Love, death and poetry: epidemic intertextualities in Chaucer's Book of the Duchess and Tony Kushner's Angels in America

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Love, death and poetry: Epidemic intertextualities in Chaucer's 
Book of the Duchess and Tony Kushner's Angels in America

by

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Kelly Anne Munger
has met the requirements of Iowa State University

Signatures have been redacted for privacy

For the Graduate College
In memoriam:

Cary Gold
(1960-1994)

Donnie Jackson
(1958-1992)

Tracy Mure
(1964-1990)
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CHAPTER 1.

INTRODUCTION

...any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another.

(Kristeva 66)

The concept of intertextuality has been, according to Leon Roudiez, a translator of Julia Kristeva’s work, “much used and abused on both sides of the Atlantic” (15). The relationship between texts has traditionally been discussed in terms of either “influence” or “inspiration.” In the former, a temporal relationship between prior texts and subsequent texts is assumed which perceives the earlier text as a source for the construction of the later text. For example, Chaucer’s *Book of the Duchess* has been read as constructed of material from earlier sources: Boethius’ *The Consolation of Philosophy*, the *Roman de la Rose*, Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, and Froissart’s *Dit dou Bleu Chevalier*, among others (Cherniss 1969, Crane 1992, Hardman 1990, Findlayson 1990). In the latter, “inspiration,” which is perhaps best represented by T. S. Eliot’s metaphor of the poet as a “catalyst” (Eliot 469), the “individual talent” of the writer transforms the tradition. The problem with a strict reading of the
relationship between texts as one of either influence or inspiration is that the emphasis in such an understanding is placed on the centrality of the author, who is engaged and assumed to be familiar with the prior texts which are transformed and absorbed into the new text. There is a tension in such a binary model of intertextuality, as Thaís Morgan explains in her essay, “The Space of Intertextuality.”

Given the incongruent presuppositions of these two models, it is not surprising that their point of unending dispute lies in that gray area which constitutes most of literature: those texts in which the author imitates or borrows features from an earlier text or set of texts, but in the process changes or transforms these features to suit the characteristics of his own previous work. (241)

Morgan here tells us that there is nothing simple about either influence or inspiration, for neither sort of intertextual relation is static. It is not a matter of picking out the bits of prior texts from the mosaic which makes up the text under construction, but also a task of asking questions about the relationships between the texts: how do they change, from one place to another, and, more importantly, why? This conception of influence, inspiration, and intertextuality as existing in relationship to each other in more than one fashion is also described by Jay Clayton and Eric Rothstein:

The shape of intertextuality in turn depends on the shape of
influence. One may see intertextuality either as the enlargement of a familiar idea or as an entirely new concept to replace the outmoded notion of influence. In the former case, intertextuality might be taken as a general term, working out from the broad definition of influence to encompass unconscious, socially prompted types of text formation (for example, by archetypes or popular culture); modes of conception (such as ideas “in the air”); styles (such as genres); and other prior constraints and opportunities for the writer. In the latter case, intertextuality might be used to oust and replace the kinds of issues that influence addresses, and in particular its central concern with the author and more or less conscious authorial intentions and skills. (3)

Clayton and Rothstein are suggesting that, although one might limit the relationship between texts to that which can be attributed to the author (through either intention or sociohistorical construction), one might also expand the conception of intertextuality so that it reaches beyond the author as the center of textual relationships to include both reader and culture. This expanded understanding of the relationship between texts, which sees the author as but one part of “a complex of relation between the text, the reader, reading, writing, printing, publishing, and history” (Plottel xx), opens up interpretive possibilities by reordering the tradition to create a more resonant significance than any one text carries in a more traditional, diachronic reading. It is not just the author’s influence and inspiration which creates the intertextual web in which the text
exists, but also the influence and inspiration of the reader, and of the culture in which all (author, text, reader) coexist. Unlike some models of the literary tradition, which assume a linear progression from one text or period to the next, the sort of intertextual relations suggested by Morgan and Plottel, among others, assumes a web-like arrangement of intertextuality; we can no longer assume "precursors" or "prior texts," and can, therefore, no longer assume direct relations between texts. Rather, some texts will only be related to each other when read through other texts—a literary version of the contemporary parlor game, "Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon," in which connections between actors must be threaded along a web of film trivia until a connection to the character actor, Kevin Bacon, is established. In such a relationship, whether between texts or between actors, connections are established along criteria other than the linear construction of the literary tradition or film history. What takes precedence is the relationship of the text to the web of other texts, and not to a diachronic timeline. In such a reading of cultural texts, Kevin Bacon can be linked to actors and actresses who died before he was born; in the such a reading of literary texts, the chronologically "later" text may be read as informing and influencing the "prior" text.

This paper will examine the ways in which such a simultaneous, web-like intertextual reading of Chaucer's long poem, the Book of the Duchess, and Tony Kushner's Pulitzer Prize-winning two-part play, Angels in America, can open up interpretive possibilities for both texts by engaging in a process of reordering the tradition. In an adaptation of T. S. Eliot's conceptualization of a tradition
that opens itself to make room for the new talent, we have in these texts an example in which the addition of a “new” text to the tradition in fact makes room for the “old” text to be read anew. This reordering of the tradition creates, to borrow the words of the poet Galway Kinnell, a “backward-spreading brightness” (59), a more resonant significance for both the “older” and “younger” text than either carries in a more traditional, chronological reading. The addition of *Angels in America* to the literary tradition makes it possible to move beyond traditional readings of Chaucer’s text as an occasional poem to commemorate the death (or to dedicate the tomb) of Blanche of Lancaster, or as the first of his long poems and an attempt to integrate the French romance style of *Roman de la Rose* into the English vernacular. Instead, the presence of *Angels in America* in the tradition makes possible, as well as necessitates, a reading of the *Book of the Duchess* as an exploration of grief in the face of plague, and of the ways in which traditional understandings of consolation fail the survivors of such a plague. It is by reading the failure of philosophical or religious consolation in the contemporary plague--AIDS--which *Angels in America* addresses that we are able to read the significance of the poet-dreamer’s failure to console the Man in Black.

Such a reading allows us to perceive both texts as engaged in a conversation--a relationship that is fluid and changing, rather than the static and linear relationship of traditional literary history. This new reading allows us to address both the contextualities (historical and contemporary) and the intertextualities of the texts: beyond similarities in content and form, the texts
speak to each other through other texts (Boethius’ *The Consolation of Philosophy* and *Come Back, Little Sheba* are two examples). Thus *Angels in America* and the *Book of the Duchess* are built, as Julia Kristeva states, in such a way that “any text is the absorption and transformation of another” (66). Reading the two works together is less an engagement in source study, influence, or inspiration than it is an examination of the transformation of texts into intertexts.

To examine the conversations within and between these two texts, the key paradigm for discussing such intertextuality will be a model of “epidemic” intertextuality that is reflective of the epidemics which are described in or contextually linked to *Angels in America* and the *Book of the Duchess*. Some texts appear complete and seemingly unchanged within the intertextual mosaic, as bacteria retains its genetic identity, separate from the host it inhabits (such as *yersis pestis*, which causes bubonic plague, called the Black Death, or, in Chaucer’s works, the pestilence). “Bacterial” intertextuality, like bacterial disease, is a situation in which the “infecting” text remains complete; whole sections of a text (such as passages from the *Consolation*, or whole scenes from *The Wizard of Oz*) appear within the “host” text unchanged—a situation that occurs in both *Angels in America* and the *Book of the Duchess*. Alongside these “bacterial,” or relatively unchanged, texts, there are also passages from other texts that appear and are recognizable, but altered; as the virus that causes AIDS changes the genetic make-up of cells once it enters the host, the texts are transformed as they enter the “host” text. Examples of this sort of “viral”
intertextuality include the transformation of Ovid’s story of Ceyx and Alcyone in the *Book of the Duchess*, and the transformations of William Inge’s *Come Back, Little Sheba* and of the official history of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints in *Angels in America*. *Angels in America* and the *Book of the Duchess* represent an epidemic of intertextualities for us to examine: whole passages of other texts exist complete within the “host” texts, while still more texts are incorporated and altered. This epidemic intertextuality reflects the epidemic diseases which provide the starting point for the textual discussion of grief and its consequences, and the resulting texts, *Angels in America* and the *Book of the Duchess*, are organic in a far more literal fashion than formalism can imagine: they are fluid, self-transformational, evolving.

A word of disclaimer: to write about texts as if they were physical bodies, particularly when invoking a metaphor of plague, is to risk forgetting the human cost of such epidemics. As Tony Kushner has noted in a recent essay, “There’s an unforgivable and inescapable arrogance in producing a literature about AIDS: To write about this horror is to say ‘AIDS means...’ or ‘AIDS has meant...’ that the plague has meaning” (Kushner, *Advocate* 64). There is also, and for the same reason, “an unforgivable and inescapable arrogance” in producing a criticism of the literature about AIDS—especially when it is constructed with the sort of epidemiological tropes used in this intertextual reading. It is my hope that this criticism, like the texts it seeks to examine, will find some way to remember the human cost of such metaphors; that it might, in “the desire for meaning, and the artifices through which meaning is pursued,”
do as Kushner hopes and

wrest from inarticulate Nature--or from imponderable sorrow--ghostly, evanescent demarcations of who we are and what we mean to be. Art offers the magic (illusory but nevertheless vital) possibility that this artificial Meaning will vanquish dumb, inhuman, dire Reality, will conquer--though we know nothing can--death itself. (Kushner, *Advocate* 64)

It is with this hopeless/hopeful conflict that we turn, in our search for meaning, to an artifice through which it can be pursued: the examination of "epidemic" intertextualities.
CHAPTER 2.

EPIDEMIC INTERTEXTUALITIES

“So from what come the pleasures of Paradise? Indeterminacy!”

(Kushner, Perestroika 137)

The term “intertextuality” can be, as we have seen, rather loosely applied in the study of literature. The most common split is between what might be called “influence,” or the use of a chronologically older text as a source, and what might be called “inspiration,” or the transformation of a chronologically older text into a newer text through the use of what T.S. Eliot describes as the “individual talent.” Such an understanding of the construction of texts requires an understanding of the process of reading and writing as two sides of the same coin; as Judith Still and Michael Worton note in their introduction to Intertextuality: Theories and Practices, a text “cannot exist as a hermetic or self-sufficient whole, and so does not function as a closed system” (1). They explain the two-fold reasons for such a statement, reasons grounded in the belief that reading and writing are acts which cannot be separated.

Firstly, the writer is a reader of texts (in the broadest sense) before s/he is a creator of texts, and therefore the work of art is
inevitably shot through with references, quotations and influences of every kind. . .

Secondly, a text is available only through some process of reading; what is produced at the moment of reading is due to the cross-fertilization of the packaged material (say, a book) by all the texts with the reader brings to it. A delicate allusion to a work unknown to the reader, which therefore goes unnoticed, will have a dormant existence in that reading. On the other hand, the reader's experience of some practice or theory unknown to the author may lead to a fresh interpretation. (Still and Worton 1-2)

Still and Worton identify “influence” as the political and emotional power exerted through these “co-producers,” that is, the writer/reader and the reader/writer. The text produced by these axes of intertextuality is, they say, “the object of an act of influence,” and, as such, “does not perceive that pressure as neutral” (Still and Worton 2).

Still and Worton differ only slightly, in foregrounding the political implications of intertextuality, from the definition of intertextuality—called “influence”—in Eliot’s essay, “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” Eliot’s description of the relationship between the individual talent (or poet) and the literary tradition is not a linear one: the text is placed next to the tradition and simultaneously conforms and retains its identity. Individuality and conformity have the same relationship as past and present, as the dead poets and the living ones: each text is defined, shaped, and made meaningful by its juxtaposition
with the other. Eliot has made possible, by placing the tradition (which is a set of related texts) next to the "new" text, a way of reading that understands the literary tradition is a web, a network—not a linear model of descent.

Such a choice of terminology—the use of "intertext," with all its postmodern, structuralist baggage, including the assumption of language as a paradigmatic system—might, at first glance, seem to be an odd choice for a more culturally-centered reading of texts. However, like Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, in her introduction to Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance, in this case, the "use of the term intertexts . . . highlights choice and praxis. Instead of theorizing about intertextuality at a high level of abstraction, I give a name and habitation to the phrase any text: I specifically address the question of which texts, among many possible candidates in many possible discursive traditions, a given . . . text is to be juxtaposed and read against" (10). By identifying at least some of the texts which make up the intertext in which the Book of the Duchess and Angels in America are engaged, it is possible to see an intertext as something different from a linguistic indeterminacy—that is, the intertext can be identified as having substance, along the lines of the "tradition" that Eliot had in mind, as opposed to existing as a virtual reality, forever deferred in poststructuralist word- and text-play.

Such an understanding of the relationships between texts, one which re-thinks texts "in terms of space instead of time, conditions of possibility instead of permanent structures, and 'networks' or 'webs' instead of chronological lines or influence" (Morgan 274) is a negotiation and a continuation of a critical
conversation begun by Eliot and continued by most of the poststructuralists (but particularly Foucault and Kristeva). The specific texts under discussion, *Angels in America* and the *Book of the Duchess*, reflect each other, forming a conversation across arbitrarily imposed textual lines concerning the nature of love, grief, and consolation; the critical conversation surrounding intertextuality has its theoretical underpinnings and origins in formalism, structuralism, and poststructuralism, discourses which are themselves engaged in a negotiation. Specifically, both Eliot and Foucault see the text as one part of something larger; in Eliot’s case, the tradition, in Foucault’s, discourse.

Eliot’s and Foucault’s critical conversation creates an intertextuality. Although differences between the two critics are readily identifiable, by reading Eliot in light of Foucault, we can see, as if through a “backward spreading brightness” (Kinnell 59), that the critics in fact tell the same story, a story about the construction of texts and discourses in relation to each other rather than springing from the forehead of the individual, god-like genius; like the transformational action of a virus inside a human cell, the reflection of this conversation is altered. It is as if Eliot and Foucault are looking at each other through the sort of twisted, thickened glass used in funhouse mirrors, so that what they agree on is distorted by the light in which it is perceived.

For example, Eliot’s description of the relationship of the individual and the tradition is not a linear one: the text is placed next to the tradition and it “appears to conform, and is perhaps individual, or it appears individual, and may conform; but we are hardly likely to find that it is one and not the other”
Individuality and conformity have the same relationship as past and present, as influence and inspiration: they may--and do--overlap, envelop, surround. Eliot wants us to understand that the tradition "has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order" (467); it does not exist chronologically. Eliot's tradition is a synchronic construction, continually changing as each text changes.

Foucault also notes (in his essay "What is an Author?") the continually changing nature of the individual--what he calls the author-function--as a complex transformation that "does not develop spontaneously as the attribution of a discourse to an individual" (983). The author is constructed by a culture over time through the use of methods similar to the four-fold process of canonization articulated by St. Jerome. Foucault points out that "all discourses endowed with the author-function... possess this plurality of self" (984). There is no single author; all authors are plural in some way, a dispersion of what Foucault describes as "three simultaneous selves" (984), the author-function that voices textual producer, persona, and interpreter.

So, while Eliot "locates the individuality of a poet neither in his innovativeness nor in his imitativeness, but in his ability to include all previous literature in his work so that past and present discourses coexist" (Morgan 242), Foucault locates the individuality of the discourse in the ability of "three simultaneous selves" to coexist within the author-function. What Eliot and Foucault both seem to be saying is that no author exists apart from discourse, no individual talent exists outside the tradition, and a simultaneous
(synchronic) discourse/tradition is both the creation and the creator of the text(s). It is, in the case of both critics, a belief in a constructed text, which is part of a constructed discourse/tradition, contributed by a constructed author/talent. Ultimately, we have a multiplicity of texts—Angels in America, the Book of the Duchess, and all the other texts within, between and around these two—which are reflecting/refracting each other, telling the same stories by constructing texts from texts, creating a web of tradition in which the historically linear connections from text to text are perhaps the weakest connections, initiating a discourse/dialogue/conversation between and within texts. It is, as Eliot says, "a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and the temporal together" (467).

This conversation between texts can be broken into at least two types—types which may appear to be quite similar to the lines drawn earlier between "influence" and "inspiration," although perhaps not quite so simple. As previously discussed, the traditional view of intertextual "influence" is generally thought of as a situation in which a later author models his or her writing on the work of an earlier, already canonized author. Thaïs Morgan calls this a "positive intertextual relation," and cites as an example James Joyce's use of the central episodes from the Odyssey to structure the chapters in Ulysses (241). In such a case, the "original," or previous text, is left the same as it was before; it has simply had elements of itself incorporated whole into a new text. Similarly, the type of intertextuality that has traditionally been called inspiration (and about which Harold Bloom has written in Freudian detail in The Anxiety
of Influence) exists when an author decides to “finish” or “expand on” the text of a precursor. In such a case, the older text becomes a point of departure for the new text; elements remain the same, but the prior text is altered before incorporation into the new text. Morgan calls this a “negative textual relation,” and compares it to the ironic transformation of the epic hero in Joyce’s characterization of Bloom (241). These divisions of intertextual relations, while not always so neatly drawn, can also be seen in another, more organic fashion: as elements that are capable of passing the arbitrary textual barriers as easily as bacteria and viruses pass the physical barriers of cell walls.

Such a truly “organic” picture of intertextuality sees the text not as an artifact, complete in itself, but as a textual cell within a body, or a textual body within a community: permeable, changing, fluid, evolving. As the bacterium retains its identity within the human body, so do some texts retain their identity within the intertext. For example, in Angels in America, when Louis, his desire for Joe momentarily frustrated, says, “Ohblahdee, oblahdah, life goes on. Rah” (Kushner, Perestroika 16), the line from the familiar song is unchanged; in fact, in production, it is sung. The fact that Joe responds with a puzzled “What?” does not alter the power of the intertext; even an audience/reader who is not familiar with the Beatles will understand that there is some significance—a significance incompletely understood, but present, nevertheless. For those whose intertext includes the entire song, with its happy, gender-bending, drunken finale, the lyric’s presence in this intertext is a short-hand for all of
Louis’s desire. But the lyric itself is unchanged; it retains the form--partial, incomplete, but still itself--that it has in a recorded version.

Other texts enter and are altered, re-formed into a new text. What Morgan calls a “negative textual relation” can also be seen as a sort of textual retrovirus, introducing its own genetic make-up into the host text. This intertext “converts viral RNA into a DNA copy that becomes part of the host cell’s DNA,” so that “offspring of the altered . . . cell thus contain the virus’s genetic code” (Biddle 78); what is left is a new text that retains some semblance of the prior text, but is also completely new--Eliot’s “individual talent,” or intertextual “inspiration.” An example of this would be the ironic re-fashioning of the Boethian dialogue in the Book of the Duchess, in which the exchange between the poet-dreamer and the Man in Black follows the same format of the exchange between Boethius and Lady Philosophy in the first two books of The Consolation of Philosophy. While the poet-dreamer does follow the pattern of the dialogue, his dialogue does not have anything close to the outcome described by Boethius. Although Chaucer’s use of Boethius is complicated by the influence of the French romance poets, and he “may have been led to the Consolation by Jean De Meun’s continuation of the Roman de la Rose” (Hanna and Lawler 396), his own later translation of Boethius opens up the possibility of a more direct intertextual relation. One traditionally Boethian reading of the Book of the Duchess would have us believe that the only consolation available to the Black Knight is that of Boethius--
that virtue emanates from God and, therefore, can never finally perish. The lady was a paragon of virtue, and so her soul must be in heaven. The Knight must, like Boethius, learn to distinguish between the perishable gifts of Fortune and the immortal attributes of the virtuous. (Cherniss 662)

The text of the poem, however, shows us a different reading entirely: a completely unconsolated Man in Black riding off alone to his castle, and a poet-dreamer who is so slow to understand the situation that he can offer no fitting consolation. While critic James Dean might offer another possibility--that the Book of the Duchess "is a courtly poem offering the consolation of art rather than a Boethian narrative offering the consolation of philosophy or theology" (236)--we are left with the image of the grieving lover unconsolated, while the obtuse narrator records his dream. The reality of grief as something that must be experienced rather than philosophically resolved is never addressed. What for Boethius can be a resolution to his pain, the consolation of philosophy, is transformed in this intertext, retaining its outer form, but altered on the inside: the bereft cannot reason his way out of grieving his loss. The Man in Black must simply grieve, while the obtuse observer seeks consolation for suffering that is not his.

Such viral intertextualities spread epidemically throughout the Book of the Duchess and Angels in America, transforming and altering each connected text. The Boethian dialogue, ironically transformed in Chaucer's poem, is altered yet again--a virus genetically changing the text it inhabits--in the
dialogues that seek out consolation and meaning in Kushner's plays. The
dream-vision genre, which is incorporated entire--or bacterially--in the *Book of
the Duchess* becomes virally altered into a sort of apocalyptic nightmare/drug-
induced hallucination (while still retaining some of the standard features of a
dream-vision) in *Angels in America*. The obtuse narrator of Chaucer's poem, so
hopelessly unable to have insight into the grief of the Man in Black, becomes
the emotionally stunted, deliberately blind characters in *Angels in America*, as
both Joe and Louis turn away from grief they can neither understand nor
endure. Ovid's tale of transformed lovers is altered into a bedtime story in the
*Book of the Duchess*, while standards of the stage and screen are pressed into
service in Kushner's plays. Ultimately, the intertextualities--love, death and
poetry--create a pandemic of grief, an epidemic desire for consolation and
meaning, in the age of plague.
CHAPTER 3.

AN INTERTEXTUAL READING OF BOOK OF THE DUCHESS
AND ANGELS IN AMERICA

"Show me the words that will reorder the world, or else keep silent."

(Kushner, Perestroika 14)

An intertextual reading of the Book of the Duchess and Angels in America easily reveals textual similarities, an intertext which might at first appear to be the result of a traditional, "influence"-based intertextuality. For instance, both the poem and the play are concerned with grief in a time of plague; both involve the use of dreams/visions/hallucinations as a means of introducing intertextualities; both make extensive use of an obtuse narrator/performer (the dreamer-poet and the characters of Louis Ironson and Joe Pitt) to open up the dialogic imagination; and both texts make extensive use of the "epidemic" intertextualities previously discussed: bacterial (unchanged) intertexts appearing whole within the text, and viral (transformed) intertexts. However, it is more than a set of (inter)textual similarities that connect Angels in America and the Book of the Duchess. What happens when the texts are read synchronically, or, as Eliot would say, simultaneously, is that the "existing monument" (in this case, the Book of the Duchess) which has been an
established part of the intertextual tradition for hundreds of years, "was modified by the introduction of the new" (Eliot 467). Our reading of Chaucer's poem is fundamentally changed by reading it through its connection to Kushner's plays.

This intertextual reading will begin with a brief reading of each text, with an emphasis on these elements: the dream-vision, the use of the obtuse narrator, and the use of "epidemic" intertextualities of the bacterial and viral type. Finally, these elements of the two texts will be placed side-by-side, an arrangement which opens up the possibilities of relationships between the texts that are synchronic rather than diachronic, dialogic rather than monologic. Such an arrangement reveals that, when read in light of Angels in America, the Book of the Duchess becomes a commentary on the failure of Boethian dialogue to cope with grief, and on the necessity for understanding the emotional response to loss as both an inevitable and a normal part of the human condition.

The Book of the Duchess

Chaucer's first long poem, the Book of the Duchess, opens with the poet-dreamer so sick that he wonders "How that I lyve" (2), for he has been unable to sleep for eight years. He decides to read in bed as a way to pass the night, but we learn immediately that the poet-dreamer suffers from a somewhat distorted
perception, as we can see from his description of the subject matter of the book he reads:

And in this bok were written fables
That clerkes had in olde tyme,
And other poetes, put in rime
To rede and for to be in minde,
While men loved the lawe of kinde.
This bok ne spak but of such thinges,
Of quenes lives, and of kinges,
And many other thinges smale. (52-59)

Our poet-dreamer reads of those who followed the natural law ("lawe of kinde") and of the lives of queens and kings, but he considers these subjects of little import ("thinges smale"). This is a forewarning for us not to trust the perceptions of the dreamer, for he is well-meaning in his report, but will consistently suffer from an appalling lack of perspective. He is an obtuse narrator--blind even to the obvious.

The book that our dreamer reads to fall asleep is the tale of Ceyx and Alcyone from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The version reported by the dreamer-poet is, however, altered: Orpheus, at the command of Juno, animates the body of the drowned husband and appears to Alcyone, telling her of Ceyx's death. Alcyone, overcome with grief, "deyede within the thridde morwe" (214). The transformation of the two into sea-birds is completely omitted from the version
we are given by the poet-dreamer; instead, he immediately moves from their story back to his:

    Whan I had red thys tale wel
    And overloked hyt everydel,
    Me thoghte wonder yf hit were so,
    For I had never herd speke or tho
    Of noo goddes that koude make
    Men to slepe, ne for to wake,
    For I ne knew never god but oon. (219-225, 231-237)

The narrator of the *Book of the Duchess* is far more interested in what the tale of Ceyx and Alcyone can tell him about sleep than he is concerned with what it says about love, death, and grief. In fact, he comments on Alcyone's grief only by acknowledging that it killed her; the poet-dreamer ignores the main point of the story and alters the ending, choosing instead to focus on a minor machination of plot. In the text from which the poet-dreamer reads, Ovid offers an ending in which Alcyone, upon recognizing her husband’s drowned body as it washes ashore, screams and leaps from a seawall to join him, only to be transformed:

    She flew and through the air on new-found wings
    Sped skimming o’er the waves, a hapless bird;
    And as she flew, her slender bill poured forth
    Sad plaintive cries that seemed to speak of grief.
And when she reached the silent bloodless corpse
Her new wings clasped her loved one; her hard beak
Printed cold futile kisses on his lips.

The gods changed both to birds; the same strange fate
They shared, and still their love endured... (Ovid 271)

It is the absence of part of the text from the poet-dreamer’s narration that alters
his intertext, for, without the hopeful conclusion, the tale of Ceyx and Alcyone
is merely a sad story—a situation which makes it possible for the poet-dreamer to
focus on a detail like Orpheus’ ability to induce sleep. The transformation
which offers Ovid’s lovers the possibility of consolation in life-after-death is
irrelevant to the dreamer in Chaucer’s poem; the dreamer’s interest in the
intertext is as a sleeping potion, and not a balm for grief.

The poet-dreamer then falls asleep and dreams that he has awakened on a
bright May morning in the middle of a hunt; significantly, the hunters seek to
“slee the hert with strengthe” (351). The dreamer-poet joins the chase,
eventually the hounds lose the scent, and a pup comes to the dreamer. When
he tries to grab the whelp, it runs from him; he follows it deeper into the wood,
where he comes upon a Man in Black who is grieving:

I stalked even unto hys bak,
And there I stood as stille as ought,
That, soth to saye, he saw me nought;
For-why he heng hys hed adoun,  
And with a dedly sorwful soun  
He made of rym ten vers or twelve  
Of a compleynte to hymselfe--  
The moste pitee, the moste rowthe,  
That ever I herde; for, by my trowthe,  
Hit was gret wonder that Nature  
Myght suffre any creature  
To have such sorwe and be not ded. (458-469)

In his dream, the narrator encounters the same sort of “heart-slaying” grief that he read about before sleeping, as in the description of Alcyone: “For sorwe ful nygh wood she was” (104); as before, although he recognizes grief, he is ignorant of the significance of what he sees before him.

The poet-dreamer observes the Man in Black, who eventually becomes aware of the narrator’s presence. At first assuming the Man in Black to be part of the hunt, the poet-dreamer says to him, “I holde that this hert be goon; / These huntes konne hym nowher see” (540-541), a sad double-entendre indeed, for it reflects the poet-dreamer’s literal reading of events—the deer hunt—as well as the Man in Black’s status—heart-broken. The dreamer, however, thinks only on the most literal of levels. Whatever the problem is, it can be repaired, probably as easily as Orpheus induces sleep. The narrator asks the Man in Black why he grieves, in this mistaken assumption that he can comfort this grief:
But certes, sire, yif that yee
Wolde ought discure me youre woo,
I wolde, as wys God helpe me soo,
Amende hyt, yif I kan or may.
Ye mowe preve hyt be assay;
For, by my trouthe, to make yow hool
I wol do al my power hool. (548-554)

The poet-dreamer, in spite of his well-meaning, does not recognize the depth of the loss suffered by the Man in Black, who then embarks on a long tale of his inconsolability over his lost love. The Man in Black places the blame for his loss, in a textual fashion only slightly altered from Boethius, on fate personified:

For fals Fortune hath pleyd a game
Atte ches with me, alas the while!
The trayteresse fals and ful of gyle,
That al behoteth and nothyng halt,
She goth upryght and yet she halt,
That baggeth foule and loketh faire,
That dispitouse debonaire
That skorneth many a creature! (618-625)

Fortune is personified in a fashion typical in the period as a woman who “ys fals, and ever laughynge/ With oon eye, and that other wepynge” (633-634). It is also reminiscent of Boethius’ complaint to Lady Philosophy, in Book I, Prose IV of The Consolation of Philosophy, where he says first, “Surely the severity of
Fortune's attack on me needs no further mention; it is self-evident" (41), and later, "Fortune should have blushed at the sight of innocence accused" (43). The difference here, though, is in the response given to the complainant: Lady Philosophy leads Boethius through the logical steps to explain and accept his condition (falsely imprisoned and scheduled for execution), while the poet-dreamer is unable even to follow the complaint of the Man in Black, let alone offer anything resembling an explanation for his current situation. The form of the Boethian dialogue has been altered; the presence of the obtuse narrator--in this case, the poet-dreamer--makes the change ironic, since the complainant seeks consolation from one who is incapable of offering it. As has been previously discussed, this "viral" intertext gives us the outward manifestation of the older text, but it has been changed, transformed from a straightforward, philosophical exchange into an exercise in futility for the grieving lover.

The Man in Black describes his chess game with Fortune, in which "With hir false draughtes dyvers/ She staal on me and tok my fers" (653-654). This should be a clue for the poet-dreamer, for this noble knight is describing the loss of his "fers," or queen, a move in chess that results in a final end to the game; still, the obtuse narrator persists in seeing the Man in Black's description as if it were only a game, and not the life of his love, that has been lost. He then attempts to console the grieving Man in Black with, first, philosophy:

"A, goode sir," quod I, "say not soo!

Have som pitee on your nature
That formed yow to creature.
Remembre yow of Socrates,
For he ne counted nat thre strees
Of noght that Fortune koude doo."  (714-719)

The Man in Black refuses this comfort—"I kan not soo" (720), so the dreamer-poet follows the philosopher with references to famous lovers of the past, whose inability to overcome heartbreak led to tragedy. The list includes Medea and Jason, Phyllis and Demophon, Dido and Aeneas, Echo and Narcissus, and Samson and Delilah; all have in common a loss through some sort of selfish betrayal, a series of bacterial intertextualities which illustrate how far afield the poet-dreamer is in his assessment of the Man in Black’s situation, since he has still failed to grasp that this is not simply an unhappy love affair. When the poet-dreamer admonishes the Man in Black “But ther is no man alyve her / Wolde for a fers make this woo!” (740-741), it is a sort of command to “snap out of it.” This reveals to the griever how obtuse this narrator really is: “Thou wost ful lytel what thou menest;/ I have lost more than thow wenest” (743-744).

The poet-dreamer is not so easily convinced, however, and asks yet again what troubles the Man in Black:

“Good sir, telle me al hooly
In what wyse, how, why, and wherfore
That ye have thus youre blysse lore.”  (746-748)

After all that story-telling, the Man in Black is no closer to being understood by the poet-dreamer, and so he must begin yet again. The Man in Black is not only
forced, by the demands of the poet-dreamer for information, to recite his story, but to explain it as well; it is more work to talk to his would-be consoler than it is to simply grieve, a situation which will also arise in Angels in America.

This time, the Man in Black dispenses with much of his metaphoric description of a battle with Fortune; he straightforwardly and descriptively tells the story of how he came to fall in love with and marry White. Still, at the end of the Man in Black’s description of how fair, sweet, gentle and well-loved was his White, the poet-dreamer is at a loss to understand; although he has heard a long and detailed story, yet he asks again, “For Goodes love, telle me al” (1143). The Man in Black goes on, then, to tell of the courtship and subsequent marriage. He ends on a happy note, which only serves to make his loss more heart-breaking:

"Al was us oon, withoute were.
And thus we lyved ful many a yere
So wel I kan nat telle how.” (1295-1297)

This apparently happy ending has the poet-dreamer truly puzzled, and he asks where White has gone. Again, the Man in Black pales with grief, and repeats: “Thou wost ful lytel what thou menest; I have lost more than thow wenest” (1305-1306). Finally, the Man in Black must be blunt with the obtuse narrator: “‘She ys ded!’ ‘Nay!’ ‘Yis, be my trouthe!’” (1309), a rather rapid unfolding after the lengthy speeches, but a statement for which, at last, the poet-dreamer has no response except “Be god, hyt ys routhe!” (1310).
The poet-dreamer makes no further attempt to explain, console, or distract the Man in Black from grief; he gives up, surrenders to silence, and simply watches as the knight rides off to his castle. The bells from the castle in his dream then wake the poet-dreamer, who discovers that he has fallen asleep over the open book which contained the story of Ceyx and Alcyone. The only closure for the poet-dreamer is the end of the dream; there is no resolution of grief or loss except for “This was my sweven; now hit ys doon” (1334). As the critic J. Stephen Russell notes, “Ultimately, all human grief, we learn, is as impossible to express or to judge as Geoffrey’s eight years’ sickness” (Russell 159); there is no satisfactory expression of loss and consolation to be had in this ending.

The majority of the poem’s action—the hunt, as well as the interchange with the Man in Black—takes place while the narrator is engaged in a dream-vision. Russell describes the dream-vision in his book, *The English Dream Vision: Anatomy of a Form*, as having several noteworthy elements. First, and at “the simplest level, a dream vision is the first person account of a dream” (5). This basic form of the dream-vision, which Russell describes as the “dream report,” is very close to the textual form of the *Book of the Duchess*:

- the dream report is usually preceded by a prologue introducing the dreamer as a character and is often followed by an epilogue describing the dreamer’s reawakening and recording the dream report in verse. (5)
The dream report itself is, according to Russell, a record of a debate or conversation between characters, and, while it may include motifs such as preternatural light, talking animals, or personified figures (such as Fortune in the *Book of the Duchess*), these things are not necessary. "In all of this," Russell continues, "the only constant seems to be the complex central figure of the dreamer-narrator-character: unlike most absent, omniscient, impersonal medieval narrators, the dreamer is *always* a character in his dream narrative" (6). The poet-dreamer's account of his encounter with the Man in Black fulfills all the core requirements of the dream-vision: it begins by introducing us to the poet-dreamer, then his dream, which is followed by a sort of narrative split (what Russell calls "narrative normalization") as the poet-dreamer and the dream become separate for the reader and an expectation of narrative develops. This creates a situation in which the reader has a "growing intuition that events and images, the details and the situations of the dream narrative are symbolic and that their symbolism is comprehensible to the readers without the intervention of the dreamer-narrator" (124) [author's italics]. Thus, the dream-vision creates a sense of competence on the part of the readers, who become more confident in their own interpretive abilities than they are in the abilities of the dreaming narrator. The obtuseness of the poet-dreamer functions not only as a part of the dialogue between himself and the Man in Black, but as a necessary part of the genre, so that the audience can reach the point at which they are sure they understand what the poet-dreamer does not.
Writing specifically about the *Book of the Duchess*, Russell notes how this leads us to disparage the perceptual skills—or lack of them—in the poet-dreamer:

The *Book of the Duchess* is an even clearer case: narrative normalization virtually turns this poem against its own dreamer-persona, the man who cannot see what the dream makes so patently obvious—that the Black Knight has lost his lady Blanche through death. In this case... critics of the poem have actually become impatient with the dreamer, calling him boorish, insensitive, cruel, or at least obtuse. This long-standing view of Chaucer’s “Geffrey”—a perfectly accurate character description—is the mark of Chaucer’s success in normalizing the lyric experience of the *Book of the Duchess*, for it shows that readers feel perfectly competent to judge the actions and reactions of the dreamer in what is, remember, his dream. (126-127)

This identification of the poet-dreamer as an “obtuse” narrator is important, for whether this was an act of authorial intentionality or a function of genre, it creates a situation in which the way the text is read makes all the difference in its meaning; it creates a gap into which the reader must step. As Wolfgang Iser describes it, “whenever the flow is interrupted and we are led off in unexpected directions, the opportunity is given to us to bring into play our own faculty for establishing connections—for filling in the gaps left by the text itself” (1222-1223). In some cases, those gaps can only be filled by another text.
Angels in America

Angels in America, which is subtitled, A Gay Fantasia on National Themes, is a sweeping, two-part analysis and indictment of America in the Reagan years—a period which, perhaps not coincidentally, saw AIDS move from epidemic to pandemic status while continuing to be ignored by the highest levels of government. The plays follow the disintegrating relationships of two couples (Prior Walter, a gay man with AIDS, and his lover, Louis Ironson, and Joe and Harper Pitt, a Mormon couple from Utah who are living, albeit unsuccessfully, in New York) as they attempt to find meaning in the face of indescribable grief and loss. The first part, Millennium Approaches, introduces the characters and their failing relationships against a backdrop of impending arrival: the Angel, who has been appearing to Prior in dreams which are accompanied by sexual arousal, makes her entrance in the final scene. In Perestroika, the separated couples do not reconcile—which would foreclose the possibility of growth for all of them—and instead, they are all forced to confront the connections between personal and political desire, between their hopes for comfort and safety and what Prior describes as "More Life" (Kushner, Perestroika 148).

Like the Book of the Duchess, much of Angels in America occurs while the characters are dreaming—or, occasionally, hallucinating. The first such instance involves a little of both, as Prior Walter’s dream overlaps with Harper Pitt’s hallucination in Act I, Scene 7 of Millennium Approaches, in what is
described as a “mutual dream scene.” Although neither Prior nor Harper know it yet, they are both about to be left by the men in their lives; Louis, Prior’s partner of four and a half years, and Joe, Harper’s husband, will become lovers shortly. The scene begins with a sleeping Prior putting on his makeup in front of a mirror and exclaiming, “I’m ready for my closeup, Mr. DeMille” 
(Millennium 30). This bit of intertext—a line from the movie Sunset Boulevard, starring Gloria Swanson as the slightly mad, definitely over-the-top has-been movie star who longs for a comeback—foregrounds for the initiated readers/audience a high-camp sensibility. It tells us what Prior finds desirable. He then speaks, for the first time directly, of his grief at having developed AIDS:

PRIOR. One wants to move through life with elegance and grace, blossoming infrequently but with exquisite taste, and perfect timing, like a rare bloom, a zebra orchid... One wants... But one so seldom gets what one wants, does one? No. One does not. One gets fucked. Over. One... dies at thirty, robbed of... decades of majesty.

Fuck this shit. Fuck this shit.

(He almost crumbles; he pulls himself together; he studies his handiwork in the mirror)

I look like a corpse. A corpsette. Oh my queen; you know you’ve hit rock-bottom when even drag is a drag.

(Kushner, Millennium 30-31)
At this point, Harper wanders into Prior's dream. She does not believe herself to be dreaming; rather, she is in the Valium-induced hallucinatory state that has become comfortable to her:

HARPER. Are you...Who are you?

PRIOR. Who are you?

HARPER. What are you doing in my hallucination?

PRIOR. I'm not in your hallucination. You're in my dream.

(Kushner, *Millennium* 31)

Harper thinks she's found the answer in the simple declaration: "I have emotional problems. I took too many pills" (31), but what is going on here is much more complex. While she may be hallucinating, Prior is having nothing less than a full-fledged dream-vision, and she has become part of it. She resists the power of this dream-vision at first, saying,

HARPER. I don't understand this. If I didn't ever see you before and I don't think I did then I don't think you should be here, in this hallucination, because in my experience the mind, which is where hallucinations come from, shouldn't be able to make up anything that wasn't there to start with, that didn't enter it from experience, from the real world. Imagination can't create anything new, can it? It only recycle bits and pieces from the world and reassembles them into visions...Am I making sense right now? (Kushner, *Millennium* 32)
Harper's desire for a constant, for stability in her world-view, leads her to "read" her hallucination as an intertextual relation: "Imagination can't create anything new, can it? It only recycles bits and pieces from the world and reassembles them into visions." She is actually describing the sort of viral intertextuality in which she is engaged. However, she is not completely unaware of the potential here for a strange sort of prophecy, and eventually admits to Prior that she knows this is not an ordinary hallucination:

HARPER. The world. Finite. Terribly, terribly... Well...

This is the most depressing hallucination I've ever had.

PRIOR. Apologies. I do try to be amusing.

HARPER. Oh, well, don't apologize, you... I can't expect someone who's really sick to entertain me.

PRIOR. How on earth did you know...

HARPER. Oh, that happens. This is the very threshold of revelation sometimes. You can see things... how sick you are. Do you see anything about me? (Kushner, Millennium 33)

What Prior sees--that Harper's husband is a homosexual--is, unfortunately, something she already expects, but cannot stand to hear. She leaves, but not without giving Prior something very important to think about:

HARPER. Yes.

I have to go now, get back, something just...fell apart.
Oh God, I feel so sad . . .

PRIOR. I . . . I'm sorry. I usually say, "Fuck the truth," but mostly, the truth fucks you.

HARPER. I see something else about you . . .

PRIOR. Oh?

HARPER. Deep inside you, there's a part of you, the most inner part, entirely free of disease. I can see that.

PRIOR. Is that . . . That isn't true.

HARPER. Threshold of revelation.

Home . . .

(She vanishes.)

PRIOR. People come and go so quickly here . . . (Kushner, Millennium 34)

Prior's comment on Harper's exit is lifted en toto (so to speak) from the movie version of The Wizard of Oz, a cultural text to which he returns frequently as the best way to explain what is happening to him during the course of his dream-visions. The line is taken from shortly after Dorothy's arrival in Oz, in a scene just before she sets out on the Yellow Brick Road:

MEDIUM SHOT--THE COUNTRYSIDE FROM DOROTHY'S VIEWPOINT

GLINDA. Just follow the Yellow Brick Road.

She steps back, and the large pink-tinted crystal BLUBBLE
reappears. The bubble slowly rises, carrying GLINDA away, as the MUNCHKINS rush toward it.

MUNCHKINS. Good-bye! Good-bye! Good-bye! (etc.)

MEDIUM SHOT--DOROTHY

DOROTHY. My! People come and go so quickly here! (Langley 63)

The film, first released in 1939 and shown annually on television since the late 1950s, has particular significance for gay culture: the high-camp style and theme of isolation in an unfamiliar terrain made for identification among gay and lesbian viewers, and, in later years, the phrase “a friend of Dorothy’s” became an almost-universal code identifying gays and lesbians in an otherwise hostile heterosexual environment (Shilts 387). Furthermore, The Wizard of Oz is itself a dream-vision; Dorothy experiences the Land of Oz, but awakens to discover that her visit there was “all a dream,” in spite of the appearance of people familiar to her from her life in Kansas. The insertion of this text, unaltered from the original form, carries with it the context of the gay subculture; it is Prior’s way of insisting that “There’s no place like home” (Langley 129) as he becomes ever more disoriented by the dream-vision. Like the poet-dreamer in the Book of the Duchess, Prior is attempting to make sense of the dream landscape by applying familiar paradigms; Prior’s choice of Dorothy is, because of the nature of the dream, more fitting than the intertexts that the poet-dreamer attempts to apply (Samson and Delilah, Jason and Medea, et cetera).

The dream-vision becomes even more disorienting after Harper’s exit, for Prior then begins to hear and see signs of the impending arrival of the Angel:
(He begins to wipe makeup off with his hands, smearing it around. A large gray feather falls from up above. Prior stops smearing the makeup and looks at the feather. He goes to it and picks it up.)

A VOICE. (It is an incredibly beautiful voice) Look up!

PRIOR. (Looking up, not seeing anyone) Hello?

A VOICE. Look up!

PRIOR. Who is that?

A VOICE. Prepare the way!

PRIOR. I don’t see any . . .

(There is a dramatic change in lighting, from above.)

A VOICE.

Look up, look up,

prepare the way

the infinite descent

A breath in air

floating down

Glory to . . .

(Silence.)

PRIOR. Hello? Is that it? Helloooo!

What the fuck . . .? (He holds himself)
Poor me. Poor poor me. Why me? Why poor poor me? Oh I don’t feel good right now. I really don’t.

(Kushner, *Millennium* 34-35)

Where initially Prior’s dream-vision seemed to be only a "first person account of a dream" (Russell 5), since Prior commented and analyzed the dream even as we observe it occurring, the last part of the dream-vision reflects a shift within the genre. Although the "mutual dream scene" starts out as what the audience "reads" as an advancement of plot (a way in which both Prior and Harper can gain information necessary to propel the action of the play forward), it becomes, with the portent of the Angel, something else entirely. Prior's dream-vision moves from an emphasis on what Russell called a “dream-as-narrative-event” toward what he calls “apocalypse,” a difference which is defined by the circumstances and purpose. In the dream-as-narrative event, the circumstance is a larger narrative that the dream is to advance, while the apocalypse is generally divinely inspired and intended to convey a definite philosophical or theological message to the audience. The true dream-vision, according to Russell, exists “in space between the dream and the apocalypse, a space between wholly dramatic and wholly didactic purposes” (47). He further describes the dream-vision as a combination of the two forms:

From the dream event it takes drama and an abiding interest in the personality of the dreamer as the aesthetic center of the work. . . . [The dreams] are uniquely psychological events inextricably tied to the personalities of their dreamers. From the apocalypse the dream
vision takes a fascinated, unblinking report of a remarkable inner occasion. The form of the dream vision, a lengthy dream report framed by a brief prologue and epilogue, invites a sort of forgetfulness on the part of its readers, invites them to treat the dream report as an important, even supernal message only accidentally enclosed within an “insignificant” dream. (48)

Although both Prior and Harper might prefer to dismiss the dream-vision as "only a dream," and therefore insignificant, the fact that the phrase "Threshold of revelation" is reiterated makes clear that this dream-vision does indeed have significance: it is "an important, even supernal message." While this particular dream--or, more appropriately "mutual dream scene"--lacks the frame which Russell considers an integral part of the dream-vision, one of Prior’s later dream-visions recreates (as closely as is possible on stage) the format required of a dream-vision.

Act II of *Perestroika* (titled "The Epistle," with Biblical connotations that reinforce the significance of the material presented) is Prior’s report of his “visitation” by the Angel to Belize. The act is set up in the frame format that Russell notes as a hallmark of the dream-vision: Prior and Belize are at the funeral of a fellow drag queen when Belize begins to press Prior to explain some of the changes he’s undergone recently--changes that could not all be due to the progress of the disease.

PRIOR. I was improving. Before. Remember my wet dream.
BELIZE. The angel?

PRIOR. It wasn’t a dream.

BELIZE. Course it was.

PRIOR. No. I don’t think so. I’m a prophet.

BELIZE. Say what?

PRIOR. I’ve been given a prophecy. A book. Not a physical book, or there was one but they took it back, but somehow there’s still this book. In me. A prophecy. It... really happened, I’m... almost completely sure of it. (He looks at Belize) Oh stop looking so...

BELIZE. You’re scaring me.

PRIOR. It was after Louis left me. Every night I’d been having these horrible vivid dreams. And then...

(Little pause.)

BELIZE. Then...?

PRIOR. And then She arrived. (Kushner, Perestroika 43)

The rest of the act--all of Scene 2, which begins immediately--has Prior recounting his dream to Belize, while at the same time reliving/reenacting it, with Belize as an audience. He describes his visitation, including his reluctance to accept the role of prophet and the physical effects (sexual arousal) of having the Angel near him. As the Angel recites her directions to the “no-thanks-I’d-rather-not” prophet Prior, he interprets her words for Belize--and for the audience.
ANGEL. In creating You, Our Father-Lover unleashed
Sleeping Creation's Potential for Change.
In YOU the Virus of TIME began!

PRIOR. In making us God apparently set in motion a potential in
the design for change, for random event, for movement
forward. (Kushner, Perestroika 49)

As Prior explains it, the creation of humanity caused the introduction of change
in Heaven; “human progress...shakes up Heaven” (Kushner, Perestroika 50).
These “heaven-quakes” caused quite a bit of damage, and God began to wander
away from the angels, eventually abandoning them, a theme that Belize
recognizes as “The man that got away” (Kushner, Perestroika 51). Like the
apocalyptic dream-vision that Russell describes, this dream-vision demands to
be treated as a matter of some significance; it is, in fact, a call to action. The
Angel charges Prior with the task of stopping human progress in order to restore
order to Heaven—which leads everyone to a moment of clarity:

ANGEL. [...] There is No Zion Save Where You Are!

If you Cannot find your Heart's desire...

PRIOR. In your own backyard...

ANGEL, PRIOR, AND BELIZE. You never lost it to begin with.

(Kushner, Perestroika 53)

Once again, the gay sensibility Prior represents—and that the play invokes—calls
up images of The Wizard of Oz, this time the final scene:
TIN MAN. What have you learned, Dorothy?

DOROTHY. (thoughtfully) Well, I . . . I think that it . . . that it wasn’t enough just to want to see Uncle Henry and Auntie Em . . . and it’s that if I ever go looking for my heart’s desire again, I won’t look any further than my own backyard; because if it isn’t there, I never really lost it to begin with!

(timidly to GLINDA) Is that right?

GLINDA. (nodding and smiling) That’s all it is. (Langley 128)

The Oz intertext remains both the touchstone of familiarity and the representation of gay camp culture here (and, as a side note, had noticeably different responses from a predominantly gay audience and a “mixed” gay and straight audience at two different Midwestern performances of the play). To find all three participants in the dream-vision—the Angel and Prior, as well as Belize, who is the “first audience” for Prior’s recital—returning to the paradigm for dream-vision interpretation which is provided by the Oz intertext shows how much they all desire the apocalyptic dream-vision to be a “only a dream.”

While Prior’s dream-vision conforms in format to the standard frame here, it also crosses into the realm of apocalypse, particularly in Prior’s insistence that all he has witnessed really occurred. This insistence is consistent with Russell’s observation concerning the dream-vision genre that, where the apocalypse is concerned, “visionaries may occasionally be tranced or even on the point of death, but never asleep” (40). What we have then, in Angels in America, is a movement from one extreme of the dream-vision—the dream-as-
narrative-event, which, in the case of the “mutual dream scene” with Prior and Harper, advances the play’s narrative—to another extreme—the dream-as-apocalyptic-vision, which develops Prior’s prophetic relationship with the Angel and transmits the message he is to carry to the world.

The “viral” intertext—the dream-vision genre—is adapted structurally to the plays, with elements of both extremes of the genre expanding with the narrative possibilities in the plays. Further, the dream-vision has incorporated within it another epidemic intertext—the bacterial intertext of the passages from *The Wizard of Oz*—which serve as a reflective surface upon which a mirror image of the dream-visions of *Angels in America* can be seen. Prior’s and Harper’s dream-visions are read through the dream-vision which makes up *The Wizard of Oz*, but while the text of the film remains intact inside the play, the form of the genre is altered.

In the concluding frame for Prior’s final dream-vision (Act V, Scene 8), he has returned from Heaven, where he demanded—and received—his blessing. Upon his “return” to a hospital room he never really—that is, physically—left, he reenacts the closing scene of the frame story from *The Wizard of Oz*. Prior’s version goes like this:

PRIOR. [. . .]

I’ve had a remarkable dream. And you were there, and

you. . .

*(Hannah enters.)*
PRIOR. And you.

HANNAH. I what?

PRIOR. And some of it was terrible, and some of it was wonderful, but all the same I kept saying I want to go home. And they sent me home. (Perestroika 140)

While this directly refers to the use of the same theatrical trick used in The Wizard of Oz—casting actors in more than one role—it also reflects Prior’s desire for the sort of happy ending he loves in the dream-vision he knows best, and so he uses the dream-vision text most familiar to him as a way of describing his experience:

DOROTHY. No, but it wasn’t a dream. It was a place.

(as she points to the THREE BOYS)

And you--and you--and you--

(points to the PROFESSOR)

And you were there!

PROFESSOR MARVEL. Oh!

HUNK. Sure.

They all laugh.

DOROTHY. (puzzled) But you couldn’t have been, could you?

AUNT EM. (gently) Oh, we dream lots of silly things when we--

DOROTHY. (with absolute belief) No, Aunt Em, this was a real truly live place. And I remember that some of it wasn’t very
nice—but most of it was beautiful! But just the same, all I kept saying to everybody was, "I want to go home." And they sent me home!

(She waits for a reaction; they all laugh again.)

Doesn’t anybody believe me? (Langley 131-132)

The changes in dialogue are slight; for the most part, Prior repeats Dorothy’s lines verbatim. Unlike Dorothy’s dream-vision in The Wizard of Oz, however, we get to see how Prior is changed by his experience; in the Epilogue of Perestroika, Prior shares directly with the audience what he has learned—and it’s not that your heart’s desire “is in your own back yard”:

PRIOR. I’m almost done.

The fountain’s not flowing now, they turn it off in the winter, ice in the pipes. But in the summer it’s a sight to see. I want to be around to see it. I plan to be. I hope to be.

This disease will be the end of many of us, but not nearly all, and the dead will be commemorated and will struggle on with the living, and we are not going away. We won’t die secret deaths anymore. The world only spins forward. We will be citizens. The time has come.

Bye now.

You are fabulous creatures, each and every one.

And I bless you: More Life.
The Great Work Begins.  \textit{(Perestroika 148)}

While we suspect that Dorothy's attitude toward and appreciation of her life in Kansas has changed, while we hope that the poet-dreamer in the \textit{Book of the Duchess} will eventually reach some understanding of what troubles him, we know what Prior has learned: "More Life."

Of course, the intertext from \textit{The Wizard of Oz} is only part of the intertext in which the plays \textit{Angels in America} coexist. The texts also inhabit the stage, with references to Lillian Hellman, Tennessee Williams, and an on-going intertext involving William Inge's play, \textit{Come Back, Little Sheba}. The intertextual relationship between Inge's play and \textit{Angels in America} appears to be bacterial—that is, whole lines are lifted from the play—but it is also one of inspiration, or genetic alteration, for the use of the text of \textit{Come Back, Little Sheba} in \textit{Angels in America} highlights what Belize perceives about theme: "I smell a motif. The man that got away" \textit{(Perestroika 51)}.

Inge's play is also about grief—the main characters, Doc and Lola, grieve the loss of youth, love, and Doc's sobriety. Perhaps not surprisingly, \textit{Come Back, Little Sheba} makes use of dream-reports in both the opening and closing scenes. In this play, "Little Sheba" is the name given to Lola's small dog, who has been missing for a while, but for whom Lola still searches and calls. When, in the opening scene of the play, she tells Doc about her dream of looking for Sheba, she is hoping that it has meaning and afraid it doesn't:

\textbf{LOLA. (Sadly)} I had another dream last night.
DOC. *(Pours coffee)* About Little Sheba?

LOLA. *(With sudden animation)* It was just as real. I dreamt I put her on a leash and we walked downtown—to do some shopping. All the people on the street turned around to admire her, and I felt so proud. Then we started to walk, and the blocks started going by so fast that Little Sheba couldn’t keep up with me. Suddenly, I looked around and Little Sheba was gone. Isn’t that funny? I looked everywhere for her but I couldn’t find her. And I stood there feeling sort of afraid. *(Pause)* Do you suppose that means anything?

DOC. Dreams are funny.

LOLA. Do you suppose that means Little Sheba is going to come back?

DOC. I don’t know, Baby. *(Inge 7-8)*

Lola’s dream of the loss of her dog, a dream that she both hopes and fears has meaning, precedes a day of loss, as her husband’s longing for youth and his unhappiness and disappointment with their lives lead him to get drunk after almost a year of sobriety. The “Little Sheba” in *Angels in America* is a cat that belongs to Prior and Louis, and has already been missing for a while when the play begins. A discussion of the missing cat provides the impetus for Prior to reveal the progression of his AIDS to the development of Kaposi’s sarcoma:

LOUIS. You’re in a pissy mood. Cat still missing?
(Little pause.)

PRIOR. Not a furball in sight. It's your fault.

LOUIS. It is?

PRIOR. I warned you, Louis. Names are important. Call an animal "Little Sheba" and you can't expect it to stick around. Besides, it's a dog's name.

LOUIS. I wanted a dog in the first place.

[...]

PRIOR. Cats know when something's wrong.

LOUIS. Only if you stop feeding them.

PRIOR. They know. That's why Sheba left, because she knew.

LOUIS. Knew what?

(Pause)

PRIOR. I did my best Shirley Booth this morning, floppy slippers, housecoat, curlers, can of Little Friskies: "Come back, Little Sheba, come back . . ." To no avail. Le chat, elle ne reviendra jamais, jamais . . .

(He removes his jacket, rolls up his sleeve, shows Louis a dark-purple spot on the underside of his arm near the shoulder.)

See.

LOUIS. That's just a burst blood vessel.
PRIOR. Not according to the best medical authorities.

LOUIS. What?

(Pause)

Tell me.

PRIOR. K. S., baby. Lesion number one. Lookit. The wine-dark kiss of the angel of death. (Kushner, Millennium 20-21)

In this case, the scene has been altered in form, while the intertextuality between the plays creates a foreboding sense of loss—the pet is missing, a grief that presages the larger grief to come. Although Prior has not dreamed of the missing cat, he sees its absence as a forewarning of what is ahead. The desperation with which Lola tries to hold onto Doc—and to hold onto his sobriety for him—is reflected in the desire Prior has for Louis to show the sort of strength and character they both wish Louis possessed.

The mention of the actress, Shirley Booth, in connection with this intertext adds another dimension—the film version of the play, starring Booth and Burt Lancaster as Lola and Doc. In the cultural text of the movie, Booth brings a particular level of sloppy dependence to the role she originally created on Broadway. In the intertext of Angels in America, Louis takes on the distant demeanor of Doc, while Prior is already clinging even as he puts the status of his health in the bluntest terms possible.

What we have here, in the transformation of the text of Inge’s play as it is absorbed/remade in Angels in America, is a viral intertextuality. The dog has become a cat, the dependent wife has become a gay man who wishes he weren’t
so dependent, and the husband who fails—well, he remains a “husband” who fails. Just as Doc will not live up to his obligations to Lola, and to his own sobriety, so too will Louis leave when Prior needs him most, unable to cope with the grief, as well as the physical reality, of AIDS.

The cat, “Little Sheba,” actually appears in *Perestroika*, during the scene in which Prior has hitched a ride to Heaven with the Angel. Unlike Lola, Prior knows for certain what happened to his pet—and, although he, too, eventually takes his man back, at least into an expanded “family” circle, unlike Lola, Prior does not return to a state of dependency. He initially refuses a reunion with Louis; when they do reunite, it is on Prior’s terms. Lola’s reunion with Doc does have an interesting—rather heavenly—twist:

**DOC.** *(Now loses control of his feelings. Tears in his eyes, he all but lunges at her, gripping her arms, drilling his head into her bosom)* Honey, don’t ever leave me. *Please* don’t ever leave me. If you do, they’d have to keep me down at that place all the time. I don’t hardly know what I said to you or what I did, I can’t remember hardly anything. But please forgive me . . . please . . . please . . . And I’ll try to make everything up.

**LOLA.** *(There is surprise on her face and new contentment. She becomes almost angelic in demeanor. Tenderly she places a soft hand on his head)* Daddy! Why, of course I’ll never
leave you. *(A smile of satisfaction)* You’re all I’ve got.

You’re all I’ve ever had.

*(Very tenderly he kisses her)* *(Inge 67)*

Doc and Lola, convinced that they cannot live alone, settle for a mutual
dependence. This idea that another person can console such deep grief is the
same fundamental error that the poet-dreamer makes in the *Book of the
Duchess*, and is also a hallmark of the behavior of Joe Pitt in *Angels in America*.

In a very similar attempt at reconciliation, Act V of *Perestroika* has a double
scene with Joe and Harper, and Prior and Louis. Joe and Louis do not find the
same level of acceptance and forgiveness that Doc receives from Lola. The
powerful dream-visions/hallucinations that Harper and Prior have experienced
have made them far less willing to tolerate the emotional and moral failures of
their partners.

HARPER. I want your credit card.

That’s all. You can keep track of me from where the
charges come from. If you want to keep track. I don’t care.

JOE. I have some things to tell you.

HARPER. Oh we shouldn’t talk. I don’t want to do that anymore.

Credit card.

JOE. I don’t know what will happen to me without you. Only you.

Only you love me. Out of everyone in the world. I have
done things, I’m ashamed. But I have changed. I don’t
know how yet, but . . . .Please, please, don’t leave me now.
Harper.
You’re my good heart.

She looks at him, she walks up to him and slaps him, hard.)

HARPER. (Quietly) Did that hurt?

(Joe nods yes.)

HARPER. Yes. Remember that. Please. (Kushner, Perestroika 142)

Harper’s response, unlike Lola’s, is to see that her pain has no less value or importance than Joe’s; it’s not simply a case of everything being all right because he’s come home and is making promises. Her experience in the dream-vision of Heaven, “a City Much Like San Francisco” (Kushner, Perestroika 50), has taught her that she’s “ready to lose him. Armed with the truth” (Kushner, Perestroika 122).

Louis, too, engages in an emotional, stumbling apology, during the split scene:

LOUIS. I want to come back to you.

You could . . . respond, you could say something, throw me out or say it’s fine, or it’s not fine but sure what the hell or . . .

(Little pause)

I really failed you. But . . . this is hard. Failing in love isn’t the same as not loving. It doesn’t let you off the hook, it doesn’t mean . . . you’re free to not love.
PRIOR. I love you, Louis.

LOUIS. Good. I love you.

PRIOR. I really do.

But you can’t come back. Not ever.

I’m sorry. But you can’t. (Kushner, Perestroika 142-143)

Prior, like Harper, has learned a great deal. After his struggle with the Angel, his determination to receive the blessing of “more life,” he has come to the conclusion that the abandoning man ought not be welcomed back with open arms, for he tells the assembled Angels (about God, who has also left): “He walked out on us. He ought to pay” (Kushner, Perestroika 136). This desire for justice, to be treated as he deserves, will not allow him to take Louis back on any terms but Prior’s own.

Louis has consistently shown himself unable to understand or to cope with the reality of life as a gay man in the Reagan years. He is, at times, blind to the consequences of what he says and does for those around him; at other times, he expresses an incredible, almost unbelievable amount of guilt over the pain he causes--but without doing anything to change. Louis’s version of events will always be interesting, but just as frequently either insensitive to others or completely off the mark. In fact, if whatever is going on around Louis doesn’t directly involve or affect him, he often doesn’t notice. For example, in Act I, Scene 4 of Millennium Approaches, just before Prior tells Louis that he’s developed Kaposi’s lesions, Louis demonstrates clearly just how blind he can be:
PRIOR. (Hugs him) Poor Louis. I’m sorry your grandma is dead.

LOUIS. Tiny little coffin, huh?

Sorry I didn’t introduce you to . . . . I always get so

closety at these family things.

PRIOR. Butch. You get butch. (Imitating) “Hi Cousin Doris, you
don’t remember me I’m Lou, Rachel’s boy.” Lou, not Louis,
because if you say Louis they’ll hear the sibilant S.

LOUIS. I don’t have a . . .

PRIOR. I don’t blame you, hiding. Bloodlines. Jewish curses are
the worst. I personally would dissolve if anyone ever looked
me in the eye and said “Feh.” Fortunately WASPS don’t say
“Feh.” Oh and by the way, darling, cousin Doris is a dyke.

LOUIS. No.

Really?

PRIOR. You don’t notice anything. If I hadn’t spent the last four
years fellating you I’d swear you were straight.

(Kushner, Millennium 20)

Louis is consistently unable to look at the evidence before him and draw the
same conclusion that everyone else draws; he is obtuse. He cannot see that Joe,
the conservative Republican Mormon law clerk, is part of the same Reaganite
right wing movement that he abhors--at least, not until Belize hits him in the
face with proof. He cannot see that there is no way he can leave Prior, sick and
in need, and still have any self-respect. He cannot understand the obvious--that
grief and love and responsibility cannot be reasoned out or negotiated, but simply exist.

In the same manner, Joe is engaged in a sightless restructuring of the world. He cannot even acknowledge his sexuality openly, hiding it behind a sham marriage that has destroyed Harper. When she asks him directly, “Are you a homo?” (Kushner, *Millennium* 37), he cannot answer. In order to justify to himself the work he is doing on behalf of the already rich and powerful, he must re-envision the entire nation:

JOE. Wait. For the good. Change for the good. America has re-discovered itself. Its sacred position among nations. And people aren’t ashamed of it like they used to be. This is a great thing. The truth restored. Law restored. That’s what President Reagan’s done, Harper. He says “Truth exists and can be spoken proudly.” And the country responds to him. We become better. More good. I need to be a part of that, I need something big to lift me up. I mean, six years ago the world seemed in decline, horrible, hopeless, full of unsolvable problems and crime and confusion and hunger and . . . (Kushner, *Millennium* 26)

This is Joe’s response to Harper’s emotional breakdown and to the breakdown of their marriage; he simply cannot acknowledge that anything bad is happening at all, much less that he has anything to do with it. He not only cannot see, but refuses to see, reality, until Louis and Harper, quite literally, slap him with it.
The obtuse character, which is represented in *Angels in America* in the form of Louis and Joe, does not change; while Joe disappears from the play after Harper leaves him, Louis is, at the end, continuing to ignore the obvious even though he has been readmitted to the circle of family around Prior. Louis’s reading of Gorbachev still remains, if not obtuse, at least naïve:

BELIZE. I don’t think we know enough yet to start canonizing him. The Russians hate his guts.

LOUIS. Yeah but. Remember back four years ago? The whole time we were feeling everything everywhere was stuck, while in Russia! Look! Perestroika! The Thaw! It’s the end of the Cold War! The whole world is changing! Overnight!

HANNAH. I wonder what’ll happen now in places like Czecho­slovakia and Yugoslavia.

LOUIS. Yugoslavia? (Kushner, *Perestroika* 145-146)

Louis has fallen into the same blind enthusiasm that Joe expressed for the Reagan presidency. He remains clueless; it is an obtuse response that is particularly chilling in light of the subsequent consequences of the end of the Cold War for the former Yugoslavia.

What we are left with, then, at the end of *Angels in America* is an intertext constructed of not only unchanged bits of other texts, but of transformed and altered texts as well--an epidemic intertextuality both bacterial and viral. The intertexts within *Angels in America* and the *Book of the Duchess* are made up of both kinds of intertextualities; however, a
simultaneous reading of the two texts shows even more clearly the ways in which the epidemic of intertextuality has spread between them.

**Reading Synchronously, Reading Simultaneously**

An understanding of the relationship of texts, as we have seen, leads us to read them together; not diachronically, but synchronically--at the same time. Such a simultaneous reading, while not physically possible, occurs virtually each time we read a text, for all texts are intertextual. The intertext to which we, as readers, have access, determines how we will read. As Jonathan Culler noted in his book *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics, and the Study of Literature*,

A work can only be read in connection with or against other texts, which provide a grid through which it is read and structured by establishing expectations which enable one to pick out salient features and give them a structure. And hence intersubjectivity—shared knowledge—which is applied in reading—is a function of other texts. (139)

As Culler makes clear, we are always reading intertextually, intersubjectively, synchronically; we are just not always aware of doing it. Terry Eagleton elaborates when he writes, “A specific piece of writing thus has no clearly defined boundaries: it spills over constantly into the works clustered around it. . . . If there is any place where this seething multiplicity of the text is
momentarily focused, it is not the author, but the reader" (Eagleton 138). The reader who approaches the Book of the Duchess and Angels in America is likely to notice some aspects of their intertextuality that are obvious: the obtuse narrator/characters, the use of the dream-vision throughout, and the dialogue/negotiation that surrounds grief and loss, without ever reaching the resolution or consolation that the characters desire.

As we have earlier discussed, the Book of the Duchess follows the format of the Boethian dialogue, with a major ironic twist: the narrator (the poet-dreamer) has such difficulty understanding the Man in Black's sorrow that he never gets to offer consolation, whether of philosophy or any other type. Furthermore, such dialogues occur more than once in Angels in America, and they are often just as frustrating. For instance, in Act I, Scene 8, just before Prior becomes severely ill and Louis leaves him, the two engage in a dialogue in which Louis (the obtuse character) attempts to find some rational way to absolve himself of responsibility. He is trying to explain the difference between the "Jewish" attitude toward the afterlife and the Christian "you-pay-for-your-sins" concept; he sums up his understanding of the differences as "it's not the verdict that counts, it's the act of judgment" (Kushner, Millennium 38). Prior simply won't let him off the hook.

LOUIS. That it should be the questions and shape of a life, its total complexity gathered, arranged and considered, which matters in the end, not some stamp of salvation or
damnation which disperse all the complexity in some unsatisfying little decision--the balancing of the scales . . .

PRIOR. I like this; very zen; it's . . . reassuringly incomprehensible and useless. We who are about to die thank you.

LOUIS. You are not about to die. (Kushner, Millennium 38-39)

Confronted with Prior's deteriorating physical state, Louis continues, first to deny it, then to run from it. Finally, he is forced to face himself:

PRIOR. Well Louis you win Trooper of the Month.

(Louis starts to cry)

PRIOR. I take it back. You aren't Trooper of the Month.

This isn't working.

Tell me some more about justice.

LOUIS. You are not about to die.

PRIOR. Justice . . .

LOUIS. . . . is an immensity, a confusing vastness. Justice is God.

Prior?

PRIOR. Hmmm?

LOUIS. You love me?

PRIOR. Yes.

LOUIS. What if I walked out on this? Would you hate me forever?

(Prior kisses Louis on the forehead)
PRIOR. Yes.

Even as Louis is seeking refuge in justice, it fails him; just as the poet-dreamer’s advice to the Man in Black that he ought to disavow Fortune did him no good. Prior recognizes the failure of Louis’s world-view, which seems to have no consequences for Louis; Prior says, “it seems to me that it lets you off scot-free” (42).

LOUIS. What do you mean?

PRIOR. No judgment, no guilt or responsibility.

LOUIS. For me.

PRIOR. For anyone. It was an editorial “you.”

LOUIS. Please get better. Please.

Please don’t get any sicker. (Kushner, Millennium 42)

Louis hopefully/hopelessly attempts to turn the responsibility for his actions onto Prior, or at least onto Prior’s illness. It is the same sort of move that the Man in Black makes, as he shifts the blame for his situation onto Fortune:

Hyt had be never the bet for me,

For Fortune kan so many a wyle

Ther be but fewe kan hir begile;

And eke she ys the lasse to blame;

Myself I wolde have do the same,

Before God, hadde I ben as she;

She oghte the more excused be.
For this I say yet more thereto:
Had I be God and myghte do
My wille whan she my fers kaughte,
I wolde have drawe the same draughte. (672-682)

The Man in Black thus problematizes the moral situation by de-centering it, as Louis has done. Since he would have done the same to Fortune, had he the chance, that she did to him, there is, as for Louis, no constant. Even as he grieves his loss, the Man in Black notes that there are two ways to see things: his, and Fortune’s. The poet-dreamer’s simplistic desire to renounce Fortune is, in this case, as useless as Louis's simplistic desire to embrace justice: ultimately, life--and the grief that accompanies it--are too complex for such simple answers.

The Man in Black’s recital of the chess contest he lost to Fortune (652-669)-an ideal personified, and, in this representation, god-like--is reflected in the ongoing contest between the individuals (Joe, Louis, Harper, Prior) and their circumstances in *Angels in America*. The Man in Black finds that competing with Fortune is pointless, for he notes,

.... Allas,

Ful craftier to pley she was
Than Athalus, that made the game
First of ches, so was hys name. (661-663)

His regret at having tried to compete with such a personified figure is deepened by his knowledge that the game was unfair. In the plays, the contest is described, at least by the Mormon characters, as an act of wrestling with an angel; such a
wrestling match is, in fact, what Prior literally engages in, while Joe's contest remains figurative. Joe first brings it up in Act II, Scene 2 of *Millennium Approaches*:

JOE. I had a book of Bible stories when I was a kid. There was a picture I’d look at twenty times every day: Jacob wrestles with the angel. I don’t really remember the story, or why the wrestling—just the picture. Jacob is young and very strong. The angel is . . . a beautiful man, with golden hair and wings, of course. I still dream about it. Many nights. I’m . . . . It’s me. In that struggle. Fierce, and unfair. The angel is not human, and it holds nothing back, so how could anyone win, what kind of a fight is that? It’s not just. Losing means your soul thrown down in the dust, your heart torn out from God’s. But you can’t not lose.

(Kushner, *Millennium* 49-50)

Joe has described the futile, yet unavoidable, struggle that the Man in Black was engaged in as well: the struggle between love and death, between life and defeat. Both Joe and the Man in Black lose—but Prior does not. Perhaps the difference is that Prior—unlike the Man in Black, who is familiar with Fortune, and Joe, who is familiar with Angels—refuses to believe that he can’t win.

When the Angel returns to Prior (Act Five, Scene I of *Perestroika*)

Hannah Pitt, Joe’s mother, is there with him. Hannah has previously discussed
her beliefs, including how she understands the vision of the prophet of the
Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, Joseph Smith, with Prior:

HANNAH: [. . . .]

One hundred and seventy years ago, which is recent,
an angel of God appeared to Joseph Smith in upstate New
York, not far from here. People have visions.

PRIOR. But that's preposterous, that's . . .

HANNAH. It's not polite to call other people's beliefs
preposterous. He had great need of understanding. Our
Prophet. His desire made prayer. His prayer made an angel.
The angel was real. I believe that.

PRIOR. I don't. And I'm sorry but it's repellent to me. So much of
what you believe.

HANNAH. What do I believe?

PRIOR. I'm a homosexual. With AIDS. I can just imagine what
you . . .

HANNAH. No you can't. Imagine. The things in my head. You
don't make assumptions about me, mister; I won't make
them about you.

PRIOR. (A beat; he looks at her, then) Fair enough. (Kushner,
Perestroika 103)

Prior is surprised--and discomfited--by Hannah's perspective; he tells her, "I
wish you would be more true to your demographic profile. Life is confusing
enough” (Kushner, *Perestroika* 104). He decides to trust her knowledge of visions and prophets, though he is disappointed when she tells him that the consequences of refusing his vision may include his being eaten by a whale. Later, when the Angel comes back, Prior turns to a very surprised and overwhelmed Hannah for advice on how to deal with it, and, like the good Mormon she is, she has a suggestion:

PRIOR. *(To Hannah)* Help me out here. HELP ME!

HANNAH. *(Trying to shut it all out)* I don’t, I don’t, this is a dream it’s a dream it’s a . . .

PRIOR. I don’t think that’s really the point at this particular moment.

HANNAH. I don’t know what to . . .

PRIOR. *(Overlap)* Well it was your idea, reject the vision you said and . . .

HANNAH. *(Overlap)* Yes but I thought it was more a . . .

metaphorical. . . . I . . .

PRIOR. *(Overlap)* You said scriptural precedent, you said . . .

WHAT AM I SUPPOSED TO . . .

HANNAH. *(Overlap)* You . . . you . . . wrestle her.

PRIOR. SAY WHAT?

HANNAH. It’s an angel, you . . . just . . . grab hold and say . . . oh what was it, wait, wait, umm . . . OH! Grab her, say “I will
not let thee go except thou bless me!" Then wrestle with her till she gives in. (Kushner, *Perestroika* 118)

Prior does as he is told, and engages in the contest that Joe was afraid of; a contest with a being more powerful than he that is very much like the chess game that the Man in Black lost. Prior’s wrestling match has, however, a different outcome than the chess game. Prior wins; the Angel allows him to choose to return the book of prophecy to Heaven. He has agency in this dream: unlike the poet-dreamer, he does not simply move where the dream takes him. Unlike the Man in Black, he does not know Fortune always wins; unlike Joe, he is not aware that the Angel is unbeatable. Prior’s victory over the Angel may only be possible because his paradigm for this dream-vision experience is *The Wizard of Oz*, and not the Bible or other dream-visions. Because Dorothy has agency, can act upon the Witch rather than simply be acted upon, Prior’s tradition—his intertext—allows for success.

The wrestling between Prior and the Angel, the chess battle between the Man in Black and Fortune, both lead to the same question: why do we love in the face of death? What is the point of life, when so much can go wrong? The differences between the situations, like the differences between bubonic plague and AIDS, are multiple, but the question remains: Wouldn’t it be easier to refuse life in the face of grief? It is a question that remains unanswered in the *Book of the Duchess*; although critics would offer us the consolation of philosophy, of theology, of art—still, the Man in Black rides off alone and heartbroken, while the poet-dreamer is no closer to understanding. Russell
makes the comment that “the Book of the Duchess . . . is finally a poem which expresses grief by proving that successful such expressions are not possible” (159). It fails to resolve the conflict between love, death and poetry.

Perhaps Angels in America comes a bit closer, for while Prior, on first arriving in Heaven, thinks that the answer is “To face loss. With grace. Is key, I think, but it’s impossible” (Kushner, Perestroika 122), he later changes his mind. Before the assembled Angels, Prior returns the book of prophecy and demands his blessing, even after repudiating the God who has abandoned His creation. The Angels are surprised at Prior’s fierce will to live, his desire for “More Life.” One Angel attempts to dissuade him, saying “Life is a habit with you” (Kushner, Perestroika 134), but Prior insists:

PRIOR. But still. Still.

Bless me anyway.

I want more life. I can’t help myself. I do.

I’ve lived through such terrible times, and there are people who live through much much worse, but . . . You see them living anyway.

When they’re more spirit than body, more sores than skin, when they’re burned and in agony, when flies lay eggs in the corners of the eyes of their children, they live. Death usually has to take life away. I don’t know if that’s just the animal. I don’t know if it’s not braver to die. But I recognize
the habit. The addiction to being alive. We live past hope.

If I can find hope anywhere, that’s it, that’s the best I can do.

It’s so much not enough, so inadequate but... Bless me anyway. I want more life. (Kushner, Perestroika 135-136)

Prior has come as close to consolation as he can, by declaring himself inconsolable. The Man in Black has also declared himself inconsolable; we do not know, as he rides off with his pain, whether or not he shares Prior’s desire for "more life," in spite of his loss. The question “Why?” cannot be answered; it is far less relevant than the simple fact of the desire for life, even in the face of seemingly unbearable loss.

This is what Russell would describe as “precisely the point,” because, as he notes,

... the dream vision breaks loose from the twin dream taxonomies we have been examining [dream-as-narrative-report and apocalypse]. The poems always record experiences that are never finally alien or incomprehensible:... the Book of the Duchess speaks to all who mourn Blanche of Lancaster and all others who must someday mourn someone. (80)

In the Book of the Duchess, in Angels in America, and in any attempt to create a literature out of love and death, what these “epidemic” intertextualities infect us with is, not “the virus of Time” or “the virus of Prophecy” (Kushner, Perestroika 49, 55), but the virus of grief. To love at all is to place oneself inevitably in the path of grief, and language will fail. The Man in Black, Prior,
and Harper all know what the poet-dreamer, Louis, and Joe do not: there is no consolation in philosophy. Knowledge fails in the face of grief. The only option when love and death intersect is suffering—and poetry is the refusal to suffer in silence.
"History is about to crack wide open. Millennium approaches."

(Kushner, *Millennium* 112)

It is traditionally accepted that Chaucer wrote the *Book of the Duchess* as a memorial to Blanche, Duchess of Lancaster, perhaps even at the request of her bereaved husband, Chaucer's patron, John of Gaunt. While the time at which the poem was written is still debated among scholars, with some leaning toward a date close to the death of Blanche of Lancaster while others suggest a later date (perhaps in conjunction with a commemorative service), it is generally believed that this particular poem is an elegy for the Duchess, who died of plague in either 1368 or 1369.

This would have been the third outbreak of plague within a twenty-year period, and, although mortality rates dropped with each epidemic outbreak, the death tolls were still very high. In the *pestis tertia*, the third wave of plague, between ten and fifteen per cent of the population of Europe died, with an average of 13% mortality for England (Gottfried 130). The psychological effect on those who survived was a major one:

People were traumatized. The lost faith in their own abilities, in
the old values, and if not in God then in the traditional ways in which He had been propitiated (Gottfried 103).

For Chaucer’s audience, hearing a poem as full of grief and loss as the *Book of the Duchess* would have taken on personal significance even for those who did not know Blanche of Lancaster. No one in his audience was untouched by plague; within every 100 people, a dozen or slightly more had died. In this poem, Chaucer opened up and examined the grief of not only one husband, but all those who had lost loved ones to a plague that seemed to have no justice to it at all, taking righteous and unrighteous alike. “It is possible that the recollection of the countless thousands who mourned their dead was intended to provide Gaunt with the consolation of company in grief,” writes one critic (Wilcockson 330).

While the AIDS pandemic does not have the overall mortality impact on the population at large that the Black Death did, the close to 100% mortality rate for those who contract AIDS assures that its impact on some segments of American society has been every bit as traumatic. Arno Karlen, in describing the history of the disease, notes

By 1985, AIDS was pandemic. Cases had multiplied exponentially in the United States and Africa. By the early 1990s, it was epidemic in parts of Europe, Asia, and Latin America. Now the number of projected cases in staggering. Conservative estimates predict millions of infections in the United States early in the next century, and tens of millions worldwide. The number of
deaths will keep chasing the number of infections, for AIDS is almost always fatal. (185)

Karlen’s predictions for the fate of persons with AIDS, and their cultures, are not at all optimistic. He envisions “a new pandemic that will cause not only individual tragedies but demographic disasters, leaving whole nations crippled as if a scythe had mowed down generations” (185-186). This generational idea appears in *Angels in America* in the dream-vision visitation of the “prior” Priors, two of Prior Walter’s ancestors. One of them died of the Black Death, the other of cholera—“In a family as long-descended as the Walters there are bound to be a few carried off by plague” (Kushner, *Millennium* 87). They are messengers of the Angel’s impending arrival, but also represent the inevitability of disease from one source or another. What they do not encompass, however, is the emotional trauma associated with plague, as Prior tells Belize:

PRIOR. Then I’m crazy. The whole world is, why not me? It’s 1986 and there’s a plague, half my friends are dead and I’m only thirty-one, every goddamn morning I wake up and I think Louis is next to me in the bed and it takes me long minutes to remember . . . that this is real, it isn’t just an impossible, terrible dream, so maybe yes I’m flipping out.

(Kushner, *Perestroika* 55)

This is the world we live in now, and will, barring a sudden medical discovery, continue to live in for a while; a world in which thousands die while the President of the United States refuses to say the word "AIDS" in public.
condition that persisted into the second term of the Reagan administration). But it is also a world where the historical master narrative continues to be displaced by voices from what were once the margins of history; as Prior says, "we are not going away" (Kushner, Perestroika 148). The ghost of Ethel Rosenberg in Millennium Approaches tells us, "History is about to crack open" (112). It is this world, this moment in time, where an epidemic has become a political hot-potato, which is ripe with possibilities for an intertextual pedagogy, a way of talking about literature that, in the words of the New Historicist Louis Montrose, will “disabuse students of the notion that history is what’s over and done with;” that will bring them “to understand that they live in history, and that they live history” (25). To imagine the Book of the Duchess as far removed from the world in which we live, to surrender to the idea that the so-called “dead White males” are irrelevant to the culture we inhabit, is to embrace a vision of history in which the past “is what’s over and done with,” and has no bearing on the struggles, negotiations, dialogues, and griefs we deal with in the present. To read Angels in America as existing only at this point in time and concerned with one sort of grief and loss is to bypass the concept of an intertextual web, a series of relationships, and to enforce an additional burden of isolation on those who already suffer from being set apart.

What is needed, then, is an intertextual pedagogy for literature; a way of seeing literature, not as an unbroken line of canonicity, with each new work adding to the past tradition, but as a simultaneous, synchronic entity—the tradition that Eliot imagined. Such a web-like, relationship-based approach to
teaching literature would, as Mary Janell Metzger notes, make it possible for
“students to be empowered, to find in literature ways of making sense of the
world, and of the variety of lives and meanings that make it up” (67). We live
in a society where one of the best-selling books of 1996 was titled The Coming
Plague, where films and novels about outbreaks of devastating illness make up
the fabric of the popular culture. The simple fact of life itself, its transience and
fragility, makes grief inevitable. A pedagogy that recognizes the “webs” and
“networks” of literary relationships that have been demonstrated with the Book
of the Duchess and Angels in America has within it the possibility of leading
students to make the critical leap—to go beyond reading literature as if it exists
outside our selves and to move into ways of reading that make clear our
presence in the texts we read. Not only will such an approach to teaching
literature make clear “the nature of our multiple identities—defined by age, race,
class, and sexual orientation, for instance—and the ways in which this weave
must complicate our notions of power” (Metzger 69), but it would make possible
for the study of literature to “be rethought as a new ‘positivity’ or a
(re)construction through deconstruction of what we know and how we know it”
(Morgan 274).

One possibility for this practice in the classroom is what James Tackach
calls the “single-event literature course,” and which he describes as focusing “on
a single historical event” and which students may investigate “through a
variety of texts—not just the standard novel, short story, poetry, autobiography,
and drama, but also song lyrics, newspaper articles, speeches, letters, as well as
films and photographs" (225). Tackach's rationale for such an approach is that it "prompts students to interdisciplinary thinking and . . . exposes them to literary and visual texts that are too often excluded from traditional college literature courses" (231). His main goal, which is to expand the concept of canonicity and introduce his students to an interdisciplinary way of thinking, also serves to establish a pattern of looking at texts in terms of their relationships to each other--the basis of a web or network model of intertextuality. While Tackach focuses on a single historical moment, it would be just as worthwhile to focus on a particular type of moment, one perhaps not as well documented as the events which make it onto the timelines in standard history texts. The intertextual reading of the Book of the Duchess and Angels in America that we have in place provides us with a way to see beyond the moment itself, and into a simultaneous reading of many moments--a literature of love, death, and grief, as well as the responses to these things.

Along the lines of the cultural study suggested by Tackach, which includes an intertextuality made up of more than what we might normally think of as strictly literary texts, such a course could take death from epidemic disease--various plagues--as a departure point for a reading of responses to disease and grief, including the search for meaning and consolation in times of devastating illness and sorrow. Some suggestions--and there are many--would, of course, include the Book of the Duchess and Angels in America. In addition, diaries and memoirs (such as Miquel Parets' A Journal of the Plague Year: The Diary of the Barcelona Tanner, Miquel Parets, 1651, Paul Monette's Last Watch
of the Night, and Mark Doty's Heaven's Coast), novels (Albert Camus' The Plague, Richard Adams' The Plague Dogs, and Stephen King's The Stand), poetry (in addition to the Book of the Duchess, more contemporary works: Mark Doty’s My Alexandria, and Thom Gunn’s The Man with the Night Sweats, perhaps), and many choices for nonfiction (including Susan Sontag’s two short books, Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors). The boundaries of genre could be further blurred by the inclusion of texts such as Daniel Defoe’s A Journal of the Plague Year, which claims to be a journal, but was written fifty years after the outbreak it describes. There are numerous films available as well; the problem would be more one of limiting the content than having enough texts/intertexts.

All of these texts offer possibilities for organization along lines of genre, elements of formal and aesthetic concern, or even along a traditional, diachronic vision of history. As Barbara Fass Leavy argues in To Blight With Plague: Studies in a Literary Theme, among the issues addressed, one is quite fundamental: "plague literature brings into sharp relief the complex issues surrounding that both essential and ephemeral entity known as the 'self'" (7). As crucial as conceptions of self have been to the formation and expansion of the contemporary identity politics which surround our discussion of AIDS, further complication of identity construction in relation to plague will problematize any simplistic understanding of "self." Leavy further notes that "consistent in plague literature is the 'I' who strives to survive a deadly danger only to confront questions about what it is in addition to the body that is being
preserved" (7-8) [author's italics]. It is the question reflected in the Man in Black's lament as well as in Prior's demand to be blessed: at some level, the demand of the body to live is not enough, and an intertextual reading of plague literature resonates with this knowledge. The body and the spirit wrestle, as Jacob wrestles with the Angel, as Prior wrestles with the Angel, to decide whether life is a blessing worth keeping.

This wrestling with the body/spirit is, ultimately, what texts like the Book of the Duchess and Angels in America take us to; what Kushner describes as finally among the hardest problems--how we 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. (Blanchard 42)

It is not easy. The challenge is to move across the text--to avoid reducing the relationships between the texts to simple questions of "influence" and "inspiration," and to recognize the ways that the intertext creates an on-going, multilogic conversation: many voices, many stories, many (inter)texts.
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