

**“TRULY AN AWESOME SPECTACLE”: GENDER PERFORMATIVITY, THE  
CLOSET, AND THE ALIENATION EFFECT IN *ANGELS IN AMERICA***

by

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## ABSTRACT

Tony Kushner's two-part play *Angels in America* uses stereotypical depictions of gay men to deconstruct traditional gender dichotomies. In this thesis, I argue that Kushner has created a continuum of gender performativity to deconstruct these traditional gender dichotomies, thereby empowering the effeminate and disempowering the masculine. I closely examine Kushner's use of Brechtian and Aristotelian tenets in the first Broadway production of the play to demonstrate that Kushner sought to induce social awareness of gay male oppression, contingent on the audience's perception of Kushner's deconstruction of the traditional gender dichotomy. I also scrutinize the role of the closet and its implications in the play, primarily analyzed with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's theoretical framework, suggesting Kushner's partiality to openly gay men who can actively participate in the cessation of gay male oppression.

*To Matt –  
For your invaluable friendship, and  
for helping me realize that  
my concept of self-worth comes  
from self-reflection  
and not the perception  
of those around me.*

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Tony Kushner's *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes* follows the lives of five gay men, two of whom are infected with AIDS. Many critics consider the play a milestone in American theater, as it portrays the social, political, and emotional effects of AIDS on gay men amidst the oppression imposed by the heterosexual hegemony in the mid 1980s. However, the play does not simply examine the effects of AIDS; it also portrays the tribulations of gay men in their daily lives. The play deconstructs traditional gender dichotomies and ultimately empowers gay men as a result of this deconstruction. In the play, gay men are not simply marginalized figures; they establish identities that disempower the heterosexual hegemony, and those who propagate it.

Before examining how gay men establish their identities, it is first important to consider their oppression in society. In the Reagan administration's early years, many gay men were becoming infected with AIDS, and by 1985, the year in which *Angels in America* is set, AIDS had already claimed the lives of thousands of gay men. The disease rapidly proliferated, subsequently creating an equation of homosexuality and illness. This equation exacerbated the oppression of gays, stigmatizing AIDS as a gay man's disease. However, while AIDS had and continues to have oppressive connotations, Susan Sontag states that "[AIDS] flushes out an identity that might have remained hidden. It also confirms an identity and, among the risk group in the United States most severely affected in the beginning, homosexual men, has been a creator of community as well as an experience that isolates the ill and exposes them to harassment and persecution" (Sontag 113). Sontag explains that AIDS creates a sense of community among those who

have it or are affected by it. Homosexuals and those infected with the virus are more apt to establish their identities and turn to each other for support. However, Sontag also states that AIDS can be a source of persecution and oppression exposing “them to harassment and persecution” (Sontag 113). AIDS exacerbates homophobia because various religious organizations that already condemn gay men view AIDS as a malediction for those who engage in homosexual relations. Furthermore, those who are ignorant about the nature of the illness practice discrimination out of fear for their own safety and fear of the potentially detrimental ramifications of allying themselves with someone diagnosed with HIV or AIDS.

Although AIDS is no longer seen as an automatic death sentence, gay men in 1985 were demonized and oppressed for their perceived perpetuation of AIDS; therefore, homosexuality was stigmatized due to the presumption that gay men were vulnerable to the disease, thereby significantly emasculating them in society. The equation of gay men and AIDS is thus “a marker of both individual and social vulnerability” (Sontag 153). This stigma exacerbates homophobia, allowing religious zealots to consider AIDS a divine vindication for the death of gays. Indeed, the Reverend Fred Phelps of the Westboro Baptist Church promulgates AIDS as divine retribution against homosexuals when he uses the slogan “AIDS: Kills Fags Dead,” a revision of an advertisement for Raid insecticide. This particular slogan has been used repeatedly, most notably at the funeral for Matthew Shepard, a young gay man whose death provoked a protest by Reverend Phelps. The slogan encourages violence against homosexual men with AIDS, and it associates gay men with vermin, suggesting that both need to be exterminated.

Reverend Phelps represents an extremist sect of the dominant heterosexual hegemony. This hegemony oppresses gay men by suggesting that homosexuality deviates from behavior for men established as the societal norm. *Angels in America* attempts to disempower this hegemony with the establishment of a continuum of gender performativity. This continuum portrays a usurpation of traditional culturally defined gender roles, allowing effeminacy to dominate masculinity. On the continuum, Kushner situates feminine gay characters at one end and masculine gay characters on the other. Indeed, the play uses the stereotyped gay male characters to convey the empowerment of effeminacy and the disempowerment of masculinity. Kushner hopes that this empowerment provokes critical reflection by the audience, reflection that will preclude the oppression of gay men by the heterosexual hegemony.

Kushner conveys the continuum of gender performativity to the audience using epic staging, a style of theatrical presentation used by Bertolt Brecht. While staging typically falls under the jurisdiction of the director and actors, Kushner intends for the play to effectively convey its circumstances to the audience to instigate critical reflection, and he therefore provides specific directions for the play's direction. Moreover, Kushner uses montages and stage trickery, Brechtian tenets, to create a distancing effect between the audience and the play so that the spectators can ruminate on the play's gender performativity continuum, attempting to provoke the audience to assume a counteroppressive stance, subsequently creating a stronger awareness of oppressive social constructs. Kushner intends for the audience to examine these oppressive social constructs and to fight against them. However, Kushner does not simply rely on epic staging to convey these constructs. He also appeals to the audience's emotions,

anticipating sympathetic and empathetic responses that could potentially lead to a purgative response. These appeals heighten the effect of epic staging in that audiences *feel* the urgency of the play's circumstances. Kushner intends for the play to be both didactic and revolutionary, giving voice to a marginalized group in the midst of a crisis, allowing the audience to understand oppressive constructs, and in doing so, provoke social change.

Subsequent chapters closely examine the ways that *Angels in America* endeavors to provoke critical reflection by the audience on the circumstances of each gay character in the play. Chapter two scrutinizes the stereotyping of five gay male characters in the play and the effects of the continuum of gender performativity. Gender performativity, a term used by Judith Butler, refers to the speech acts and gestures culturally ascribed to each sex. The more a character deviates from the culturally imposed masculine behavior for men, the more he is oppressed in society. However, the play attempts to portray the converse, empowering the effeminate gay men. The chapter first examines gender performativity and the association of gay men and femininity.. The chapter then analyzes Belize, a flamboyant former drag queen who is seemingly socially oppressed because of his feminine gestures and utterances, and the power that Kushner bestows upon him. Belize is the most effeminate character in the play, yet he is the character who is the most comfortable with himself. Kushner uses Belize's comfort with his homosexuality to suggest that comfort with homosexuality is a comfort with the feminine. Belize's power is most apparent because he does not shun effeminacy, but rather embraces it. The chapter examines the interactions of each of the other gay male characters: Prior, Louis, Joe, and Roy. This examination reveals the extent to which each of the gay male

characters is comfortable with his homosexuality. This interaction distinguishes different levels of comfort, and thus, different levels of femininity. The gay characters who are not comfortable with their homosexuality use a masculine façade to give the illusion of assimilation with the dominant heterosexual hegemony. Finally, the chapter examines the use of the masculine gay characters to provoke the audience to feel disdain for homophobia.

Chapter three merges the examination of gay stereotyping with an analysis of the effect of the play's staging on the audience. *Angels in America* uses stereotypes to induce critical reflection by the audience, and the staging is important to facilitate this critical reflection. Kushner uses several tenets of Bertolt Brecht's epic staging to distance the audience from the characters on stage. This distancing, also known as the alienation effect, allows the audience to scrutinize the action and characters in the play to provoke social change that precludes the oppression of homosexuals. The chapter also analyzes the extent to which Kushner amalgamates Brecht's alienation effect with Aristotle's catharsis. The problem with analyzing the play as an exclusively Brechtian piece is that a significant portion of the New York theater audience includes gay men. Some gay men will identify with the gay characters in the play and may even experience catharsis through the characterizations onstage. Moreover, montages, dream sequences, hallucinations and stage spectacle all create a fantastical world onstage that divorces the spectator from the characters onstage, regardless of the spectator's sexual orientation. Chapter three also discusses the extent to which Kushner uses Walter Benjamin's notion of the historical materialist. Kushner subtly adapts Benjamin's notion of historical materialism to suit the counteroppressive message of the play. A historical materialist

strives to end an oppressive past, and Kushner assumes this role tangibly in *Angels in America* through the character of Prior Walter. Prior, a gay man with AIDS, is the “prophet” bestowed with the responsibility to change the world, and serves as a messenger for Kushner himself. Prior not only changes other characters’ perception of gay men with AIDS, but he also challenges the audience to consider the oppression of gay men. Kushner’s essential goal in adapting Benjamin’s historical materialism is to give each spectator the opportunity to become a historical materialist themselves, with the anticipation of ending the subjugation of gay men. Kushner uses the aforementioned stereotypes combined with the epic staging of Brecht and the catharsis of Aristotle to create a sense of incumbency to the audience to end the oppression of gay men.

Chapter four examines the role of the closet, and its implications as an oppressive social construct. The chapter returns to Joe Pitt and Roy Cohn, two masculine gay characters who struggle with their identities, for the purpose of examining Kushner’s use of the closet as a separation device among gay men, thereby distancing the closeted from the openly gay. He sets up a dichotomy, endowing openly gay men with dominance, and closeted gay men with oppression. Kushner includes this oppressive construct as a device that marginalizes closeted gay men among openly gay men because of the closet’s ability to polarize and categorize homosexuals as closeted and openly gay. Subsequently, closeted gay men cannot act as historical materialists to fight against oppression, instead choosing to live with the fear being exposed. Openly gay men therefore act as revolutionaries against oppression, while closeted gay men succumb to the oppression. The heterosexual hegemony traps both Joe and Roy because they fear being marginalized by coming out of the closet. They believe that they must perpetuate a façade to maintain

the power and dominance associated with heterosexuality. Kushner endows them both with social status to heighten the effect of the continuum of gender performativity. He equates hegemonic masculinity with societal power, or at least the illusion of power, and their jobs as lawyers represent this equation. Kushner attempts to dismantle the association of hegemonic masculinity with power by disempowering those who perpetuate hegemonic masculinity and empowering those who are marginalized as a result of it. Thus, Kushner disempowers Joe and Roy because they succumb to both the fear of disempowerment by the hegemony, and the oppression of the closet, suggesting that Joe and Roy's fear of marginalization further denigrates their status in society.

Kushner ascribes a purpose to the five gay characters in *Angels in America*. He creates a gender performativity continuum to deconstruct traditional gender dichotomies, thereby empowering the effeminate, and disempowering the virile. Kushner heightens this continuum with his use of epic staging. Not only does he use Brechtian tenets to incite the alienation effect, but he also relies on the sympathetic and empathetic responses of the audience, allowing the audience to both think critically about the action onstage and feel the sense of urgency to end the oppression of gays. Kushner endows the character of Prior Walter with the opportunity to become a historical materialist, and in doing so, Kushner bestows upon the audience the opportunity to become historical materialists themselves with the intention of ceasing the oppression of gay men. However, Kushner realizes that the role of a historical materialist is lost on those who remain closeted, for they are doubly oppressed in the play. Kushner marginalizes the closeted gay characters because they succumb to the oppression of the closet and must perpetuate the illusion of hegemonic masculinity. Thus, Kushner empowers the openly

gay characters, particularly those who are more effeminate, and disempowers the closeted gay characters who perpetuate the illusion of hegemonic masculinity because of their assimilation into the heterosexual hegemony. Kushner therefore purports that to assume the role of a historical materialist who fights against the oppression of gay men, one must openly declare his own sexuality, for fear of marginalization only exacerbates oppression.

## CHAPTER 2: THE CONTINUUM OF GENDER PERFORMATIVITY AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

The two part play *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes* openly proclaims its unique perspective on politics suggested by its title. The play is also unique in its incorporation of fantastical staging coupled with a rapid succession of scenes. The play is a spectacle, particularly utilizing Brechtian tenets that induce deep thought and reflection of these “national themes” by the audience.<sup>1</sup> An important catalyst for the audience’s deep contemplation of the issues in the play is the use of gay male characters to bring attention to the social, political and emotional effects of people living with AIDS. Kushner understands that this play has the potential to educate his audience, and he creates characters that represent different stereotypes within the gay community. These stereotypes exaggerate homosexuality, thereby creating disinterestedness within the audience so that the spectators can contemplate the important subject of the play. Kushner stereotypes the different gay men in the play through gender performativity, deviating from traditional culturally imposed equations of masculinity and power by associating feminine performatives with power. Some of the gay characters manifest these feminine performatives in the various speech acts, gestures and staging elements both written into the text as well as contributed by the actors and director. Thus, the gay characters embody different levels of masculinity and femininity that can be differentiated on a continuum, separating masculinity and femininity in a nontraditional manner. In the play, femininity usurps the traditional power structure, dominating masculinity. Thus, Kushner bestows power to the effeminate gay characters who resist heteronormativity, thereby disempowering the masculine gay characters. He equates the

masculine gay character's lack of effeminacy with the false impression of assimilation into the heterosexual hegemony, suggesting that their power is illusory. Gay stereotyping thus becomes the vehicle for the creation of this continuum and reversal of power, enhancing the effect of the characterizations to the audience by exaggerating their varying levels of masculinity. With the use of gender performativity challenging the traditional masculine/feminine binary, the alienation effect allows the spectator to acknowledge the rigid limitations of this binary, and the misconceptions of what manifests power in this dichotomy. As a result of this variation, Kushner attempts to induce reflection on the socio-political "national themes" of the text that will subsequently provoke social change and reduce the oppression of gay men.

Before examining the role of the continuum of gender performativity in the play, a delineation of gender performativity is necessary before establishing the significance of the gay stereotypes. In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler examines the performance of gender as a signifier, suggesting that gender is a cultural construction created in defiance of perceived and established norms for standard male and female behavior. Indeed, during the developmental stages, young boys learn that they must adhere to what is perceived as masculine behavior. They learn that they should not show emotions that express vulnerability, as such an act connotes emasculation. Girls learn that they should not participate in competitive activities of physical exertion, such as sports. Thus, according to Butler, young boys and girls learn to adhere to these imposed cultural constructions by repetition, to the point that the perceptions of their own masculinity and femininity become innate. Those who do not manifest the extreme characteristics of either masculinity or femininity are viewed as deviants, or "queer."

Cultural assumptions of masculinity, therefore, are cultural impositions, and as masculinity coalesces in its place in the dichotomy, society designates stereotypical assumptions of what it means to be masculine. An early study conducted by Deborah S. David and Robert Brannon delineates four components of masculinity.<sup>ii</sup> According to the study, the first tenet of masculinity is the eradication of any behavior perceived as feminine, including feeling emotions and being perceived as passive. The second tenet is that of status. Men must be in a position that is successful and admired by others. The third tenet is confidence and autonomy. A man, in order to be perceived as virile, must possess assertive qualities that do not permit him to be viewed as passive in any way. The fourth tenet involves a sense of adventure and violent aggression. These four traits imply a hegemonic masculinity because those who do not fit the parameters of this hegemony are perceived as passive or feminine, and will be dominated by those who do indeed adhere to the tenets.

While the aforementioned four tenets delineate traits of masculinity, they are summative qualities that do not specify or outline specific gestures relative to masculinity. The specific gestures that indicate masculinity must clearly contribute to the overall perception of adherence to the cultural designation of virility, and adherence to the dominant hegemony. Men who do not use masculine performatives are perceived as aberrations to the hegemony, and the extreme deviation from the societal norm for masculine behavior is the drag queen. In the preface to *Gender Trouble*, Butler asks “is drag the imitation of gender, or does it dramatize the signifying gestures through which gender itself is established?” (Butler xxviii). She uses this question to suggest that a gender “performs” those gestures that are endemic to either masculinity or femininity.

Because drag queens are biologically male, they are simply “performing” female gestures. Butler explains performativity as:

Words, acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. (Butler 173)

Thus, Butler’s notion of performativity suggests that gestures and acts are “fabrications” that signify cultural constructions of masculinity and femininity, and a drag queen performs the cultural construction of femininity. Butler contends that drag queens “thematize ‘the natural’ in parodic contexts that bring into relief the performative construction of an original and true sex” (Butler xxix).

A drag queen may experience liberatory effects in contradicting cultural constructions of masculinity and femininity, rebelling against the confines of the rigid dichotomy; however, this dichotomy also systematically oppresses them because they deviate from the aforementioned masculine qualities associated with traditional hegemonic male behavior. While drag queens are diametrically opposed to masculinity, Kushner creates characters that challenge the mutual exclusivity of masculinity and femininity, as well as the traditional perception of the power manifested in the binary opposition. Because Kushner stages *Angels in America* utilizing some of the tenets Brecht’s epic staging, the audience can potentially reflect critically on the characters who demonstrate the continuum of gender performativity. The gay characters in the play

represent different extremes of masculinity and femininity, demonstrating the extent to which a gay character acts either masculine or feminine. The purpose of representing gender on a continuum in the play is to insinuate that the closer a gay character is to the feminine end of the continuum, the more comfortable he is with his homosexuality.

Kushner portrays the characters who are more effeminate as more comfortable with their homosexuality while the characters who are more masculine are portrayed as having many unresolved issues with their homosexuality. Kushner creates this continuum of exaggerated stereotypes to provoke the audience to think critically about the oppression of those who deviate from the perceived acceptable behavior for men propagated by the hegemonic heterosexual norm.

Kushner's equation of femininity and power in the play refutes cultural assumptions of masculine power. For Kushner's gay characters, femininity manifests comfort with one's homosexuality simply because contemporary associations with homosexuality equate gay men with effeminate behavior, traditionally rendering them powerless because their use of feminine performatives indicates adherence to the culturally prescribed behavior associated with the marginalized female sex. Kushner creates the continuum to distinguish the most feminine gay character from the most masculine gay character to illustrate the shift in power.

On the continuum of gender performativity, the most effeminate character in the play is Belize. Belize, a former drag queen, is the play's voice of reason. He manifests the stereotype of a drag queen to contribute to the overall theatricality of the play and the audience's alienation. He assumes the uncomfortable task of being the infamous Roy Cohn's nurse, a role that allows him to understand the secret reality of Roy's illness.

Belize receives a perpetual barrage of insults from Roy, but reciprocates the insults with a restrained intensity that is diametrically opposed to the ostentation of a drag queen, his former profession. Despite the fact that he is no longer a drag queen, Kushner frequently refers to this profession, not only in relation to Belize, but also to Belize's close circle of friends, including the ailing Prior Walter.

In *Angels*, Belize does not dress in drag, though there are numerous references to his life as a drag queen. However, the cultural norms propagated by his occupation as a nurse require that he disassociate himself from explicitly performing as a woman. The “manufactured” gestures and attire common to drag queens must be eschewed to assimilate with the dominant heterosexual culture to avoid alienating his patients.

Despite the fact that Belize deliberately adheres to masculine behavior determined by the acceptable hegemonic norm while conversing with Cohn, Belize still manifests a drag persona. As a male nurse in the 1980s, Belize performs as a man in a position stereotypically ascribed to women, basically perpetuating feminine characteristics. To the audience, Belize has not completely escaped the drag queen persona as he both converses with Prior and Cohn in a feminine manner and works as a nurse. Belize only replaces the dress of an ostentatious drag queen with the more subdued mandated uniform of a nurse.

Belize's decision to stop dressing in flamboyant drag subsequently deepens the audience's interpretation of Belize. It is understandable that Belize needs to assimilate into a heterosexual society by not explicitly performing the feminine traits attributed to drag queens; however, Kushner does not completely abandon feminine performative traits in Belize's characterization. Kushner's dialogue demonstrates Belize's professional

behavior while not sacrificing his tendency to act femininely. This dialogue occurs while Belize is working at the hospital. In one such instance, he receives a telephone call from his best friend Prior after Prior wakes up:

Prior: I am drenched in spooj.

Belize: Spooj?

Prior: Cum. Jiz. Ejaculate. I've had a wet dream.

Belize: Well about time. Miss Thing has been abstemious. She has stored up beaucoop de spooj.

Prior: It was a woman.

Belize: You turning straight on me?

Prior: Not a *conventional* woman

Belize: Grace Jones? (Kushner 153).

Belize refers to Prior as “Miss Thing,” a female appellation, as Prior explains his encounter with the Angel, then subsequently proceeds to the female personal pronoun “she.” The use of a female pronoun in this instance suggests that this scene was envisioned as a form of “girl talk” as the two men are having an intimate and detailed sexual conversation over the phone. By using a female pronoun, Belize endows female traits to Prior, and Prior does not recoil. The conversation proceeds to Belize’s questioning of Prior’s sexuality, to which Prior responds that his wet dream was not over any “*conventional* woman,” to which Belize’s reaction is “Grace Jones?” Grace Jones, a former model and disco artist, is known for her androgynous characteristics, allowing her to perform masculine traits with her short, buzzed haircut, lanky frame and deep voice. Belize’s allusion to a woman who performs as a man in his rebuttal demonstrates

Kushner's use of feminine appellations in an intimate conversation over the phone; however, male behavior that adheres to the norm propagated by the hegemony is necessary while conversing with patients in the hospital because the patient would potentially react adversely without them.

Although Belize must behave professionally while at the hospital, his professional behavior does not limit his use of feminine performatives. Indeed, his former drag queen persona is insinuated in his conversations with every character. While Belize comfortably deploys feminine performatives in these conversations, he feels most comfortable speaking to Prior. During their conversations, Belize's flamboyance is most apparent.

After the funeral of a former drag queen who has died of AIDS, Belize relishes in the celebration that occurred immediately prior to the start of that scene. Belize's festive attitude and appearance is diametrically opposed to Prior's bleak attitude and appearance in the scene. Indeed, Kushner describes Prior's appearance as "strange, but not *too* strange" (Kushner 167) to differentiate his attire from "the defiantly bright and beautiful clothing" that Belize is wearing. Belize's "defiant" clothing is evocative of his homage to the loss of a drag queen, one whom he considers "one of the Great Glitter Queens." This conversation hyperbolically stereotypes drag queens by endowing the typically somber funeral ceremony with flamboyant images. The endowment of flamboyant celebration equates the funeral with a lively drag show as opposed to a serious ritual. While Prior believes that the funeral was "tacky," Belize considers it "divine," connoting Belize's more celebratory attitude to the loss of his friend. The word "divine" also suggests that the death of a drag queen is celestial and heavenly, thereby elevating the

importance of the drag queen to Belize. Also, by suggesting the divinity of the grandiose funeral, Belize demonstrates a feminine characteristic with his alignment of the image of the drag queen with the more celestial use of the word in that the funeral was the proper burial for a feminine individual.

The equation of a deceased drag queen with a grandiose funeral suggests that Kushner bestows power to the drag queen. Because the drag queen manifests femininity, and femininity in this play represents power, Belize states that the drag queen “couldn’t be buried like a *civilian*” (Kushner 167), indicating that Belize’s affiliation with the drag queen persona suggests that the drag queen is not only divine, but special. Because the drag queen is not a “civilian,” the drag queen requires a different type of funeral ceremony. Belize recognizes that a drag queen is special because she is overtly feminine, and deserves a burial that will reflect the feminine qualities manifested in the person buried. Therefore, to Belize, the funeral should reflect the ostentation of a stereotypical drag queen.

Kushner strategically places Belize in scenes that juxtapose his feminine behavior with masculine behavior to illustrate the power struggles inherent in any conversation between an effeminate gay man and one who conforms to hegemonic masculinity. These power struggles are heightened because Belize is comfortable with his femininity, and he is also aware of the insecurities latent in masculine behavior when challenged by femininity. When Belize converses with Louis, Prior’s ex-boyfriend, Belize’s femininity often fluctuates because of their frequent disagreements and the disdain that the two hold for each other. In the conversation that they have at a coffee shop, Louis delivers a diatribe on his feelings about racism in America. Louis’s comments infuriate Belize, an

African-American man, to the point where he wants to leave, and Belize's diction in the situation indicates his anger. After Louis suggests that there is no racism in America, Belize stands to leave, exclaiming, "girlfriend it is truly an *awesome* spectacle, but I got better things to do with my time than sit here listening to this racist bullshit" (Kushner 99). Belize again calls another gay man "girlfriend"; however, in this situation, "girlfriend" does not actually indicate that they are friends. The word "girlfriend" is a casual reminder to Louis that he is indeed a marginalized figure in America because he is both Jewish and gay. Here, Belize intends to make him realize that he is in a position vulnerable to discrimination. Belize's use of the word "girlfriend" indicates that he both no longer wants to communicate with Louis in this situation and also disparages him. By suggesting that Louis's harangue is an "*awesome* spectacle," Belize intimates that Louis's pomposity is performance, and the sardonic nature of the comment demonstrates Belize's frustration with Louis, to the point where he denigrates Louis's diatribe and calls it "bullshit."

Belize also implies that Louis behaves in a manner that deserves the attribution of the word "spectacle." Louis is a very melodramatic character, and his insecurities provoke him to leave Prior. Belize is aware of Louis's insecurities and acknowledges them during their conversation. As Belize leaves, Louis again exaggerates the emotion that he feels:

Louis: I'm dying.

Belize: He's dying. You just wish you were. Oh cheer up, Louis. Look at the heavy sky out there.

Louis: Purple.

Belize: *Purple?* Boy, what kind of a homosexual are you, anyway? That's not purple, Mary, that color up there is (*Very grand*) *mauve*. (Kushner 106).

By stating that he is dying, Louis reestablishes his melodramatic characterization, suggesting that Prior's death causes him deep, unavoidable pain. Belize is quick to note the reality that Prior is the one who is dying, and that Louis is overtly dramatizing his own situation because he is emotionally weak. Indeed, Louis's melodramatic reaction indicates that he is emotionally weaker than Belize. Louis's excessively emotional vulnerability, as compared to Belize, demonstrates the extent to which Belize, the more feminine individual, is more stable. Louis, the more stereotypically masculine gay man, is emotionally unsteady, and Belize derides him both for his abandonment of Prior and for his lack of emotional fortitude. Belize questions Louis's homosexuality when he mocks him, demonstrating the continuum of gender performativity in the play: the more feminine a character is, the more comfortable they are with themselves. Belize's mocking of Louis's inadequacies as both a homosexual man and as a boyfriend indicates his superiority over him.

The conversations between Belize and Louis are inevitably power struggles, and both demonstrate their power by reminding each other that they are both marginalized individuals in society. However, in this particular conversation, marginalization demonstrates a degree of power in the argument, as the underlying structure of the scene is that whoever can demonstrate their marginalization most effectively in the argument speaks from the point of view of the other, not the hegemony. Gender performativity thus becomes a way to demonstrate who is more marginalized, and therefore more

credible. Belize demonstrates his credibility as a homosexual when he concludes that the color of the sky is “mauve,” and deprecates Louis’s use of the simple term “purple.” Belize also uses the word “mauve” to satiric effect when he exaggerates the color to a word that implies ostentation, pomposity, and even spectacle. He is frustrated with Louis’s melodrama because he knows that Louis was wrong to abandon Prior, yet Louis refuses to take responsibility for his actions and resorts to self-pity. Indeed, Kushner’s stage directions for the delivery of “mauve” indicate Belize’s mock exaggeration manifested in the grandiose delivery.

Belize’s conversation with Louis indicates his power due to his comfort with being gay and being feminine. Belize is the most feminine character on the continuum of gender performativity, and he is diametrically opposed to Roy Cohn. Because Louis manifests an interim place on the continuum, Kushner posits that masculine gay men and feminine gay men are not mutually exclusive; however, the masculine gay characterizations are contingent on the rigidity of the oppressive binary structure to maintain the illusion of power. Belize knows that his own power is not illusory, but the hyperbolic masculinity of other gay characters reaffirms his awareness of their façade. While Belize’s diction and gestures are heightened in his conversation with Louis due to their mutual distrust of each other, Belize’s conversations with Roy Cohn demonstrate a range of emotion, rooted in Roy’s pejorative and insulting comments. Roy’s comments to Belize are both racist and homophobic, and his comments reinforce Belize’s perception that Roy maintains a façade to give the illusion of power.<sup>iii</sup> Despite the awareness of Roy’s façade, Belize feels solidarity with Roy because he is aware of Roy’s latent homosexuality. Indeed, Belize directly concedes his knowledge that Roy is a

closeted gay by revealing that he knows that Roy does not have liver cancer, but AIDS. Roy is admitted for treatment under a liver cancer diagnosis, but Belize advises him not to undergo chemotherapy. When Roy questions Belize's credibility, Belize knowingly shatters the façade when he tells Roy that "[his doctor] is not queer" (Kushner 160), but that Belize is, and then follows the statement with a wink. This rebuttal intimates that Belize is aware of Roy's furtive gay tendencies, and his revelation of Roy's homosexuality again demonstrates that his own marginalization as a gay man gives him the credibility to advise Roy. Belize's response is twofold in that he both demonstrates his credibility as well as insults Roy to avenge the preceding pejorative dialogue, in which Roy impugns Belize's credibility as a nurse, calling him "just a fucking nurse" (160). Indeed, Kushner's stage directions read "*Belize winks at Roy*," indicating that Kushner intends for Belize to achieve retribution with his open acknowledgement of Roy's homosexuality. Belize's winking teases him because he is insecure with his homosexuality and is paranoid of any discovery of it, indicating a transfer of power because Belize is aware of Roy's illusion of heterosexuality and is therefore uncomfortable with himself. Belize senses Roy's discomfort and intentionally mocks him, suggesting that Belize is privy to the secret of Roy's homosexuality. Because Roy is extremely paranoid and Belize is very comfortable with himself, Belize has more power in the scene, and Roy says pejorative comments to him to regain dominance.

This scene between Roy and Belize indicates the extent to which Roy must use pejorative language to regain the dominance in the scene. Because he is both hospitalized with a debilitating disease and being treated by a gay nurse who is clearly very comfortable with his homosexuality, Roy feels that his power is threatened. Roy's

persistent denigration of Belize is continuous, but Belize consistently uses his own marginalized status to demonstrate his credibility to give Roy advice. Roy calls him a “butterfingers spook faggot nurse” (Kushner 160), when he asks why Belize is helping him. Roy derides Belize, making it apparent that Roy represents the heterosexual hegemony. Ironically, Roy’s status as a closeted gay man further marginalizes him, making Roy’s apparent assimilation with the heterosexual hegemony illusory. Roy attempts to assert control over Belize because of Roy’s intense self hatred and homophobia; however, Belize once again counters in his rebuttal and admits that he knows Roy is gay. He tells Roy to “consider [his advice] solidarity. One faggot to another” (Kushner 161). Kushner’s stage directions for Belize’s exit on that line state that “*Belize snaps, turns, and exits*” (Kushner 161). The snap is a hyperbolic demonstration of Belize’s adherence to his drag queen persona because it is a gesture that reveals a feminine characteristic. The snap also demonstrates that he has won the argument with Roy and emphasizes Belize’s power as a nurse as opposed to Roy’s status as a patient. Furthermore, the snap is a sign of his credibility as both a gay man and a nurse to be giving advice to Roy.

Belize represents one stereotype of a gay man in the play. Kushner portrays him as very feminine and subsequently very comfortable with his own sexuality. In the context of the play, the gay characters who are most feminized are the characters who are most comfortable with their sexuality. Belize manifests the most feminine characterization, suggesting that he is the character who is most secure with his sexuality because he does not adhere to the behavior constructed for men by the hegemony. However, Kushner also creates characters who struggle with society’s construction of

masculinity and who also use this construction as a façade through which they can assimilate into society.

While Belize is a gay man who is extremely comfortable with his femininity, Joe Pitt performs masculinity to assimilate into the dominant heterosexual hegemony, both because he is married and because he is an attorney. Despite the challenges that Joe encounters throughout both parts of *Angels*, he is the character who changes the least, indicating that he does not reconcile his homosexuality with his religious convictions. Because Joe is naïve, he represents a specific type of gay man: he is a stereotype of a closeted man discovering what it means to be gay. Joe is aware of his sexuality, but attempts to remain steadfast in his religious convictions. Kushner presents Joe's homosexuality as a discovery process and an acclimation to the reality of living as a gay man, despite the fact that in the end, he asks to return to his wife. Indeed, Joe's unhappy marriage to the drug-addicted Harper is a catalyst for his exploration of his latent homosexual tendencies. Because Joe allows himself to explore his hidden attraction to men, he has preconceived notions of who gay men are and how they act. Thus, Kushner uses Joe as a vehicle to explore gender performativity and stereotyping of the homosexual. On the continuum, his masculinity relegates him to the spot closest to Roy Cohn, suggesting that adherence to culturally constructed masculine behavior is both a façade and a fear of the potential ramifications of being discovered as a gay man. Because of contemporary associations of homosexuality and femininity, it is important for Joe to convey virility while he slowly comes out of the closet so that he will not be perceived by the heterosexual hegemony as gay and marginalized.

Joe himself is a masculine man. Indeed, Prior refers to him as the “Marlboro man” (Kushner 223), demonstrating that he epitomizes masculinity both in his appearance and in his demeanor. Joe’s mannerisms are masculine enough for him to pass as a heterosexual and to marry Harper. When juxtaposed with the other gay characters in the play, Joe performs masculinity in such a manner that the other characters notice and comment on it. Prior calls him the “Marlboro man,” when meeting him at the courthouse. Later, he says that Joe is “Mega-butch” and that “he made [Prior] feel beyond Nelly. Like little wispy daisies were sprouting out of [Prior’s] ears” (Kushner 224). Prior’s reaction to Joe’s demeanor and appearance implies that Prior recognizes that masculine traits signify power, at least to the dominant hegemony. Prior’s acknowledgement of Joe’s masculinity demonstrates that Prior, while more comfortable with his own homosexuality than Joe, believes that Joe possesses more power because of his adherence to the behavior ascribed to men by the hegemony. Thus, Joe’s performance of masculinity represents a façade that masks the internal conflict with his own homosexuality. The reality is that he is not comfortable with himself, and in the context of this play, gay men who perform feminine gestures and speech patterns are more comfortable, and thus more powerful. Kushner implies that Joe’s traits are more robust and strong when juxtaposed with Prior, suggesting the revered status of masculinity and the apparent power manifested in virility. Indeed, Prior’s lines indicate that he acquiesces to Joe’s masculine façade, but does not realize the extent to which Joe is confused. On the gender performativity continuum, this scene presents the dichotomy of Prior, a gay man who is comfortable with himself and performs feminine gestures, and Joe, a gay man who is not quite comfortable and performs masculine gestures. The

symbolism of the dialogue presents this dichotomy with the use of the word “daisy.” Because the word “daisies” already has a feminine connotation, Prior further contends that they are “wispy,” and contrast with Joe’s strength, indicating that he is seemingly less of a man in comparison.

Prior’s use of the word “daisies” also represents more than femininity; the flowers symbolize the debilitating nature of the disease itself and the feminizing force of AIDS. Prior trails off his daisy metaphor with the adjectives “little droopy wispy wilted...” suggesting that the feminine comparison of daisies to Joe’s image represents the iconography of a healthy, robust, and virile man perpetuated by the hegemonic heterosexual norm. Prior reveres the image of one who is not feminine, while the play itself delineates an affinity for the feminine man, suggesting that the more comfortable a gay man is with himself, the more effeminate his gestures. Prior’s behavior, however, demonstrates the extent to which society influences thought on what behaviors and traits should be considered normal for a man. Prior suggests that he is attracted to the paradigm of masculine behavior propagated by the hegemony.

Joe’s masculinity is not only manifested in his physical appearance, but also in his scent. Indeed, Louis remarks that Joe smells masculine before they have their first sexual encounter in *Perestroika*. Louis comments that Joe’s cologne is “very butch heterosexual high school” (Kushner 163), suggesting that certain scents reveal stereotypically masculine characteristics. Joe’s use of the Fabergé cologne not only highlights the masculinity already associated with him, but also indicates a need for Joe to demonstrate the appearance of achieving that masculinity. The cologne, commonly associated with young, straight men, contributes to Joe’s own heterosexual pretense, thereby suggesting

his own insecurities. Fabergé thus represents a masculine façade by which Joe can assimilate into the hegemonic heterosexual norm.

When Joe's sexuality is questioned, the accusation of his homosexuality causes him trepidation. When Joe walks into a men's room in the courthouse and catches Louis crying, Louis instantly observes the nuances of Joe's latent homosexuality, and thereby brings them out into the open. Joe speaks comfortingly to Louis, but the emphasis of the scene is not on Louis's emotional state. Indeed, the emotion of the scene is secondary to Louis's accusation that Joe is gay. Louis calls Joe a "gay Republican" (Kushner 34), an accusation that Joe outwardly denies. Indeed, Joe gets rather defensive about the remark and wonders why Louis instantaneously determines his sexuality. Joe's defensiveness prolongs the conversation to where Louis can explain his observation, stating that he "can tell from the way a person sounds." Joe realizes that Louis has penetrated the façade that he has created and wants to know the extent of Louis's observations.

Louis's suggestion that Joe "sounds" gay is a stereotype, but one that Kushner uses as a catalyst for Joe to take an interest in Louis. Evidently, nobody has ever taken Joe for a gay man, and the discussion of his mannerisms intrigues him. It is clear that the conversation, while ostensibly about Joe's Republican ideology, is the focus of the scene, but Louis manipulates the conversation because Louis knows that his claim fascinates Joe. Louis uses Joe's curiosity to flirt with and taunt him.

Early in *Millenium Approaches*, Prior states that "the sound of a gay man can be determined by a sibilant 's'" (Kushner 26), and he also suggests that a gay man's voice can be determined by vocal inflections. With the aforementioned discussion of Joe as the Marlboro man, it is clear that Louis does not recognize Joe's vocal qualities as an

indication of his homosexuality, but rather his tenderness in noticing that Louis is upset. Joe's nurturing of Louis is a catalyst for Louis's suggestion that Joe is gay. Joe's insecurity over the implication bolsters Louis's insight, and gives Louis the confidence to give Joe a kiss on the cheek as he leaves the bathroom.

Joe realizes that he does not fit the stereotype of a gay man, and is quick to tell Louis that assumptions should not be made about one's sexuality based on seemingly cliché stereotypes. Louis makes an assumption about the ambiguous sexuality of Ron Reagan, Jr. that somewhat offends Joe. Joe's response to Louis is the simple question, "How do you know?" (Kushner 75), to which Louis replies with a "vulgar" remark, stating, "darling, he never sucked *my* cock, but..." Louis has an innate understanding of signs that indicate one's homosexuality, commonly referred to as "gaydar." "Gaydar" detects subtle physical and emotional signs that a gay man performs, and focuses on gestures, speech patterns, eye contact, demeanor and attire. Louis instantly recognizes the subtle clues about Joe's repressed sexuality deep within the Marlboro man façade. Joe assimilates into the hegemony because he has created a façade through which he can conceal his homosexuality. Kushner endows Joe with this stereotypical façade to indicate the extent to which some gay men grapple with their homosexual desires, but choose to hide it for fear of discovery. Thus, the masculine façade suggests a discomfort with one's own sexuality because it is diametrically opposed to the femininity of Belize.

Because masculinity is a façade that Joe uses to hide his latent gay tendencies, he is secretive about his homosexuality in all aspects of his life. Harper, Joe's valium-addicted wife, is aware that Joe is gay, both from her own intuition and from piecing together clues about her relationship with Joe. Joe admits that he is not sexually attracted

to Harper when he states that has no “sexual feelings” (Kushner 84) for Harper, and does not “think [he] ever did.”<sup>iv</sup>

Kushner provides clues about Joe’s homosexuality in his scenes with Harper. In these scenes, he perpetuates the illusion of heterosexuality, demonstrating his discomfort with being gay. Joe’s relationship with Harper is a marriage in name only. He does not feel sexually attracted toward her and closes his eyes when they have sex so that he can envision having sex with other men. Joe does, however, care for Harper as a close friend, and indeed loves her as a person. Joe and Harper call each other “buddy,” a term of endearment that represents their love for each other. The word “buddy” also has a homosexual connotation in that they are using a traditionally masculine term of endearment that a male friend would call another male friend. Furthermore, these “buddies” are married and are having sexual relations, although with Joe and Harper, their marriage is an unhappy friendship filled with passionless sexual encounters. Indeed, there is no explanation in the text of the genesis of the term between the two; however, whether it is Joe who actually coins the term is not as important as Joe’s perpetuation of it. Joe calls Harper “buddy” to assuage her anxieties about Joe’s long absences from home, and his latent homosexuality.<sup>v</sup>

An examination of the term “buddy” is important because it is a masculine performative. The term “buddy,” when used as a term of endearment, suggests camaraderie and a strong relationship between male friends. Joe’s use of the term indicates his latent homosexuality. When Joe calls his wife “buddy,” he uses a term that men call other men, a type of fraternal appellation. Thus, he considers his wife to be more of a friend and less of a sexual partner. Furthermore, by calling Harper “buddy,” he

endows this masculine designation to a woman, bestowing upon her a masculine trait to placate his desire for male bonding. Joe takes it a step further by attaching a kiss to the appellation, calling it a “buddy kiss” (Kushner 32). A buddy kiss, essentially, is a kiss between two male friends. Joe’s use of the term suggests that he must endow Harper with a masculine designation for him to feel comfortable enough to kiss her. By calling it a buddy kiss, Joe can consider his marriage to be a friendship, and therefore perpetuate the illusion of the marriage to others. Indeed, the first time in the play that Joe gives Harper a buddy kiss, Harper follows the kiss up with a remark about how she learned to give a “blowjob” (Kushner 33) by listening to the radio, suggesting that she desires Joe sexually, beyond the platonic relationship represented by the term “buddy.” Joe’s use of this masculine performative reveals the extent to which Joe’s façade makes him unhappy. His marriage is passionless, and though he may love Harper, he cannot reconcile love and sexual desire in his relationship with her.

Kushner presents Joe’s coming-out process to illustrate the difficulties Joe encounters in reconciling his sexuality with his religion and his marriage, both facets of the heterosexual hegemony. Joe formally comes out to his mother Hannah via a public telephone in Central Park, a location that Joe frequently visits for voyeuristic satisfaction. This conversation is particularly important because it marks Joe’s first open admission that he is a gay man. Joe tells his mother that he is “homosexual” in a phone conversation that he makes late into the evening; however, before he says that he is gay, he asks her if his father ever loved him, a question to which Hannah does not provide the answer. Indeed, after she learns of her son’s sexuality, her response does not directly address the admission, but rather addresses Joe’s previous question about his father’s

feelings, stating that Joe is “old enough to understand that [his] father didn’t love [him] without [Joe] being ridiculous about it” (Kushner 82). This conversation demonstrates Hannah’s initial perception of homosexuality in that she avoids the issue at hand: her son’s sexuality. She immediately blames Joe’s sexuality on the lack of love that he received as a child, suggesting that she does not initially believe that it is possible for her son to be gay.

Kushner presents the stereotype that Joe desires masculine affection because of a lack of it during his childhood. Joe’s father’s neglect of his son surfaces during a conversation between Hannah and Joe via telephone, and because Joe’s revelation surprises her, she immediately promulgates the stereotype that a lack of fatherly affection induces homosexuality. Kushner presents this reaction to promulgate to the audience the absurdity of the notion. Earlier in the play, Joe admits to Roy Cohn that his father did not love him as a child, a disclosure that Roy does not believe. Roy tells Joe that he is sure that his late father indeed loved Joe, but Joe says that his father was in the military, suggesting that he was both “unfair” and “cold” (Kushner 62). This conversation provides evidence that an obvious lack of affection from Joe’s father persisted during Joe’s childhood. This neglect probably occurred under the watchful eye of Hannah, thereby prompting her to make the assumption that Joe’s phone call and alleged homosexuality is a sign of the lack of affection that Joe experienced as a child from his father. At the end of their phone conversation, Hannah again avoids the issue of Joe’s sexuality by stating that “drinking is a sin” (Kushner 82) and that Joe’s drunken behavior is reprehensible for a Mormon. She does not acknowledge Joe’s homosexuality as being a sin because she does not believe it to be true at this moment, implying that she is in

denial over the situation, both for not acknowledging her son's sexuality and for blaming his sexuality on other underlying causes.

Kushner uses Hannah to symbolize the ignorant heterosexual hegemony and their perceptions of gay men. To the audience, she represents what must be overcome in the struggle to diminish the oppression of gay men: she is a religious woman who harbors prejudice against homosexuals. Hannah demonstrates her preconceived notions about homosexuality when she meets Prior in *Perestroika*. Prior follows Joe to the Mormon visitor's center, and confronts Hannah about her son's relationship with Louis, and Hannah infers that Prior is gay because of his knowledge of the relationship between Louis and Joe. Hannah's curiosity is piqued because of her lack of familiarity with gay men, and because of her sudden affiliation with gay culture due to her son's homosexuality. She asks Prior if he is a "typical...homosexual," to which Prior replies that he is "stereotypical." Confusion ensues regarding the actual stereotype, and it is not stereotypical gay gestures or speech patterns about which each character comments, but rather a stereotypical gay man's profession: the hairdresser. Hannah's question regarding Prior's job as a hairdresser demonstrates her unfamiliarity with gay men. She is confused as to how her masculine, married son and the effeminate Prior can both be gay, when Prior claims that he himself embodies the stereotype. Because Joe assimilates into the dominant heterosexual hegemony via his façade, this conversation represents the extent to which Joe's masculinity successfully masks his homosexuality. This conversation also presents Prior's comfort with his own sexuality through his discussion of the hairstylist stereotype, presenting Joe's masculine façade as a hindrance simply because Prior openly

acknowledges a gay stereotype and jokes about it. Thus, Prior demonstrates his security in his sexuality.

While Joe's performance of masculinity clearly places him in opposition to Belize, Prior, and Louis, he is not the only gay character who performs masculinity. Roy Cohn embodies the preconceived notions regarding homosexuality held by the heterosexual hegemony, and also performs masculinity to deter any suspicion of his being gay. While Kushner presents Joe's coming out as a process, Roy Cohn's sexuality lacks development throughout the play. Cohn perpetuates the illusion of heterosexuality, from Roy's perspective apparently evident only to his doctor. Roy believes that his sexuality is well hidden and that nobody notices it. He is unaware of his persisting reputation as a closeted gay man within the gay community, and therefore does not believe that his disease will be discovered by anyone. Roy Cohn's masculinity, while seemingly overt, is also a façade that masks his closeted homosexuality. He epitomizes masculinity with his use of pejorative language and cold, unfeeling behavior to others, mostly to deflect the attention from his own insecurities about his sexuality. Roy goes to great lengths to hide his homosexuality from everyone, but his covert sexual behavior divulges his secret.

Roy develops a bond with Joe Pitt, and seemingly attempts to develop him as his protégé. This bond reaches a climax when Joe discloses his homosexuality to Roy. The segue to the conversation occurs when Joe explains that he has left his wife, a revelation to which Roy reacts nonchalantly by saying, "it happens" (Kushner 218). Joe proceeds to tell Roy that he has been staying with a man since he has left his wife, a remark that stuns Roy. Roy is initially in disbelief; however, he gets out of bed and walks toward Joe, with

the IV tugging at his arm. Roy rips out the IV and begins bleeding profusely. The contaminated blood that drips profusely from Roy's arm potently symbolizes Roy's own coming out to Joe as well as the extent to which he goes to ensure that his protégé follows the same path that he has. Because Joe's coming out is more explicit than Roy's, Joe is more comfortable with his sexuality than Roy, allowing Roy to occupy a place on the continuum of gender performativity that is characterized by hypermasculinity. Because Roy both epitomizes masculinity and insecurity, he is diametrically opposed to Belize. Belize represents security and femininity, precisely the characteristics that Roy denigrates to perpetuate his façade.

Joe's verbal disclosure of his homosexuality demonstrates his attempt to reconcile his secretive sexuality with his public persona. Roy does not ever make the same disclosure for fear that it would emasculate him. Instead, Roy's copious blood dripping from his arm is symbolic of his coming out because of Belize's reaction to the blood that ends up on Joe's shirt. Belize warns Joe to "get somewhere [he] can take off that shirt and throw it out," and further warns him not to "touch the blood" (Kushner 219). The naïve Joe does not realize why Belize tells him to do so, but the revelation to the audience is that Joe now knows the circumstances of Roy's illness.

Because Roy adheres to the heterosexual hegemony, he perceives homosexuality as a weakness that marginalizes gay men. He also equates homosexuality with the contraction of both HIV and AIDS, both debilitating diseases that render their victims feeble. Therefore, Roy does not want Joe to contract the illness, or accept his marginalized status and warns him to go back to his wife, "or [he] will regret it" (Kushner 219). Joe does not realize that Roy has AIDS, and does not realize that Roy

essentially is warning him not to be gay or he will contract HIV and AIDS, significantly weakening his social status and distancing himself from the hegemony. Thus, Roy establishes his own characterization as a stereotype. Roy represents the perception that AIDS is synonymous with homosexuality, and that AIDS renders one powerless.

Because Roy equates AIDS with homosexuality, his characterization is one that Kushner demonizes. This demonization stems from Roy's hypermasculinity, and the misconception by the heterosexual hegemony that masculinity embodies more power than femininity. According to the continuum in the play, gay characters who perform feminine gestures exhibit more power because they are more secure. Their portrayal is more sympathetic and caring because they feel secure with their homosexuality. The characters who perform masculine gestures do so to present a façade that adheres to the heterosexual hegemony so that they can propagate the illusion of power. Roy not only performs masculinity, but he also manipulates others to deflect suspicion of his homosexuality, demonstrating his discomfort with being openly gay because to Roy, being openly gay means disempowerment. Kushner reveals Roy's manipulative demeanor many times throughout the play, but most notably when his doctor diagnoses him with AIDS. This particular conversation is vital because it not only exposes Roy's manipulative demeanor, but provides a moment of didactic reflection about the disease. Henry, Roy's doctor, educates Roy about the disease, and subsequently educates the audience. Henry states that those most at risk are hemophiliacs and homosexuals. Roy realizes that Henry is making the inference that Roy is homosexual, and sees this inference as a threat to his own perceived power. Roy entices Henry to openly state that Roy is gay, and then threatens to "destroy [his] reputation and [his] practice in the State

of New York” (Kushner 50), to demonstrate not only that he has a degree of power, but also that he needs to assert this power to maintain his own illusion of power. Because Roy equates homosexuality with a debilitating and eventually fatal disease, he likens the contraction of AIDS to a loss of status and power. This conversation demonstrates the extent to which Roy must fully exercise his power to give the appearance of strength, not an ailment that symbolizes weakness.

Roy tells Henry that Henry’s main concern is with labeling people; however, ironically, Roy actually favors labeling people more than Henry because it reinforces his assimilation with the hegemony. Roy explains that Henry thinks that the label “homosexual” implies the type of person with whom Roy has sexual encounters; however, Roy states that the label does not apply to sexuality, but rather to power. Roy states that homosexuals are individuals who have “no clout” (Kushner 51), and that Roy cannot possibly be homosexual because he has such a vast amount of clout that he possesses the capacity to speak with the first lady of the United States in a matter of minutes. Roy’s diatribe to Henry reveals that he believes that homosexuals are weak individuals and that the disease magnifies the debilitation.

Henry’s attitude is conciliatory to assuage Roy’s obvious discomfort with his own sexuality. Henry knows of Roy’s discomfort with his homosexuality, but knows that he must provide Roy with the diagnosis, and that Roy must accept his situation; therefore, he allows Roy to believe false information. Roy denies his diagnosis by telling Henry that it is not AIDS that he has, but rather liver cancer, because “AIDS is what homosexuals have” (Kushner 52), and Roy considers homosexuals powerless. Liver cancer then is a façade through which Roy plans to mask his illness and thus his homosexuality. He feels

that if it were to be discovered that he is in indeed gay, he would relinquish any power that he has accumulated over time. This power hungry attitude is the very attitude that Kushner both criticizes and demonizes.

Kushner further demonizes the aforementioned characterization of Roy in his many conversations with Belize; however, in one particular conversation, he reveals his fabricated superiority over gay men when Belize tells him that his advice to Roy is from “one faggot to another” (Kushner 161). Roy’s reply demonstrates his struggle to maintain the illusion of power when he screams that Belize will “be flipping Big Macs in East Hell” if he gives Roy anymore of his “lip” (Kushner 161). Roy does indeed realize the extent to which he is in danger because he calls Martin Heller, an employee of the Reagan Administration Justice Department, and tells him to send over the experimental drug AZT so that Roy can keep his “own private stash” that he controls in his room. This phone conversation, which demonstrates Roy’s clout, reveals more of his villainous characterization. Roy resorts to threats, intimidation and derogatory language to further his own superiority, or at least to propagate the illusion of it.

Kushner uses Roy Cohn to entice the audience to feel disdain for homophobia while simultaneously enticing the audience to feel pity for the plight of the oppressed homosexual. Because Roy uses pejorative language and intimidation tactics to demonstrate his power throughout the play, Kushner demonizes his portrayal to prove to the audience that adherence to the often judgmental hegemonic heterosexual mainstream is just as villainous as Roy Cohn.

Belize, Prior, Louis, Joe, and Roy, respectively, are gay characters in *Angels in America* who exist on a continuum that expresses the extent to which they perform

femininity. Within the context of the play, Kushner posits the notion that the more feminine a gay man acts, the more comfortable he is with his own homosexuality. While Belize celebrates his femininity on one end of the continuum, Roy shuns it, and refuses to accept the fact that he is gay. The gay men are stereotyped to manifest a specific place in this continuum, suggesting that stereotyping is necessary to convey to the audience that a man who acts in a feminine manner is not necessarily emasculated, but could perhaps hold more power than a masculine man due to his level of comfort. The tendency for the heterosexual hegemony is to equate a feminine man with less power because he repudiates culturally constructed masculine behavior. In this play, however, the men who are most rendered powerless are Joe and Roy, the characters who act the most masculine.

### **CHAPTER 3: PERFORMING THE PERFORMATIVE: THE STAGING AND SUBSEQUENT EFFECTS OF *ANGELS IN AMERICA***

As mentioned in Chapter Two, Kushner stereotypes gay characters in *Angels in America* to create a continuum of gender performativity that ultimately empowers the effeminate gay characters. Thus, the masculine characters are marginalized, contradicting the masculinity/femininity binary present in a patriarchal society. The equation of gay men and femininity is a contemporary construction that marginalizes gay men because they do not adhere to the culturally imposed behavior for men propagated by the heterosexual hegemony. The marginalization that the hegemony perpetuates creates a crisis among some gay men in constructing their own identities. These gay men fear effeminacy because of the equation of homosexuality and feminine behavior, causing them to create a masculine façade to give the appearance of assimilation into the hegemony. Alan Sinfield states that “many men are avoiding effeminacy because they wish to pass as heterosexual. Despite initial liberationist optimism, a large proportion of gays are still subject to overwhelming pressure not to appear queer” (Sinfield 192). Thus, for some gay men, the appearance of “queer” behavior signifies marginalization and a deviation from the behavior for men established by the hegemony. Any behavior that renders a gay man effeminate signifies his deviance from the hegemony and thereby oppresses him.

Kushner uses the gender performativity continuum to bestow power to the feminine gay characters while marginalizing the masculine gay characters to demonstrate to the audience that a gay man’s acceptance of femininity indicates security with one’s homosexuality, and that this security represents empowerment. However, the continuum

is not the only means by which Kushner attempts to provoke the audience to end oppression. Kushner also uses the tenets of Bertolt Brecht's epic staging to convey his message of social change. The tenets of Brecht's epic staging include the use of montages and stage trickery, resulting in the alienation effect.<sup>vi</sup> With the alienation effect, the audience can distance themselves from the action on stage to reflect critically on the occurrences, thereby provoking social change that will alter the plight of the gay man in society.<sup>vii</sup>

To further provoke social change, Kushner subtly adapts Walter Benjamin's notion of historical materialism to suit the counteroppressive message of the play.<sup>viii</sup> A historical materialist strives to end an oppressive past, and Kushner assumes this role tangibly in *Angels in America* via Prior Walter, as Prior is the "prophet" endowed with the responsibility to change the world. Prior not only changes other characters' perception of gay men with AIDS, but he also challenges the audience to consider the plight of the homosexual. Kushner's essential goal in adapting Benjamin's historical materialism is to give each spectator the opportunity to become a historical materialist themselves, thereby reducing the oppression of gay men. Kushner uses the aforementioned stereotypes combined with the epic staging of Brecht to create a sense of incumbency to the audience to diminish oppression, and to celebrate the disempowered, effeminate characters in the play by demonstrating that their identity is worthy of celebration.

Kushner uses Brechtian staging and Benjamin's historical materialism interchangeably, as epic staging induces critical reflection that entices the audience to desire social change. However, Kushner cannot possibly rely only on Brecht to stimulate

reflection by the audience. Kushner also relies on the Aristotelian notion of catharsis, whereby the spectator identifies with a character onstage, resulting in a purgation of emotion. With catharsis working in tandem with the alienation effect, Kushner both appeals to the emotions of the audience while simultaneously inducing critical reflection.

Kushner accomplishes the assimilation of the cathartic effect and the alienation effect by bestowing the responsibility of the cathartic effect to the actors, while simultaneously using unique staging elements to induce the alienation effect. It is first important to examine the actors who convey the issues of the play to the audience via catharsis. In order to induce audience identification with the characters, Kushner provides specific details about how his characters are to be portrayed. The actors cast in *Angels in America* have a particularly difficult task in determining the character choices necessary for a truthful portrayal. A truthful portrayal by an actor accurately depicts a character as realistically as possible under the circumstances of the play. Given the performative gestures discussed in Chapter Two, the actor must truthfully convey the nuances of the character with the intention of evoking a specific stereotype within the gay community. Several actors experience further difficulty when the play calls for not only the mastery of one character, but also a complete transformation to depict other minor characters in the play. Kushner intends for certain actors to play these parts. For example, the man in the park who has sex with Louis is ironically played by the same actor playing Prior. Mr. Lies, a character “*who in style of dress and speech suggests a jazz musician*” (Kushner 13), is played by the same actor who plays Belize. Prior 1, a character from the thirteenth century, is played by the actor playing Joe, and his speech should have a “*guttural Yorkshire accent.*” Prior 2, a character from the seventeenth

century is played by the actor portraying Roy Cohn, and whom Kushner describes as “*sophisticated*,” contrasting with Roy’s portrayal. The aforementioned minor characters are caricatures as opposed to the major characters, who are seemingly more realistic. The purpose of this distinction is to heighten the reality of the major characters, thereby evoking pity and empathy from the audience. Kushner has actors play dual roles not only for the obvious economic advantage of having a smaller cast to pay, but also to provide a challenge for the actor who must alternate between the realistic and the exaggerated characterizations. This fluctuation emphasizes the importance of the actor’s realistic behavior in the scene as this behavior will induce a more cathartic effect, whereas the exaggerated characterizations will induce more critical reflection.

The actors in the play must be cast not only for their acting ability, but also to inhabit physiologically the characters that they are portraying. Uta Hagen uses the term “realism” to apply to the actor’s performance:

The actor puts his own psyche to use to find identification with the role, allowing the behavior to develop out of the playwright’s given circumstances, trusting that a form will result, knowing that the executions of his actions will involve a moment-to-moment *subjective* experience.

(Hagen 43)

The actor needs to be able to live in the circumstances of the play; therefore, an actor playing Prior must embody the complex feelings associated with AIDS, including the anxieties, desperation, heartache, and vulnerability associated with the illness. The purpose of this complete physiological and emotional identification with the role is to heighten the audience’s response to the play. The actor needs to evoke responses from

the audience; however, these responses are not simply the spectator's identification with the character. The audience is enticed into a conflicting sympathetic/empathetic response to the characters on stage.

Kushner, through the editing process of the play and during rehearsals, grew accustomed to how the play was to be performed by the actors during the first staging of the play.<sup>ix</sup> Indeed, in a preface to *Perestroika*, he provides a note to the actors and directors regarding the manner in which the scenes should be played. Kushner states that “*Perestroika* is essentially a comedy” (142), despite the gravity of the circumstances. Furthermore, he “cautions” the actors and directors:

The play is cheapened irreparably when the actors playing the Angel and *especially* Prior fail to convey the gravity of these situations. A Prior played for laughs is death to this enterprise! Every moment must be played for its reality, the terms always life and death; only then will the comedy emerge. There is also a danger in easy sentiment. Eschew sentiment! Particularly in the final act—metaphorical though the fantasies may be (or maybe not), the problems the characters face are finally among the hardest problems—how to let go of the past, how to change and lose with grace, how to keep going in the face of overwhelming suffering. It shouldn't be easy. (Kushner 142)

Kushner's acknowledgement that each word should perform “reality” with clear motivation and high stakes evokes Hagen's teaching. The reality of Kushner's circumstances provide the veracity for the actor; the actor must not “perform” comedy or sentimental melodrama, but rather experience the truthfulness in the words firsthand and

live in the moment. If the actor simply performs the role with the intention of evoking audience reactions, the meaning of the play is lost. Kushner trusts that the audience will be able to reflect on the action on stage and respond accordingly. He is also clear that the actors should be aware of the metaphors in the play; however, this awareness should not affect the honest pursuit of the characters' goals. Kushner's stage directions imply his belief that this play has the capacity to evoke strong cathartic responses from the audience, and he then needs the actors to truthfully experience the circumstances on the stage, as opposed to "playing" the action. The actor must experience the emotion that the character feels to induce a cathartic response from the audience. By "playing" the emotion of the scene, Kushner warns to "eschew" exaggerating the emotion, favoring realism over feigned sentiment.

Kushner's warning to avoid overacting the emotion of a scene by playing a scene for its "reality" induces sympathetic and empathetic responses from the audience. Kushner intends for these responses to be cathartic by appealing to the audience's emotions so that they will feel incensed at the action onstage and subsequently yearn for social change. This cathartic response is Aristotelian in nature. In *Poetics*, Aristotle explains that "pity and fear [affects] the proper purgation of these emotions" (Dukore 36), and later states that "fear and pity may be aroused by a spectacular means, but they may also result from the inner structure of the piece, which is the better way, and indicates a superior poet" (Dukore 43). Aristotle does indeed mention the spectacle that Brecht later incorporates into the alienation effect, but favors the "inner structure," or plot elements to heighten the purgative effect. Identification with the characters' conflicts induces this purgation.

Though *Angels in America* depicts emotional circumstances with which the audience can potentially identify, it is not primarily an Aristotelian drama. Kushner does not specifically intend for the audience to identify with the many facets of his characters. Indeed, the play most often treats the spectator as a disinterested witness, with the notable exception of the final scene of the play when some characters directly address the audience. Kushner assimilates tenets from both Aristotelian drama as well as Brecht's epic staging for the purpose of enlightening the audience to the reality of the AIDS epidemic and the oppression of gay men. Because the play was written and performed years after the initial AIDS outbreak, it provides a history of the disease through the eyes of characters who could have, and in Roy Cohn's case, actually did live through it. This didactic effect closely adheres to Brecht's belief that epic theater should challenge the spectator with circumstances that require choices, thereby making the audience not simply passive, but productive. Moreover, the audience must examine powerful dichotomies, assuming the audience to be heterogeneous in composition (a topic that will be discussed later in the chapter). In society, the dominant heterosexual hegemony marginalizes homosexuals, but in this play, the gay characters are the focus. Furthermore, the gay characters are written as stereotypes to explore gender performativity and to heighten both the social realism and the fantastical nature of the play. The productivity of the spectator then manifests itself via pity and empathy for the characters onstage, and determines if it is possible to progress to a social acceptance of both homosexuality and gay men with AIDS in a post-Reagan America.

The influence of Brecht in *Angels* cannot be underestimated. Epic theater is not a subtle, naturalistic manner of staging, but rather a grandiose appeal to the spectator to

think about the circumstances on stage. The first and perhaps most important indication of Brechtian influence is a note about the staging provided by Kushner:

The play benefits from a pared down style of presentation, with minimal scenery and scene shifts done rapidly (no blackouts!), employing the cast as well as stagehands—which makes for an actor-driven event, as this must be. The moments of magic—the appearance and disappearance of Mr. Lies and the ghosts, the Book hallucination, and the ending—are to be fully realized as bits of wonderful *theatrical* illusion—which means it’s OK if the wires show, and maybe it’s good that they do, but the magic should at the same time be thoroughly amazing. (Kushner 12)

The specific detail that the production is going to be an “actor-driven event” implies that the emphasis is going to be on the dialogue on stage. Kushner also emphasizes the way in which the characters act and react to the other characters on stage to the extent that the stagehands become integral to the flow and pacing of each performance. However, the intimation that Kushner intends for the production to be a spectacle is unmistakable. Kushner refers to specific circumstances in the play as “moments of magic,” indicating that certain moments are intended to mystify the audience and cause them to be aware that they are watching a performance, and thereby dissuading any empathy with the characters, as with Aristotelian drama.

Kushner also suggests that each performance is to have rapid scene changes, creating a montage effect that heightens the drama occurring on stage. The most pertinent example of rapid scene changes is with the use of the split scene, most often occurring between Louis and Prior, and Harper and Joe, thereby allowing the audience to

observe the similarities and differences between the two couples as both relationships degrade. The purpose of the montage is for the audience to remain distant. With two separate scenes occurring simultaneously and attention shifting rapidly, the interest of the audience is diverted, and therefore less able to experience sympathetic responses to the action onstage. The audience observes the action as a representation of life and curbs their sympathy for any one character due to the pacing of the dialogue and the duality of the staging. Because both relationships are decaying for different reasons, the intention is not for the audience to favor one over the other.

Kushner's overall objective for this montage is to create the alienation effect derived from Brecht. The alienation effect occurs when the audience is reminded that they are watching a performance. According to Brecht, critical detachment is necessary for the play to provoke thought within the spectator. The intention of the alienation effect is to induce reflection of a particular issue, whether political or social awareness, without being overtly propagandist. The aforementioned split scene maximizes the dramatic effect of the demise of both couples:

Prior: I'm dying! You stupid fuck! Do you know what that is! Love! Do you know what love means? We lived together four-and-a-half years, you animal, you idiot.

Louis: I have to find some way to save myself.

Joe: Who are these men? I never understood it. Now I know.

Harper: What?

Joe: It's me.

Prior: GET OUT OF MY ROOM!

Joe: I'm the man with the knives.

Prior: If I could get up now, I'd kill you. I would. Go away. Go away or I'll scream. (Kushner 85-86)

Because the split scene diverts the attention of the audience, the audience cannot completely identify with one couple, let alone one character. As indicated in this scene, Kushner's use of the split scene has another purpose that is more didactic.

The lines above seemingly respond to each other, despite the fact that they are two separate conversations. These two conversations reflect marital strife. While one couple is homosexual and the other is heterosexual, Kushner's intention is to demonstrate that essentially both couples are in relationships that are partnerships, thereby demonstrating to the spectator that the gay relationship is legitimate. Thus, the split scene induces reflection in the audience about a social issue, enticing them to become more socially aware, and perhaps provoking the audience to instigate social change against the oppression of gays. However, this critical reflection, while relying heavily on the staging, cannot be attributed only to Brechtian influence; the possibility for identification with a character onstage could evoke more cathartic responses. These cathartic responses, relying heavily on sympathy and empathy, subsequently generates critical reflection that induces the spectator to act as a historical materialist and contribute to the end of the social oppression of gays. Kushner exposes the issues surrounding gay men, and via Aristotelian and Brechtian aspects of staging, invites the audience to both experience life from a marginalized perspective, and reflect critically on it.

While the use of the split scene effectively conveys Kushner's portrayal of parallel relationships, another important element of epic staging is the use of illusions to

make the audience aware that they are observing a play. This awareness, while seemingly obvious, is important to distinguish from catharsis, which implies audience identification with the characters onstage. In the aforementioned scene, Joe acknowledges his wife Harper's hallucinations, illusions that occur often in the play. Harper is indeed a victim of her husband's deceit, and she often experiences hallucinations. Because she has agoraphobia, she takes valium to escape the trappings of her home instead of physically leaving. She is often assisted by an imaginary travel agent aptly known as Mr. Lies, who takes Harper to Antarctica. Kushner uses Mr. Lies as a *deus ex machina* figure sent to assist Harper.<sup>x</sup> In ancient Greek theater, particularly in the tragedies of Euripides, the *deus ex machina* is sent to assist a protagonist when he is in trouble. It is important to note that this theatrical device is not Brechtian in nature. In fact, stage trickery is not an actual tenet of epic theater; however, the effect of stage trickery is that these 'special effects' make the audience aware that they are watching a play, and can therefore critically reflect on it. Kushner acknowledges the importance of making the audience aware of the stage trickery when he purports that it is "OK if the wires show."

Harper's need for escape with Mr. Lies suggests a pertinent political undertone. Harper possesses a fascination with the ozone layer, and she tells Mr. Lies that she wants to visit Antarctica to see the hole in it. The illusion of Mr. Lies instigates critical reflection by the audience because of the metaphor that she uses. She describes the ozone layer as "a shell of safety for life itself," and then says that "things are collapsing [. . .] systems of defense [are] giving way" (Kushner 22-23). The ozone layer then is a metaphor for the defense mechanisms of the human body, and is thus analogous to the

immune system. Kushner's use of the ozone layer as a metaphor dually suggests the Reagan administration's reluctance to control the depletion of the Earth's protective stratum and symbolically the unwillingness to acknowledge AIDS as a threat to humanity. While the metaphor itself is not a Brechtian technique, the effect of the metaphor is that it induces audience reflection on a political issue.

Kushner further exaggerates Harper's hallucinations so that at one point in the play, she shares her hallucination with one of Prior's dreams. Kushner explains that "*For some reason, Prior has appeared in this [dream]. Or Harper has appeared in Prior's dream. It is bewildering*" (Kushner 36). Here, Kushner purposely pairs the two victims of their respective relationships together to demonstrate their similarities, despite the fact that Prior is a gay man and Harper is a straight woman. They both "intuit" about the other in a "threshold of revelation" (Kushner 39), in which they share their problems: Prior reveals Joe's latent sexuality to Harper, and Harper knows that Prior has AIDS. Kushner creates a scene where two abandoned characters empathize with each other, foreshadowing the demise of their respective relationships. However, both give each other touching advice, and Harper explains to Prior that "deep inside [. . .] there's a part [. . .] entirely free of disease" (Kushner 40), suggesting that Kushner's intention for the scene is to demonstrate while AIDS may cause the body's debilitation, it does not weaken the soul. Creating this awareness in an exchange between these two particular characters allows the audience to reflect on these words, and acknowledge that Prior should not be marginalized in society because of his illness.

The hallucinations experienced by Harper and Prior induce critical reflection; however, it is not the most influential staging element designed to provoke the audience

into critical reflection. The most important “*theatrical* illusion” that Kushner writes in *Angels* is the angel itself. An obvious illusion that is central to the play, the Angel is a character whose presence manifests the deus ex machina. However, the Angel remains pivotal in *Angels*, and adheres to the traditional use of the deus ex machina as an important figure sent to assist the protagonist. The use of the Angel as a deus ex machina is a symbolic panacea to those gay men afflicted with AIDS. The Angel bestows Prior with the message that he has the power to alter his fate, and when this message is conveyed to the audience, they are enticed to consider the historical oppression of gay men throughout history.

In history, perhaps the most oppressive apparatus dominating homosexuals is religion. Religion generally ostracizes gay men, contributing to their oppression and various Christian denominations justify their oppression by considering their sexual activity deviant. Therefore, the Angel is an ironic use of Christian iconography, indicating a Christian figure calling upon a homosexual as a prophet. Despite this irony, Kushner’s use of the Angel indicates his assimilation of homosexuality with spirituality and suggests his belief that gays are not individuals devoid of morality and values as is commonly thought by religious zealots. The Angel considers Prior a prophet who must intervene and instigate stasis for humanity, thereby bestowing religious importance to a person marginalized by religion.

The Angel’s appearance in the text begins subtly and crescendos to her climactic appearance in Prior’s dream, as Prior retells the dream to Belize. The dream itself is a plea for a cease in progress, a central issue in the play. The Angel warns Prior that God created humans and endowed them with the gift of creativity, a gift which also possesses

the “Virus of Time” (Kushner 175). Here, Kushner uses specific diction by calling time a virus, a parasitic life form that can never be killed, creating the analogy to AIDS. Angels are diametrically opposed to humans; they are “uni-genitaled” and reproduce hermaphroditically, making them pure and free of the “Virus of Time.” According to the Angel, God became bored with his Angels and “bewitched by humanity,” and subsequently took long journeys. On April 18, 1906, the day of the great San Francisco quake, God disappeared and never returned. The Angel’s task for Prior is to create stasis, and it is a prophecy that he is told he cannot avoid. If Prior fails to accomplish the prophecy, God will never return.

Prior is not only the prophet chosen by the Angels, but he also represents Kushner’s attempt to persuade the audience to work as a historical materialist and strive to cease the oppression of gay men. Much of the progress/stasis dichotomy is derived from Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History.” Benjamin states:

A historical materialist approaches a historical subject only where he encounters it as a monad. In this structure, he recognizes the sign of a Messianic cessation of happening, or, put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past. He takes cognizance of it in order to blast a specific era out of the homogeneous course of history—blasting a specific life out of the era or a specific work out of the lifework. As a result of this method the lifework is preserved in this work and at the same time canceled; in the lifework, the era; and in the era, the entire course of history. (Benjamin 262)

The Angel thus serves as a messenger to deliver the news to Prior of the need to stop moving, thereby precluding the progress of mankind. The progress/stasis dichotomy in particular directly affects Prior's dream and as a result endows the play with a metaphor: stasis is death, and progress is life. Therefore, Prior rejects death and wants "more life," representing the need to move forward despite the Angel's explanation that God has abandoned humanity and heaven because of the progress yielded by man's unique creativity. However, Art Borreca suggests that "the Angel does not offer a chance to remake the past; she only seeks relief from its ruin and despair" (Geis and Kruger 249). Thus, Borreca suggests that the Angel is not completely Messianic because "her Messianism is false, expressed as it is by an Angel abandoned by God to a world similarly abandoned" (Geis and Kruger 249). However, Borreca does not suggest that Kushner intends for Prior to embody the prophecy and to provide a voice for Benjamin in the play. Kushner gives Prior the opportunity to "fight for the oppressed past" (Benjamin 262), and in writing the character, carries out the work of a historical materialist. Thus, Prior represents the struggle against the plight of the homosexual, and the possibility to advance and survive in the presence of the debilitating AIDS epidemic.

According to Benjamin, history must be "blasted," and "cancelled" to progress, and Kushner implies that progress is essential for the cessation of an oppressive past. The Angel literally "blasts" Prior's apartment at the end of *Millenium Approaches*. The multifarious purpose of this action offers a literal staging of Benjamin's idea, while also providing a climax from the buildup throughout *Millenium Approaches*. Furthermore, the Angel's spectacular appearance gives Prior a sense of purpose; Prior is the individual who has been chosen to "blast a specific era out of the homogeneous course of history"

(Benjamin 262). Kushner recognizes the power of Prior to demonstrate that AIDS should not be synonymous with death. Prior's importance in the role of prophet is heightened by the political ammunition of Louis, his overtly political ex-boyfriend. Louis's role is important because he challenges several characters in the play, sparking political debates even when they are seemingly irrelevant. Each political diatribe that Louis divulges provides a fragment of history that deals with various forms of oppression. As Louis challenges several characters in the play, he also challenges the audience. Prior's portrayal as a victim of Louis's abandonment and of AIDS itself provides a sympathetic voice of reason to induce social reflection, and eventual social change.

Here again, Kushner relies on the alienation effect to instigate reflection by the audience to cease the oppressive history of gay men. Louis makes the audience aware that they are watching a historical play. His knowledge and exposition of the oppression of groups of people in his conversations with Belize and Joe demonstrate his didactic function in the play. Louis evokes responses from the audience that require reflection; however, this particular character creates a unique attraction and repulsion depending on who is present in the audience. Thus, to say that *Angels in America* is exclusively Brechtian is spurious; the importance of a character such as Louis lies in his ability to entice the audience through a range of feelings. The spectator might resent him for leaving Prior, for his politics, or for his failure to adequately communicate with others in the play, and it is this resentment that goes against Brecht's view of epic theater. Brecht states that in an epic production, "the actors [. . .] refrained from going over wholly into their role" (Dukore 850), a statement that contradicts the aforementioned teaching of Hagen, and essentially, the advice of Kushner himself. Thus, Kushner expects an

assimilation of epic theater and the dramatic form of theater. Honesty in the circumstances should evoke both emotional responses as well as critical responses to entice the audience into reflection, and subsequently provoke social change.

Because Kushner wants to convey the importance of historical materialism to provoke the cessation of an oppressive history, it is important to determine the composition of his audience. A New York theater audience is generally comprised of people who are less politically conservative than other parts of the country, suggesting that the liberal political overtones are potentially already considered by the spectators. Furthermore, because this play is a “gay fantasia on national themes,” the audience is perhaps more likely to be comprised of a larger homosexual population. Therefore, how can awareness instigate social change when the audience is already aware of the extent to which gay men are oppressed? The answer is in Kushner’s amalgamation of the tenets of epic theater and the sympathetic, empathetic and cathartic responses posited by Aristotle. The gay audience can potentially experience Aristotelian responses to the characters and action onstage, provoking them to consider the play’s message of social change experienced through the Brechtian critical responses. Kushner intends for the audience to feel emotion at certain moments in the play—these intimations are present in his stage directions. Thus, the possibility exists for spectators to experience sympathetic, empathetic and purgative responses to the play and carry forth the play’s message of the abolition of gay oppression, and the oppression of those living with AIDS.

Because *Angels in America* is contingent on an amalgamation of Brecht’s epic theater and Aristotelian drama to prompt social change, Kushner relies on stereotypical characters that elicit emotional and critical responses from the audience. Louis is an

important character with whom the audience can potentially experience a strong reaction. Louis leaves his boyfriend when he is sick because he does not possess the emotional fortitude to support Prior through his illness. Louis is obviously more concerned about *his* situation than actually helping Prior. The first indication of Louis's weakness in the relationship is the first time Prior gets sick. After Prior faints, Louis cries to himself, "Oh help. Oh help. Oh God [. . .] help me I can't I can't I can't" (Kushner 54). Louis knows that he cannot be with Prior because of the uncertainty of Prior's future; Louis cannot handle losing Prior, so he leaves Prior on his own terms. This abandonment represents Louis's weak emotional state.

Louis's characterization as one who abandons a person in his time of need sends a message to the audience. Because the audience can potentially react adversely to Louis, they can also reflect on the circumstances. Essentially, Kushner is representing the extent to which AIDS patients suffer, demonstrating that they not only experience discrimination from the government, manifested in Louis's constant reminder of the inadequacy of the Reagan administration, but also in Louis's abandonment of Prior. Louis makes the audience aware of how important it is for a person to remain loyal and supportive to someone who is extremely sick or terminally ill. The audience also sees that Louis's abandonment exacerbates Prior's suffering, not only emotionally, but also physically, exemplified in Prior overextending himself when he purposely follows Joe Pitt around Manhattan.

In acknowledging Louis's demonization in the play, a heterogeneous audience also accepts and validates the relationship between Louis and Prior. Assuming the audience to be a heterogeneous mix of people with different sexualities, a heterosexual

man or woman can potentially witness the extent to which Louis betrays Prior, thereby endorsing their relationship as acceptable. When the play was first produced in the early 1990's, gay men were only just beginning to move beyond the heterosexual hegemony's affiliation of being gay with the spread of AIDS. For a heterosexual audience to witness Louis and Prior's relationship signifies the universality of their love, and the extent to which Louis betrays Prior. The straight audience's reflection on their relationship and this universality creates an awareness that instigates social change.

Thus, the audience's reactions to the characters onstage play a pivotal role in the extent to which they accomplish social change. The reactions to the characters are contingent on the performance by the actor, for the actor possesses the capacity to heighten the established stereotype written in the text with the charisma necessary to entice the audience. Gay stereotypes combined with epic staging create the alienation effect necessary to distance the audience from the action to prompt critical reflection necessary to bring about social change; however, the audience is not limited to Brechtian responses. The audience also possesses the capacity to experience sympathetic, empathetic and cathartic responses that can provoke critical reflection as well.

#### CHAPTER 4: JOE PITT AND ROY COHN: A STUDY OF HYPERMASCULINITY AND THE CLOSET

Both parts of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* depict gay characters that are stereotyped to heighten the effect of their portrayal to the audience. As discussed in Chapter Two, each gay character's respective depiction can be placed on a continuum according to their stereotyped gender characteristics, with masculinity at one extreme end, and femininity at the other. The purpose of this continuum is to demonstrate that the more feminine the gay character is, the more comfortable that character is with his homosexuality, and the more masculine the gay character, the more uncomfortable he is with his identity as a gay man. Thus, stereotyping is necessary to convey to the audience the equation of femininity with self-acceptance and security, thereby marginalizing the masculine gay characters because of their adherence to behavior propagated by the dominant heterosexual hegemony.

The gender performativity continuum, however, is not the only device that Kushner uses to marginalize the masculine gay characters; he also uses the closet to create a rigid dichotomy that separates the openly gay characters from the closeted ones. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick examines the implications of the "closet" in *The Epistemology of the Closet*, suggesting that it is "the defining structure for gay oppression in this century" (Sedgwick 71). Sedgwick implies that the closet is an oppressive social construct because it separates heterosexuals from homosexuals, thereby marginalizing homosexuals. The closet contributes to the construction of the dominant heterosexual hegemony in that it creates a binary in which heterosexuality exists in contrast to homosexuality. Indeed, the term "heterosexual" is never mentioned without implying the

otherness of the “homosexual.” The implied universality of heterosexuality thus marginalizes homosexuality, and the closet is the clandestine construct that creates a façade to the hegemony, a façade that all gay men and women must abolish to publicly decree their sexual orientation to the hegemony. Such a construct has oppressive characteristics that imply control over sexual identity: gay men and women in the closet conceal their true identities, while open disclosure of their identity makes them susceptible to marginalization.

Sedgwick closely examines the power struggles between homosexuals and heterosexuals, and she contends that the rigid separation between the two categorizations stems from homophobia:

I argue that the historically shifting, and precisely the arbitrary and self-contradictory, nature of the way *homosexuality* (along with its predecessor terms) has been defined in relation of the rest of the male homosocial spectrum has been an exceedingly potent and embattled locus of power over the entire range of male bonds, and perhaps especially over those that define themselves, not as homosexual, but *as against* the homosexual. (Sedgwick 185).

Sedgwick’s contention is that an intense homophobia characterizes relationships between heterosexual men, implied by the term “homosocial.” Male heterosexuality, then, is defined only against the term homosexual, a term from which there would be no need for identification. This comparison of the heterosexual to the homosexual subculture creates a sense of “overarching male entitlement” (Sedgwick 185) that implies the manifestation of power in the separatist binary. Sedgwick suggests that the dominant heterosexual men

separate themselves from the marginalized homosexuals by distinguishing their masculine performatives from effeminacy. Straight men perceive effeminate men as gay; therefore, feminine performatives are oppressive signifiers. The closet then is a pretense that gay men can hide behind, assimilating into the heterosexual hegemony by performing masculinity.

While a lengthy discussion of the gender performativity continuum already examines the implications of the performance of femininity in Chapter Two, a close examination of the societal implications of the closet and the pretense of hegemonic masculinity in *Angels in America* is important to further explain why Joe and Roy are marginalized. Kushner includes two closeted gay characters to demonstrate that the closet is a separation device that polarizes gay men into the categories out of the closet and in the closet. Kushner creates a dichotomy that allows openly gay men to dominate closeted gay men in the play. Thus, Kushner posits that closeted men are separated from the gay community. They give the pretense of assimilation into the heterosexual hegemony, but are not actually part of it. To openly gay men, closeted gay men relinquish their true identities with the perpetuation of this pretense. Because of this assimilation, closeted gay men cannot assume the role of a historical materialist to fight against oppression, instead choosing to live in fear of disclosure. Therefore, openly gay men act as revolutionaries against oppression, while closeted gay men succumb to the oppression.

Both Joe Pitt and Roy Cohn struggle with the closet and their identities. They are trapped by society's marginalization of gays, believing that they must perpetuate the pretense of heterosexuality to maintain the power and dominance associated with straight

men. Both Joe and Roy are lawyers; Roy is the wealthier, more experienced attorney, while Joe is more inexperienced. Because both men are professionals, Kushner attributes power to them via social status to heighten the effect of the continuum of gender performativity. Kushner equates hegemonic masculinity with monetary and societal power, or at least the illusion of power, and the legal profession represents this equation. Kushner attempts to dismantle the association of hegemonic masculinity with power by disempowering those who perpetuate hegemonic masculinity and empowering those who are marginalized as a result of it.

While Belize, Louis, and Prior demonstrate the extent to which gay characters feel comfortable with their own sexuality in this play, Joe Pitt and Roy Cohn remain closeted because they are not comfortable with the potential loss of power equated with full disclosure of one's homosexuality. Joe and Roy are stereotyped to the same extent that Belize, Louis, and Prior are, albeit in a different manner. They exhibit exaggerated masculine qualities that are diametrically opposed to the feminine qualities attributed to Belize, Louis and Prior to demonstrate their discomfort with their own sexuality, seeking solace in the closet. This discomfort provokes the audience to reflect critically on the status of gay men in *Angels in America*. Gender performativity in this play entices the audience to identify with the feminized male characters rather than the masculine characters. The more feminized the character, the more comfortable they are with their own sexuality because they do not need to propagate the acceptable societal norm for masculinity. Kushner endeavors to preclude the equation of hegemonic masculinity with power with his use of the openly gay man/closeted gay man dichotomy.

Joe Pitt never comes completely out of the closet, allowing the audience to juxtapose Joe's closetedness with other characters who are openly gay. Joe makes an effort to come to terms with his sexuality in his relationship with Louis, and in his coming out to his wife and mother. However, he ultimately asks his wife Harper to stay with him because he feels that admitting his sexuality has left him a lonely man. By asking his wife to stay with him, Joe comes full circle; he tries to live his life as a gay man, and ultimately fails because he quickly attaches himself to the first gay man with whom he actually speaks, causing their relationship to end as quickly as it began. When Joe realizes that his relationship with Louis has ended, he asks Harper to stay, stating that she is his "good heart" (Kushner 272). Joe's progress in coming to terms with his sexuality is left open at the end of the play. Kushner deliberately leaves Joe's narrative unresolved because he wants the audience to feel disconnected from Joe to reflect on how Joe conforms to both culturally imposed masculinity and religious convictions as opposed to completely immersing himself in gay culture like Belize, Prior and Louis. If Kushner were to resolve Joe's story, Joe would have more credence in the play as a gay man, and Kushner uses him as a foil to empower the effeminate gay characters with the openly gay/closeted dichotomy.

Though Joe's status as a closeted man marginalizes him according to Kushner's dichotomy, in a heterogeneous audience, the possibility exists for a spectator to identify with Joe's admission that he is gay. Joe exhibits curiosity by stating that he likes "to watch" (Kushner 81) the men in central park. This voyeurism indicates that Joe is curious about gay sexual behavior, yet does not feel comfortable experimenting. A gay spectator can potentially identify with this coming out process, signifying a step in the

process of coming out of the closet. Kushner stereotypes Joe as a closeted man in the process of coming out to demonstrate the differences among gay men in terms of levels of self-acceptance. This Aristotelian identification, while not the intention of the Brecht's alienation effect, is inevitable. However, Kushner posits the possibility of audience identification with Joe to draw attention to the other characters in the play who are more comfortable with themselves, equating effeminacy with homosexuality, and therefore empowerment. Thus, identification with a character, while more empathetic than Brecht's tenets, can stimulate a gay spectator's alienation effect, causing critical reflection on the play's circumstances.

Joe's curiosity regarding the men who engage in sex acts in Central Park differentiates him from the other gay characters in the play because he does not possess the comfort to actually pursue a sexual relationship with another man. He therefore experiences discomfort with his sexuality even while in the closet. Joe's anxiety regarding his sexuality creates irony in that the masculine "Marlboro man" who physically embodies the pinnacle of masculinity is extremely insecure with his own sexuality to the extent that he will not pursue another man. This anxiety forces the virile Joe to assume the role of the pursued as opposed to pursuer, breaking a heterosexual chivalric tradition in which the masculine figure pursues the feminine. Indeed, Louis first shows interest in Joe, teasing him at the courthouse and then enticing him to have sex back at Louis's apartment. This pursuit is contrary to societal norms in that the more effeminate character is pursuing the more masculine character, a reversal of traditional male/female courtship. The gestures of each man are the only signification of masculinity and femininity that cause the reversal of the traditional courtship; however,

Joe's discomfort with his sexuality emasculates him in the play, endowing another, openly gay character with the power to pursue. Louis is aware of Joe's unease and preys upon it, flirting with him and eventually luring him back to his apartment. Louis possesses more power because he is more comfortable with being gay, and therefore able to seduce Joe effectively by commenting on his masculinity, represented in the scene in Louis's apartment when he comments about Joe's "heterosexual high school" (Kushner 163) cologne. Joe, although hesitant, is intensely stimulated by Louis, eventually succumbing to the seduction.

In the context of the play, Louis is the first person to tell Joe that he is gay, revealing Louis's power because he can see through Joe's constructed façade and is therefore a threat to the illusion of hegemonic masculinity. In the process of coming out, Joe falls for Louis because he is the first man to show attention to Joe. This sudden love for Louis is another stereotype in the play: the misconception that a lack of fatherly affection induces homosexuality. When coming out to his mother, Joe asks her if his father ever loved him, creating the psychological impression that Joe was neglected by his father, thereby allowing Joe to find solace in the first masculine figure to show him attention. Here, the stereotype is given a back story, prompting Joe's search for love, a love that is never explicitly fulfilled in the play. With Louis, Joe mistakes lust for love. Louis uses Joe as a distraction from his guilt over leaving Prior, while Joe quickly succumbs to Louis's seduction, inducing an ephemeral three week relationship.

In a conversation with Roy, Joe reveals that, in his marriage to Harper, he finds it difficult "to pass" because he knows that he is different "inside" (Kushner 59), indicating that he knows that his marriage to Harper is a façade. Although Joe admits that he loves

Harper, he is aware that he “never stood out” when living in Salt Lake City. Joe is purposely ambiguous in his conversation to Roy so that Roy will not infer that Joe is homosexual; however, this particular conversation foreshadows Joe’s burgeoning admission that he is gay, as well as providing a foundation for the emotional turmoil plaguing him. This emotional turmoil is apparent when Roy advises Joe that in marriage, “there are obligations” (Kushner 60), and the conversation leads to a discussion of father and son relationships, whereby Joe states that he “had a hard time with [his] father” (Kushner 62). Because Joe’s father neglected him as a child, he represents the misconception that a gay man needs attention from other men because of a lack of an adequate father figure, or because of some kind of traumatic childhood. While this misconception does not have anything to do with gender performativity, it is important in establishing a familiarity with the stereotype to the spectator to provoke audience reflection. The purpose of the stereotype denigrates Joe’s status in the play because Joe is unable to determine that the equation of his father’s neglect and his homosexuality is spurious. A gay spectator possesses the capacity and experience to view this stereotype as particularly naïve on Joe’s part because Joe mentions his father’s neglect during the conversation in which he comes out to his mother. Joe then begins to mistake his homosexuality as being instigated by his father’s neglect; to Joe, Louis fills the void. However, Louis mocks Joe’s sudden love for him in the following conversation on the beach:

Joe: I love you

Louis: No you don’t

Joe: Yes I do.

Louis: NO YOU DON'T. You can't, it's only been a month, it takes years to fall in love, four and a half years minimum. You *think* you do, but that's just the gay virgin thing. (Kushner 205)

Louis questions the truthfulness of Joe's feelings because Joe is inexperienced with gay relationships. Louis knows that he loves Prior, and that his love for him has grown over an extended period of time. However, in his relationship with Joe, Louis acknowledges Joe's coming out of the closet, and the stereotypical tendency for a gay man to fall in love with the first man that shows him attention, especially when he is first coming to terms with his sexuality. Joe spent years in a sexual relationship with Harper that was sexually unfulfilling to him, and because he finally feels that he is in a relationship that has sexual chemistry, he mistakes the chemistry for love.

While the stereotype of a father's neglect as a foundation for his homosexuality proves to be a naïve inclination, it represents another of Joe's anxieties. Indeed, all of Joe's anxieties regarding his sexuality heighten the impact of the effeminate gay characters. Joe's insecurities demonstrate to the audience his weaknesses, thereby emasculating him. The effeminate gay characters promulgate the play's notion that comfort with one's own homosexuality is a comfort with the feminine. The play then utilizes the stereotype of the feminine man to provoke awareness of the gay issues by providing the audience with the effeminate image of gay men, when in actuality, not all gay men who are comfortable with their sexuality perform overtly feminine gestures. However, in creating a continuum of comfort with one's homosexuality in the play, the play provides the familiar image of the feminized gay man and attempts to add depth of character to reveal the oppression imposed by the heterosexual hegemony in the play.

Joe's masculine characterization exists on the continuum for the purpose of delineating those who are feminized and those who are not. Without Joe's internal conflicts, the impact of Belize's, Prior's and Louis's respective characterizations dwindles because Joe's masculinity is a foil to the effeminate gay characters.

Joe's weakness is, in effect, represented by his closetedness. He seemingly feels comfort in his relationship with Louis, but Louis considers it a "gay virgin" (Kushner 205) attraction. Joe never becomes completely comfortable with his sexuality and attempts to assimilate back into the heterosexual hegemony at the end of the play. Kushner then creates an equation between closetedness and masculinity in that masculinity represents the behavior ascribed to heterosexual men. Joe represents this equation and is indeed disempowered because of his inability to come out of the closet. However, the connection between disempowerment and masculinity is even more apparent in Roy Cohn, the archetypal villain who eventually evokes both pity and resentment from the audience.

Kushner intends for Roy to assume the role of father figure to Joe to reveal their homophobia and fear of social disempowerment. Roy sees Joe's potential as a lawyer and envisions him as a protégé. It is important to note that loss of power is not the primary reason that Joe does not come out of the closet, but Kushner intends for his relationship with Roy to raise the stakes for his revelation. Joe and Roy develop a connection with each other, perhaps instinctively noticing subtle clues about each other's own closeted sexuality. Kushner characterizes both men as hypermasculine and thereby creates the equation of masculinity and disempowerment to denigrate hegemonic virility and bolster the link between femininity and homosexuality. However, while both men fit

the paradigm of the hypermasculine gay man that is uncomfortable with the feminine, Roy's characterization is represented as more explicitly villainous because of his lust for power.

Roy's demonstrates his lust for power in the play most obviously in his derogatory statements. The derogatory statements that Roy makes to Belize illustrate Roy's need to bolster the illusion of power. However, derogatory statements are not the sole indication of his lust for power. Roy's condescending tone and denigrating argumentative skills suggest that he does not want to give the impression that he is weak or inferior in any way. Roy believes that he is powerful and wants everyone else to believe it; therefore, Roy does not show symptoms of vulnerability. Roy perceives his homosexuality as a liability to the image of power that he has created for himself. He believes that being gay makes one inferior and weak, stating to his doctor that "homosexuals are men who in fifteen years of trying cannot get a pissant antidiscrimination bill through City Council. Homosexuals are men who know nobody and who nobody knows. Who have zero clout" (Kushner 51). According to Roy, he has "clout," indicating that he believes he is a powerful man and cannot possibly be gay. Roy is apprehensive about the categorization of his sexual preference as "homosexual" because of the debilitating connotations with which he believes society endows gay men.

Roy's conflict throughout the play is a power struggle, but one that occurs both intrinsically and extrinsically. Intrinsically, Roy maintains a power struggle with the AIDS that is physically impairing his body, while extrinsically, Roy fears the disclosure of his closeted sexuality, a disclosure that he believes would emasculate him. With Roy, the intrinsic power struggle with his illness is also manifested extrinsically, in the very

gestures that represent his extreme masculinity. This masculinity is compensation for the perception that any effeminacy would render him emasculated, thus relinquishing his self-perceived “clout.”

Roy’s relationship with Joe extends somewhat beyond a strictly professional relationship, though it never becomes explicitly homosexual. The relationship instead becomes that of a mentor to a young apprentice; Roy senses Joe’s naivety, and advises him to make decisions that will endow Joe with the same perceived power that Roy has amassed over the years. In the aforementioned scene when Joe tells Roy that he had “a hard time with [his] father,” Roy states that he’s “had many fathers” (Kushner 62), including Walter Winchell, Edgar Hoover and Joe McCarthy. This intimate conversation between Roy and Joe reveals a more tender side of Roy, but it still does not stray from his need to demonstrate power. Instead, Roy explains that he is a protégé of other, more powerful men, and that he “was and [is] a good son” (Kushner 62) to them. Because Roy senses Joe’s naivety, he assumes a mentor role by explaining the need for a young man to assume an apprenticeship role to develop power and “clout.” Roy then uses his illness, in the guise of cancer, as a life lesson that Joe must learn. He tells Joe that he is dying, and that Joe must learn to make the right decisions and “save” himself. This advice is tinged with the subconscious subtlety that Roy knows he is not honest with himself regarding his sexuality; however, Roy believes that he is advising Joe to make the decision to move to Washington. Naturally, Joe takes the advice to heart, and feels that he needs to come out.

This conversation is important because it gives insight into two masculine men grappling with their discomfort in their own sexuality, and reveals their internalized

homophobia. Roy believes that disclosing his homosexuality will relinquish any power that he has, while Joe is unaware of the extent to which his homosexuality is hurting those around him. While the scene humanizes both Roy and Joe despite their often disempowered status in the play, it ultimately provides a psychological foundation for the decisions that they make. Even in this intimate conversation, Roy is still engrossed in his struggle for power, consciously aware of his status as the mentor. Meanwhile, Joe begins making stereotypical assumptions that fatherly neglect induced his homosexuality, a postulation that resurfaces a few scenes later in his coming out to his mother, and also in his ephemeral relationship with Louis.

While Roy's power struggle is always apparent to the audience, he carries the bravado of his perceived power literally to his deathbed. Joe finally comes out to Roy while Roy is hospitalized, announcing that his marriage is ending, and that he has been living with a man. This news surprises Roy, disappointing him because he feels as though Joe is exposing a serious vulnerability, and that any "clout" that Joe has will be relinquished. Roy explains that he wants Joe to return home to his wife and never talk about his homosexuality again. Roy believes that he has worked hard to give the illusion of heterosexuality, and an open admittance of one's homosexuality is an extreme liability. Because he has been advising Joe throughout the play, he advises him not to relinquish his power and to remain closeted. Naturally, to the audience, this further exacerbates Roy's villainous portrayal. Kushner endows the openly gay characters with power in the play, and marginalizes the closeted gay characters. Roy's illusion of power is apparent to the audience, and it demonizes him because of his belief that power is contingent upon deceit instead of honesty. Roy himself believes that he has made everyone believe that

he is straight, while the dramatic irony is that both the audience and the gay characters in the play know he is “New York’s number one closeted queer” (Kushner 156). The effect of the continuum between the effeminate gay characters and the masculine gay characters is the notion that the effeminate gay characters are more honest with themselves, creating the notion that comfort with one’s own homosexuality is an embracing of the feminine. To Roy, the feminine is perceived as weak, and he does not want both Joe and him to exhibit any vulnerability.

Roy’s demonization in the play is mostly predicated on his hypermasculinity and discomfort with his own sexuality; however, Roy Cohn’s characterization to the audience is unique in that he is an actual historical figure with whom a New York audience would be familiar. The audience is aware of Roy’s political and legal triumphs as they are well documented and publicized. Because the audience’s reaction to Roy is so crucial throughout the play, Kushner’s use of the alienation effect is vital to his characterization. The alienation effect (mentioned in Chapter Three) incorporates elements of staging that are designed to distance the audience from the characters in the play so that the audience can reflect critically on the work. While the Angel is the most obvious Brechtian tenet in the play, Roy’s constant bedside companion is the ghost of the executed Ethel Rosenberg, a character who entices the audience to criticize Roy. Indeed Roy and Ethel develop a relationship in the play that is predicated on Ethel’s sadistic satisfaction in Roy’s suffering, a suffering that mirrors the satisfaction that Roy took in sentencing her and her husband to death. Ethel’s presence, like the Angel’s, detaches the audience from the action onstage as they are aware of the historical association between Roy and Ethel. If perchance a spectator is unfamiliar with the historical association between Roy and Ethel,

the back story is explained throughout their scenes together, and the spectator can infer the circumstances surrounding their vitriolic relationship.

Ethel's presence in the play further exacerbates the audience's caustic reaction to Roy; her presence is a constant reminder to the audience of Roy's lust for power at the expense of others, as well as at the expense of honesty. Ethel sees Roy at his most vulnerable stages, mocking his suffering. Most notably, the audience is invited to suspend disbelief as Ethel calls 911 to have Roy taken away by ambulance. It is in this scene that Roy pompously exclaims that he "has *forced* [his] way into history" (Kushner 118), an exclamation to which Ethel responds, "History is about to crack wide open. Millenium approaches." This statement by Ethel both foreshadows Roy's death and also suggests Kushner's message of social change and empowerment of disempowered and oppressed gay men.

Roy's disbarment represents his loss of power and "clout." He loses the power attributed to his profession and status, and this loss symbolizes emasculation. Because the heterosexual hegemony equates masculinity with power, Roy's disbarment symbolizes castration. Ethel's appearance during Roy's death scene exacerbates her delight in Roy's disempowerment. Her pleasure in Roy's suffering indicates a vengeance on her behalf; however, Kushner does not intend for Ethel to be completely vengeful. Indeed, after Roy's death, her presence signifies forgiveness when Belize asks Louis to say the Kaddish, a Jewish prayer for the dead, for Roy. Because Louis is a "secular Jew" (Kushner 256), his knowledge of the Kaddish is limited. Nonetheless, he proceeds, assisted by the ghost of Ethel. Louis is initially skeptical about praying for a man whom Louis and so many other gay men have regarded as a dishonest and villainous individual;

however, “if Ethel Rosenberg can forgive the man who is responsible for her death, then Louis [can be] asked to acquiesce” (Brophy 112). Louis’s recitation of the Kaddish then signifies a simultaneous forgiveness of the oppressors and an homage to those who suffer as a result of AIDS. Ethel’s assistance to Louis’s recitation of the Kaddish is a Brechtian tenet that forces the audience to note the poignancy in the forgiveness of the “vanquished foe” (Kushner 256), thereby provoking the audience to contemplate the extent to which the vilified can be forgiven.

Ethel’s ghost is not the only aspect of staging intended to enhance the alienation effect. Kushner also wrote a scene that he deemed optional, suggesting that the final words of Roy Cohn are at the discretion of the director. The optional scene vilifies Roy, further establishing his portrayal as one who lusts for power. However, Kushner explains that should the director want Roy’s characterization to end on a forgiving note, as indicated in the recitation of the Kaddish by Ethel and Louis, this scene should not be staged. In this particular scene, Roy defends God for his abandonment of Heaven. The stage directions give the director the option to stage the scene in Heaven, Hell, or Purgatory. Roy is “*standing waist deep in a smoldering pit, facing a great flaming Aleph*” (Kushner 274), and the importance of this scene is to illustrate that Roy, even in death, is known for his deceit and his lust for power. Roy is confident that he will win the case, despite the fact that God is “guilty as hell” (Kushner 274). Roy explains that he is “an absolute fucking demon with Family Law,” so he acknowledges the difficulties that he will encounter in the trial. Nonetheless, he plans to bribe the judge and the jury. The bribery suggests that Roy feels like he can control the verdict of the case, but that Roy is representing God in a trial that fully demonstrates the extent to which Roy hungers

for power, especially when he states that he will “bully and seduce” to win the case. Roy’s defense of God, if staged, distances the audience from Roy so that they may see his deceit and lust for power. Thus, Kushner once again uses the alienation effect to evoke a critical response from the audience. This scene creates a concrete characterization of Roy as an archetypal villain in the play. The monologue that he says reveals both his lust for power and deceit, while the staging simultaneously bathes Roy in fiery “*volcanic, pulsating red light,*” heightening the dynamics of his personality.

While Roy Cohn is vilified due to his unethical historical associations as well as his homophobic and racist rhetoric, his demonization is heightened because of the presence of Ethel Rosenberg, a presence that induces the alienation effect. Furthermore, Roy experiences extreme discomfort in his sexuality, fearing that exposure will emasculate him. Thus, the implication of the play is that Roy’s sexuality exists at one end of the polarized continuum between masculine gay men and feminine gay men. Comfort in feminine gestures represents security with one’s homosexuality, and Roy is not the only character who exists on the masculine end of the continuum. Kushner also polarizes the gay men by creating an openly gay/closeted gay dichotomy to illustrate the extent to which the closet marginalizes gay men in society. Closeted gay men are doubly oppressed because they are not fully integrated into the gay community due to their assimilation into the heterosexual hegemony, and also because they live in fear of being considered gay by that hegemony.

Joe Pitt is also extremely uncomfortable with his own sexuality and is stereotyped as the paradigm of masculinity in appearance and gestures. However, his masculinity suggests assimilation into the heterosexual hegemony, perpetuating his closetedness. Joe

never reconciles his homosexuality, ending with a plea to his wife to stay with him following a failed relationship with Louis. Thus, Joe is disempowered because of his inability to accept his homosexuality. Kushner's effect with Joe and Roy reverses the traditional dichotomy that equates masculinity with power and marginalizes effeminacy. If the closet is an oppressive construct, then Kushner disempowers Joe and Roy because of their failure to come completely out of it, and construct their respective identities as gay men.

## CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

When asked to fill out a questionnaire originally written by French novelist Marcel Proust prior to the Baltimore Center Stage opening of Kushner's play *Slavs!*, Kushner was asked to identify the quality that he finds most attractive in a man.<sup>xi</sup> His answer to this question was "femininity." Kushner's response represents the conflict between the performative gestures that he finds attractive in a man, and the masculine behavior established by society as the norm. The culturally imposed gender hierarchy subjugates femininity and empowers masculinity; however, in *Angels in America*, Kushner reverses this hierarchy, empowering femininity and disempowering masculinity. Kushner acknowledges stereotypes in society yet deconstructs them to demonstrate gay marginalization to the audience. This deconstruction challenges the audience to consider the oppression of gay men and to provoke social change that precludes this oppression. Kushner accomplishes this deconstruction of stereotypes with the use of a gender performativity continuum. Kushner creates a gender performativity continuum to empower those who resist heteronormativity, and marginalize those who succumb to it.

Kushner expresses the continuum of gender performativity to the audience using Brecht's epic staging to create a distancing effect between the audience and the play so that the spectators can ponder this continuum. He attempts to provoke the audience to assume a counteroppressive stance, thereby creating a stronger awareness of oppressive social constructs. Kushner intends for the audience to examine these constructs and to rebel against them. However, Kushner does not simply rely on epic staging to convey his counteroppressive message. He also appeals to the audience's emotions, anticipating sympathetic and empathetic responses that could potentially lead to catharsis. These

appeals heighten the effect of epic staging in that audience can understand the incumbency of the play's message. *Angels in America* is both didactic and revolutionary, giving voice to a marginalized group in the midst of a crisis, allowing the audience to understand oppressive constructs and subsequently provoke social change.

The legacy of *Angels in America* is that it is a play that provides a voice for marginalized gay men amidst oppression perpetuated by the heterosexual hegemony. *Angels in America* portrays the social, political, and emotional turmoil that encumbered gay men during the 1980s. In an interview with Charlie Rose, Kushner states:

I think that after listening to gay people—various kinds of gay people—and thinking about ways in which gay issues are not marginal, but central to the American political and cultural agenda, I hope that people will come away with a sense of comfort, a sense of curiosity, a sense of excitement, a sense of having been exposed to something that maybe they thought they knew, but didn't know as well as they thought they knew, or hadn't known at all. (Vorlicky 47)

Kushner's reason for writing this play was to stimulate the audience and induce social change. *Angels in America* is a play that merits discussion and analysis, not only for its aesthetic and revolutionary qualities, but also for its ability to illuminate gay oppression and treat it as integral to American politics. Kushner speaks through his characters, inviting the audience to partake in the advancement of his agenda, depicting homophobia and AIDS as oppressive constructs that should be discussed and considered not only by politicians, but also by all Americans.

The first Broadway production of *Angels in America* was a milestone not only in the portrayal of AIDS, but also in the portrayal of gay men. Its predecessors were primarily plays that depicted AIDS as a burgeoning epidemic, during a time when the disease was closely associated with gay men, and the government did little to support research into it. Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart* was one of the first plays to reveal public misconceptions about the disease and the oppression of gay men as a result of their perceived perpetuation of it. *Angels in America* opened on Broadway almost a decade later, around a time when heterosexual celebrities such as Magic Johnson were promulgating their contraction of HIV and AIDS. Thus, Kushner's desire to disassociate the stigma of gay men and AIDS was made easier by media interaction. Kushner's play, however, maintains its purpose by portraying the oppressive status of gay men in society, caused primarily by hegemonic masculinity, and his play depicts many aspects of this plight. In the years that followed, plays such as Paul Rudnick's *Jeffrey* and Jonathan Larsen's *Rent* brought more notoriety to gay issues, by portraying their struggles as more microcosmic and interpersonal rather than the macrocosmic notion of the gay man versus society tacit in *Angels in America*.

Much of the scholarship and criticism of *Angels in America* creates a spectrum of interrelated ideas and analyses, yet they do not often converge into a synthesis that deconstructs the text to search for performatives and oppressive constructs. Some research analyzes Kushner's use of Brecht's epic staging, while others scrutinize the depictions and implications of Judaism. Other research delves into the depictions of racism and misogyny. However, no effort to date has been made to assimilate analysis of Kushner's use of epic staging to the staging of gay male oppression. My thesis argues

that Kushner's use of Brecht works in tandem with gender performativity and stereotypical characterizations to influence the audience.

While this thesis analyzes Kushner's equation of effeminacy and security in one's homosexuality with empowerment to disempower hegemonic masculinity, I believe that this equation excludes masculine gay men who are comfortable with their homosexuality. I have met many gay men who perform masculine gestures and are openly gay and comfortable with their sexuality, yet Kushner uses effeminacy as a stereotypical depiction to instigate the cessation of gay male oppression. I acknowledge that he excludes secure masculine gay men to heighten the deconstruction of the traditional gender hierarchy.

When I approached this project, I was certain that gay male stereotyping was present in American theater, but I wanted to know exactly why such stereotyping still persisted amidst growing social acceptance of gays and lesbians. In many plays of the 1990s, gay stereotyping allows the playwright to include campy dialogue and create a spectacle that can entertain the audience. In analyzing a landmark play in the depiction of gay men, I learned that not all plays with gay characters use stereotypes in this manner; some have a purpose that educates and provokes the audience as opposed to entertaining. *Angels in America* raised the level of expectation for the portrayal of gay men. Twelve years after the initial Broadway opening of *Millennium Approaches*, some playwrights still stereotype gay characters to entertain, but others provide a more nuanced and complex portrayal. With *Angels in America*, Kushner created a dialogue among audiences that focuses on gay issues. The purpose of this thesis is to continue the dialogue that *Angels in America* provokes so that the issues and injustices of gay oppression remain center stage, never drifting to the marginalization of the wings.

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## FOOTNOTES

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<sup>i</sup> Kushner uses the montage frequently in *Angels in America*, a Brechtian tenet, and also uses stage trickery to distance the audience from the action on stage and draw attention to the political and social issues of the play.

<sup>ii</sup> David, D. S. & R. Brannon (Eds.). (1976). *The forty-nine percent majority: The male sex role*. London: Addison-Wesley. Though this study is quite antiquated, it is important in determining the history of hegemonic masculinity. The study is a solid foundation for later studies in the construction of gender. Because this is an early study, much of the research tabulated has changed over the years; however, the research serves as a progenitor in establishing preconceived notions about virility. This study can be found in Kimmel, Michael S., Jeff Hearn, and R. W. Connell. *Handbook of Studies on Men and Masculinities*. (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2005. 181-82.)

<sup>iii</sup> Framji Minwalla analyzes this scene closely, revealing its apparent power struggles; however, he examines the racial implications of the scene instead of illuminating the power manifested in Belize's unclosetedness.

<sup>iv</sup> This scene is juxtaposed with the scene in which Louis leaves Prior, a juxtaposition that will be analyzed further in Chapter Three.

<sup>v</sup> Although my analysis focuses on feminine performatives demonstrated by the male characters, Natalie Meisner examines the ghostly portrayal of the women in the play. She

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also contends that Harper is “biologically coded female,” but “is subjected to a clinical and exhaustive set of restraints and strategies for containment.”

<sup>vi</sup> Specifically, Walter Benjamin states that “instead of identifying with the characters, the audience should be educated to be astonished at the circumstances under which they function” (Benjamin 150). Benjamin analyzed Brecht’s epic theater in “What is Epic Theater.” (*Illuminations* 147-55)

<sup>vii</sup> Charles McNulty states that “the question is no longer what is the place of AIDS in history, but what of history itself can be learned through the experience of gay men and AIDS” (44). His examination of Kushner’s Benjaminian adaptation examines *Angels in America* as Kushner’s belief that the AIDS related oppression of gay men possesses the “greatest potential for social change” (50).

<sup>viii</sup> Kushner’s use of Benjamin’s historical materialist is intended for an audience comprised of different sexualities. However, David Román states that Kushner “demands that as gay men we persevere in locating and claiming our agency in the constructions of our histories” (42), suggesting that gay men need to take control of their history. However, Kushner’s message is not only for gay men, but for a heterogeneous population.

<sup>ix</sup> All analysis of the staging refers to the workshop and initial productions of both parts of *Angels in America* up to the Broadway opening in April 1993.

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<sup>x</sup> Martin Herries briefly examines the “demands for the spectacular deus ex machina” (188) with the Angel, but not with Mr. Lies. He also judges the use, calling it “pandering” to Broadway audiences. He connects the use of the Angel briefly to Brecht, and more substantially to Benjamin, but his argument focuses on their limitations in the “reconciliation between theology and historical materialism” (188).

<sup>xi</sup> Kushner was asked to fill out this questionnaire by Charlotte Stoudt in 1995. The entire questionnaire can be found in *The Next Stage at Center Stage* 1, no. 3: 16-17.