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Missing Pieces and Broken Patterns: A Dramaturgical Study of Thornton Wilder's *The Emporium*

By Bonnie Georgette Hamlett

Abstract

As an incomplete play, Thornton Wilder's *The Emporium* offers a unique dramaturgical challenge. Since the '80s, *The Emporium* has been available to us in only four select scenes in varying degrees of interconnected character and plot throughlines. Historical research indicates that these four scenes, though available for purchase, have never been staged in original form in production, and the play itself has largely been dismissed from academic consideration. But even unfinished, *The Emporium* gives a brief glimpse into the creative mind and genius of one of the great American playwrights. Demonstrative from his other, more distinguished work – *Our Town* and *The Skin of Our Teeth* – Wilder was no stranger to the complexities of metatheatricality, and *The Emporium* is no exception. Pushing the bounds of metatheatricality and character-audience engagement, Wilder's unfinished play teases perhaps the most complicated theatrical experiment of his career; complicated enough that Wilder ultimately abandoned it leaving us with just a few pages. This article seeks to explore the theoretical question of producing an incomplete text: what are the structural concerns and is a dramaturgically-successful performance of *The Emporium* even possible?

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The role of the dramaturg often surrounds the question of how to ensure the dramatic integrity of a play's structure. In most productions, that narrative structure has been determined by the playwright's script, and the dramaturg works to explore, deepen, and question the playwright and director's vision. But what happens when the script is abandoned before that structure can be fully realized? Can the structure be considered as part of a whole, cohesive narrative despite its missing pieces? This is the case of Thornton Wilder's *The Emporium*, and the beginning of a dramaturgical study of dramatic and structural integrity.

For the purposes of this paper, I will be analyzing the "Scenes From *The Emporium*," contained within the Library of America edition of the *Thornton Wilder: Collected Plays & Writings on Theater*. I have selected this version as it is the first and only collection to have published all four scenes of the incomplete play as opposed to the standard two.¹ I will also refer to the selected "Notes Toward *The Emporium*" found in *The Collected Short Plays of Thornton Wilder: Volume II*, kept by Wilder and detailing his writing process between 1952-1954. From what insight his notes provide, it is assumed Wilder began work on *The Emporium* in 1948, envisioning it as his next full-length play. For as-of-yet unidentified reasons, he put it aside for a few years before returning in 1953. Sometime around the mid-1950s Wilder ceased working on *The Emporium*. Although his journals do

¹ As of the time of this writing, scenes from *The Emporium* have been published in the Library of America collection (2007), *The Journals of Thornton Wilder 1939-1961* (1985), and *The Collected Short Plays of Thornton Wilder: Volume II* (1998). The latter two books only include Scenes 1 and 2.

not provide definitive evidence for why he quit writing, it is assumed that his frustration with the project bested him and he preferred to turn his attention to new projects. Interestingly, likely around the same time Wilder began to set *The Emporium* aside, he started reworking his 1938 flop *The Merchant of Yonkers* into the widely successful *The Matchmaker*. *The Emporium*, unfortunately, would never receive that same revisit.

Despite the published scenes and notes, little knowledge has been made available to the public regarding *The Emporium*'s final unfinished product. Ten years after Wilder died in 1975, the first two scenes from *The Emporium* were published in a collection of his journals. In the years after, the scenes would be republished and added to different collections. While he was still alive, Wilder began donating a few of his papers to the Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library at his alma mater Yale University; after his death, his family continued to add materials. So far my research has not indicated whether Wilder donated his writings on *The Emporium* or if it was done posthumously. The editors of *The Emporium* scenes for each collection were Donald Gallup, the curator for the Wilder papers at Beinecke, and Tappan Wilder, Thornton's nephew and literary executor. Along with editing, Tappan Wilder would also have been the one to give permission for its publication and all other Wilder writings made public since his uncle's death. The archival listings for the Thornton Wilder Papers at the Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library do have materials for the *The Emporium*, including a "holograph manuscript of Acts I and II and story summary"; but unfortunately this manuscript is only available via in-person request.²

Another curious point of interest, according to present day record, to date there has not been any production, performance, or staged

² Email correspondence with an archivist confirmed no online access available.

reading of the incomplete play; however, *The Emporium* is available on Concord Theatricals website as a Samuel French, Inc. title, similar to Wilder's other work.³ Although the website provides sparse information pertaining to the production and script rights, it does list a price of \$75 per performance and an option to request production rights. I find the listing of interest because it does not reveal which script version would be authorized for production: Scenes 1 and 2, or the publicly available four.⁴ Hopefully in the future this study can be revisited to include additional insights and answers regarding the state of *The Emporium*, and perhaps over time new written materials will be made accessible; but for now I will be working within the parameters of what is available.⁵

One of the first questions I approached after reading *The Emporium* was what is the arc of the structure across the four scenes, and how does its incomplete nature affect the narrative? At first read-through, the scenes of Wilder's script may seem near-disjointed, held together by the thinnest threads of plot, character, and theme. To quote from my previous paper published in the December 2021 edition of the Thornton Wilder Journal:

Scene One opens in an orphanage run by Mr. and Mrs. Foster. In the scene, the Fosters have gathered the orphans together because one child, John, was caught running away and is being returned because he has been adopted. The second scene jumps forward a

³ Samuel French, Inc. has no record of *The Emporium* having been produced, unlike other available Wilder scripts; nor is there any record of productions through internet research or inquiries made with the Thornton Wilder Society and Wilder Estate.

⁴ At the time of research preparing for this paper, I attempted to solicit more information from Concord Theatricals but, as an individual with purely hypothetical interest, could not provide the necessary information requested belonging to a theater company.

⁵ Since the submission of this paper, the Alley Theatre in Houston, Texas, staged the world premiere of Kirk Lynn's adaptation of *The Emporium* in June 2022. Lynn's script however is a new, full-length completed version of the play in collaboration with Wilder's original material.

decade to John, who is now eighteen and living with his abusive adopted parents, the Grahams, at their farmhouse. By the end of Scene Two, Mrs. Graham reveals that John was found as a baby on the steps of the titular store, making him what she calls an Emporium Man, and John sets out in search of his origin. Scene Three, set within the Emporium, has an employee and guard closing for the night and discussing the store's peculiar nature and its beautiful music only people who have worked there can hear. When John sneaks into the store after hours, he is shocked by its apparent emptiness. When the employee and guard find him and prepare to throw him out, John exclaims that he can now somehow hear the music of the store. The guard cryptically informs John that no one can help him experience the Emporium store; he will have to "do it all [himself]" (Collected Plays 487). In Scene Four, the store manager, Mr. Dobbs, is screening potential applicants for employment at the Emporium. He is interrupted by three old people who enter from the audience claiming the Emporium exists outside of the play-within-a-play framework and they want a job. Flustered, Mr. Dobbs tries to ignore them because John, who has also snuck in, is demanding answers to his questions. When Mr. Dobbs is uncooperative, he and John get into a physical altercation. Mr. Dobbs finally begins vaguely to explain the store's secrets before exhaustion stops him. As the manager leaves the stage, John swears to hide in the Emporium until he can talk to more people who work there. (Hamlett 196)

What is notable about the four scenes from *The Emporium* is that each takes place in an entirely different location with a rotating cast of characters played by the same two or three actors. There are only two constant characters in *The Emporium*, and even that is a presumptuous

statement to claim. The first of these is John, the protagonist, and one of the few roles Wilder does not want double-cast. John is first introduced at the start of the play as a runaway orphan, unhappy with his lot in life and the miserable world of the orphanage. In Scene 1, notably the characters who have physical bodies on stage are the adults, played by live actors. The orphan children, including John, are completely invisible and inaudible. Only the adult characters can 'see' and 'hear' the children, and their actors must pantomime appropriately as if the children were actually present. One such example of this pantomiming is when the stage directions for Mr. Conover's actor read: "[he] leads a boy, invisible to [the audience] holding him by the ear" (Wilder, "Scenes" 468). This stagecraft is not unique to *The Emporium*: Wilder often utilized invisible characters, set pieces, and props in nearly all of his short and full-length plays.⁶ This script is an exception in that he had never before or since used that technique on a main character, especially not the protagonist, nor had he ever included it temporarily before introducing the physical actor or object to replace the invisible one. For in Scene 2, when John has reached adulthood around age eighteen, he is now to be played by an actor through the remaining scenes. John's introduction in the scene is unusual and unique to his character: according to the stage directions, "John seems suddenly to rise up in the middle aisle of the auditorium, about six rows from the stage" (Wilder, "Scenes" 471). Working under the assumption that these stage directions call for a live performance in front of an audience, and given the historical proscenium theater layout Wilder's plays typically call for, it appears John's actor must be seated somewhere in the house before curtain and wait for his reveal. This entrance closely aligns John's character with Wilder's audience, a

⁶ A notable exception would be *The Matchmaker* (1954), one of Wilder's few predominantly realist-style plays.

significant association he will continue to reinforce throughout *The Emporium*.

The second character that, like John, is mostly consistent across the four scenes is that of the Member of the Audience.⁷ Similar to the Stage Manager in Wilder's *Our Town*, the Member of the Audience appears on stage before the performance begins. After the stagehands set the properties for Scene 1, including placing a nondescript chair on the stage, the Member of the Audience "enters from the wings at [stage] left...and seats himself in this chair" (Wilder, "Scenes" 463). In a sense, the Member of the Audience has the reversed entrance and association John later does: John is a character who appears immersed in the audience, and the Member of the Audience, representative of a collective 'ideal audience,' appears on the wrong side of the proverbial fourth wall by sitting on the actual stage (Hamlett). Like John, the Member of the Audience is also not double-cast, not because he is the protagonist, but because he is truly meant to look and sound indistinguishable from the actual general audience of any given production. And curiously similar to John as well, the Member of the Audience is seemingly invisible in one scene. In Scene 3 when John sneaks into the Emporium store, this is strangely the only scene that diverges from the others by not mentioning the Member of the Audience in stage directions or dialogue. Though he is notably absent from the written script, in a performance one would assume the character remains on stage as is the expectation of an audience person in the theater. Even Wilder was aware of the character's noticeable absence from Scene 3. In his "Notes Toward *The Emporium*," from August 27, 1953, Wilder ponders how to correct some of the working issues he had with the

⁷ Although none of the dialogue or physical attributes assigned to or referencing the Member of the Audience genders the character, Wilder's stage directions use he/him/his pronouns. Out of consistency for the textual analysis, I will follow his example.

scene, the first of which was “what [to] do with the Member of the Audience” (Wilder, “Notes” 130). Even with the assumption that the Member of the Audience could continue to be onstage during Scene 3 in production, the absence itself speaks to a problem rooted into the four scenes of the unfinished *The Emporium*: how to find structure amidst broken patterns.

Dramaturg Lee Devin writes in “Conceiving the Forms: Play Analysis for Production Dramaturgy,” the structure of a play is found in how “we imagine [its] parts and create the many patterns their arrangement will support” (Devin 209). The idea of identifying patterns and repeating materials in an unfinished piece like *The Emporium* is an interesting, and frustrating, exercise. It frustrates because there is just enough in each of Wilder’s four scenes that we begin to see what could have been a pattern or motif, but ultimately collapses because it is not sustainable across the entire available script. The Member of the Audience’s unintentional absence from Scene 3 is one such break in pattern. From a dramaturgical perspective, we *know* he should be there fulfilling his role as the audience unless given explicit reason not to. Logically he should also be there because the stage directions do not indicate an exit or re-entrance for him, and we know he appears in Scene 4. Even Wilder has told us he should be there, and the only reason the dramaturgical structure breaks is because the scene was left unfinished. Other repeated materials that follow this same unfortunate break are the sound of bells and the Christian imagery. In Scenes 1, 2, and 3, the sound of ringing bells is heard to symbolize different events and evoke different emotions. The alarm bells in the orphanage summon the children during Scene 1 and add a sense of urgency and gathering to the scene; the sleigh bells at the Graham Farm in Scene 2 are a traumatic trigger that signals Mr. Graham’s arrival and violent abuse of his son; and the closing bells inside the Emporium in

Scene 3 provide simultaneous relief and stress to the employees as they try to herd invisible customers out and help create the reality of the store. Wilder himself seemed conscious of the pattern, as in Scene 3 the opening stage directions read: "Again there is a bell" (Wilder, "Scenes" 481). Although his notes do not address the missing bells in Scene 4 as he did the Member of the Audience, it raises the question of this being another case of a missing element Wilder intended to correct had he not abandoned the play.

The other repeated pattern, the Christian imagery, is even less consistent than the previous. In Scenes 1 and 2, the theme of Christianity is overwhelmingly present and tied strongly to other themes of abuse and masculinity. At the orphanage, Mr. Foster "looks like a deacon" and has a "deacon's chair" which sits beside "a vast bible" on a podium (Wilder, "Scenes" 463). Although less explicit in the following scene at the farm, Mr. Graham instructs John to "kneel down and ask God's blessing," an implicit ritual that signals the start of his abuse (Wilder, "Scenes" 479). It seems no coincidence why Wilder intended for these characters to be played by the same actor. In Scene 1, Mr. Foster is physically associated with the dress and station of an authority in the Church, and as Mr. Graham that patriarchal display of power manifests in how he evokes God's name and image to abuse his adopted son. Curiously, Wilder also wanted that same actor to play Mr. Hobmeyer, the night guard for the Emporium store who appears in Scene 3. In this scene, however, all references to Christianity are nonexistent, with the exception of the reference to the Sistine Chapel ceiling having been commissioned for the Emporium Store. By Scene 4, there is not one reference to religion. A question for a production team staging these scenes would be whether to bridge some of these gaps in the patterns Wilder left unfulfilled. Of the three I used for examples—the Member of the Audience, the bells, and

the Christian imagery—I would assume there is more creative liberty to be had with the first two. Though he has no dialogue or specific stage directions in Scene 3, the Member of the Audience should remain present on stage and, using the few cues the actor has available to build the character, he could still react and silently respond as he would throughout the rest of the script. Although perhaps a little trickier, it could be argued for sound design that some kind of bell be added to Scene 4 for continuity. In a hypothetical production, this would present a unique challenge for the dramaturg deciding how best to engage with the audience in pre- and post-show scenarios to provide necessary context concerning both Wilder's incomplete script and that specific theater's approach.

As I worked on this analysis, I had a difficult time thinking of the script in production as a play. I think as a textual piece of writing I can refer to it as an incomplete, or unfinished play; because that is what it is on the page. But in a theatrical context for production this would have to be presented as "Scenes from *The Emporium*." Following the traditional Freytag Pyramid for play structure, I attempted to identify the exposition, point of action, rising action, complication, climax, and denouement across the four scenes, to varying degrees of success. The exposition and point of attack were the first problems because I found three different possibilities for each. Without actually knowing how Wilder intended his play to end, I believe the original exposition might have been Scene 1 at the orphanage through Scene 2, and the point of attack the moment John fights back against his father and leaves, declaring himself an Emporium man. This feels like what should have been a monumental shift in the play but unfortunately now occurs halfway through the available script; and for this reason, in a production of the scenes I would think the second or third possibilities would be the most logical structure to follow.

In the second possibility, the exposition could still be Scene 1 and the point of attack is when John is informed that he will be adopted and have a new life elsewhere. The third possibility, and my personal favorite, is structuring the exposition up until the Member of the Audience is recognized by the other actors; the point of attack becomes when the 'actors' break the fourth wall and the reality of the play-within-a-play is affirmed. Regardless of which option is decided upon, the rising action continues from each point of attack. Discounting the first possibility because it is not the most logically viable, if we go with the second option for the point of attack, I would think the complication occurs in Scene 3 when John is thrown out of the Emporium right when he becomes able to hear the store's music. In the third and final option structured around the Member of the Audience, I would have the complication be when the three old people wander into the auditorium and reveal they are both members of the audience *and* past employees of the Emporium. I think these two options diverge to create two paths for what a production wants to highlight in the performance. The first path focuses on John by structuring the actual plot and hints of the narrative conflict around John discovering his past and what the Emporium is. Since it can be argued there is not enough plot or narrative structure to support John's arc, the latter path centers Wilder's metatheatricality. The three old people's reveal serves as an extraordinary complication because it implodes what we thought we knew of the play's reality. Instead of it being merely a play-within-a-play with the Member of the Audience as the outside observer, the three old people's appearance shocks and confuses even the 'actors' by claiming the reality of the play *is* reality itself.

Regardless of which path is chosen in production, I believe they still both have their climax and denouement around the similar point. For John's narrative-centered structure, I would have the climax build around

Mr. Dobbs' "It's...it's..." cut-off line (Wilder, "Scenes" 495). If drawn out well, this line heightens the secrecy of what exactly the Emporium is, a question John and anyone experiencing the play should be asking at this point; and the denouement comes with the realization that Mr. Dobbs does not finish the answer, and Wilder did not finish the play so we will never know. In the metatheatrical-centered structure, that climax builds at the same point when, during Mr. Dobbs' lines, the Member of the Audience "crosses the stage" for the first time because he is equally as curious, and physically mirrors the general audience's suspense (Wilder, "Scenes" 495). The denouement remains the same in both structures. In either scenario, there is no way to end completely satisfied; so better to structurally lean into and revel in that building of suspense and shared disappointment with the protagonist and representative Member of the Audience at the end.

Wilder himself could never fully articulate in his notes what exactly the Emporium store was or what it should symbolize; and he too was conflicted about the four scenes. At various times in his "Notes Toward *The Emporium*," Wilder considers rearranging and cutting scenes, or playing in reverse-chronological order ending with Scene 1 at the orphanage. *The Emporium* confused Wilder, and it should confuse its audience. I would not recommend in production treating *The Emporium* as a 'complete' structure because to do so is to do disservice to Wilder, his script, and the audience. There are missing pieces and broken patterns within the scenes, and the audience should feel the phantom limbs of a play that might have been. Presenting the incomplete scenes as a play interrupted would be a unique challenge to the dramaturg to engage audiences in pre- and post-show conversation and generate dialogue surrounding Wilder and Wilder's stagecraft, and the validity of staging an incomplete play.

To answer the question of if I believe *The Emporium* could be staged as it stands with the four scenes: yes, because without a production, the most that I and other scholars may continue to offer are these hypothetical evaluations of the available text. A full-scale production, I believe is essential to our continued understanding of Wilder's craft and theatricality, and perhaps seeing and hearing it performed aloud, we can better understand its failures that Wilder clearly saw. But with that being said, anyone who enters into its production must acknowledge certain artistic liberties will need to be taken. I do not feel a performance could or even should exist merely for entertainment purposes; there would have to be some larger historical or literary context attached to its production and an awareness of its incomplete status and all the questions that raises. I do not believe on its own this script would entertain anyone, and I think to present it with the sole purpose of entertainment would be to disregard its complicated process. Narratively, there is very little to sustain its arc. After analyzing the structure, however, I am surprised at the dramatic integrity of the piece and I think there is a real opportunity to garner valuable insights into Wilder and his metatheatricality through its presentation. I hope in the future to have more resources available to the general public for study, and I look forward to the day someone accepts the challenge of staging *The Emporium* in its incomplete form.

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