

**The Power of Political Persuasion**

Ella Ross Russell

August 2022

---

*“In unified compliance to the destiny of Miss Brodie, as if God had willed them to  
birth for that purpose’ (Spark, 30)*

Both Tony Kushner's play *Angels in America* and Muriel Spark's novel *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* are compelling criticisms of varying political attitudes. Characters in *Angels in America* work to expose the political injustices that riddled Reaganite America during the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century, whilst Miss Brodie directs a corrupted quasi-dictatorship amongst her students in Marcia Blaine School in Edinburgh. Despite the varied settings, characters across both texts are presented with damning fates due to the power of political persuasion. Kushner took influence from German playwright Bertold Brecht in an attempt to bring to light the inequality and discrimination within the political sphere (Fisher 6), promoting what critic Frank Rich called a 'searching and radical rethinking' of American political drama (*New York Times*, 1992). Similarly, Spark's 'novel of Fascism and fascisms' (McQuillan 4) undermines Jean Brodie's totalitarian vision, again inviting audiences to rethink and critique the conventions and limitations of certain political policies.

The texts arrive at a shared consensus of rejection towards their respective political worlds. In a conservative all-girls private school, Miss Jean Brodie boldly flaunts her admiration for Fascist leaders such as Hitler, Mussolini and Franco, which involves a dramatic detour from the typical school curriculum for her students at Marcia Blaine. She prioritises the cultivation of a respected cultural palate over more classical teachings, claiming 'Art and religion first; then philosophy; lastly science' (25). She displays photographs of the *fascisti* in her classroom, recalls stories of war and lectures about John Knox, all to which her students are blindly led to believe and comply. Miss Brodie's overt opposition to Stanley Baldwin's conservatism, and consequently Miss Mackay, is firmly established as she preaches to her classroom that 'Miss Mackay...believes in the slogan "Safety First". But safety does not come first. Goodness, truth and beauty come first' (10).

As a homosexual Marxist Jew, Tony Kushner also offers an political standpoint that differs from the conventions of the majority view. Through *Angels in America*, Kushner

promotes liberal idealism in America and rejects the limitations enforced by Ronald Reagan's presidency. Set in New York in 1985, the play bares the ugly inequity faced by the homosexual communities under Regan's modern conservatism. In 'Millenium Approaches', Roy Cohn offers his fateful view of America in light of the recent AIDS epidemic. He sees 'the universe...as a kind of sandstorm in outerspace with winds of mega-hurricane velocity but instead of grains of sand it's shards and splinters of glass' (19). This reflects the gruelling reality of belonging to a disregarded minority under the conditions of Republican authority. Rob Weinert-Kendt wrote in a review of the play that it 'centres on 'the moral rot of the Republican Party' (*America: The Jesuit Review*, 2018). Both Kushner and Spark recognise the flaws in the political worlds in which their characters dwell; Miss Brodie's radical Fascist teachings and characters such as Louis and Prior's homosexual advocacy both refuse to conform to the conventions of conservatism.

Characters in both *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* and *Angels in America* are seemingly defined and divided by their political compass. Jean Brodie's reverence for the Fascist logic manifests itself into her own embodiment of a dictatorship within the classroom. Miss Brodie 'elected herself to grace' (109), recklessly coordinating the futures of the Brodie set in a seemingly selfish feat to satisfy her own desire for complete conformity to the fascist appropriation of culture. Miss Brodie declares from the start that her girls are to be the 'crème de la crème' (8), denying any form of autonomy in establishing their destiny. Similarly, Kushner manifests his idealised politics in an attempt to determine a future for his characters and wider society. However, the primary difference is that Kushner's future favours tolerance and change, whilst Miss Brodie follows a tight aversion to any view conflicting her own, but both claim to promote individualism. Miss Brodie predicts that when Rose Stanley comes to the end of her childhood she will 'come to the moment of your great fulfilment' (110), referring to her foreboding sex-instinct. Rose does eventually have a 'reputation for sex' (28),

almost subconsciously abiding by Miss Brodie's prediction. Sandy Stranger recognises that herself and the rest of the Brodie set are in 'unified compliance to the destiny of Miss Brodie, as if God had willed them to birth for that purpose' (30). Miss Brodie's determination employs a 'prophetic lens that obfuscates events and qualities that do not conform to it' (Suh 88), providing an entirely narrow direction for the Brodie Set to follow in contrast to the fight for fluid identity and tolerance that Kushner puts forward in *Angels in America*. In 'Perestroika', Prior epitomises this process, claiming that 'We can't just stop. We're not rocks, progress, migration, motion is...modernity' (263-264). Prior represents the individualistic desire to succeed and thrive through American history and Louis upholds this longing at the end of the play, stating, 'The world moving ahead. And only in politics does the miraculous occur' (278). This reinforces the tight link between politics and progression. 'Perestroika' is a Russian word meaning 'restructuring', reflecting Kushner's concept of a utopian change through America that Joe epitomises in his statement; 'We're a movement, this is politics' (17). The texts therefore exhibit the importance of politics in defining and potentially refunctioning the outcomes of society.

This political significance is further demonstrated throughout both texts by the threat of social exclusion. Jean Brodie's uncompromising views are condemned though she does not waver, whilst Joe Pitt and Roy Cohn consistently battle their latent homosexuality, opting for social conformity. Miss Brodie is eventually fired for her 'proselytization for Mussolini's and Franco's regimes' (Suh 86), and Joyce Emily is killed in an accident stemming from her following her desire to 'wear a white blouse and black skirt and march with a gun' (118) and fight for Franco. Miss Brodie even alludes to the possibility of Mary Macgregor's death from a fire being a judgement on 'poor Mary' (60) for betraying her, showing the pressures and influence of politics on social behaviours. By the time the Brodie set reached the end of their school years, Miss Brodie had worked herself 'into their bones, so that they could not break

away' (115), reinforcing the binding influence of her authority. This is also significant in *Angels in America*; the socio-political threat cast over gay communities provided a cause for masking true identity. Roy defines the law as a 'pliable, breathing, sweating organ' (72), personifying and masculinising every aspect of government, giving rise to a period where masculinity allied with power and politics. Joe and Roy's closeted homosexuality dismantles this sense. They define as exemplary Republicans in order to remain true to social loyalties, even when Harper discloses Joe's sexuality and Roy is diagnosed with AIDS, Roy still affirms that he is 'a heterosexual man...who fucks around with guys' (52). In both texts characters are led astray by compelling societal pressure that joins force with profound political authority. Joyce Emily meets her demise by complying to the strain of Miss Brodie's prophecy, just as Joe and Roy withhold their true selves in pursuit of satisfying socio-political 'norms'.

This alliance between politics and social standing prompts the concept of political aesthetic in both texts. For Miss Brodie, her Fascist perspective demands crowd conformity, closely adhering to Mussolini's claim to reconcile an 'aesthetic production of obedient masses' (Suh 92) in Italy. In Sandy's recollection of the photograph of the Italian fascists, she notes how they were 'all marching in the straightest of files, with their hands raised at the same angle' (31), whilst 'Mussolini stood on a platform like a gym teacher or a Guides mistress and watched them' (31). This echoes Miss Brodie's control over the Brodie set, obeying the mass-aesthetic of fascism as Sandy acknowledges; 'The Brodie set was Miss Brodie's fascisti...marching along, but all knit together for her need' (31). Miss Brodie saw the importance of her girls being recognised as a distinct social unit by the rest of the school, referring to the aesthetic of 'team spirit' (78) that aligns with her Fascist view. However, in *Angels in America*, Kushner rejects this idea of cloned crowds of compliant citizens. The play encompasses an array of personal and social matters, depicting the multifaceted,

ever-changing society that makes up America. Prior, a white Anglo-Saxon protestant with AIDS, is the boyfriend of Louis, a progressive Jewish New Yorker who goes on to pursue Joe, a repressed Republican Mormon lawyer who is married to mentally unstable Harper. David Román recognises Kushner's ability to 'open up the microstructures of the characters interactions in order to comment on the macrostructures of social institutions, political philosophies, and competing historiographies'. (210). The aesthetic political cohesion that Miss Brodie craves is abandoned by Kushner's intermingling of disparate livelihoods.

In both texts, the corrupt relationship between the characters and politics can offer an anti-political argument. For characters to be compelled into a political preference by the pressures of public image perhaps supports a flaw in the political system. Despite Miss Brodie's strong Fascist sentiment, she is never urged into violence. She is fundamentally a romanticist and is seemingly naïve of the severity of her own beliefs. Perhaps, she finds comfort in the aesthetic appeal of fascism but, as David Lodge states, it 'is not a reasoned political attitude, but an extension of her egotism' (247). She consistently underplays the notions of Fascist control, claiming 'Hitler was rather naughty' (122), providing what Judy Suh acknowledged as a 'gross misapprehension of the Nazi War machine' (87). Miss Brodie was primarily focused on her own power and her regard to Fascism can be seen as 'an instinctive and relatively uncomprehending one'. (Murray and Tait 10). Similarly, Joe Pitt and Roy Cohn blindly follow the conventions of conservatism in America, seeking refuge in their own ignorance. Roy asserts himself at the heart of modern conservatism yet discloses his corrupt nature as the play progresses as he faces disbarment for borrowing money, highlighting significant flaws in American politics. It is clear that both Miss Jean Brodie and Roy Cohn have a superficial value where they are partially defined by holding a certain power over society. Miss Brodie's unwitting dedication to Fascism is arguably a method of establishing authority. Her distinguished views elevate her above traditionally politically

passive middle-class women. She focuses on how the modern woman operates in 'mechanisms of power and rebellion inside closed systems' (Dunker, 70), giving her an authoritative voice. Similarly, Roy's forged idolisation of modern conservatism merely allows him to maintain his public reputation. This deception contributes to the anti-political nature of both texts, where adherence to public policy masks an underlying superficial ambition.

Throughout both texts, the undeniable influence of politics determines the course of every character. The Brodie set and the characters in Kushner's play reach a conclusion that, in order to progress, change and adaptation is paramount. Political consideration and potential revaluation are notable forces in such change. The Brodie set eventually acknowledge the illegitimate world that Miss Brodie puts forward and find resolution through the enlightenment of hindsight, while Kushner's allusions to modernity and motion dismisses the stagnation enforced by previous social and political attitudes. The Angel works to represent a symbol that encompasses the verdict of both texts: a utopia for social politics where governmental focus centres on 'Forgiveness. Which is maybe where love and justice finally meet. Peace' (82).

*Words Cited*

Duncker, Patricia. 'The Suggestive Spectacle: Queer Passions in Bronte's *Villette* and The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie' in *Theorising Muriel Spark: Gender, Race, Deconstruction* Ed. McQuillan, Martin. Palgrave Macmillan, 2002, pp. 67-77.

Fisher, James. *The Theatre of Tony Kushner: Living Past Hope*. Psychology Press, 2002.

Kushner, Tony. *Angels in America*. Nick Hern Books, 2017.

Lodge, David. 'The Uses and Abuses of Omniscience: Method and Meaning in Muriel Spark's *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*', *Critical Quarterly*, Vol 12, Number 3, 1970.

McQuillan, Martin. *Theorising Muriel Spark: Gender, Race, Deconstruction*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2002.

Murray, Isobel and Tait, Bob. *Ten Modern Scottish Novels*. Mercat Press, 1984.

Rich, Frank. 'The Reaganite Ethos, With Roy Cohn As a Dark Metaphor'. *The New York Times*, March 1992.

Román, David. *Acts of Intervention: Performance, Gay Culture, and AIDS*. Indiana University Press, 1998.

Spark, Muriel. *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*. Penguin Modern Classics, 2000.

Suh, Judy. 'The Familiar Attractions of Fascism in Muriel Spark's *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*'. *Journal of Modern Literature*, Vol 30, Number 2, 2007, pp. 86-102.

Weinert-Kendt, Rob. 'Angels in America: revival takes flight in a new political age'. *America: The Jesuit Review*, March 2018.

