

Collaboration in *Angels in America*

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In the afterword of *Angels in America*, titled “With a Little Help from My Friends,” Tony Kushner discusses the circumstances of the creation of the two plays involved, and how they relate to his own life and philosophy. After mentioning other individuals who directly or indirectly contributed to the creation of his work, Kushner summarizes the main point of his afterword by reinterpreting Karl Marx: “The smallest indivisible human unit is two people, not one; one is a fiction” (Kushner 289) This idea of collaboration as a necessity for progress is not merely espoused in the afterword, but applied in the causal structure of *Angels in America* itself: positive, functional collaboration is used as an external source of movement toward the internal resolution of self-conflicts within characters. Characters can only find resolution if they interact with others and move toward it together. This functional collaboration, and the resolution of conflict it provides, is epitomized in the close, parallel relationship between Prior and Harper.

One conflict of central importance to *Angels in America*'s main theme of stasis against progress is Prior's; he is forced to choose between death, with its offer of escape, and the harsh reality of life, which is mainly his abandonment by Louis. Initially, while it is only suggested that Louis will leave Prior soon, this choice has not yet made itself clear. In the beginning of the play, as he is revealing his condition of AIDS, Prior mainly sees death as a singular inevitability looming in his immediate future, instead of a choice, as evidenced by his statement to Louis early in *Millennium Approaches* regarding the appearance of a lesion on his arm, “The wine-dark kiss of the angel of death.” (Kushner 27) Prior continues to curse the inevitability of death,

lamenting in his dream about how “One gets fucked. Over. One . . . dies at thirty . . . robbed of decades of majesty.” (Kushner 36) As his dream progresses and Harper appears, noting confusedly that Prior is a man that wears makeup, the production notes indicate that he “mimes slashing his throat, with his lipstick and dies, fabulously tragic.” (Kushner 37) This mock-suicide, while being Prior’s tongue-in-cheek response to Harper’s naive interpretation of drag, also foreshadows the concept of suicide becoming a part of Prior’s life. The action subtly suggests a shift away from mere fear of death that could be supported by the appearance of the “incredibly beautiful voice” immediately after Harper vanishes (Kushner 40). This voice is the first event tied to the Angel’s future appearance, and thus the beginning of a new stage in the development of Prior’s character.

After Louis has abandoned Prior, Prior’s conflicting choice slowly propagates itself, in the sequence of events leading to the revelation of the Angel; death is no longer a lamentable inevitability but a choice. Whether or not Prior’s visions are meant to be real, hallucinated, theatrical, or something else, they are representative of his internal struggle between choosing life or death, a struggle brought to him and made manifest by the appearance of the Angel. In the article “Identity and Conversion in *Angels in America*,” while discussing how characters’ identities are changed in the course of the play, author Stephen F. Kruger argues that “the Angel’s visitation to Prior takes the form of a mission of conversion.” Though the exact nature and purpose of the Angel’s mission has many possible interpretations, including God’s disappearance as a factor, it definitively brings Prior’s internal conflict into focus. When Prior is presented with the book (later referred to as the “Tome of Immobility, of respite, of cessation” by another angel, Europa) he is symbolically given the choice, in the form of the book, to die (Kushner 265). After “the Angel presses the volume against his chest” as stated in the production

notes, Prior distinctly changes, saying to Belize, “Maybe I am a prophet... I believe I’ve seen the end of things” (Kushner 182). During this scene, and in scenes following, Prior externally exhibits his interest with the idea of suicide, while internally yielding to the escape and stasis of death, speaking in apocryphal tones, and wearing a dark, hooded garment, a costume that is described as “fundamentally corvine, ragged, and eerie” in the production notes (Kushner 167).

Similar to Prior, Harper is conflicted between life and escape from it. However, she differs in that her escape is not by means of death, but by delusion. Like Prior, this escape is not immediately presented in the beginning of the play, and instead, through much of the *Millennium Approaches*, Harper’s real-world problem is first developed. According to Kruger, regarding Harper, “*Millennium Approaches* is devoted to Harper’s uncovering of Joe’s homosexuality.” How Harper actually deals with Joe’s homosexuality, by delusions, is only hinted at in the beginning of the play, such as the brief introduction of Mr. Lies, Harper’s hallucinated travel agent. Harper suggests going to Antarctica, but this action is not yet played out, giving way to the real world as Joe enters the scene (Kushner 22). Whereas Prior’s real-world problem is that Louis has left him out of fear of his disease, Harper’s real-world problem is that she wants to have a family and an ideal life when, given Joe’s hidden homosexuality and disinterest in her, this life is not possible. This problem is quickly exposed in Harper’s second conversation with Joe, when, after hinting at the failing nature of their marriage, she tells Joe that she “heard on the radio how to give a blowjob.” She rapidly follows this statement, and Joe’s disapproval of it, with “This is a good time. For me to make a baby.” (Kushner 33) Here, the instant association of sex with having a baby may seem immediately odd, but considering Prior’s later sexual encounter with the Angel, through “[humping] the book” (Kushner 174), a common, if subtle, meaning of sex is established: sex, in these cases, is a mechanism of escape. As sex is linked to

Prior's escape of death, brought by the Angel, Harper's suggestion of a "blowjob", followed by the statement of her desire to have a baby, links sex to her own escape, her delusion of an unrealistic future with Joe.

When Harper fully enters her hallucination of Antarctica, her real-world problem is temporarily displaced by escape. Harper is in denial of her problems with Joe and avoiding confronting him, claiming, "I want to go away. I don't want to see him anymore." (Kushner 86) She gives in to a similar kind of escapism that Prior does, substituting this world, "a retreat, a vacuum" as Mr. Lies calls it, in order to avoid the difficulty of reality (Kushner 108). Harper makes many statements while in Antarctica relating to her insoluble desires, pertaining to the future of her and Joe's relationship: she wants to "stay here forever. Set up camp. Build things", as well as get pregnant and have a baby (Kushner 108). An Eskimo appears, eventually revealed to be a constructed, unattainable version of Joe, a longing vision that echoes Prior's escapist dance with an unreal, "spectral" incarnation of Louis (Kushner 120). Mr. Lies, who often appears to be an ironic revealer of truth, says of the Eskimo, "There's something wrong with this picture." (Kushner 108) Not only is this literally commenting on the incorrectness of an Eskimo in the Antarctic, but it figuratively implies the contradictory and opposing desires that constitute Harper's internal conflict—Harper escapes from Joe in her hallucination, and yet she also incorporates him into it.

Harper must destabilize her escapist world, by interacting with Joe, in order to change. It is only after she confronts "Eskimo" Joe, who tells her that "I can't [come back]", that her delusion falls apart, and her escape gives way to the reality of a park in Brooklyn, mirroring the slow disintegration of the alternate delusion of her and Joe's relationship toward reality (Kushner 151). According to author Deborah R. Geis, who analyzes Harper's hallucinations from a literary

and psychological standpoint in her article “The Delicate Ecology of Your Delusions,” “[Harper’s] “healing” must include her insanity or visionary abilities (the threshold or revelation), rather than reject such qualities or reabsorb them into so-called normalcy.” This argument applies here, to the dissolution of Harper’s Antarctica: it is through her vision, and specifically through its breakdown, that she is able to come to terms with the reality of her and Joe’s impossible relationship.

Prior and Harper are both shown, in their own ways, to be in denial of the realities of their situations, and they must interact in order to change this. However, an environment for this collaboration to occur must first be established in the form of a joined identity. The parallel circumstances, and the similar internal conflicts that Prior and Harper must deal with, compose the shared, hierarchically elevated identity that allows this collaboration. Their similarities may explain why the two characters, in Prior’s dream, come to the conclusion of having had a “blue streak of recognition” at first seeing each other (Kushner 39). They have a sort of entangled identity that resembles the concept of an “indivisible human unit [of] two people” that Kushner sets forth in the afterword. Kruger, while assessing the complexities of characters’ identities in the play, makes the claim that characters in *Angels in America* exist “in contrast to, in solidarity and negotiation with a variety of other selves,” a statement that concurs with the possibility of entanglement between Prior and Harper’s identities.

The merging of identity between Prior and Harper is the necessary union which allows their simultaneous existence in imagined or paranormal states, such as when Harper inhabits Prior’s dream, supposedly through a valium-assisted hallucination. In this dream, they collaborate; they have several “thresholds of revelation” between themselves. In these “thresholds,” Prior and Harper alternately reveal mutually hidden truths about the other character, that the former is sick

(and yet has an aspect at his “most inner part” that is “entirely free of disease”) and that the latter’s “husband [Joe is] a homo” (Kushner 39) These “thresholds”, named as they are, are symbolic acts, representative of each character’s denial of self and inability to come to terms with reality, yet also connoting future realization of it. Prior and Harper only fully realize their messages to each other much later, in *Perestroika*. After Harper leaves, for example, Prior states, “I don’t think there’s any uninfected part of me. My heart is pumping polluted blood.” This refutes Harper’s previous “revelation”; communicating that Prior will, for now (and for the rest of *Millennium Approaches*), only remain on the “threshold” of realizing its truth (Kushner 265).

Collaboration not only allows for truths to be revealed about Prior and Harper; it also allows for the creation of force, the grappling with their internal conflicts, that drives these characters forward. The “beautiful voice,” appearing immediately after Prior denies any “[freedom] from disease” within himself, begins the metaphorical journey that Prior must take to discover the truth in Harper’s revelation—that life is worth living, because of the aspect within himself that is “entirely free of disease.” In *Perestroika*, Prior finally goes to Heaven, and returns the book, saying, “I still want... my blessing. Even sick. I want to be alive.” (Kushner 265) This request directed at the Angels echoes Harper’s “threshold of revelation” directed at Prior, demonstrating that Prior has found the value of the “uninfected part” of himself, and resolving Prior’s internal conflict of choosing life or death. Just as this collaboration between the two characters has initiated Prior on his journey of self-discovery, it immediately does the same for Harper as well; in the scene immediately following the dream, Harper brings her own “threshold of revelation” received from Prior into the real, physical world, asking Joe, “Are you a homo?” (Kushner 43) While it is apparent from her later sinking into delusion that Harper temporarily remains in denial of the answer to this question, it has been made clear by the dream and the “thresholds of

revelation” that both Harper and Prior have been set in motion to discover and later resolve their own internal conflicts and come to terms with reality—and that their collaboration was necessary for this movement forward.

With close analysis of the causality and relationships between characters in the play, it becomes quickly apparent that Kushner’s concept of progress, highlighted in the afterword as writing *Angels in America* itself, is a thing generated from the collaboration of people. As shown by the merged identities in *Angels in America*, Kushner sets forth a utopian view in which people are able to move forward only by cooperation and collaboration, and in which the “myth of the individual” is defined as a source of stagnation and a barrier to progress. Kushner provides examples of collaboration in his own life following a play that is meant to prove the benefit of collaboration by the examples of two seemingly different characters—Prior, a gay man, and Harper, a female “Jack-Mormon”—who are vastly interconnected in their problems. With the entire work of *Angels in America*, placed in the context of his own life, Kushner argues that individuals can resolve both their external and internal difficulties and conflicts by embracing interaction with others.

Works Cited

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