# Visionaries: Supernatural Revelation in Two Brechtian Plays

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In Europe during the 1920s, a new form of theatre, called 'Epic Theatre', was changing the way audiences viewed and interacted with the stage. The term, coined by German playwright Bertolt Brecht, referred to a modern theatre which rejected contemporary drama's ae sthetic of "invit(ing) its spectators to empathise with the emotional destiny of its central individual characters", instead presenting them as "socially constructed and malleable" as a reflection of the drastically changing sociopolitical nature of the times (Brooker 212). According to Brecht, "the continuity of the ego is a myth", which explained why he felt it was necessary to remove the naturalistic elements of theatre and replace them with a universe that was ever-changing, in keeping with a Germany that had seen the decentralization and subordination of the individual (212). Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* (Post-Brechtian) and Christopher Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus* (Pre-Brechtian) are two plays that, although succeeding and preceding Brecht's era respectively, contain elements of Epic Theatre that either inspired Brecht's work (in Marlowe's case) or were influenced by it (in Kushner's case). In *Angels in America*, we have supernaturally-inspired entities visiting various characters in different forms in their time of need and bestowing upon them visions which reveal hidden truths about who they are and their place in the world. In *Dr. Faustus*, the title character summons a demon from Hell that grants him supreme power over the elements, in exchange for his soul. What these plays have in common is that they both feature socially isolated characters who are struggling with religious quandaries about their own existence and who may not be ready to embrace the answers.

The nature of religion as a social construct is a prevalent theme in *Angels in America*, one that links many of the narrative's disparate threads together. Joe Pitt, the young lawyer, is representative of the devout Mormon, experiencing a crisis of faith as he fights with his demons over his homosexuality, which he perceives as a sin according to his religion. Although Joe's wife, Harper, is a Mormon like her husband, she appears to believe in a more metaphysically naturalistic form of God. This is revealed in her opening monologue to herself where she muses on "guardian angels, hands linked, making a spherical net, a blue-green nesting orb, a shell of safety for life itself" (Kushner 16). This is emblematic of her isolation, being pushed away by Joe who is constantly working but is secretly also gay. Her loneliness also explains why she is frequently left talking to herself (and the audience) and has a rather grim, almost apocalyptic outlook on the world where she imagines "beautiful systems dying, old fixed orders spiraling apart" (16).

Harper has visions of a man named 'Mr. Lies' who appears when she is at her most emotionally vulnerable, her guardian angel as it were. In one of his visits, she tells Mr. Lies that she secretly hopes that the new millennium will either bring new, good things to the world and change everything for the better (which includes the coming of Christ), or that everything will be destroyed in a series of biblically-scaled catastrophes (18). Later, Mr. Lies transports her to Antarctica, where she is surrounded by ice and snow, a haven for her which complements her loneliness and isolation. Although Mr. Lies tells her that "even hallucinations have laws," Harper is somehow able to conjure up images that were never meant to be a part of her imaginary landscape. This proves that she has control over her own destiny because she has the power to will what she desires into existence. As she states, "I want to make a new world here. So that I never have to go home again" (106). The audience is meant to question whether Harper has actually been transported to an alternate reality by some form of divine intervention or whether she is crazy (as she soon becomes aware that she is still in Brooklyn, when the Antarctica setting fades away at Mr. Lies' behest and the city re-emerges.)

Roy Cohn, the powerful Republican lawyer, represents the assimilated American Jew who values the American constitution and the freedoms held within, but harbours his homosexuality as a secret shame. When his doctor reveals to him that he has AIDS, Roy is defensive and stresses that someone in his position cannot have that disease and remain a powerful attorney, as it is a sign of weakness. Roy tells the doctor to diagnose him with liver cancer instead. Roy emphasizes his political influence by hinting that all he has to do is pick up the phone and he can get any member of the White House, all the way up to the president, to do him a favour. As Vanessa Campagna puts it, "Roy Cohn is a character who relentlessly manipulates the facts and works desperately to preserve his image to ensure that his history is written as he desires" (9).

In Act 3, Scene 5, Roy is visited by the ghost of Ethel Rosenberg, the woman convicted of treason against the United States and executed for selling secrets to Russia. Roy tells Joe of his lobbying for Ethel's execution as his personal pride and that he is completely unashamed and unremorseful of his actions, despite being vilified by the liberal media:

> I pleaded till I wept to put her in the chair. Me. I did that. I would have fucking pulled the switch if they had let me. Why? Because I fucking hate traitors. Because I fucking hate communists. Was it legal? Fuck legal. Am I a nice man? Fuck nice. They say terrible things about me in the *Nation*. Fuck the *Nation.* (Kushner 113)

Despite this tirade, Roy exposes his true motivation behind his push for Ethel's execution when he states that "she reminded us all of our little Jewish mamas" (113), which may explain why she comes to Roy when he is near death, as opposed to her husband, Julius. In a sense, Kushner is suggesting that Ethel represents Roy's repressed Jewish guilt, a mirror image of his own mother whom he has hostile feelings towards. As well, her presence as his own personal Angel of Death is appropriate given the subtext of Roy feeling emasculated by the limitations of his power and the advanced onset of AIDS ravaging his body. Despite his venomous rantings against Ethel, Roy shows his true emotions when, during his last scene on his death bed and seemingly disoriented, he imagines she is his mother and asks her to sing for him the way his mother used to, which prompts Ethel to sing a Yiddish folk song to

him. Though Roy claims a few moments later that he knew who she was all along and was just goading her into singing for him, the poignancy of the scene remains intact, as Roy has finally given in to his humanity and symbolically submitted to his own weaknesses and limitations.

Prior Walter, another victim of AIDS, is visited in what appears initially to be a dream by the Angel representing America - actually four separate entities in one form (Lumin, Phosphour, Fluor, and Candle) - and is given a divine prophecy, instructing him to unearth a holy book from underneath the tiles of his kitchen floor and to "SUBMIT TO THE WILL OF HEAVEN!" (162). The Angel appears in the form of a "hermaphroditically equipped" female with "eight vaginas" and a "bouquet of phalli"(165) and tells Prior that God is in fact male, represented by the "Aleph Glyph" (166). The transgendered motif is an allusion to the nature of homosexuality, with gays having both male and female anima, and Prior having sex with the hermaphrodite angel (producing "plasma orgasmata", the material of all creation [166]) as part of his revelatory experience is a way of confirming and validating his true nature - that homosexuality is not just a lifestyle choice but rather an undeniable biological and spiritual part of someone's being. San Francisco, considered to be the gay capital of the world, is revealed as being the earthly equivalent of Heaven, suggesting that Prior's prophetic vision is in fact a dream where his desires come true. In this case, that dream would be that in Heaven he will be allowed to be himself without fearing judgment from others. The allusion to the Great San Francisco Earthquake of 1906 echoing the "Heavenquakes" (170) certainly supports Prior's conception of San Francisco as a heavenly paradise. It may also be Kushner's way of hinting that God has abandoned not only humanity in general but gays specifically, as they are left to wander the earth as outcasts among their own kind, with AIDS as their punishment. The Angel also cryptically alludes to the fact that Prior has driven someone away, and Prior understands that he is talking about his boyfriend Louis, the main source of him feeling abandoned. This especially rings true when the Angel proclaims that "There is No Zion Save Where You Are!" (172), meaning that salvation lies within everyone's reach and that, deep down, Prior feels guilty for his virus putting a wedge between himself and Louis.

If the characters of *Angels In America* are seeking freedom through salvation, then *Dr. Faustus'* title character seeks his freedom through damnation. The play was written at the height of the English Reformation, a major religious movement spearheaded first by Martin Luther and then by John Calvin, which challenged the authority of the Catholic Church and its theological notion of purgatory and free will (Poole 2). Although Luther introduced the concept of a faith-based Christianity (known today as Protestantism) which emphasized a person's personal connection with God, as opposed to the Pope and the Catholic Church acting as the middle man, it was Calvin's extreme ideology of 'predestination' that shook the foundations of Elizabethan theological practice by suggesting that mankind had no control over where he ended up in the afterlife (3). *Dr. Faustus*' narrative hinges on this religious zeitgeist by offering the audience a morally conflicted character seemingly caught between two possible realities of his own existence: one that sees him serving God, the other that sees him serving the Devil.

As the play opens, we are introduced to the character of John Faustus via Greek chorus, which proceeds to espouse how he was once a respected doctor who used his knowledge of science and the arts to do good works, before becoming lured by his own

egocentric exhortations towards the black arts, sullying his once good name and damning himself in the process.

> That shortly he was grac’d with doctor’s name,
> Excelling all those sweet delight disputes
> In heavenly matters of theology;
> Till swollen with cunning, of a self-conceit,
> His waxen wings did mount above his reach,
> And, melting, Heavens conspir’d his overthrow. (Marlowe 6)

This passage compares Faustus to the character of Icarus from Greek mythology, who ambitiously tried to fly too close to the sun and had his waxen makeshift wings melted off, plummeting to his death. This moral fable is usually referenced in conjunction with any overly-ambitious figure who attempts to grab hold of more than is destined for him, and appropriately in this case: Faustus tries to procure for himself Godlike powers by bargaining with Lucifer’s cohort, Mephistopheles, and trading his soul to become divine.

Faustus invokes the name of Lucifer through incantations which he reads from a book of black arts, summoning the devil Mephistopheles in the process. Mephistopheles tells Faustus that he can attain the power he desires in exchange for his soul, which will belong to Lucifer. Throughout the play, Faustus is challenged by the presence of two angels, good and evil, representing his conflicted conscience; on one hand, the good angel encourages Faustus to keep his soul with God, urging him to “lay that damned book aside and gaze not upon it lest it tempt thy soul” and to “read the scriptures” (12), reminding him of the importance of “contrition, prayer (and) repentance” (39), while the evil angel slyly coaxes him towards the darkness, telling him to “be thou on earth as Jove is in the sky / lord and commander of these elements”(12) and that only “honour and wealth” are of any significance (39). Shortly after regretting signing his name in blood to the unholy contract, both angels continue to argue over the reality of salvation, as the good angel tries to convince Faustus that it is not too late to repent and be saved, while, naturally, the evil angel attempts to dash his hopes by telling him that he is already damned and should accept his place as Lucifer’s servant. According to Kristen Poole, these angels “are a holdover from the allegorical medieval genre known as the morality play,” and represent “the play’s complicated relationship between old and new” in respect to Christian doctrine (4). Although Faustus is primarily a modern Renaissance man, versed in philosophy, medicine, law, and astronomy, his conscience is still fundamentally primitive, relying on simplified archetypes of ‘good and evil’ to make his decisions.

Faustus is obsessed with the need to control the universe, arising from his insecurity in regards to his limitations as a man. By allying himself with Lucifer, he hopes to gain supernatural powers to break free of those limitations, even if that means enslaving himself in the next life as a servant in Hell. In one of his earlier monologues, he mentions all the nations he desires to hold sway over, not just as a ruler but as an absolute tyrant, forcing the world to bend to his will. The source of Faustus’ deviation from his Christian doctrine to indulge in the black arts is clarified when, contemplating turning back to the righteous path, he concludes that there would be no purpose because he has already been damned since “God loves (him) not” and that the only god he serves “is (his) own appetite” (Marlowe 39) . This suggests that Faustus feels abandoned by not only God but by what

God symbolizes - in this case, the Catholic Church. Faustus' rejection of Christian doctrine to indulge his own selfishness is in fact a rejection of the control that the Church (and society) has over his life. However, Marlowe reveals that it is not only Man who feels abandoned by God on Earth: Mephistopheles informs Faustus that the reason Lucifer tempts humans with forbidden power is to "enlarge his kingdom" with their souls, because "*Solamen miseris socios habuisse doloris*", which is Latin for "misery loves company" (41). In essence, Faustus and Lucifer were meant for each other, as they are both burdened with the sin of rejecting God.

Marlowe exposes Faustus' disdain for Catholicism in Scene 7, in which Mephistopheles transports him to the Pope's chamber in Rome as an invisible spectre. While there, Faustus seizes the opportunity, cursing, humiliating, and terrorizing the Pope and his friars, by stealing his food and wine and mocking St. Peter ("Anon you shall hear a hog grunt, a calf bleat, and an ass bray, / Because it is Saint Peter's holiday"), before physically assaulting them and disappearing. This scene shows that Faustus' primary source of discontentment is the oppressiveness of the Church as opposed to God himself, as Marlowe depicts the Pope and his followers as quite foolish while God is still held with a degree of reverence throughout the play. Faustus' rather malevolent attitude towards his oppressors comes into play in a later scene as well, during his encounter with the Emperor, who requests that he resurrect the body of his heroic ancestor, Alexander the Great, whom he admires, along with Alexander's paramour. Although he admits that this feat would be impossible, as their bodies would have been dust by that time, Faustus offers to summon spirits that would take the exact form of their original bodies, down to the very last detail. The Emperor's knight, however, remains unimpressed, referring to Faustus as a common conjurer and is sceptical of his abilities, belittling him in front of the Emperor. As a spiteful gesture, after granting the Emperor's request, Faustus has Mephistopheles attach horns to the knight's head, in reference to his comment of the likeliness of the goddess Diana turning him into a stag (89).

Towards the play's end, Faustus is visited by an old man, who warns him of the dire consequences of his dalliances in the dark arts and urges him to repent and save his soul from damnation. He tells Faustus to "Break heart, drop blood, and mingle it with tears, / Tears falling from repentant heaviness…" and that only the blood of "thy Saviour sweet" can wash away his guilt (110). The blood imagery serves to reinforce how deep his contract with Lucifer is, as it was also forged in his own blood and, therefore, only through further bloodshed can he be purified and absolved. The old man may represent, if not an angelic vision, then a vision of Faustus' prospective future if he embraces God and retains his innocence; yet, after being visited by Mephistopheles and accused of being a traitor, Faustus quickly recants and once again draws his blood to freshly 'reseal' the contract. Parallel to the characters in Kushner's play, Faustus is aware that his time on Earth is limited, as Lucifer has granted him just twenty-four years till his soul is claimed. However, unlike Prior and Harper, who simply wish for lives free of undue complication and conflict, Faustus creates his own conundrum by asking for more than he rightfully deserves or even needs. Faustus refuses to take responsibility for his own dilemma, though, choosing to blame the world around him instead, including Aristotle, the devils, the stars, and his own parents at various intervals (Poole 5).

In true Brechtian form, the characters in these two plays experience forms of supernatural revelation that, although not grounded in realistic or 'traditional' elements of

theatre, open up new possibilities that shape their view of the world and offer them a new set of moral and ethical choices. It is these kinds of revelations that make traditional theatre transcend its naturalistic limitations and become truly ‘Epic’. While the characters in *Angels In America* are, for the most part, victims of external forces beyond their control, Faustus is a victim of his own avarice and seals his fate by not keeping his ambitions in check. Though not inherently an evil man, it is difficult for the reader to feel much empathy towards someone who, despite his vast knowledge, flagrantly ignores the obvious warning signs and chooses a path that yields little merit for himself and society in general. It is fitting, then, that most of the characters in Kushner’s play are rewarded for their efforts to overcome their situation with a reasonable compromise for the ideal life they had imagined, while Faustus is dragged off to Hell, never to find peace again.

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