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Women in the World of Gays: An Exploration into the Female Characters in *Angels in America*

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ABSTRACT

Through a thorough text analysis, this paper aims at finding the root cause of the ambivalence demonstrated by the two female characters in *Angels in America*. The contradiction in the double faces of Harper and Hannah, the wife being both neurotic and clear-minded, and the mother being both considerate and indifferent, reflects the well-established social discrimination by heterosexuals against homosexuals. By reviewing the image of women created by female playwrights on the stage and the two stereotypes of women created by male authors in history, the paper also argues that the double faces of the two characters display an obvious contradiction of the playwright himself in characterization. This contradiction and ambivalence in Kushner's creation of Harper and Hannah might also mirror something that is equally contradictory and ambivalent of the playwright himself.

Keywords: *Angels in America*, Harper, Hannah, Image of Women, Stereotypes of Women

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1. Introduction

Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes is the master piece of the Pulitzer-Prize winner Tony Kushner. The drama consists of two plays: Part I- *Millennium Approaches*, first produced in 1991, and Part II – *Perestroika*, 1992, both of which won Tony Awards for best new play. Representing an epic of life in America in the 1980s, it affords a panoramic view of America during the age of AIDS under the Reagan administration. It has been receiving a world of praise since its premiere. Jack Kroll (1992) called it “the most ambitious American play of our time”. John Lahr (1993) claimed that no playwright had announced his poetic vision with such authority on the Broadway stage since Tennessee Williams. Being compared to Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams (Teachout, 2011, p.80), Kushner was believed to “rescue the American theatre” (Savran, 1995, p.207). Being the last one on Harold Bloom’s list of western canon (Bloom, 1994, p.567), *Angels in America* is indeed one of the most commented on and awarded American drama in the latter half of the twentieth century. After its debut on the Broadway stage 25 years ago, the play will

be revived at the Neil Simon Theater in the spring of 2018.

The play “focuses on politics, sex and religion”, “deals with Jews, Mormons, WASPs, blacks”, “switches between realism and fantasy, from the tragedy of AIDS to the camp comedy of drag queens to the death or at least the absconding of God” (Kroll, 1992). Scholars have examined the complex theme of the play from various aspects. David Savran (1995) explores the play from the historical, political, and sociological point of view and claims that it reconstructs the American nation. Jonathan Freedman (1998) probes into the intersections of queer and Jewish identity and believes that the Jewish element contained in the play is essentially Christian. Claudia Barnett (2010) looks at the issue of AIDS and death and concludes that “AIDS is not only death but a precondition for life” (p.472).

Most of the critical analyses of the play center on the numerous binary oppositions hidden in the play: “heaven / hell, forgiveness /retribution, communitarianism/ individualism, spirit/ flesh, pleasure /pain, beauty/ decay, future/ past, homosexuality/ heterosexuality, rationalism/ indeterminacy, migration/ staying put, progress/ stasis, life/

death” (Savran, 1995, p.212). Nevertheless, there is one fundamental binary opposition left out: i.e. man/woman. The playwright may simply ignore the issue intentionally because in his eyes, the world consists of people who are either gay or straight. Since the subtitle states clearly that the play is a gay fantasia, women are doomed to be out of focus anyway. Savran (1995) does touch upon the masculinity/femininity opposition but it is to prove the centrality of masculinity of the play (p.215-216). Catherine Stevenson (2005) also analyses the mother-child relationship in the play and asserts that in Kushner’s plays mothers are the source for producing change and seeking for something new. However, few critics look into the connection between the homosexual identity of the playwright and the ambivalence of the female characters he created in the play.

Being straight, this author can’t refrain herself from looking at a gay fantasia from the perspective of man/woman dichotomy. As we all know, there are eight main characters in the play. Biologically speaking, they can be divided into three groups: men, women, and hermaphrodite. There are five men—Roy Cohn, Joe Pitt, Prior Walter, Louis Ironson, and Belize—all gays, and two women, Harper and Hannah, Joe’s wife and Joe’s mother respectively. The last but not least important character is the Angel. Though referred to as “she” at the beginning of the play, the Angel is a hermaphrodite, with eight vaginas, and a bouquet of phalli. The ambiguity of the sex of the Angel might reflect the playwright’s subconscious of undermining the distinction between the heterosexual and the homosexual as well as between the male and the female.

For that reason, this paper is going to discuss Harper and Hannah only, the two main female characters. Through a close reading of the play, this author tries to answer the following question: what is the root cause of the ambivalence demonstrated by the two female characters in *Angels in America*? Inspired by Cousin’s analysis of women created by female writers on the stage and Gilbert & Gubar’s categorization of female characters created by male authors, this paper aims at tracing the contradiction in Kushner’s creation of Harper and Hannah back not only to the well-established social discrimination but also to the gay identity of the playwright himself.

2. Valium-Addicted Harper and Kind-Hearted Hannah

“An agoraphobic with a mild valium addiction” (1995, p.11) was Kushner’s description of Harper at the beginning of the play, which, of course, formed our first impression about her. As the play went on, we found that Harper was strange because she started talking about weird things like the ozone layer to herself. She was delusional and full of hallucinations because she talked with her imaginary friend Mr. Lies who appeared and disappeared in incredible ways. The sixteen “maybes” that Harper used consecutively in one paragraph in response to Mr. Lies’ suggestion for a guided tour spelt out for us that Harper was overwhelmed by feelings of depression and despair (Kushner, 1995, p.24).

When Harper told Joe how creepy their apartment was, Joe’s first reaction was, “How many pills today, buddy” (Kushner, 1995, p.30)? Joe believed that Harper hardly made any sense in their conversation because she never went out in the world and she had emotional problems. Joe’s comments on Harper reinforced our understanding of Harper as an abnormal housewife. In Harper’s later pill-induced hallucinations, Prior told us she was amazingly unhappy and Mr. Lies took her to Antarctica. She even mistakenly believed that she was carrying a baby. Besides, when one day Joe called Hannah from the street in the small hours, Hannah’s first reaction demonstrated that in Hannah’s eyes, if something went wrong, it must be Harper. In a word, Harper was having a nervous breakdown.

Hannah was a widow of a deceased military Mormon man. She was decisive. After receiving Joe’s call, she sold her house in Salt Lake City and came to New York immediately to help the couple saving their marriage. Hannah refused Sister Ella Chapter’s advice to “stay put”, which told us that she was longing for change (Kushner, 1995, p.88). Undoubtedly, she adapted to change unbelievably well. After five years, she looked “like a New Yorker” and engaged in political talking (Kushner, 1995, p.277).

Hannah was kind-hearted. She took care of Harper when Joe left her. Treating Harper like her own daughter, she consoled her from her own experience. “At first it can be very hard to accept how disappointing life is, Harper, because that’s what it is and you have to accept it. With faith and time and



hard work you reach a point... where the disappointment doesn't hurt as much, and then it gets actually easy to live with. Quite easy. Which is in its own way a disappointment" (Kushner, 1995, p.184). Hannah was even kinder to Prior, who was believed to be her "surrogate" son (Stevenson, 2005, p.760). She rushed Prior to hospital when he collapsed in the Mormon Visitor's Center. Upon request, she even watched the night with him.

Hannah was also strong-willed. She helped Prior understand his visions better. "An angel is just a belief, with wings and arms that can carry you. It's naught to be afraid of. If it lets you down, reject it. Seek for something new" (Kushner, 1995, p.237). When Prior was frightened and turned to her for help in his encounter with the Angel, she answered, "You ... wrestle her ... grab hold and say ... 'I will not let thee go except thou bless me!' Then wrestle with her till she gives in" (Kushner, 1995, p.250). Belize felt Hannah was "formidable" and Prior believed she saved his life (Kushner, 1995, p.270). In the Epilogue of the play, Hannah talked light-heartedly with Prior, Louis, and Belize, making us believe that she had really become Prior's surrogate mother. With all these depictions about Hannah, we thought she was a wonderful mother with great determination and perseverance.

3. The Truth Behind

However, do our impressions of Harper and Hannah represent the whole picture about them? Is there anything hidden that we might have overlooked? What is the truth behind the conclusions that we have drawn so far? As first impressions are always deceptive, let's take a second look about the two female characters.

Surely Harper was emotional as all women did. Yet she was not mad. Even in her hallucinations, she never really lost her mind. She was fully aware that "things aren't right" with her and Mr. Lies was just an imaginary friend (Kushner, 1995, p.23). When Joe asked her to pray, she answered, "God won't talk to me. I have to make up people to talk to me" (Kushner, 1995, p.46). She knew their marriage was problematic and advised Joe to go to Washington alone. She thought geographic distance might help improve their relationship. Decisions like this could never have been made by irrational housewives. She loved Joe so "terribly" (Kushner, 1995, p.56) that even after she had learned Joe was a homo she didn't want to give him up so easily. "Tell me what to do. I'm stuck. My heart's an

anchor" (Kushner, 1995, p.201), she turned to the Mormon Mother for help.

We could infer that although she had been trying very hard to escape from the torturous marriage, hallucinations were the only actions she took in reality. She had been waiting. However impossible it might be, she hoped one day Joe would change for the good. Or maybe she had been waiting for herself to change. When Joe miraculously came back to her after leaving for a month, she was still full of hope, yet with great pains. She didn't really make up her mind to leave Joe until Joe, looking right at her, told her he saw nothing (Kushner, 1995, p.239). Once she was determined, she became a different person. She slapped Joe in the face when he, in order to prevent her from leaving him, said hypocritically she was his "good heart" (Kushner, 1995, p.272). She finally summoned up the courage to walk out of the sweet trap set by Joe. "Nothing's lost forever. In this world, there is a kind of painful progress. Longing for what we've left behind, and dreaming ahead" (Kushner, 1995, p.275). Harper experienced an epiphany at the end of the play. We could hardly find another character that was more clear-minded than Harper.

Similarly, Hannah was not a perfect mother as she looked like. She was kind-hearted to everyone including strangers, but not his own son. She turned a deaf ear to Joe when he told her he was a homo, "You're ridiculous. You're being ridiculous. ... No more talk. Tonight. This (*Suddenly very angry*) ... Drinking is a sin! A sin! I raised you better than that. (*She hangs up*)" (Kushner, 1995, p.82). After disappearing and not returning his mother's call for a month since her arrival at New York, Joe finally came to the Mormon Visitor's Center to talk to her. When he was just about to explain for himself, Hannah interrupted him by saying "Being a woman's harder" (Kushner, 1995, p.229). On the one hand, she couldn't accept the fact that Joe was gay; on the other, she insisted that "You are a man, you botch up, it's not such a big deal" (Kushner, 1995, p.229).

Nevertheless, it was indeed a big deal for Joe to find his real sexual orientation as Mormons didn't believe in homosexuals (Kushner, 1995, p.38). Joe was never so strong. He had been trying to get some emotional support from his mother as he knew his father didn't love him since he was a little boy. He tried his best to communicate with his mother, yet she was not only reluctant to listen to him but mean to show

any sympathy as well. Hannah was tough. Joe had never experienced any tender feelings from his mother, “I migrated across the breadth of the continent of North America, I ran all this way to get away from ...”, “YOU and me. It’s like we’re back in Salt Lake again. You sort of bring the desert with you” (Kushner, 1995, p.230). In fact we could catch a glimpse of Hannah’s toughness when she was lost on the first day of her arrival at New York. She spoke to a homeless woman who sounded like an insane in an irresistibly harsh way:

HANNAH: Shut up. Please. Now I want you to stop jabbering for a minute and pull your wits together and tell me how to get to Brooklyn. Because you know! And you are going to tell me! Because there is no one else around to tell me and I am wet and cold and I am very angry! So I am sorry you're psychotic but just make the effort – take a deep breath – DO IT! (Kushner, 1995, p.111)

When Hannah talked happily with other gays at the last scene of the play without mentioning Joe, we simply couldn’t help thinking that she never really cared about her own son.

Why do we come to totally different conclusions after a second reading of the play? Why did a seemingly insane housewife turn out to be a cool-headed woman? Why did the strong-willed caring mother act so cold-hearted to her own son? In fact, Joe’s disclosure of his sexual identity to his mother was believed to be “a scene from Mr. Kushner’s own life” (Gussow, 2002). Kushner’s mother was scared upon the first production of the play in 1990 and his father upset. All these indicate that being a family member of a homosexual is never easy. No matter how well they can get along with other homosexuals (for example, Harper with Prior, and Hannah with Prior, Louis, and Belize), they just can’t face the fact that their family members, who are so close to them, are homosexual. It seems that the social prejudice and discrimination against homosexuality is so deep-rooted that they can hardly be removed even when homosexuals become citizens.

4. Women on the Stage and in History

Geraldine Cousin is one of the few writers who look at female characters in modern theatre. In her book, *Women in Dramatic Place and Time: Contemporary Female Characters on Stage*, Cousin presents detailed analyses of a wide range of

plays by British women dramatists from the 1980s and 1990s. Using Ibsen’s Nora as the prototype, she describes the female characters under discussion as travelers in different states of movement. In the introduction, she writes, “My prologue begins with a room – the four walls and a door within which so many women have been confined. To be more exact, my starting point is the leaving of that room, and the slamming of a door” (Cousin, 1996, p.1). To illustrate this metaphor, she uses three women characters, all of which are different versions of Nora, as point of reference: Mary and Janet in Githa Sowerby’s 1912 play, *Rutherford and Son*, and Judith in Clemence Dane’s 1926 play, *Granite*. Cousin argues that these three female characters resemble Nora in one way or another when they are faced with opportunities to leave the room that confines them: Janet moves out by herself, Mary chooses not to move out, and Judith does move out but is confined again later.

Comparing Harper and Hannah with the characters discussed by Cousin, we may find that Kushner is a feminist writer who supports Cousin’s idea. Harper’s abandonment of Joe and decision to find a job at the end of the play coincide with Nora’s moving out of the house. Hannah’s moving to New York from Salt Lake City and the final adaptation to New York five years later also fit into Cousin’s metaphor of women as travelers.

However, if we look at the female characters created by male writers in history, we will get another picture. According to Gilbert and Gubar (2000, pp.16-44), all female characters in books written by male authors can be classified into two stereotypes: either the “angel” or the “monster”.

The popular image of an ideal woman in the Victorian age was called “the Angel in the House”, which was originally the title of a narrative poem by Coventry Patmore, first published in 1854. The poem was an idealized account of Patmore’s courtship of his first wife, Emily, a pattern Victorian lady and an angel on earth (Gilbert & Gubar, 2000, p.22). “The Angel in the House” was expected to be selflessly devoted to her children and submissive to her husband. The opposite of “the Angel in the House” is “the Madwoman in the Attic”, an image referring to Bertha Mason from Charlotte Bronte’s famous novel *Jane Eyre*. There is a marked



contrast between Berha's violent nature and Janet's calm morality.

"The Angel in the House" is pure, unemotional, and submissive, while "the Madwoman in the Attic" is sensual, rebellious and uncontrollable. One is the ideal female figure in the male-dominated society, the other the source of men's anxiety. However, in Gilbert and Gubar's opinion, "even the positive images of women in literature express negative energies and desires on the part of male writers" (Rivkin & Ryan, 2004, p.812). The image of "the Angel in the House" remained influential even in the twentieth century, representing the repressive ideal of women. Considering its negative effects, Virginia Woolf advocate that "Killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of a woman writer" (1942, p.237). Gilbert and Gubar suggest that in order to gain "literary autonomy", women writers should kill not only "the aesthetic ideal" but also "the angel's necessary opposite and double, the 'monster' in the house, whose Medusa-face also kills female creativity" (2000, p.17).

If we take another comparison of Harper and Hannah with the two stereotypes of women characters created by male authors in history, we come up with a similar result of Harper being the "monster" and Hannah the "angel".

Apart from the hallucinations which suggested the monstrous image of Harper, we could easily discover the other traits of Harper which fit the image of the "monster" well. First, Harper was unquestionably sensual. She tried every means to seduce Joe, including an offer of a blowjob and a suggestion for having a baby (Kushner, 1995, p.33). After Joe finally had sex with her, she told Joe that "the only time I wasn't imagining [men] was when I was with you" (Kushner, 1995, p.238). In the HBO film version of the play, Harper was stark naked in front of Joe when she asked him what he saw and Joe answered "Nothing" (Kushner, 1995, p.239). Besides, Harper was also rebellious and uncontrollable. When Joe pointed out that she had emotional problems, instead of feeling sorry, she blamed Joe angrily, "if I do have emotional problems it's from living with you" (Kushner, 1995, p.33). After breaking up with Louis, Joe was desperate to seek comfort from Harper. However, what awaited the heart-broken husband was only the wife's ruthless abandonment.

When it comes to Hannah, it's much easier to draw a parallel between the "angel"

and her. As the analysis in the second section of this paper points out, Hannah was a devoted and accommodating mother. She gave up her own life in Salt Lake City to improve her son's life in New York. The succour and strength she gave Prior, along with the advice and consolation she gave Harper, made her an analogous character to Makarie, the angel in the house in Goethe's novel *Wilhelm Meister's Travels* who "shines like a beacon in a dark world, like a motionless lighthouse by which others, the travelers whose lives do have a story, can set their course" (quoted in Gilbert & Gubar, 2000, p.22).

It should be indisputable for a male playwright to create two female characters that happen to fit into the historical stereotypes. Yet what remains confusing is why should the cold-hearted mother wear a mask of the angel in the house? And why should the cool-headed housewife look like the madwoman in the attic? Why are there all these contradictions and ambiguities? The only reasonable explanation is that no matter how much Kushner may look like a feminist, no matter how well Harper and Hannah could fit into the new types of women created by female dramatists on the stage, the two female characters in *Angels in America* couldn't escape from the fate of being described as the two stereotypes of women in history created by male authors because though homosexual, Kushner is biologically male.

5. Sum Up

Through a thorough analysis of the two main female characters in *Angels in America*, the paper points out that both Harper and Hannah are not the kind of people they look like. Harper, who was valium-addicted and full of hallucinations, looked as if she was neurotic and insane. In fact she was conscious of all the problems she met. Hannah, who was strong-willed and decisive, looked as if she was kind-hearted to everyone without any prejudice. Yet she was harsh to her own son. The contradiction in the double faces of the two characters, the wife being both neurotic and clear-minded, and the mother being both considerate and indifferent, reflects the well-established social discrimination by heterosexuals against homosexuals. Joe's painful yet transient process of coming out was partly the result of the negative response he received from Harper and Hannah, two most important women in his life.

Besides, through a review of the image of women created by female playwrights on

the stage and the two stereotypes of women created by male authors in history, the paper also argues that the two main female characters in *Angels in America* display an obvious contradiction of the playwright himself in characterization. This contradiction and ambivalence in Kushner's creation of Harper and Hannah might also mirror something that is equally contradictory and ambivalent of the playwright himself.

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