play, made more evident by the accelerated passage of time. No sooner has Leonora expressed her delight at the weather as a new wife than the nurse brings in a baby buggy for her and wheels it directly to the death portal, further reinforcing the separation of death and old age. Lucia, who has in turn become Mother Bayard, slowly walks toward the dark portal, and then twins are born. Constantly, the play juxtaposes birth and death, beginning and end, establishing a strong sense of balance as one person dies and another is born. The continuing action eventually shows a range of life’s possibilities, rather than simply repeating birth-marriage-parenthood-death. The plot follows the line of sons, as Roderick’s son Charles marries, but daughter Genevieve does not, simplifying the number of characters to trace through the years and maintaining a focus on the Bayard name.

Connected to that focus on patriarchal line, *The Long Christmas Dinner* generally upholds the prevailing negative stereotypes of aging women when it sketches alternatives to married life. Genevieve “becomes a forthright and slightly disillusioned spinster,” the stage directions note, using a loaded age/gender-related term, at the same time that the family invites “dear old Cousin Ermengarde” to live with them (72). In addition to highlighting Ermengarde’s age in the first dialogue reference, the directions indicate that she “already wears her white hair” (72). As the unmarried cousin, Ermengarde is relegated to the sidelines of Bayard family life, but she does become a positive model of stability, remaining on stage for the rest of the play while other characters exit. However, the audience would expect the other unmarried woman, Genevieve, to be a more dynamic character, as she is part of the Bayard lineage central to the plot. She begins to voice bitterness and resistance in the face of normal life changes. When young adult Leonora playfully tries to deny

the inevitability of aging by admonishing her baby, “Stay just as you are,” Genevieve “dryly” echoes that line (72). She is painfully aware that no one will stay the same because she never stops grieving her own mother’s death. She represents those who cannot bear the constant change that life brings, which is made more evident by the play’s time compression. Ermengarde and Genevieve offer the two instances of unmarried life, implying that women were more often single than men were. The play then shows one more life-course possibility, this time one that culturally applied more to men than to women: Charles and Leonora’s son Sam enters the stage as a young man but immediately is killed in a war, cutting his life short (74). The play quickly sketches a wide range of life courses for both genders, contemplating life events on the grandest possible scale.

Part of the focus on the life cycle in *The Long Christmas Dinner* is the conflict between generations, which emerges more clearly in the latter half of the one-act play. The younger son of Charles and Leonora finds his hometown stifling and goes to China, while their daughter leaves the area to make a new home with her family in New York. The house feels empty to the older generation without young people; Charles dies; and Leonora departs to live with her daughter’s family, although she claims to be leaving just for a short time. This exit leaves Ermengarde alone in the Bayard home, reading a letter from Leonora about the first Christmas dinner in her daughter’s new home. The cycle begins again, as Leonora reports that the family calls her Mother Bayard, and she prefers to use a wheelchair. As Ermengarde stays seated at the table, a remnant of the old family in the old house, the script again attends to aging. Ermengarde “grows from very old to immensely old,” takes a cane, and “totters” toward the death portal, ending the play with thoughts about the younger generation, “dear little Roderick and little Lucia” (79). The action concludes with the death of the oldest member of the household, a repetition of the play’s first “event.” Wilder critic Lincoln Konkle, however, reads the cycle not just as repetition, but as a pattern of slow progress. From building the family business to adding personal leisure time, the play shows that each new generation improves on the one preceding, a

pattern that the audience perceives because it holds an omniscient point of view (99). This progress prevents the play from sinking into a perspective of life as meaningless, an endless repetition of birth and death for naught.

The repetition of the life cycle intrigues critics primarily as an issue of time experimentation, working from Wilder's own definitions in the essay "Some Thoughts on Playwriting." He claims that drama differs from other arts in four ways: It is collaborative, "it is addressed to the group-mind," it is "based upon a pretense," and "its action takes place in a perpetual present time" (694). As scholars relate the last condition to the repeated elements of *The Long Christmas Dinner*, they do not make any explicit reference to the aging process which accompanies the passage of time on stage. Radavich interprets the play as deconstructing time "backwards and forwards, both foreshadowing and recalling" happenings that the audience simultaneously witnesses and remembers (46). He does not recognize that this fluidity echoes the way many people experience their own aging. Mansbridge reads Wilder's plays as "dramas that stage the tensions generated from humanity's limited ways of thinking about time" (213). Fletcher mentions the use of white wigs, but only as another method to mark the passage of time (165). Favorini is the rare critic who remarks on aging in conjunction with time: "Rather than conventional flashbacks that place a settled past in relationship to a developing present, these manipulations of time establish a co-immanence of past and present, rather like the time scheme Eliot imagines for the world of literature. This condition is also the experience of aging in the body, where a receding hairline or arthritic finger simultaneously registers both now and then" (133-34). However, Favorini's line of inquiry does not pursue the aging process evident in the play text, for example, by considering the coimmanence of white wigs on youthful actors. The sense of time in *The Long Christmas Dinner* draws critical attention, but the text itself constantly equates the passage of time with the phenomenon of aging.

AGE MARKERS AND IDENTITY: AGENCY AND INEVITABILITY

Wilder's script emphasizes the aging process by dictating the use of wigs, shawls, and wheelchairs, and the nature of that process appears

paradoxical; the actors actively don these accoutrements as if they have control over them, yet the props' inevitable appearance signals that no one can avoid the transformation to old age. The wigs are available from the time the characters enter the scene; they do not exit to obtain them, so aging is always part of the onstage action. All of the characters who live long enough must experience the aging process, and its ending in a calm death after a long life is clearly the best possible outcome. Wilder also very directly states that the actors must *perform* their characters' gradually advancing ages, so that anyone staging the play should not presume that costuming and props are sufficient to indicate the aging process. The script specifies exact times for donning white hair, but it does not orchestrate the raising of the shawls of old age about the women's shoulders, leaving those choices to individual productions. The accelerated time forces the audience to confront the physical transformation of age: The body does change; it must change. When audience members see a character put on a white wig, they know that the character soon will exit through the death portal. Regardless of the control over their bodies that characters seem to possess, they all will grow older and die.

The outward signs of age, from a wig to the actor's shift in posture or gait, manifest a tension between the portrayal of the body, which seems to change before the audience's eyes, and the inner self, which appears essentially unaltered. The white wig is just a marker, which the play demonstrates most clearly when Sam dies in the war, heading for the death portal and "tossing his unneeded white hair through the door before him" (74). He visibly carries his white hair—the symbol of his old age—but discards it when he realizes he will never need it. Just as Mother Bayard embodies old age while referring to girlhood, Sam embodies youth while indicating senescence. Obviously, giving this character white hair to carry on stage was not necessary; however, this action highlights the potential of a long life cut short by war. Carrying his wig illustrates that humans carry the expectation of living at least until the third age, particularly when they are young adults.

The wig in hand also functions to distance the audience from the action

in the tradition of Bertolt Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*, which attempts to defamiliarize the familiar in order to encourage analysis of issues that the play raises. Haberman and Radavich are among the critics who note Wilder's affinity for Brechtian alienation techniques, which call attention to the play as a play, preventing audience members from losing themselves in the action. The tragedy of Sam's death is not thematically important; it is only one of many life possibilities sketched while Wilder contemplates the universality of the life course. Sam throws his wig, alienating the audience from sentiment, calling attention to the stage convention, and perhaps drawing a laugh at the same time that he represents the sadness of death at a young age. The wig distracts the focus away from a particularly difficult individual death and toward the larger issues of life course that interest Wilder. Reviewing a Chicago production, for example, Bommer writes that the play's emphasis on life course prevails over individual circumstance: "The Bayard family's ebb and flow has the grace of a river flowing inevitably toward the sea: you believe the character who comforts another with, 'There's nothing sad about death.'" If it were not for such metatheatrical elements as the wigs and the remarkable compression of time, *The Long Christmas Dinner* easily could tilt too far toward pathos.

Sam's wig spotlights wasted potential because the character is so visibly young, which his mother underscores in dialogue: "He was a mere boy" (74). For the markers of age to be as effective as possible, should all the actors cast in the play be too young to have grey hair? The script gives no indication of how to cast the characters who live out a full life span, but if they appear on the younger end of the age continuum, the marking of the wig might convey more meaning. What, then, of the first Mother Bayard, and of cousin Ermengarde, who already are older characters when they enter? The script is silent about the former, but states of Ermengarde that she is already wearing her wig (72). The actor could be of any age, because the production would use the marker to proclaim the character's age, and she advances to the fourth age during the action. Thus, nothing in the script prohibits casting all the actors from the same general age group. This was the approach of a prominent production of

The Long Christmas Dinner included in an evening of three one-acts called *Wilder, Wilder, Wilder*, performed at New York's Circle in the Square theatre in 1993. Reviews noted that the cast was young; most were in their twenties to early thirties, according to the Internet Broadway Database, and Cynthia Besteman, who played Ermengarde, was in her late twenties. A *New York Times* review singles out for praise the performance of age, especially that "Besteman deftly ages Cousin Ermengarde into a touching portrait ..." (Hampton). The convention of playing against age on stage, so often glossed over in drama criticism, becomes one of the subjects of this play. While it would be intriguing to interpret a production that casts completely against the stated "starting" ages of the characters, casting all the characters in the same age range further emphasizes the life course as a continuum centering on the journey of an individual self.

Although the wigs, shawls, and wheelchairs are the most striking markers of age in *The Long Christmas Dinner*, other textual choices comment on the relationships among age, the physical body, and identity. For example, a character is not embodied at all until becoming a young adult; a baby carriage represents the baby. The new parents make appropriate remarks about the empty carriage, a marker of infancy, as if the baby were there, and then the nurse pushes the buggy offstage. Characters may refer to the child during the few minutes it takes to attain adulthood, but the character does not actually appear on stage until he or she has reached that threshold. Aside from considering the practicality of casting children, the play indicates that only adults have any level of agency. Once embodied, having truly become a subject within the world of the play, the character does not necessarily change outward appearance until the beginning of the third age. Although the text specifies the point at which the character is embodied and when the character puts on a wig, it does not dictate the details of any other age marker. The actor and director may choose to show the character as a completely stable subject from young adulthood to the onset of old age and beyond.

Thus, in performance, *The Long Christmas Dinner* claims an intriguing stability of self, fully formed at the beginning of adulthood and largely unchanged during the rest of the life course. Dialogue reflects that

stability, as Roderick repeats his invitation to drink with cousin Brandon in exactly the same way over the years, saying “A glass of wine with you, sir,” so characteristically that other characters refer to it after Roderick’s death (69). The play, then, can be interpreted as accepting the physical Othering of the aged: The physical age markers—wigs, shawls, and wheelchairs—set the third age apart from adulthood. However, the play can also be seen as acknowledging the changes of physical old age, but not creating an Other because there is no accompanying alteration of the sense of self; imagine, in contrast, how the audience would infer a changed sense of self if a completely different older actor were cast to play the same role once the character reaches the third age.

The markers of old age on stage can be seen in the light of the physical aspects of aging that critics such as Kathleen Woodward and Simon Biggs have discussed as “masquerade.” Older people negotiate in myriad ways the relationship between a continuing sense of young—or ageless—self and the changes of physical age. The subject can feel alienated from the aged body and sometimes will take every possible measure to avoid the appearance of physical age. Biggs addresses Woodward’s nuanced reading of youth masquerade as both hiding something and indicating how it is being hidden: “It therefore tells us something truthful about an act of deception” (52). Biggs notes that theories of masquerade may differ, but they commonly address the difficulty of directly expressing a concealed inner self (53). *The Long Christmas Dinner* provides an unusual—even for the theatre—glimpse at that inner self, in this case showing an aged masquerade after the play already has established the younger self. The audience witnesses the decline on the surface that draws attention away from the initial representation of character and the actor who persists underneath the wig. However, the audience members perceive more than simply the aged mask, as they already have become acquainted with the young self. They are aware that senescence is performed; the wig hides the youthful hair but reminds the audience that the aged exterior is in fact a youthful actor. By donning a white wig, the actor also creates self-distance from the aged—it is the not-me, only a performance—and so proclaims personal youthfulness by

contrast. In the interplay of perceptions of the actor as younger character and older character, the drama portrays the tension in masquerade between the psychological sense of self and the corporeal self.

This conspicuous display of masquerade in *The Long Christmas Dinner* subverts the conventional polarization of young and old, offering potential for acknowledging and combating ageism. Rather than marginalizing the aged, the play establishes a self on stage that is younger and unmarked, then so speedily shows its aging that there is no time to consider the aged differently from the young. This differs from the typical portrayal of aged characters on stage or screen, which generally aims for verisimilitude. When a film or television character must age, makeup and special effects attempt to transform the appearance of a youthful actor into an aged character, garnering attention for how perfectly the mask goes unnoticed. A stage actor also may be cast against chronological age and, without the pressure of a close-up shot, have even more opportunity to perform a different age unnoticed. Some plays, particularly memory plays such as *Death of a Salesman* and *How I Learned to Drive*, require that a main character change ages without any physical alteration at all, which does, like Wilder's play, imply a stability of self. However, the masquerade of *The Long Christmas Dinner* reveals to the audience not only a stability of self-concept but also the social tendency to treat the marked aged as Other, drawing on the masking abilities of a white wig and a shawl to encourage the audience to consider carefully what is hidden.

THE LONG CHRISTMAS DINNER AS OPERA: THE STABILITY OF THE AGING SELF

While this article focuses primarily on the wigs and shawls central to the portrayal of the life course in the play version of *The Long Christmas Dinner*, Wilder notes in a letter that many early productions of the play ignored the costuming directions. "It's been given 500 times, but for the first time as far as I know they're going to use those wigs to indicate the passing of time," he writes of an upcoming production in Vienna in 1935 (qtd. in Niven 408). Subsequently, the wigs and shawls are absent in the libretto that Wilder wrote for Paul Hindemith,

who composed the opera and simultaneously translated the libretto into German. The play had often been described as musical or lyrical (Radavich 44), making it a natural for operatic treatment. The opera, which premiered in 1961, draws characters even more broadly than the play does, omitting some of the more specific historical references as well as individuals' idiosyncrasies. Wilder was suited to the task of the librettist, according to Janie Caves McCauley:

Clearly Wilder, an enthusiastic operagoer himself, understood that opera had to be more concise than drama both because the listener has much more to assimilate in an opera house and because it takes much longer to sing a line than to speak it. Thus, for purposes of economy and clarity, some plot details had to be omitted from and others highlighted in the libretto, although Hindemith's plan maintained Wilder's basic structure and plot. Wilder understood that the librettist must select from the dramatic text those elements that seem most congenial to the essentially lyrical form of opera. (275)

Among those elements, Wilder retained the strong focus on the life course, not only in characters' entrances and exits, but also in inquiries into each other's growth and health. For example, Mother Bayard initially cannot attend the Christmas service at church; then soon, Lucia asks, "Are you tired, dear? Do you want to lie down?" As Mother Bayard responds, "No. No," she heads toward the "Door of Death" (45). As other plot details are pared, the physical decline narrative of aging is more pronounced in the libretto.

The life course is central to the musical scoring as well. Schubert's liner notes for the Wergo recording of the opera explain that Hindemith designed motifs for each life milestone represented. In an interview, Hindemith elaborates, "The children, for example, are always born to the same melody; when someone dies, the same melody returns. The old nanny has her own motif. So even if the word 'leitmotif' is not right, it may be said that each age has its own 'characteristic' motifs" (qtd. in Schubert 16). While aging still is quite evident in the dialogue and action, the cyclical nature of life achieves greater thematic centrality.

The opera's omission of shawls and wigs stands out because the

opening staging notes retain the play's direction that the characters are "eating imaginary food with imaginary knives and forks," which Lifton traces to Wilder's interest in Asian theatrical conventions (78). Other shifts occur in the opera scenes where white hair makes a statement in the play. For example, the play directs that Cousin Ermengarde appears already wearing white hair, while the libretto notes that she already is fifty years old, making more explicit what age is suggested in the play but leaving the performance of that age up to the individual performer. The libretto's blocking tends to match the play's directions about age more closely when it does not involve costuming. In both versions, elderly characters use wheelchairs and change places at the table to allow the next generation to carve the turkey, representing the new head of household and the continuing march of the generations.

While subtracting the costumed markers of age, the opera adds indications of age related directly to its musical component. The parts of Lucia/Lucia II, Mother Bayard/Ermengarde, and Roderick/Sam are double-cast, which reduces the sense of individuated characterization and heightens the universal nature of the life course. The doubling of vocal parts emphasizes continuity of the life cycle even more obviously than the repetition of characters' names: Lucia and Lucia II both are sopranos, and the two characters who already are considered aged when they enter are altos. Younger characters also sing loudly to elderly characters, a nod to the aging process—instead of donning white wigs, characters become old when others raise their voices. The more evident markers of age in the opera, then, tend to be aural rather than visual. While the characters in the play appear to have agency regarding aging, as they control when they put on their white hair, the characters in the opera are aged by the others who sing loudly to them, and aged initially by the score's grouping them in the same vocal type. They are more obviously "aged by culture" than the play's characters, pointing in subtext to the social construction of age (Gullette 7). Still, without the constant visual reminders of wigs and shawls, the opera does not draw as much attention to aging as a central concern. Thirty years after the composition of the play, with Wilder and

Hindemith both in their sixties, the blatant visual marking of senescence is no longer imperative. The sense of aging self that arises from the opera is both less stereotypical and more universal. Self construction is even more stable without the constant visible markers of age.

PERFORMANCE THAT POINTS TOWARD A PERFORMATIVE OF AGE

The stability of the self is evident in both versions of *The Long Christmas Dinner*; both works emphasize the full life course, showing its never-ending repetition until a single individual's time on earth matters very little. Wilder's talent for exploring the universal leads Anne Fletcher to conclude, "To an extent, in his plays, Thornton Wilder tames time and death" (156). That taming arises from the focus on the life cycle: "Death after death occurs in *The Long Christmas Dinner*, but throughout the play characters come to accept sameness and change as inevitable—and as somehow comforting" (Fletcher 168). Wilder maintains that drama as a genre is uniquely suited to insight into the passage of time. The "perpetual present" of a play contrasts with a novel, as the story actually unfolds in real time on stage: "A play visibly represents pure existing" ("Some Thoughts" 702). While the characters on stage age very quickly in the play, the actors age imperceptibly before the eyes of audience members. The play, like *Our Town*, asks the audience to consider the relationship of individual, mundane routine to universal human experience.

Whether characters are cast in the same age group, sing loudly, or use wigs, shawls, and wheelchairs, production elements of either version of *The Long Christmas Dinner* synthesize into a portrayal of the universality of the human life course. Both opera and play show the inevitability of aging and the accompanying physical, performative transformation, as well as the simultaneous connection and disconnection between the aging body and the feeling of an essential, unchanging self. Whereas age critics may commonly divide their attention between age performance on stage and age performativity off stage, this play encourages a simultaneous engagement with both ideas. Considering *The Long Christmas Dinner* adds to the age studies conversation because the play overtly enacts the relationship between the performance of age and its performativity.

Wilder's staging obliges the audience to notice how aging is performed by an apparently unchanged self. Simultaneously, the play draws attention to performative elements that mark the self as aging and aged, inviting and challenging the audience to notice age performativity. A character enters as young, leaves as old, in only a few moments, a process that repeats until the commonality of the experience becomes clear.

The focus on age as performative allows us to look past the stereotypes of aging. An analysis that trains only on the white wig, shawl, and wheelchair as ageist markers would miss the bigger picture, which is exactly what Thornton Wilder excels in portraying. Age studies concepts offer a new critical mode with which to appreciate Wilder's work. Despite the play's featuring a family that reflects cultural assumptions of "average" middle-class life in the United States at the time, condensing ninety years into less than an hour of stage time homes in on the universal contained in the particular. By specifically including age markers, the play emphasizes the importance of the individual's aging within the larger framework of human experience. Birth, marriage, and childbearing are milestone events, but aging is shown as an ongoing process that unites all humans. The play's anti-ageist message becomes discernable: Because all people are aging continuously, there is no reason to segregate those who are farthest along in the process.

John Gassner's 1963 introduction to *The Long Christmas Dinner* calls it "the most beautiful one-act play in English prose" (Gallup and Wilder 311). Enhancing its aesthetic appeal is the play's potential to affect understanding of aging and to combat ageism. The conscious performance of aging on stage points toward an understanding of all ages as unconsciously performative, establishing a common ground for people of every age, rather than separating out those in the third or fourth age as Other. As spectators witness the full life cycle of numerous characters in the space of a few minutes, they can recognize the inevitability of the aging process and question the stability of the self that is undergoing that process. They are undeniably aging; they, too, are simply at a particular point on the spectrum of age, and the life course moves swiftly. Margaret

Gullette advocates a reimagining of aging, bringing generations together to end ageism: “If we can rescue the generation now becoming known as the most expensive by making a progressive revolution in our society’s mental imagination of the life course, we can provide a responsible model for the new longevity for the rest of the global twenty-first century” (17). The theatre certainly has a place in shaping as well as reflecting cultural perceptions of the life course. *The Long Christmas Dinner* is not only a short play of the 1930s that prefigures *Our Town*’s achievement, but it also holds the promise of speaking to contemporary society, evident in productions two Decembers in a row (2011 and 2012) at Brooklyn’s Brave New World Repertory Theatre. Wilder’s enduring one-act can contribute to that reimagining of age, pointing toward an alternative way to envision the construction of self over the life course.

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