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# ROBERT E. SHERWOOD AND THE CLASSICAL TRADITION

## THE MUSES IN AMERICA

Robert J. Rabel

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# Robert E. Sherwood and the Classical Tradition

This volume explores the reception of the classical past in the works of twentieth-century American dramatist Robert E. Sherwood and his use of the ancient world to critique key events and trends in American history.

It explores his comedies and the influence of both Greek Old and New Comedy, as well as his mediation of his experiences in World War I through Livy's account of the war with Carthage. During the 1930s, Sherwood used the Peloponnesian War as a template for bringing to the attention of an unaware public the danger of an impending war between the forces of democracy and the totalitarianism represented by Nazi Germany, and post-war he raised awareness of the dangers of nuclear war through the lens of the Greek gods. As well as looking at his use of the classical past in his work, since Sherwood wrote drama deeply concerned with the major social and political events of his day, his plays open windows onto the major social and political challenges facing the United States and the world from the outbreak of World War I until the beginning of the nuclear age.

This volume will be of interest to anyone working on the Classical Tradition and Classical Reception, as well as to students of twentieth-century American literature, drama, history, and politics.

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# Robert E. Sherwood and the Classical Tradition

## The Muses in America

**Robert J. Rabel**

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**To Jackie,**
**without whom this book would not be.**

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# Preface

Julian Barnes quotes Igor Stravinsky, who wrote: "I wonder if memory is true, and I know that it cannot be, but that one lives by memory nonetheless and not by truth."[1] In memory, I seem to recall a caustic review that dismissed a publication by saying that it filled "a much-needed gap." I wonder whether this memory is true. This book fills a gap. Robert E. Sherwood has not received the critical attention his work as a dramatist deserves. I hope the reader will decide against thinking this gap should remain "much-needed."

*Robert E. Sherwood and the Classical Tradition: The Muses in America* discusses and analyzes Sherwood's dramas that reflect a deep and abiding interest in the literature and history of Greece and Rome. His best plays all show the influence of Greco-Roman antiquity to a great degree—even the Pulitzer Prize–winning plays of the late 1930s, which are set at or close to the playwright's own time and seem, on the surface, to have little to do with the literature of Greece and Rome.

A word about the title: scholars these days prefer to speak of Classical Reception rather than the Classical Tradition, but the latter remains a useful and convenient phrase to describe the engagement with classical antiquity that takes place in later historical periods. The relationship between tradition and reception, if such a relation exists, is a topic I have chosen to avoid. I hope readers will not be put off by a title that might seem overly conservative and elitist.[2]

In memory, I seem to recall a reviewer who quipped that most authors' lives are "rot in print." Such was not the case with Sherwood, whose career was extraordinary for its range of accomplishments. Good biographies of Sherwood exist. He was quite famous during his lifetime, but until recently he has mostly been remembered by historians of World War II, who make frequent reference to his Pulitzer Prize–winning biography of Harry Hopkins, a close adviser to President Franklin D. Roosevelt.[3] Sherwood himself was also an adviser to Roosevelt and one of his two speechwriters during World War II. Though he seems to have been largely elided from historical memory, there are signs that Sherwood is once more beginning to be regarded as an important historical figure in his own right. Lynne Olson makes frequent reference to his vehement opposition to Charles Lindbergh's isolationist stance preceding

World War II.[4] Thomas Doherty discusses at length the international incident that arose over fascist Italy's opposition to the movie version of Sherwood's play *Idiot's Delight*, which depicted the beginning of World War II at a time when most thought war could still be avoided.[5] Readers wishing to learn more about Sherwood's life than I provide here should consult the masterful biography of Sherwood by Harriet Hyman Alonso.[6]

Few critics have concerned themselves at all with Sherwood the dramatist. He receives cursory treatment by scholars who study the subject of realism on the American stage. American realist drama of the 1920s and 1930s is too little studied because it closely reflects the lives and times of the playwrights and thus might seem irrelevant to later decades. Among scholars in the burgeoning field of the Classical Tradition, Sherwood is virtually unknown. This study attempts to bridge the gap between two vital areas of study: realist drama and the Classical Tradition. Sherwood demonstrated unexampled skill in composing realist drama through the medium of classical myth and story. His plays are worthy of high regard—but only if they are studied in relation to what Mark Thompson calls "the felt context of the moment," lacking which, even the speeches of Franklin D. Roosevelt may sound "feeble, the language overwrought."[7] To the best of my ability, I have tried to supply these contexts.

Telling friends and students I'm writing a book on Robert E. Sherwood often elicits a blank stare. The more literary among them sometimes answer, "The guy who wrote *Winesburg, Ohio* and a lot of short stories, right?" "No," I answer. "That's Sherwood Anderson. I'm writing about Robert Sherwood." It's ironic that Robert Sherwood is now sometimes confused with the more famous Sherwood Anderson, since during their lifetimes fame dictated otherwise: Sherwood Anderson was often taken for the more famous Robert Sherwood. In a letter to Robert Sherwood, Sherwood Anderson once wrote how much he enjoyed the confusion of names, which was compounded by the fact that he was also sometimes confused with the equally famous, but now also largely forgotten, playwright Maxwell Anderson. Sherwood Anderson often received mail intended for Robert Sherwood or for Maxwell Anderson. This misunderstanding, he said, helped him meet good-looking blondes, to whom he would sometimes promise a part in his next play.[8] In another letter, Sherwood Anderson playfully signed himself "Abraham Maxwell Sherwood Anderson."[9]

I share the conviction underlying Edith Hall and Fiona Macintosh's magisterial study of Greek tragedy in its relationship to the British theater: a fertile field of classical scholarship is the study of how Greek and Roman literature was enjoyed, studied, and employed beyond the confines of the academy.[10] This book offers a new chapter in that larger story.

I have a number of people to thank. The librarians at Harvard's Houghton Library, where the bulk of the Sherwood papers are stored, were especially helpful, as were the archivists at the University of Texas' Harry Ransom Center. The New York Public Library has been a wonderful resource over the past several years. I want to thank Kathy Kienholz of the American Academy

of Arts and Letters for help in tracking down references to Sherwood's writings among the Academy's papers—and also for a tour of the Academy's wonderful facilities in New York. I want to thank former students Katherine Donohue, Stephanie Straub, and Claire Bishop for their careful reading and helpful comments on earlier drafts of this book's chapters. I especially want to thank my wife Jackie DeCroo, to whom the book is dedicated. She has been a dedicated, encouraging, and critical reader and editor throughout the many years of writing. Her remarks on the need to provide historical context to Sherwood's plays have done much to determine the final direction this book has taken.

## Notes

1 Barnes (2008: 223).
2 Budelmann and Haubold (2008: 13–14) point out that elitist connotations are sometimes attached to the idea of the Classical Tradition, but they acknowledge the usefulness of the phrase and also the difficulty of distinguishing tradition from reception.
3 Sherwood (1948).
4 Olson (2013).
5 Doherty (2013: 211–17).
6 See Alonso (2007).
7 M. Thompson (2016: 25).
8 Sherwood Anderson to RES: b MS Am 1947, November 21, 1940, 28: HHU. References to Sherwood's papers use the call numbers of Harvard's Houghton Library, followed by date, if known. HHU = Houghton Library, Harvard University.
9 Sherwood Anderson to RES: b MS Am 1947, n.d., 28: HHU.
10 See Hall and Macintosh (2005).

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# Introduction

## A group of brilliant people named Robert E. Sherwood

In 1949, the *New York Times* described Robert E. Sherwood as "an inspired dramatist who both in deeds and words has measured himself against history."[1] The paper captured in a sentence the importance of his contributions to the worlds of drama and politics. In November 1955, Sherwood died. His funeral was attended by more than five hundred people. In a eulogy written by dramatist Maxwell Anderson, distinguished actor Alfred Lunt described Sherwood in lines taken from George Bernard Shaw: "Death reveals the eminent."[2] Shaw, Anderson, and Lunt all played significant roles in Sherwood's life and art.

Newspapers around the world spread the news of Sherwood's death. The *Montreal Gazette* wrote: "Robert Sherwood, a great writer and a great friend to Canada, is dead." Cyril John Radcliffe, 1st Viscount Radcliffe, wrote in the *Times of London*:

> It would take a long time to make a list of all his enchanting aspects. One or two stick firmly in my memory. He was a gay man, a man with a rich appreciation of life and its oddities, and, above all, a man who never admitted the necessity, as he grew older, of hardening or shutting up his heart.

Radcliffe added: "he liked, understood, and admired the English so much more than we could ever like, understand, or admire ourselves."[3] Sherwood was a life-long Anglophile. His high regard for the English was on display throughout his career.

Self-critical and self-effacing to a fault, Sherwood often undervalued or disparaged his own plays, though he won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama three times and in a quick succession unmatched by any other American dramatist including Eugene O'Neill. Sherwood won for *Idiot's Delight* (1936), *Abe Lincoln in Illinois: A Play in Twelve Scenes* (1938), and *There Shall Be No Night* (1940). Pride of authorship was seldom displayed unless privately or in answer to questions posed by others. S. N. Behrman describes a scene at the Playwrights' Company, where a manuscript replete with abstruse symbolism

*Figure 0.1* Robert E. Sherwood. NBC Television Publicity Photo, 1953 (New York Public Library).

was under discussion. Behrman reproduces on the printed page Sherwood's practice of measuring out every syllable of every word before he spoke: "I pre fer the plays of Rob ert Em met Sher wood. He hasn't got much to say but at least he does not try to say any thing else."[4] Nor did Sherwood give much public expression to the importance of his service to his country in wartime.

## I Life

Robert E. Sherwood was born on April 4, 1896, in New Rochelle, New York, the privileged scion of two conservative families with long and distinguished histories, the Emmets and the Sherwoods.[5] His relatives never quite forgave him for becoming a Roosevelt Democrat. His early academic record showed little promise of later achievement. Because of poor grades, he failed to graduate from Milton Academy, a prestigious college prep school offering opportunities to underachieving students. Still, Sherwood was able to enroll at Harvard in 1914. Academic success eluded him at Harvard as well. He earned Ds in Greek and Latin. Nonetheless, two versions of *Barnum Was Right*, written for the Hasty Pudding Theatricals, demonstrate a remarkable understanding of the devices through which Aristophanes, a poet of Old Comedy, and Menander, a poet of New Comedy, achieved their effects. Especially strange was Sherwood's ability to compose comedy in the manner of Menander, whose work in Sherwood's time existed only in short fragments. John Mason Brown described his academic and extracurricular performance at Harvard:

> Bob loved the Pudding. He would have loved Harvard too, if he had not had to attend classes and face the rhythmic menace of exams. The *Lampoon*, of which he was President and the Pudding, for which he wrote the book of *Barnum Was Right*, were where he found, and gave, pleasure in Cambridge …. His interests were many but studies were not among them. Once a freshman, twice a sophomore, he always teetered undaunted on the tightrope of probation.[6]

Charles Poore spoke the truth when he wrote of "A Group of Brilliant People Called Robert E. Sherwood."[7] Always willing to respond with flexibility to the crises of his times, Sherwood led a life of shifting commitments, occupations, and literary pursuits. An ardent supporter of war against Germany, he served as a frontline soldier in World War I. Experience of combat made him a pacifist. After the war, Sherwood served as editor at *Vanity Fair* and *Life* and was a charter member of the Algonquin Round Table, sometimes known as the Vicious Circle. In 1928, Sherwood convinced humorist Will Rogers to run for President of the United States as a representative of the Anti-Bunk Party. Rogers received a large write-in vote all over the country.[8]

In the 1930s, Sherwood's lighthearted treatment of politics took a serious turn. In 1933, he became the first major American figure to realize that war with the Nazis was on the horizon—this in the year Hitler became Chancellor of Germany.[9] As part of newspaperman William Allen White's Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies, Sherwood wrote a column in 1940 that appeared in more than one hundred newspapers with the headline "Stop Hitler Now!"[10] He was also a member of the militant Century Group of prominent intellectuals, publishers, and financiers, who supported America's

entry into the war in Europe long before Pearl Harbor.[11] Sherwood's "*bête noir*," according to Lynne Olson, was famous aviator Charles Lindbergh, chief spokesman for America's isolationist policies in the 1930s.[12] In his diary, Sherwood wrote: "Will Lindbergh one day be our Fuehrer?"[13] Sherwood fit the mold of the Liberal New York Intellectual of the 1930s and 1940s: he was well read in European culture and history; he was a generalist; he was also an atheist.[14]

Sherwood was drawn into President Franklin D. Roosevelt's orbit as early as September 1938 through initial acquaintance with Harry Hopkins. "Roosevelt," Sherwood wrote, "educated Hopkins in the arts and sciences of politics and of war and then gave him immense powers of decision for no reason other than he liked him, trusted him, and needed him."[15] Hopkins would school Sherwood in much the same way. Hopkins had considerable knowledge of the theater, and, based on his appreciation for Sherwood's *Abe Lincoln in Illinois*, Hopkins struck up a friendship with Sherwood and introduced him to Roosevelt.[16] Sherwood shared much in common with the president. Both came from privileged backgrounds, both were Democrats, and both were possessed of a strong egalitarian streak that led to their being considered traitors to their class. In October 1940, Sherwood became one of two major speechwriters for Roosevelt. His experience in the theater was well suited to the style and requirements of the most theatrical of American presidents.[17] Harold Holzer and Norton Garfinkle suggest that Roosevelt's frequent references in his speeches to Abraham Lincoln can be attributed to Sherwood, Roosevelt seeing himself as much like the hero of Sherwood's play, "inclined by nature not to fight, but ready to do battle once sufficiently angered."[18]

Outside of personal correspondence, Sherwood revealed very little about his years in the White House. He worked on all of Roosevelt's important speeches from October 20, 1940, until the president's death. "Every syllable was of vital importance," Sherwood wrote in a letter to Ernest S. Brandenburg.[19] Sherwood's characteristic modesty makes impossible any accurate assessment of his role in the writing of Roosevelt's speeches. What survive are largely anecdotal accounts provided by him or others. For example, several years after the war, he wrote to Sam Rosenman, his former colleague and fellow speechwriter, about Roosevelt's stirring tribute to the defenders of Malta in 1943:

> I worked with you on the Malta Tribute and was always particularly proud of the line that it "stood alone but unafraid in the center of the sea," the latter part of that being from Homer.[20]

While serving as speechwriter, Sherwood also lived the life of chief propagandist for the Roosevelt Administration's wartime efforts. (The term "propaganda" had yet to acquire the negative connotations it would carry after its debased use in Nazi Germany.) Sherwood had responsibility for the first

civilian psychological warfare teams that were sent from the United States prior to the TORCH Operation (the joint British-American invasion of French North Africa in 1942).[21] Sherwood headed the Foreign Information Service, part of the COI (Office of the Coordinator of Information), the precursor of the OSS (Office of Strategic Services) and of the CIA (Central Intelligence Agency).[22] The COI marked the Roosevelt Administration's initial foray into the areas of espionage, sabotage, and propaganda. As head of the office's propaganda wing, Sherwood maintained a tense and uneasy relationship with legendary American spymaster "Wild Bill" Donovan. Richard Harris Smith explains differences between the two men in terms of politics and personality. Sherwood, an avid supporter of Roosevelt's New Deal, was unhappy about the presence of anti-New Dealers within the organization. He found himself frequently in conflict with bankers and Wall Street financiers in other branches of the organization, people who respected and admired Donovan. In an unflattering portrait of Sherwood, New York banker of the time James Warburg described their differences:

> Donovan, accustomed to command, was quick, extremely energetic, and ambitious. Sherwood, a playwright completely inexperienced in working with, under, or over other people, was slow, unpunctual, and moody. In addition, Sherwood resented any authority other than that of the President and was morbidly jealous of any intrusion upon his White House relationship.[23]

According to a recent history of the CIA, deeper philosophical differences set Sherwood and Donovan at loggerheads. "Sherwood," Douglas Waller says, "believed that propaganda should be based on truth and that his service should educate the world on 'the American way of life'." Donovan, on the other hand, "saw information as a weapon and had no qualms about spreading lies to subvert the enemy." Eventually, the two fell out completely and rarely spoke.[24] Sherwood's wish to disseminate information based on truth received concrete expression in the Voice of America, which he founded during the war and which continues to operate to this day.[25] He came to feel, however, that the name "Voice of America," which he coined, was appropriate only in wartime, the Voice of America being in times of peace "eternally, many voices."[26]

In addition to speechwriting and disseminating propaganda, Sherwood performed other wartime duties as well. By his own account, he traveled back and forth across the Atlantic, around the Mediterranean, and in the far Pacific on behalf of the Roosevelt Administration. He was present in Paris, Manila, and Rome, when they were first liberated.[27] He also conveyed letters of instruction from President Roosevelt to Douglas MacArthur in the Pacific theater of war.[28] After the war, Sherwood maintained his commitment to the Democratic Party and wrote speeches for presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson in 1952. He achieved postwar literary success as a biographer

and screenwriter, but as a dramatist he was unable to match the commercial triumphs of the plays he wrote during the 1920s and 1930s. He died in New York City in 1955.

## II Dramatist and screenwriter

Sherwood is of interest as a distinguished man of letters and student of the Classical Tradition. In addition to his three Pulitzers for Drama, he won a fourth for *Roosevelt and Hopkins: An Intimate History*.[29] He is one of only four people to have won four Pulitzers and the only one to win in two categories.[30] Sherwood was awarded the Gold Medal for Drama by the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1941. He was elected to the Academy in 1949.[31] He won the Academy Award for screenwriting for *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946). Scholar and critic Stanley Fish regards *The Best Years of Our Lives* as the greatest American film ever made. Fish sees within it "a measure of optimism" but "more than a residue of disappointment and bitterness."[32] These are attitudes we shall see reflected again and again in Sherwood's work for stage and screen. The film was roundly (and wrongly) criticized in the Commie-hunting days of the 1950s for seeming to contain much in the way of Communist propaganda.[33] Liberals like Sherwood were men and women "standing precariously between fanatic extremes." Communism was on the far left and powerful conservative forces were on the far right.[34]

Unlike contemporary playwright and friend Maxwell Anderson, who developed a stylized, poetic language for his characters, the like of which has never been spoken off the stage, Sherwood's characters always employ a twentieth-century, colloquial manner of speech—even in the case of gods and mortals from classical antiquity. As John Erskine noted in presenting Sherwood with the Gold Medal for Drama, he treated "ancient men and women exactly as though they were with us today."[35]

## III Living ruins

Sherwood made no pretense of being a classicist. As a creative artist, however, he made frequent use of the classical past, though he never approached the ancient world in an attempt to understand it on its own terms. He was heavily indebted to the past but saw himself as sovereign over it. In this regard at least, he resembles modernists like James Joyce and Virginia Woolf.[36] The opening scene of *The Twilight* (1947), one of his last major attempts to secure a Broadway hit, presents the audience with a cast of ancient gods and mortals, inhabiting a landscape that seems to sum up how all his life Sherwood imagined the connection between the ancient and modern worlds.

The time of *The Twilight* is very much the present of the postwar years: the beginning of the Cold War, when the world was threatened by the possibility of a nuclear holocaust. The place is a remote island in the Ionian Sea, where