

‘A Voice Amidst Mine Ears’: Silent Angels on the Early Modern Stage

CAITLÍN RANKIN-McCABE 

1. A VOICE AMIDST MINE EARS

In around 2010, a handful of historians proved that angels retained a surprisingly important role in Protestant thought, particularly since their human counterparts, the saints, had been more overtly expelled from post-Reformation life.¹ These findings are at odds with dramatic representations of angels, who eventually disappear from the stage altogether.² Although angels became a lively topic of debate in other early modern writing genres, including sermons and theological treatises, besides Holly Pickett’s study of plays that performed Pagan-Christian conversion stories at the Red Bull Playhouse, there has been little work done on understanding how angels flew the stage, and where exactly they went.³ One effect of the lasting influence of David Bevington’s history of Tudor drama, *Mankind to Marlowe*

I would like to thank Mandy Green for generously offering feedback on various drafts of this article and to Vladimir Brljak and Patrick Gray for offering advice in the early stages of this process. Thanks to all the reviewers who each offered engaging feedback and insightful suggestions for this article. I am indebted to the research of Thomas L. Berger, William C. Bradford, and Sidney L. Sondergard’s collection, *An Index of Characters in Early Modern English Drama: Printed Plays, 1500–1660*, without which this article’s scope would not have been possible. Many thanks to the editor in chief, Kevin Killeen, for welcoming this article into the fold of Renaissance Studies. This work was supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council [grant number AH/R012415/1].

¹ See Kate Harvey, ‘The role of angels in English Protestant thought 1580 to 1660’, PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, 2005; Peter Marshall and Alexandra Walsham, *Angels in the Early Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Feisal G. Mohamed, *In the Anteroom of Divinity* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008); Alexandra Walsham, ‘Invisible Helpers: Angelic Intervention in Post-Reformation England’, *Past & Present*, 208/1 (2010), 77–130; Joad Raymond, *Milton’s Angels: The Early-Modern Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Holly Pickett, ‘Angels in England: Idolatry and Transformation at the Red Bull Playhouse’, in Peter Kanelos and Matt Kozusko (eds.), *Thunder at a Playhouse: Essays on Shakespeare and the Early Modern Stage* (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 2010); Joad Raymond, *Conversations with Angels: Essays Towards a History of Spiritual Communication, 1100–1700* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Laura Sangha, *Angels and Belief in England, 1480–1700* (Religious Cultures in the Early Modern World: London: Pickering and Chatto, 2012).

² Raymond, *Milton’s Angels*, 5.

³ Pickett’s survey of the Red Bull Theatre plays argues that the Christian message travels beyond the divide of Protestantism and Catholicism to unite the audience in positive, self-conscious religious spectacle that bedazzles both the pagan characters and the plays’ audiences.

© 2024 The Authors. Renaissance Studies published by Society for Renaissance Studies and John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs License](#), which permits use and distribution in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, the use is non-commercial and no modifications or adaptations are made.

(1962), is that the study of angels on the English stage has not been taken further than the title's scope, finishing in the 1590s.⁴ While Bevington concedes that Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* is a 'remarkable advance' over the late medieval and Tudor morality plays, he does not ask what happens to angels in the five decades of English theatre after Marlowe.⁵ While some are merely symbolic relics of earlier mystery plays, the waning presence of stage angels portends the drift towards secularisation, but there is significantly more to this trend than that: the manner in which they leave the stage merits further consideration.⁶ The pattern of suppression that this article traces not only confirms how the altered place of angels has the power to galvanise a character's faith, as Pickett argues, but also explores how characters, and the audience, may come to doubt their own senses. This study will begin where Bevington ends, with Marlowe, and finish in 1645, 3 years after the closure of the English theatres.

Many playwrights took an increasingly circumspect approach to the use of devils and angels on stage. This attitude grew out of Protestant prohibitions against direct prayer to angels and the introduction of new legislation, like the Act to Restrain Abuses of Players (1606).⁷ Described by Hugh Gazzard as, 'the most precise and sweeping piece of censorship addressed to the theatre of Shakespeare', the Act added a hefty fine of £10 to anyone who jestingly or profanely used the name of God in a play.⁸ John Calvin's warning that the 'excellence of the nature of Angels' had already 'daselled the myndes of many' to the point that angels 'fained to be Gods' chimed with the plaint of London's antitheatricalists: for Stephen Gosson and Philip Stubbes, angels would have also been included amongst 'the divine matter' that they wanted to see removed from the stage altogether.⁹ If 'Stage-playes and Enterluds' are 'of diuine matter', grumbled Stubbes, 'than are they most intollerable, or

⁴ As an example, one of the first studies of angels on the English stage finishes with Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*: John Robert Moore, 'The Tradition of Angelic Singing in English Drama', *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 22 (1923), 89–99.

⁵ David M. Bevington, *From Mankind to Marlowe: Growth of Structure in the Popular Drama of Tudor England* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1962), 261.

⁶ Some plays only use angels symbolically, for example, Henry Goldwell, *Entertainment of the French Ambassadors* (London, 1581) where the angel appeared, directed praise to Queen Elizabeth, and 'sped' off 'as soone as they were spoken' (sig. B. ii); Robert Wilson, *Three Lords and Three Ladies of London* (London, c. 1585–1600); Anthony Munday's *Chrysanaleia* (London, 1616); John Webster's *Monuments of Honour* (London, 1624) where a statue is described as an angel; Thomas Dekker's *Britannia's Honour* (London, 1628); and Francis Kynason, *Corona Minervae* (London, 1635), where angels are decorative, suspended candles (sig. C3).

⁷ For discussions of direct prayer to angels, see Smalcald Articles of 1537, in T. G. Theodore G. Tappert, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 297; Walsham, 'Invisible Helpers', 78; and Sangha, *Angels and Belief*, 46.

⁸ Hugh Gazzard, An Act to Restrain Abuses of Players (1606), *The Review of English Studies*, 61 (2010), 495–528, 495.

⁹ John Calvin, *The Institution of Christian Religion*, *Vrytten in Latine by Maister Ihon Caluin.*, tr. Thomas Norton (London, 1561), I. xiv. 3; Philip Stubbes, *The Anatomie of Abuses* (London, 1583). See also Stephen Gosson's *The School of Abuse* (London, 1579) and his *Plays Confuted in Five Actions* (London, 1582).

rather Sacrilegious'.¹⁰ He even imagined angels trembling with anger at the profanities uttered by thespians:

All the holy companie of Heauen, Angels, Archangels, Cherubins, Seraphins, [...] doo tremble & quake, at the naming of God, [...] beware therfore you masking Players, you painted sepulchres, you doble dealing ambodexters, be warned betimes.¹¹

To use Shakespeare as an example, Grace Tiffany has calculated that 'seven of the nine plays [Shakespeare] wrote or co-wrote after the Act's passage are set in pre-Christian worlds' where oppressed characters do not call upon God, but instead use words like 'blessed breeding sun' or 'thunder master'.¹² Parliamentary censorship of the words 'God', 'Jesus', 'the Holy Ghost', and 'the Trinity' unquestionably changed the way writers wrote, and perhaps thought, about God. But what about angels?

'Who buzzeth in mine ears?' Faustus asks upon hearing the Good and Bad Angels first speak to him in turn.¹³ This question is the only occasion in both the A-text and the B-text where Faustus seems to acknowledge the existence of the two angels, though the angels' words are reduced to a mere buzzing in his ears. The indistinct buzzing of Faustus' experience is a far cry from the representation of angels in the Hebrew Bible, where they are often heard as a collective 'many', or, when compared to medieval and earlier Tudor dramas where the stage angels speak openly with the other characters.¹⁴ That which 'buzzeth' in Faustus' ears is far more intimate, like the 'rushing' that Ezekiel repeatedly attributes to his intimate experience of hearing a heavenly voice and angels' wings; the sound implies that the source of the buzzing is in close proximity, or even inside, Faustus' own body.¹⁵ In light of this less direct outward sense, their buzzing becomes more sinister. What is more, Faustus' full response, 'Who buzzeth in mine ears I am a spirit?' repeats the Bad Angel, immediately beforehand, who tells him, 'Thou art a spirit'.¹⁶ Since Faustus is

¹⁰ Stubbes, *Anatomie*, 154.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Grace Tiffany, 'Paganism and Reform in Shakespeare's Plays', *Religions* 9 (2018), 1 (William Shakespeare, *Timon* IV. iii. 1; *Pericles* V. iv. 30).

¹³ Christopher Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus: A and B text Edition, Contexts and Sources Criticism*, ed. David Scott Kastan (New York: Norton, 2004), II. iii. 14.

¹⁴ Rev. 5: 11; for angels in medieval and early Tudor drama see *The Castle of Perseverance* (c. 1405–25); York Mystery Cycle, *The Fall of the Angels*, or *The Creation and Fall of Lucifer* (c.1415); *Digby Mary Magdalene* (c.1460); Everyman (London, 1510); John Bale's *Temptation of Christ* (London, 1538); Henry Cheke's *Free Will* (London, 1568–73); Arthur Golding's *Abraham's Sacrifice* (London, 1577).

¹⁵ Ezek. 3: 12–13.

¹⁶ II. iii. 13–14; To be a 'spirit in form and substance' is the first condition of Faustus' deal with Mephistopheles, but this whisper may have cemented the idea in Faustus' mind that he is a spirit: considering that, later, Faustus turns invisible, and is able to kiss Helen of Troy, whereas the Emperor is unable to touch Alexander and his paramour in the A-text, and in the B-text he is stayed by Faustus who reminds him that 'These are but shadows, not substantial' (A-text: II. i. 95–6, B-text: II. i. 93–4, IV. i. 101).

so intent on conjuring and speaking with a devil, Mephistopheles, it follows, however, that he would tune in to the words of the Bad Angel.¹⁷

The Good and Bad Angels of Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* stand in a long tradition of contending angels that can be traced back to Christian antiquity: *The Shepherd of Hermas* (c. AD 140), as well as to late medieval English morality plays such as *The Castle of Perseverance* (c.1405-25), where the two angels stand either side of the character representing mankind. As embodied abstractions of 'good' and 'evil', Marlowe's Good and Bad Angels share the stage along with another more individualised, more tragically conceived angel: Mephistopheles, whose unfallen past and fallen present is personified in the two other, less distinctive anonymous angels.¹⁸ While Faustus does register the angels' buzzing, Douglas Cole points out that Faustus 'never directs his attention to the Good and Evil Angels as dramatic entities; he neither speaks to them directly or shows any sensible awareness of their physical presence'.¹⁹ Instead, he argues, their words are indicative 'of the drift of his own thought'.²⁰ Later critics such as Michael Hattaway and G. M. Pinciss also argue that the angels represent the inner workings of Faustus' own psychology; in the style of a psychomachia, they figure forth his own internal struggle between competing impulses.²¹ Part of the 'remarkable advance' that Bevington identifies in *Doctor Faustus* is to do with this shift in the angel's function, from external to internal agency.

The differences between the A-text of *Doctor Faustus* (first published in 1604) and the B-text (1616) are paradigmatic examples of the effect the Act to Restrain Abuses of Players had on the representation of angels. Published before the Act, and widely accepted as the version closest to Marlowe's original work, the A-text uses the word 'God' extensively and includes lines that are either amended or cut altogether in the B-text. The B-text is considerably more forgiving toward Faustus: he is deceived by spirits and endures physical suffering, whereas in the A-text Faustus undergoes greater psychological suffering as retribution for his own choices. The main difference between the two texts, however, is the question of whether Faustus *can* repent. In the B-text, the Good Angel says that it will not be too late for Faustus' soul if Faustus '*will* repent', offering Faustus a choice, but in the A-text, the Good Angel leads us

¹⁷ '*Ipse nunc surgat nobis dicatus Mephistopheles!*' or, 'May Mephistopheles himself arise at our command!' (A-text: I. iii. 21-2).

¹⁸ 'Evil' Angel (A-text) changes to 'Bad' Angel (B-text); for example, Mephistopheles' own experience of loss when he urgently rebukes Faustus' assumption that he is out of Hell (A-text: I. iii. 76-82, B-text: I. iii. 74-80).

¹⁹ Douglas Cole, *Suffering and Evil in the Plays of Christopher Marlowe* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1962), 234-5; In the Anonymously authored play, *Guy Earl of Warwick* (performed in 1593), the Angel also only appears when Guy is alone, exits before Guy speaks, and is largely unaddressed by Guy, who demonstrates awareness of the angel only once (V, sig. E2, F).

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ See Michael Hattaway, *Elizabethan Popular Theatre* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1985), 170-3, and G. M. Pinciss 'Marlowe's Cambridge Years and the Writing of *Doctor Faustus*', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 33 (1993), 257.

to wonder whether Faustus is even able to repent: 'if Faustus *can* repent'.²² The change from the earlier version of the text to the latter marks a turn away from the Calvinist doctrine of predestination and offers Faustus a choice that he, as an individual, can make. And here, as Ruth Lunney points out, when his thoughts drift towards the counsel of the Good Angel, Faustus does begin to reflect upon some of the 'fragments of their speech', 'momentarily achieving some understanding'.²³ Once the angels leave the stage, however, Faustus only retains the words of the Bad Angel: 'Ay, but Faustus never shall repent', to which Faustus, foreshadowing his own damnation, repeats: 'My heart's so hardened I cannot repent'.²⁴

The Good and Bad Angels never appear on stage at the same time as the other characters aside from Faustus and Mephistopheles, nor do they speak directly with the audience, the only group that can clearly follow their speech.²⁵ The inability of the angels to converse directly and unambiguously with the protagonist lays bare Faustus' psychological struggle, as he prepares for either his expected damnation or an unexpected last-minute reprieve. As Cole puts it, 'agents' that might once have been understood as more 'abstracted' and 'external' forces on Faustus are 'now within his own being'.²⁶ This transition from the conventions of the morality play to the more naturalistic representation of decision-making characteristics of Renaissance drama is in keeping with contemporary changes to underlying concepts of selfhood. Lunney draws attention to the subtleties of Faustus' 'imperfect awareness' of the angels and calls for a renewed look into the angels as 'significant dramatic devices' that independently elucidate the confusion in Faustus' mind.²⁷ Detached from the action and dialogue on stage, the angels' muffled voices enhance the extremes of Faustus' fragile mental state. But these angels are not alone in their relative silence, as the 'Mankind to Marlowe' scope would have it: after Marlowe, other English playwrights, begin to introduce similarly significant changes to their representation of angels on stage.

First performed in 1592, the same year as Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, Robert Greene and Thomas Lodge's *Looking Glasse* also features contending angels.²⁸

²² Ibid., B-text: II. iii. 80, A-text: II. iii. 76, my emphasis.

²³ Ruth Lunney, 'Faustus and the Angels', *Sydney Studies in English*, 16 (1990), 7–9.

²⁴ A-text II. iii. 16–17; or B-text, 'My heart is hardened; I cannot repent' (II. iii. 18); in Exodus 9: 12, God hardenes Pharaoh's heart against the Israelites, Faustus' hardened heart prefigures his doom, see Mandy Green *Milton's Ovidian Eve* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), 199–200.

²⁵ They are on stage with Mephistopheles once in both versions of the text (II. iii. 12–17). It is worth noting here that the Old Man does 'see an angel hover o'er' Faustus' head, but this angel is not one of the two angel characters: the Old Man's angel is more of a metaphorical term, than a physical character (A-text: V. i. 53, B-text: V. i. 56).

²⁶ Cole, *Suffering and Evil*, 242.

²⁷ Lunney, 'Faustus and the Angels', 4, 19.

²⁸ Although Greene and Lodge's play is first to appear on stage, both *Looking Glasse* and *Faustus* were written at roughly the same time, though the latter is generally considered a source text for the former. See Robert Adger Law, 'A "Looking Glass" and the Scriptures', *Studies in English*, 19 (1939), 47, in which the conclusions point to 'Marlowe as a source rather than as a borrower'.

Actor Mark Heap's portrayal of Greene in the 2016 sitcom *Upstart Crow* as a playwright who favoured sober religious didacticism over enticing spectacle might well have resonated with Greene's original audience: Henslowe's diary records 7 shillings in returns on the opening night, as opposed to, for example, Marlowe's *Jew of Malta*, which opened a month earlier and made over 50 shillings on its opening night.²⁹ In *Looking Glasse*, the Good Angel uses the cautionary tale about the city of Nineveh from the Book of Jonah to reproach the people of London for their sins.³⁰ Nineveh becomes the 'looking glass' by which the people of London are able to recognise their sins and repent. Oseas (Hosea) the Prophet, a character whom the Angel physically puts on stage at the start of the second scene, is an addition to the original Biblical text: 'Enter brought in by an Angell Oseas the Prophet, and set down over the stage in a Throne'.³¹ Michael O'Connell uses this play as an example of a Protestant biblical drama where, 'in proper Protestant fashion, Lodge and Greene's play avoids portraying the sacred [God] on stage'.³² Yet, it is still an angel that charges Oseas to sit and ponder 'The mightiness of these fond peoples' sinnes'.³³ Why introduce this complication? Even with Lodge and Greene's decision to omit God from the stage, the lines the prophet speaks in the play could conceivably have been spoken by the Angel more directly, as God's messenger. So why bring in a human character as a spectator instead? By limiting the Angel's time on stage, the playwrights make his intermittent presence more spectacular, more elusive, and otherworldly. But they also undercut the possibility that the Angel might engage in substantive debate. As a result, the play comes across as a one-sided harangue: 'Note then Oseas all their grievous sinnes', 'And see the wrath of God that paies revenge' the Angel proclaims.³⁴ Oseas mediates this warning to the audience, 'Looke London, look, with inward eyes behold/What lessons the events do here [sc., Nineveh] unfold'.³⁵ The magnetic pull of both hell and heaven gives Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* its singular electricity; Lodge and Greene's *Looking Glass*, by contrast, is a straightforward exhortation to repent. For David Nicol, the play's 'dismal financial returns imply that London did not want to be lectured about its sins'.³⁶ Both the Angel and Oseas serve as thinly veiled mouthpieces for the authors themselves,

²⁹ *Henslowe's Diary*, ed. R. A. Foakes (2nd edn, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 16; see also David Nicol, '8 March, 1592 - a Looking-Glass for London and England', *Henslowe's Diary ... as a Blog!* [Blog] (8 March 2016): < <http://henslowesasablog.blogspot.com/2016/03/8-march-1592-looking-glass-for-london.html> > (accessed March 2023).

³⁰ Jonah 3.

³¹ ii. 160.

³² Michael O'Connell, *The Idolatrous Eye: Iconoclasm and Theater in Early-Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 108.

³³ ii. 189.

³⁴ ii. 176–7.

³⁵ xv. 1804–5.

³⁶ Nicol, '8 March, 1592'.

dressed up in brief authority (heavenly messenger, prophet) without further nuance, distinction or individuation they become voices of judgement.

Less straightforward, by contrast, are the silent angels that also appear, albeit briefly, in *Looking Glasse*. As Lunney observes, an Evil Angel who appears and offers a dagger and rope to the Usurer ‘tempts the Usurer to despair’, but ‘does not speak’.³⁷ Like the buzzing in Faustus’ ears, the Evil Angel’s temptation is preceded by the Usurer’s report of hearing murmurs about damnation. A rival Good Angel also seems to be present, speaking invisibly to the Usurer, but does not appear on stage:

Usurer: I hear a voice amidst mine ears,
That Bids me staie: and tells me that the Lord.
Is mercifull to those that do repent.
May I repent? Oh thou my doubtfull soule?³⁸

The audience never hears the voice, or voices, that the Usurer hears, which plays upon his inner struggle rather than focusing on the two elusive angels. The ‘voice’ that the Usurer hears ‘amidst’, or between, his ears further suggests that the voice may be in his own mind, or possibly even a reflection of his own intrusive thoughts.

2. IF WE SHADOWS HAVE OFFENDED, THINK BUT THIS AND ALL IS MENDED

In other plays, we see angels retreating further into the minds of people when they appear in dreams. Writers often make use of dreams, and dream-like states, as a means for their characters to communicate with the divine or supernatural.³⁹ Prophetic and supernatural dream visions could exist in a space that enjoyed the privilege of divine communication without the weighty responsibility that came with seeing these visions at first hand. For James I and his contemporaries, the prospect of seeing angels proper had passed:

[W]e that are Christians, ought assuredly to know that since the comming of Christ in the flesh, and establishing of his Church by the Apostles, all miracles, visions, prophecies, [and] appearances of Angels or good spirites are ceased. Which serued onely for the first sowing of faith, [and] planting of the Church.⁴⁰

³⁷ Lunney, ‘Faustus and the Angels’, 6.

³⁸ xvii. 2069–72.

³⁹ See Jonathan Bate, *How the Classics Made Shakespeare* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2019), 238, 49; see also Thomas Warmstry, *The Baptized Turk* (London, 1658), 46, where he explains how to discern between angels and devils: when a spirit leaves the dreamer with a ‘certain impression upon the mind’ that is ‘holy and humble’, it is a good angel.

⁴⁰ James I, *Daemonologie in Forme of a Dialogue, Divided into Three Bookes* (Edinburgh, 1597), III. ii. 66. James’ opinion comes from the view—sometimes called ‘cessationism’—that since the coming of Christ miracles had ended, see: John Calvin, *The Institution of Christian Religion, Vvrytten in Latine by Maister Ihon Calvin.*, trans. Thomas Norton (London, 1561), IV. 19. 18.

Previous widespread Protestant writing on angels and apparitions broadcast analogous messages: Ludwig Lavater described how, ‘auncient Fathers’ used ‘apparitions of Devils and Spyrits [...] to bring men to great feare and Religion by those their counterfeited and imagined histories. But concerning these, this place now serueth not to intreate’.⁴¹ In all editions of his *Discoverie of witchcraft* (first published in 1584), Reginald Scot also included an explanation of early apparitions:

Heretofore God did send his visible Angels to men; but now we hear not of such apparitions, neither are they necessary. Indeed it pleased God [...] to work great Miracles for the establishing of the faith; but now, whatsoever is necessary for our salvation, is contained in the Word of God.⁴²

In a sermon preached in 1612, Thomas Taylor explained of ‘Popish miracles’ that ‘we shall ever find them brought to confirm some untruth [...] as to prove image-worship, prayers to the virgin Marie, Saints, Angels and dead men’.⁴³ Playwrights appear to heed these words and begin to seek more covert ways, like the safety of the dream world, to stage their angel characters.

Thomas Heywood’s dumbshow in *If You Know Not Me You Know Nobody* (1605) includes two good angels, but does not include any opportunity for them to speak directly either to characters on stage or to the audience. Instead, the angels are only able to communicate with the character Elizabeth by directing her to read Scripture.

A dumb show

Enter Winchester, Constable, Barwick, and Fryars: at the other door [two] Angels: the Fryar steps to her, offering to kill her: the Angels drive them back. Exeunt. The Angel opens the Bible, and puts it in her hand as she sleeps, Exeunt Angels, she wakes.⁴⁴

In the dumbshow, which takes place once Elizabeth is sleeping, the two angels protect the protagonist from the friars (who are symbols of Catholicism) revealing the popish loyalties of Winchester, Constable, and Barwick. Following the dumbshow, the characters who are driven back make no mention of the angels in their subsequent dialogue. The same is true of the dumbshow of Queen Katherine’s dream in William Shakespeare’s *Henry VIII* (1613). Like the characters of earlier medieval drama, the angelic figures wear white robes, wreathes, and golden masks to act out the

⁴¹ Ludwig Lavater, *Of Ghostes and Spirites Walking by Nyght* tr. R. H. (London, 1572), 66.

⁴² Reginald Scot, *The Discovery of Witchcraft and Discourse of the Nature and Substance of Devils and Spirits* (London, 1665), 85.

⁴³ Thomas Taylor, *Iaphets First Publique Perswasion into Sems Tents* (Cambridge, 1612), 91.

⁴⁴ Thomas Heywood, *If You Knowv Not Me, You Know No Bodie* (London, 1605), 34.

condemned Queen's vision.⁴⁵ This is the only instance in Shakespeare's drama where angel characters are almost included. Though the Queen's usher and lady-in-waiting are also on the stage, these dancing figures are only visible to the sleeping Katherine and the audience. Katherine describes these hopeful figures as a 'blessed troop' of peaceful 'spirits' with 'bright faces', but never explicitly as angels; in the stage directions, too, they are 'six personages clad in white robes', but not identified specifically as angels.⁴⁶ Shakespeare plays with the tension between dreaming, imagination, and reality: the usher, Griffith, treats Katherine's vision as a 'good dream', although, for him, Katherine's dreamy figures merely 'possess' her 'fancy', or as Jonathan Bate puts it: the angels are only 'figments of the imagination'.⁴⁷ Instead of the imagined dreams of Shakespeare's Catholic Queen, Thomas Heywood's dumbshow is brought into the reality of the play through the materiality of the Bible that Elizabeth finds in her hands after she wakes from her 'pleasant' sleep.⁴⁸ In this instance, the Bible's tangibility expresses the Angel's only means of communication with Elizabeth's sleeping body, altering the ontological status of the dumbshow and introducing the Bible alone into the reality of the play.⁴⁹

In Heywood's play-within-a-play, the Angel's mode of communication is silenced in a twofold fashion: first by the silent nature of the dumbshow, and second by Elizabeth's deep sleep. She does not physically see the Angel, nor does she comment on dreaming about the Angel when she wakes up. The Angel's inability to directly communicate with Elizabeth here renders them an entirely Protestant angel. While the first generation of reformers argued that 'angels were no longer thought of as mediators between men and the divine', Heywood's play demonstrates how ideas evolved to encompass angels who still assist characters but at a remove: such angels were better understood as 'agents of God's providence' and extensions of God's will, rather than independent agents who could communicate openly with humans.⁵⁰ Heywood thereby manages to keep the exchange between the Angel and the sleeping woman firmly within bounds of Luther's insistence on *sola scriptura*. As such, Heywood's angels here are perfectly Protestant in their conception, for direct communication with these beings is unavailable to his Protestant characters. Heywood's careful consideration of the representation of angels in *If You Know Not Me* appears to have captured his

⁴⁵ For (re)presenting the divine in mystery plays see Meg Twycross and Sarah Carpenter, *Masks and Masking in Medieval and Early Tudor England* (Abingdon: Taylor & Francis Group, 2002), 194–5.

⁴⁶ William Shakespeare, *The Famous History of the Life of King Henry VIII* (London, 1613), IV. ii. 82–8.

⁴⁷ Shakespeare, *Hen. VIII*, IV. ii. 93–4; Bate, *How the Classics Made Shakespeare*, 240.

⁴⁸ Heywood, *If You Know Not Me*, 34.

⁴⁹ A similar scene occurs in Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* (1610) when the spirits of Posthumus' dead family circle around him whilst he lies sleeping; when he wakes, he finds the material tablet placed on his breast (V. vi).

⁵⁰ Sangha, *Angels and Belief*, 46, 84. See, also, John Salkeld, *A Treatise of Angels* (London, 1613), 316.

imagination, for he would later return to, and elaborate on, these celestial figures in his lengthy poem, *The Hierarchy of The Blessed Angels* (1635).

A dreamworld that contains angels can also be indirectly conveyed. In Barnabe Barnes' *The Devil's Charter* (1607), angels are often mentioned but never actually seen on stage. When the two boys, Astor and Philipppo, are drugged with opium-laced wine, Astor seems to address an angel:

ASTOR speaketh in his sleep

ASTOR: Fair gracious angel of eternal light.
Which reachest out that hand of happiness,
Hailing my spirit to that triumphant throne.
Of endless comfort, I adore thy grace.⁵¹

In a moment of suspended relief for the characters, Astor appears to see the welcome sight of an angel while the audience are pushed to imagine, rather than witness, this sacred scene. Philipppo likewise describes his journey to Heaven, as the two boys enjoy the reveries of a drug-induced slumber. When Astor addresses a 'gracious angel' as if it were a character on the stage, his words describe the angel's 'eternal light'; he also alludes to part of the angel's charge: to lead his spirit 'to that triumphant throne'.⁵² The boys' sleep and apparent communication with heavenly hosts foreshadows their impending death. After hearing the boys' peaceful words, Alexander demands: 'Do they sleep? Are they not yet asleep?/Be not their senses yet locked up in sleep?'.⁵³ Such an impatient reaction to Astor and Philipppo's words momentarily reveal Alexander's unease: he wants the boys to be completely unconscious when he uses poisonous aspics to murder them. Once he feels more confident that they are in a deep sleep, he reassures himself:

All safe and sure. Oh, this was but a dream.
Their genius hath foretold them of their end
And joyfully they shake hands with death.⁵⁴

Barnes' deliberate omission of any visible angel on the stage allows the audience, as well as Alexander, room to speculate as to what the angel, or 'genius', as Alexander terms it, of Astor's dreams may in fact be. The boys' anticipation of heavenly joy in their vision offers some sense of comfort to the audience who are about to see the two boys, albeit actors, murdered on stage. Withdrawing the supernatural from the play with an absent angel

⁵¹ Barnabe Barnes, *The Devil's Charter*, ed. Nick De Somogyi (London, 1607; facs. edn, London: Nick Hern Books, 1999), IV. v. 99–102.

⁵² For an extended discussion on angels transporting the soul to Heaven, see Marshall, 'Angels around the deathbed', in *Angels in the Early Modern World*, 93–4.

⁵³ Barnes, IV. v. 105–6.

⁵⁴ Ibid, IV. v. 108–10.

character is still apparently insufficient; Barnes further hides his already invisible angel with Alexander's assurance that the boys' internalised experience is 'but a dream', echoing the famous caveat and epilogue of Shakespeare's Puck.

Our understanding of angels in the dream world would be incomplete if we did not briefly look at two plays performed outside of London. During his 4-year stint in Dublin (1636–1640), James Shirley tried to appeal to his Irish audiences by writing a play about Ireland's patron saint, *Saint Patrick of Ireland* (1640).⁵⁵ Besides including the anthropomorphised guardian angel named Victor, Shirley follows the English precedent of suppressing the angels' speech by having his multiple angels to communicate through song. Yet, *Landgartha* (1640), the response to Shirley's pro-English *Saint Patrick of Ireland*, written by the Catholic playwright Henry Burnell and performed at Werburgh Street Theatre (the same Dublin theatre in which Shirley's plays were performed), casts a cynical light on the reception of Shirley's play. In a dedicatory preface to Burnell's play, which tacitly condemns the special effects, songs, and elaborate costumes of Shirley's play, Burnell's cousin (John Birmingham) writes of how *Landgartha* 'do'st scorne' the 'tempests and whirlwinds' of other 'base rags'.⁵⁶ In Burnell's attempts to pare down the dramatic effects in response to Shirley's play, however, his angels become far more reserved and surprisingly similar to those that appear on the contemporary Protestant English stage. Comparable with the play's English counterparts, the plot of *Landgartha* is set in the pagan world of what we would now call Norway and features the famous shield-maiden Lagather, King Harald Fairhair, as well as Erik Thorvaldsson (also known as Erik the Red). As in Heywood's play, Harald and Eric, are both sleeping when an Angel appears on stage: 'They sleep, and a sweet solemn music of recorders is heard, then enter an Angel'.⁵⁷ The accompanying sweet music suggests the Angel's good intentions as they proceed to instruct and prophesise to the two sleeping men. After the Angel leaves the stage, Erik wakes from his sleep, but neither man hears nor sees the Angel more directly. Despite Burnell's Catholicism, he uses dreams in the same way that contemporary English Protestants did: as a means to separate an encounter with an angel from ordinary sensory experience. What Burnell seems to have inadvertently absorbed from his rejection of Shirley's play is that the uncertainty of

⁵⁵ There are some who believe James Shirley converted to Catholicism around 1620, following a suggestion made by his early biographer, Anthony Wood, but these claims are at odds with several decisions that clearly place his allegiances with the Anglican church: for example, his children were given an Anglican baptism, and his youngest son was baptised as late as 1641.

⁵⁶ Henry Burnell *Landgartha* (Dublin, 1641), sig. A3. See also Raymond Gillespie, 'Political Ideas and Their Social Contexts in Seventeenth-Century Ireland', in *Political Thought in Seventeenth-Century Ireland: Kingdom or Colony?*, ed. by Jane H. Ohlmeyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 121.

⁵⁷ Burnell, *Landgartha*, sig. I.

the dream world proves more dramatically powerful than if an angel were to appear to the characters in their waking moments.

On waking, Erik and Harold try to make sense of the dream:

ERIC: Dream't you nothing, while you slept?

HAROLD: No, did you?

ERIC: Me thought I heard a most heavenly Musicke;

And that an Angel did appeare: and wish'd us,

Betake our selves againe to th' Emperour,

That what we lost, another day sho'd purchase; [...]

HAROLD: *Though we afford no credit*

Vnto such dreames: Yet, we must steere our course

That way; there being (after so great a losse)

No comfort left, where our foes are so strong.

ERIC: Heaven will in time (I hope) revenge our wrong.⁵⁸

This exchange lays out a way of thinking about angels that extends beyond the confines of the characters' exchange: the lines Harold utters reveal a wariness of dreams, supernatural beings, and the power attributed to both. By dismissing the angel from account, Harold avoids the question of whether the dream was prompted by a good or a fallen angel. Harold pointedly includes Eric in his repudiation of the dream as being divinely inspired: 'we afford no credit'. Although ostensibly referring to their shared outlook as pagan Vikings, this 'we' extends in context out beyond the characters on stage to include the audience, as well. Harold's teaching on dreams is imbued with an understandably sceptical caution, so it is all the more surprising, then, when Harold steers their course in the same direction advised by the Angel.⁵⁹ Harold's lines allow Burnell to have his cake and eat it, too. He includes an Angel, a good Angel who proves trustworthy, in keeping with the conventions of medieval drama. But he also distances the Angel by confining them to a dream, in keeping with the more naturalistic norms of early modern drama, and by having one of the characters disavow their value as a messenger.

Burnell's dream vision is not alone in admitting an angel on the Catholic stage either; Henry Burkhead, a member of the Irish Catholic Confederation, also uses a stage angel in his tragedy, *Cola's Furie* (1645). Notably, the Angel that appears to General Abner only sings to him in his sleep: 'Is't in a dreame I saw this heavenly vision, or is't vaine fancies daseling on mine eyes'.⁶⁰ Otherwise, when General Caspilon hears the Angel, he only hears it in whispers, and then dismisses it as his imagination: 'Some voyce my

⁵⁸ Ibid., my emphasis.

⁵⁹ Dreams can be demonically inspired: witness Satan's 'offensive' whispers to Eve whilst she dreams, see John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Gordon Teskey (New York: Norton, 2005), V. 34.

⁶⁰ Henry Burkhead, *A Tragedy of Cola's Furie* (Kilkenny, 1645), 44.

thought did whisper in mine eare, a sweet melodious note that said, feare not thou shalt escape: Alas'tis but my fancies wish it had been so'.⁶¹ For the Nottinghamshire playwright John Tatham, the waking world was no place for an angel either. In *Love Crowns the End* (1632), Tatham's Heavenly Messenger is only permitted on stage when the recipient of his message, Gloriana is sleeping. Like Burkhead's Angel, when they do appear, they only communicate—to the audience—in song.⁶² Together, sleep and song disorientate the senses and cast doubt on the angels' presence. Both of Burkhead's Generals blame their imagination for their experience of the Angel, a trait which would align the Irish stage angels with curiously similar scenes on the English stage.

At this point, I would like to raise a likely objection to the inclusion of these Irish plays in this discussion, since they challenge the position that it is only Protestant stage angels who are subject to the pattern of silencing. What these Irish plays do demonstrate, however, is a way of thinking about angels that travels beyond the notion of what might be expected of a clear-cut Protestant and Catholic epistemological divide.⁶³ As O'Connell points out, anti-theatrical sentiment also emerged in the Catholic Counter-Reformation. For instance, the Archbishop of Milan, Cardinal Borromeo, troubled by the compelling power of the stage. He exclaimed: 'How much more does that which the eyes see penetrate into the spirit than does that which we only read of in books!'—and also of speech—'How much more seriously does the living voice injure the minds of the young than that which is printed in books!'⁶⁴ Of the contributing factors to the Irish stage angels' suppression, it would be hard not to see how the characters' self-doubt, on whether or not the angels are real or simply figments of their imagination did not present an enticing opportunity to intensify the dramatic power of the plays.

3. QUIET ADJUSTMENTS AND PRIVATE EXCEPTIONS

A more securely Protestant approach to the stage angel is to be found in William Rowley's *Shoo-maker* (1637), set in Roman Britain. Whilst the main plot is set in Kent, Rowley also includes a subplot that takes place in Wales which draws upon the story of St Winifred and the well. In this subplot, an Angel briefly appears to Winifred and the nobleman, Amphiabel. When the Angel ascends from the well accompanied by music, he explains how the well will 'cure the/Leapours disease, give legs unto the cripple' and offer the

⁶¹ Ibid., 49.

⁶² John Tatham, *Love Crowns the End* (London, 1632), sig. K4.

⁶³ See Pickett for more on an undivided Catholic and Protestant view of stage angels (188).

⁶⁴ Ferdinando Taviani, *La Fascinazione del Teatro* (Rome, 1970), 32; as quoted in O'Connell, *The Idolatrous Eye*, 30, 154.

'blind their sight'.⁶⁵ Rowley then departs from traditional accounts of St. Winifred's well, however, in the justification that the Angel provides for their miraculous powers:

This Heaven hath done for truth, it is but young,
And needs a Miracle to make her strong,
The time will come when men shall here not see.
Then let the world express fidelity:
Good Prayers have the power to fetch an angel down,
And give a mortal an Immortal Crown.⁶⁶

This argument and exhortation take up a third of the Angel's lines. Like James I in his *Daemonologie*, the Angel claims that miracles are confined to the early spread of Christianity. Although both Winifred and Amphiabel see and hear the Angel, they do not seek to communicate with it. Instead, they wonder at it and remain speechless until after the Angel descends into the well. Rowley's decision to include the story of Winifred, a Catholic saint, is in one sense unexpected, insofar as he is a Protestant playwright, writing for a Protestant, Jacobean audience. But, in practice, Rowley side-lines the Catholic saint. Rather than Winifred herself explaining the nature of the well, the audience hears about its powers from the Angel. Rowley takes Winifred's saintly authority and confers it on a divine emissary. When Alexandra Walsham describes a similar account in which Sir William Wentworth is advised by an angel rather than the saint herself that his ailing father would benefit from the healing properties of St Anne's Well at Buxton, she tellingly comments, 'respect for the saints had been quietly amended over the course of a generation'.⁶⁷ As Diarmaid MacCulloch puts it, angels 'could step into the shoes of the evicted Catholic saints as ideologically appropriate friends of humanity'.⁶⁸ In using the Angel to explain the healing properties of the well and to justify their presence, Rowley presents a 'quietly amended' Protestant encounter with a Catholic saint. As such, Rowley's play is the only play in this selection where the playwright takes away agency from human characters and gives it to the Angel instead.

There are a few plays that do not conform to the pattern of suppressing angels. In these plays, angels communicate directly: William Percy's *Mahomet in his Heaven* (1601, probably for private performance); Ben Jonson's *Hymenaei* (1606), a court masque; Thomas Nabbes' *Microcosmus (A Morall Maske)*, 1637), a private masque; and Thomas Middleton's *The Triumphs of Truth* (1613), written in the style of a medieval pageant play. Middleton's and Percy's dramas are the easiest anomalies to explain: Middleton departs from the trajectory of his

⁶⁵ William Rowley, *A Shoo-Maker a Gentleman* (London, 1638), sig. C3.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Alexandra Walsham, 'Invisible Helpers', 104–5.

⁶⁸ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Reformation: Europe's house divided 1490–1700* (London: Allen Lane, 2003), 581.

contemporaries in his representation of angels on stage because he deliberately sets out to recreate the conventions of earlier English drama, while Percy's play is set within a Muslim heaven.⁶⁹ In Jonson's masque, the Angel has a very brief part but does speak if only to confirm his function as messenger.⁷⁰ In Nabbes' masque, which, according to its title page, was 'presented with general liking, at the private house in Salisbury Court', there are contending angels: Malus Genius, who Nabbes describes as 'a devil in a black robe: hair, wreath and wings black' and Bonus Genius, who he describes as 'an angel in a like white robe: wings and wreath white'.⁷¹ The stage directions for Nabbes' masque require a grand 'Front' (a curtain or a frontispiece for the performance) that depicts the two moral states of good and evil between which mankind must choose. In this case, the choice is represented by a 'an Angell and a Divell':

Of a workmanship proper to the fancy of the rest, adorn'd with brasse figures of Angels and Divels, with several inscriptions: The Title in an Escoccheon supported by an Angell and a Divell. The Inscriptions: *Hinc gloria. Appetitus boni. Hinc poena. Appetitus mali*.⁷²

The plot of Nabbes' masque follows the morality play tradition and he freely uses contending angels, Bonus Genius and Malus Genius, in his masque. Perhaps because he, like Jonson, was writing for a private audience rather than the public stage, Nabbes seems to have felt at liberty to represent angels more directly. Moreover, the intimacy of the private performances often allowed for the spectators to participate in the performances, and as such, those participants would, for a time, literally inhabit the angelic character.

4. A FAMILIAR DISGUISE

To be sure that stage angels were not at risk of spilling the sound of their sacred voices too often, they were dressed up in a most brilliant disguise: the human form. In Philip Massinger and Thomas Dekker's *The Virgin Martyr*, set in ancient Rome and first staged in 1620, both good and bad angels spend most of the play disguised as humans. Their human costumes reduce the number of lines they must speak *as* angels, or rather, 'good' and

⁶⁹ In Middleton's play, the Angel is used as the good counterpart of Error and both these virtue and vice characters share a similar number of lines.

⁷⁰ Ben Jonson, 'Hymenaei', *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson*, vol. 2 (London, 1606; facs. edn, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 697–8.

⁷¹ Thomas Nabbes, *Microcosmus a Morall Maske*. (London, 1637), i, 'The Persons figur'd'; 'Genius', here, are interchangeable with tutelary angels, the meaning is similarly defined in the *OED* '1. a: With reference to classical pagan belief: the tutelary god or attendant spirit allotted to every person at birth to govern [...] fortunes and determine personal character, and finally to conduct him or her out of the world'.

⁷² Nabbes, *Microcosmus*, i.

'evil' 'spirits' as they are called in the *dramatis personae*. The good angel Angelo is disguised as a page, whereas Harpax, 'in the shape of a secretary', is bent on catching 'souls, souls, a fish call'd souls'.⁷³ Harpax is specifically after the soul of Theophilus, to whom he appears to be connected in a subversion of the tutelary role that Angelo bestows on the devout Dorothea. In his habit of a page, Angelo, by contrast, serves Dorothea who appears to enjoy the privilege of his ministration on account of her Christian beliefs, a faith which eventually leads to her execution. Until he reveals his proper form to Dorothea during her execution, to instil hope, all of the characters on stage can see and hear Angelo. But once he changes into 'the Angel's habit', he becomes invisible and inaudible to all except the audience, Dorothea and Harpax; the latter's fear further confirming Angelo's angelic authority. Hidden within the disguise of a human – except for these brief, but powerful, moments of dramatic revelation – the spectacle of the angel is thereby carefully conserved. Similarly, the lost play, *The Angill King* (London, 1624) is thought to incorporate a similar moment of disguise and angelic reveal. Believed to have been a dramatisation of the medieval poem, *Robert of Cisyle*, an angel who is disguised as the king's double, supplants King Robert and rules in his stead until the king converts to Christianity. Upon informing his angel-doubling of his conversion, the angel returns to heaven, reinstating the real King Robert.⁷⁴

Returning to *The Virgin Martyr*, when Angelo does reveal himself again, this time to Theophilus as well as the audience, he appears as 'the most bright cheek'd child [he] ever view'd'.⁷⁵ For Theophilus, the only indication that this mysterious emissary could be something more than a boy is that in the 'young lad's' eyes he sees '100 blessings danc[e]'.⁷⁶ After the boy leaves, Theophilus eventually understands that he has been mistaken in following the pagan gods. He finally recognises the 'smooth faced glorious thing' he saw was an angel:

What was this strange apparition? Sure, it had
A shape angelical; mine eyes (though dazzled
And danted [daunted] at first sight) tell me it wore
A pair of glorious wings, yes they were wings,

⁷³ Philip Massinger and Thomas Dekker, *The Virgin Martir a Tragedie. As It Hath Bin Diuers Times Publickely Acted with Great Applause, by the Seruants of His Maiesties Reuels* (London, 1622), sig. A; Massinger and Dekker's inventive name for the 'evil spirit', Harpax, comes from the Greek word ἄρπαξα, meaning 'grabber', 'seizer', or 'robber'. In Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* (London, 1604), Angelo, a human character, is likened to both good and bad angels: in a soliloquy, Angelo muses over disguising himself as a good angel, 'Let's write "Good Angel" on the devil's horn' (II. iv. 16); while later, the Duke describes Angelo as only 'angel on the outward side' (III. ii. 242).

⁷⁴ David McInnis and Matthew Steggles, 'Angel King', *Lost Plays Database* [online] (16 December 2016): <https://lostplays.folger.edu/Angel_King> (accessed August 2023).

⁷⁵ Massinger and Dekker, *Virgin Martir*, sig. K3.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

And hence he flew; 'tis vanished, *Jupiter*
 For all my sacrifices done to him
 Never once gave me smile: how can stone smile, [*Musick*]
 Or wooden image laugh? [...]
 Through my dark ignorance on my soul does shine,
 And makes me see a conscience all stain'd ore,
 Nay drown'd and damn'd for ever in Christian gore.⁷⁷

Theophilus' pagan assumptions initially prevent him from discerning the angel. He describes how Angelo 'wore / A pair of glorious wings': a transitory term whereby Massinger and Dekker obscure the shape of the angel's figure. In the scene, we understand that he is undergoing a conversion to Christianity, spurred on by the 'strange apparition' of the angel appearing to him as a human boy, and in stark contrast to the inanimate images of Jupiter in 'stone' and 'wood' that he would ordinarily worship. In this recollection of his meeting with the disguised Angelo, Theophilus weighs his vivid sense of the angel's personality and explicitly human 'smile' against his own previous experience of idol worship, which he comes to see, by contrast, as unsatisfying. Theophilus' temporary blindness 'at first sight' recalls the story of the blind man whom Jesus heals in the Gospel of St. John, as well as the temporary blindness that afflicts St. Paul on the road to Damascus, leading to his conversion to Christianity.⁷⁸ Perhaps coincidentally, Theophilus sees the angel and 'a conscience', his conscience, at the same time: this combination of angel and conscience briefly positions the angel within the company of Marlowe's internalised angels.

By setting the play in antiquity and drawing attention to pagan characters' initial incomprehension of the boy's appearance, Massinger and Dekker present an angel on stage that is less threatening to the Act to Restrain Abuses of Players and James I's public pronouncements about angels than would have been the case if the play were set closer to the playwrights' own historical moment. The above scene and Theophilus' conversion to Christianity essentially acts out the 'first sowing of faith' that the King's *Daemonologie* so succinctly describes.⁷⁹ Angelo's brief reveal dressed in the 'angels habit' also helps to distance his angelic form from continued and direct communication with the play's human characters. Similar to how Marlowe's Mephistopheles accommodates himself, upon request, to Faustus' understanding by donning the garb and human form of a Franciscan friar, the human appearances of both Angelo and Harpax make use of accommodation too: the mode of representation that puts angels into human bodies to aid human understanding of the divine.⁸⁰ Conclusively, then, Massinger and Dekker's good and evil

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ John 9; Acts 9.

⁷⁹ James I, *Daemonologie*, III. ii. 66.

⁸⁰ For more on accommodation, see Raymond, *Milton's Angels*, 7–8.

angels are obscured through time, ideology, and disguise (a theatrical means of accommodation), offering up an altogether comical but realistic human appearance, of a page and a secretary.

The human-angel disguise is nowhere better exploited than in John Fletcher's *The Night Walker*, first performed in 1611 but revised by James Shirley in 1633, where a Boy is also used to represent an angel. In this instance, the Boy impersonates an angel by donning an angel's costume and conversing with many of the other characters within the play in this guise. As might be expected from a play first performed 5 years after the Act to Restrain Abuses of Players, no angel, as such, is listed in the *dramatis personae*; the apparent angel is not an angel in fact. Fletcher, more so by way of Shirley's edits, finds an elaborate workaround to include an angel on stage, while at the same time distancing the play from medieval precedent. Recasting the stage angel of medieval English vernacular drama as a Boy, disguised as an angel, allows Fletcher and Shirley to remain within the bounds of Protestant iconoclasm, even as the character in question goes on to exercise much the same dramatic function on stage. When the Boy appears to the old miser, Justice Algrip, he commands Algrip to repent and change his sinful ways. The angel role becomes one that evokes internal reflection:

JUSTICE ALGRIP: Be my good Angel, here I promise thee,
To become honest, and renounce all villany;
Enjoy me any pennance, Ile build Churches;
A whole City of Hospitals.⁸¹

The dramatic irony, that the Boy's angelic disguise comically creates, toys with the play's metatheatre which consequently protects the 'angel' from becoming idolatrous. While Pickett suggests that the 'not-even-supposed-to-be-real angel' removes 'all possibility of idolatry' from the play, the Boy's disguise cannot but make explicit the altered place of angels on the English stage.⁸²

The Angel of *Two Noble Ladies* (1619–23) also uses a human disguise. This time the Angel is 'shaped like a patriarch', but also quite obviously an angel, for 'on his shoulders' are a set of 'large wings'.⁸³ Despite the Angel's part-celestial appearance, he does speak, but his message is not wholly given verbally: part of the Angel's message is written 'upon his brest' in 'a table full of silver letters'.⁸⁴ 'Read here, and learn' the Angel commands Cyprian, who reads the message aloud, with his human tongue, whilst trembling in

⁸¹ John Fletcher, *The Night-Walker* (London, 1611; 3rd edn. London. ed. James Shirley, 1661), sig. G2.

⁸² William Cartwright similarly employs a human character disguised as an angel in *The Siege or Love's Convert* (London, 1638), (V. vi).

⁸³ Anonymous, *The Two Noble Ladies* (London, 1619; facs. edn. Oxford: Malone Society Reprints, 1930), 44.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

admiration at the sight of the Angel.⁸⁵ The written message takes up six of the angel's 15 lines and provides Cyprian with the central message that Heaven has found 'virtuous parts' in him, and eventually Cyprian will 'renounce magicke, and turn Christian'.⁸⁶ Before the Angel vanishes, he fortells that:

[...] When againe

I meet thee, thou'lt confesse thy learning wayne.
For such a light Ile bring shall make thee see,
Thou to that hour liv'd'st in obscurity.⁸⁷

The 'light' that the Angel refers to here is a book, presumably the Bible. Cyprian is offered this book by the Angel after he sees the power that Justina's Christian prayer book has against the devils who 'roare and fly back' when she reads from it.⁸⁸ No longer having to divide his message between speech and 'silver letters', the Angel speaks to the converted Cyprian directly:

And here's the cleare light which I promis'd thee; (*gives him the Booke*)
This shews the blindness of philosopie.
This studdy'd well, will teach thee faith, and bring
Thy happy soule where happy blessed angels sing.⁸⁹

The Angel's language is similar to the discussions of blindness and newfound sight that Theophilus experiences upon his conversion. Notably, though, departing from Astor's description of an 'angel of eternal light' in Barnes' *Devil's Charter*, the Angel describes the Bible as 'clear light', placing the emphasis on Scripture rather than himself.⁹⁰

5. SILENCE AND SPECTACLE

Nathaniel Richards uses similar techniques of blinding his characters and silencing angels, in *Messallina the Roman Emperesse* (1635). Like Massinger and Dekker's unconverted, pagan Theophilus, Saufellus (the chief counsellor to the tyrannical Empress Messallina) likewise experiences overwhelming fear and subsequent blindness when he looks upon the angel that appears on the stage before him:

⁸⁵ Ibid., III. iii. 1108–25.

⁸⁶ Ibid., III. iii. 1111–4.

⁸⁷ Ibid., III. iii. 1119–22.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 72.

⁸⁹ Ibid., V. ii. 1865–8.

⁹⁰ Barnes, *Devil's Charter*, IV. v. 99.

[...] whats
 That in white there, what so e're it be; the
 Majesty it beares, trembles my sinewes
 O how it shakes me; came Furies clad in
 Flames, not all hells totturts, th'affrights & horrors
 Equals the thousand part the paines I feele
 Through sight of that, that flaming Christall, [...]

 Let me not see it, my Eye sight failes⁹¹

The Angel does not speak, but instead simply appears after a clap of thunder: 'Thunder. Enter Angell, three murdered Dames with revenge threatening'.⁹² Here, the Angel's words are replaced by thunder, the appearance of the three murdered Dames, and the personification of 'revenge' whose company reveals the clear purpose of the Angel's visit: to enact divine vengeance upon Saufellus. Richards' Angel conforms both to the pattern of silencing and to Pickett's collection of dazzling stage angels whose forms cause a 'particular type of blindness' similar to Paul's on the road to Damascus, where the momentary lapse in sight 'becomes a necessary step on the way to [Christian] clarity'.⁹³ Although we can assume that the Angel was probably wearing conventional angelic garb, consisting of white robes, a wreath, and a pair of wings, Saufellus' own perception of the Angel introduces a more sublime aesthetic. After acknowledging a figure dressed 'in white', Saufellus describes the Angel as 'flaming Christall': a combination of fire and a translucent, often reflective, mineral that Saufellus alone experiences, in his mind's eye.⁹⁴

6. SPEAK WITH THE TONGUES OF MEN AND NO OTHER

Henry Shirley's play, *Martyr'd Souldier* (1638) appeared in print only 1 year after Nabbes's masque. According to the title page, Shirley's play was performed at 'the Private house in Drury Lane', then 'at other publicke Theaters. By the Queenes Majesties servants', prior to its publication.⁹⁵ Like Heywood's use of the Bible in *If You Know Not Me*, the mute angel in Shirley's play communicates with the character Eugenius, who will become a Christian Bishop, through the medium of the written word. In this case, the Angel, only visible to Eugenius and the audience, 'comes and stands before him'.⁹⁶ 'Astonisht

⁹¹ Nathaniel Richards, *The Tragedy of Messallina the Roman Emperesse* (London, 1635), 40, V. i. 165–77.

⁹² Richards, *Messallina*, 40.

⁹³ Pickett, 'Angels in England', 187.

⁹⁴ Richard's choice here to include 'christall' in the description of the angel is in keeping with W. Rankins' description of the angels as wearing 'cristall armor' (William Rankins, *Seauen Satyres Applied to the Weeke Including the Worlds Ridiculous Follies* (London, 1587), 17–18.

⁹⁵ Henry Shirley, *The Martyr'd Souldier* (London, 1638), i.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 28.

and dazel'd', Eugenius 'falls flat on the earth'; whilst he is in this prone position, the Angel 'writes, and vanishes'.⁹⁷ Notably, Eugenius is in the process of renouncing his 'paganism and infidelity' when the Angel takes over his writing.⁹⁸ Once the Angel has finished writing, Eugenius speaks their written command aloud:

Goe, and the bold Physitian play,
But touch the King, and drive away
The paine he feelles: but first assay
To free the Christians;⁹⁹

As a result of this elaborate exchange, the audience as well as Eugenius experience the Angel's language only indirectly, as read aloud at second hand. While the Angel is on stage, music accompanies their otherworldly presence: 'whilst a song is heard, the Angel writes, and vanishes as it ends'.¹⁰⁰ Eugenius' bewildered comments about the miraculous style of the Angel's writing suggest that he understands this writing has supernatural origins: 'All writ in golden Letters, and cut so even,/As if some hand had hither reacht from Heaven/To print this paper'. Nevertheless, it is Eugenius who is the original writer and sole orator of the Angel's words.¹⁰¹

Like Heywood's character Elizabeth, who has no recollection of the angelic presences once she wakes up, Eugenius cannot recall the Angel after he recovers from the swoon and does not know for certain who has penned the instructions. That the Angel is only able to communicate with Eugenius via 'golden Letters' not only reminds us that he cannot speak directly with the Angel on stage, in keeping with Protestant prohibitions against direct prayer to angels, but also allows these 'golden Letters' to serve as a metaphor for books like the Bible, both in keeping with the Protestant doctrine of *sola scriptura* and the views of Catholic antitheatricalists like Cardinal Borromeo.¹⁰² As Eugenius reads the words of the Angel, not only is the Angel's voice silenced, but the Angel's words are transferred to Eugenius' human mouth.

Angels continue to appear on the early modern English (and Irish) stage long after Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, but their representation changes. The voices of Marlowe's angels are not alone in resembling a character's passing thoughts, for stage angels are increasingly silenced, obscured, or otherwise set at a remove from the main action and natural world on stage. They are confined to brief or blinding appearances, to dreams, to music, or to writing, and

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 29.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 28.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 29.

¹⁰² Later in *Martyr'd Souldier*, when the Angels do occasionally 'speak', they tend to express themselves in song. Only the devout Christians, Bellizarius and Victoria, hear the angels speak in words as well.

are frequently reimagined as wearing a human disguise. Speech is prioritised for human characters: they read the words angels have written, or chance to interpret their dreams that angels have visited. To use MacCulloch's imagery, just as angels 'could step into the shoes of the evicted Catholic saints', human actors stepped into the sandals of angels.¹⁰³ Angels were silenced and eventually ousted from the stage altogether, but not without leaving a vacuum. The space was filled by a single human character musing over the question, 'To be, or not to be'. Yet, however, they were suppressed, when angels do momentarily appear, their uncertain presence invites a flicker of hope or otherwise intrusive self-doubt into the minds of the individuals they haunt. It is in this space that these elusive creatures remain.

Durham University

¹⁰³ MacCulloch, *Reformation*, 581.

Abstract

Unlike the carts that crawled with angels in the medieval pageant plays, angels of the early modern stage were a rare breed. Eventually they disappeared from the stage altogether; they did not, however, disappear all at once in a puff of celestial smoke. This article reveals a pattern of suppression in the representation of angels on the English stage, ranging from Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* in 1592 until 1645, three years after the closure of the theatres in England. This study examines plays that present angels as characters who contribute to the play's action and denouement; however, by noting plays that include allegorical and decorative angels too, it comprises the most comprehensive survey of angels within plays from the period to date. Angels do not appear in many plays performed at the commercial playhouses of Elizabethan and Jacobean England; but when they do, it becomes clear that early modern playwrights gradually developed more calculated ways of staging these controversial creatures. As stage angels assume more silent roles, but before angels leave the stage entirely, human characters begin to communicate with these celestial figures differently and encounters with angels become a far more intimate experience.