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Inventing Tennessee Williams: The Theatre Guild and His First Professional Production

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Founded shortly after World War I when melodramas, farces, and revues were the standard fare on New York boards, the Theatre Guild set out to present sophisticated, intellectual plays to subscription audiences in New York and quickly expanded this effort throughout the country. The Guild's early productions met with critical acclaim as well as commercial success, and the organization soon developed into one of America's most important theatrical producers, presenting both European and American plays and nurturing young American dramatists.

^{¶2} While Tennessee Williams's experience with the Theatre Guild was not, in the end, a happy one, the company's mounting of *Battle of Angels* in 1940 marked Williams's first professional production, and the process of working with the Guild played a major role in his development as a writer. Under the influence of the Guild's producers, Theresa Helburn and Lawrence Langner, Williams undertook a wholesale revision of the play, cutting an entire act and implementing a significant number of thematic and structural changes. While Williams fought against some of the revisions, he never reversed them, though he continued to work on the play for almost twenty years. The process of producing a play for the commercial theatre introduced Williams to the conflict between artistic ambitions and financial considerations, an issue he would deal with for the rest of his career. The Theatre Guild producers, veterans of this balancing act, had been making money staging artistically significant theatre for two decades by the time they worked with Williams.

^{¶3} The Theatre Guild was initially directed by six people, many of whom had been part of the Washington Square Players in the prewar years: playwright and attorney Lawrence Langner; actress Helen Westley; designer Lee Simonson; director Philip Moeller; writer and critic Theresa Helburn; and banker Maurice Wertheim. This board of directors guided the theatre's aesthetic for two decades, after which the Guild's leadership passed exclusively into the hands of Langner and Helburn. During the Theatre Guild's early years, its directors were particularly drawn to European drama, which, as a result of America's isolationist stance at the time, had been neglected (or heavily adapted and Americanized) by most other New York producers. The Guild's first seasons featured Spanish, Irish, Russian, British, Hungarian, French, German, Czech, and Norwegian plays; a production of Elmer Rice's *The Adding Machine* in 1923 was a notable exception to the emphasis on foreign works.

^{¶4} Although the Theatre Guild would eventually become known as a strong advocate of American playwriting, its directors were at first hesitant to take a chance on staging American work because they felt that, with few exceptions, America had not yet produced talented playwrights whose craft could measure up to that of

European dramatists (Langner, *Magic* 142). The young theatre's limited resources dictated that all early productions had to "open cold," without the luxury of out-of-town tryouts that prepared previously unproduced works for commercially successful New York runs (Helburn 99). Thus, the Theatre Guild initially looked to European plays that had previously been performed in their native countries and had already proven their theatrical potential by the time they reached New York. The work of George Bernard Shaw, for instance, quickly became a staple of the Guild's early seasons. As Lawrence Langner points out, by presenting "the important plays of European authors," the directors hoped "to set a standard for American writers" (*Magic* 142). While the Theatre Guild's initial preference for European drama drew criticism from the press, that phase was short-lived. As early as the mid-1920s, the organization, now more stable financially, began holding playwriting classes and competitions and started to focus on staging the work of American playwrights.

¶15 In the mid-to-late 1920s, the Theatre Guild produced plays by Sidney Howard, John Howard Lawson, Du Bose and Dorothy Heyward, and S. N. Behrman. By the end of the decade, the organization had forged a bond with the already established Eugene O'Neill, premiering his *Marco Millions* and *Strange Interlude* in 1928; the Guild would be the first company to produce every full-length New York premiere during O'Neill's lifetime. The Theatre Guild continued to emphasize American drama in the 1930s and 1940s, staging a wide selection of works by O'Neill, Behrman, Philip Barry, Maxwell Anderson, Robert E. Sherwood, and William Saroyan, as well as single plays by such writers as Lynn Riggs, Dawn Powell, Ben Hecht, and Sophie Treadwell.

¶16 In late 1939, after they had officially taken over the leadership of the Theatre Guild, Lawrence Langner and Theresa Helburn discovered Tennessee Williams through the Guild's play reader, John Gassner. Williams's agent, Audrey Wood, had sent Gassner some of her client's work and obtained a scholarship for Williams at the playwriting seminar that Gassner and Helburn were running at the New School for Social Research. Before considering *Battle of Angels* in early 1940, Gassner had seen manuscripts of *The Fugitive Kind*, *Spring Storm*, and *American Blues* (T. Williams, Letter to Audrey Wood, [Jan. 1940]). Williams had won a special prize in a Group Theatre playwriting contest with the latter collection of short plays, but while Harold Clurman and his collaborators liked Williams's work and were reading *Battle of Angels*, Williams suspected that—since it was "not laden with social significance"—his latest play would not be right for the Group. Instead, Williams felt that *Battle of Angels* was "Commercial!" with a "Capital 'C' as in CASH!" and urged Wood to send a copy of the play to the Theatre Guild, deeming the Guild a "good producer who is not afraid of strong stuff" (Letter to Audrey Wood, [Jan. 1940] and [Mar. 1940]). Impressed with Williams's writing, John Gassner convinced Langner and Helburn to consider *Battle of Angels* for production.

¶17 In their work with American authors, the Guild producers often adopted the roles of dramaturges, guiding new plays through revisions to ready them for the stage. Williams was happy but surprised when Langner and Helburn took out an option on *Battle of Angels*, since he did not consider his 1939 version of the play "a final draft" (T. Williams, Letter to Audrey Wood, 30 Nov. 1939). The producers, however, were fully aware that the work would need "some rewriting" to "straighten out its defects" (Langner, *Magic* 331). During Williams's association with the Theatre Guild, the shape of *Battle of Angels* continuously evolved. Hopeful of persuading such a prestigious theatre to commit to a production, Williams rewrote the script during much of 1940. In the process of revising *Battle of Angels*, he tailored the play to the Guild's suggestions and requirements; his efforts resulted in a production at the end of the year. After *Battle of Angels* closed, Williams continued to work on the script, publishing his 1941 rewrite of the play for the first time in 1945. By 1957, the further revised play

reemerged under the title *Orpheus Descending*. In his article “*Battle of Angels* and *Orpheus Descending*,” Robert Bray details the evolution of the script from its earliest draft to its final form. This piece will examine the specific influence of the Theatre Guild on Williams’s process of revision.

¶8 Although the essential characters remain largely the same throughout the different versions of the play, Williams, in consultation with Helburn and Langner, drastically restructured the plot of *Battle of Angels*. The play tells the story of Val Xavier, a young vagabond torn between sexual and intellectual longings, who arrives in a small Southern town and finds work in a store owned by Myra Torrance, a disillusioned woman trapped in an unfortunate marriage. While working in Myra’s store, Val befriends Vee Talbott, a religious fanatic and a painter who is married to the sheriff, and attracts the attention of Cassandra Whiteside, a wealthy drifter. A stranger in a tight-knit community, Val ultimately provokes the ire of the townspeople. When Myra’s husband Jabe finds out that Myra and Val have been having an affair, he shoots Myra but blames her death on Val, who is afterwards killed by a mob. In addition to the outsider’s struggle with an intolerant community, themes that persist through all versions of *Battle of Angels* include the tension between sexuality and spirituality, the economics of marriage, and the revolt of life against death.

¶9 The outsiders in *Battle of Angels* who are most prominently pitted against the community are Val, Cassandra, and Myra. Cassandra, who is not accepted in the town because of her eccentric behavior, public drinking, and sexual promiscuity, recognizes in the roving Val the same passionate nature and disregard for convention that have attracted the townspeople’s negative attention towards her. Cassandra points out to Val that they are alike: “You—savage. And me—aristocrat. Both of us things whose license has been revoked in the civilized world. Both of us equally damned and for the same good reason. Because we both want freedom” (*Battle of Angels*, *Plays* 220). Later on, Cassandra tries to make Myra understand that she, too, is included in the group of exiles. “They’ve passed a law against passion,” Cassandra warns Myra. “Our license has been revoked. We have to give it up or else be ostracized by Memphis society. Jackson and Vicksburg, too. Whoever has too much passion, we’re going to be burned like witches because we know too much,” she predicts (258). Ultimately, Cassandra’s prophecy becomes reality, as all three of them die at the hands of the intolerant community.

¶10 Williams likens Val’s journey to that of Christ. As the action of the play unfolds against the backdrop of Easter week, he is persecuted, betrayed by one of his friends, and killed, thus reenacting the biblical passion. Vee, a deeply religious person who is also shunned by the townspeople, experiences the suffering of Val/Jesus on a visceral level. On Good Friday her palms are “inflamed” and show “red marks” that signify the wounds of Christ on the cross (251). Vee has had visions of the twelve apostles in the past and is now expecting a vision of Jesus. There are intimations early on in the script, however, that the spiritual nature of Vee’s revelations is questionable. People around town have commented that each of the apostles Vee has painted “looks like some man around Two River County,” and Val has noted the phallic nature of the red church steeple in one of Vee’s paintings (198, 232). When Vee experiences her vision of Christ and paints a picture of the face that has appeared to her, the townspeople, and even Vee herself, quickly recognize the face in the picture not as Jesus’s but as Val’s (252, 254). Vee’s claim that Jesus/Val touched her bosom when he appeared to her only feeds the ridicule to which Vee is subjected (251).

¶11 The exposure of Vee’s religious experience as a manifestation of her sexual imagination points to Williams’s idea that “intense religiosity and hysterical sexuality” can coexist “in one person” (Brown 254), a view he likely

adopted from D. H. Lawrence, whom Williams admired greatly and to whom he dedicated *Battle of Angels*. According to Williams, the play's title implies the "struggle" between the "desires of the flesh and the spirit," a conflict the author not only expresses in his depiction of Vee, but also in his portrayal of Val in every version of the play ("History" 281). Val's full name, Valentine Xavier, implies this tension between spirituality and sexuality. Although the name "Xavier" is a near homonym of the word "savior," the name "Valentine," coupled with Val's arrival at Myra's store in February, suggests his association with Valentine's Day, a day filled with significance for lovers. Cassandra, Vee, Myra, and many of the female customers of Myra's store experience a strong attraction to Val, whose erotic appeal and sexual pursuits make this play as much a story of the literal passion of the flesh as a story of the spiritual passion of Jesus. Val's conflict between sexual and spiritual needs causes him to attempt to leave Myra in favor of a life of reflection and writing and results in Myra's jealous revenge. With Val on the verge of deserting her, Myra makes a phone call to the sheriff claiming, "the clerk is robbing the store," and thus precipitates Val's capture and murder (269).

¶12 Another important theme in *Battle of Angels* is the life-destroying effect of a marriage of convenience. Myra married Jabe not out of love, but out of necessity. As a young woman, Myra had a lover named David, with whom she spent many romantic spring evenings in a bucolic paradise, "the orchard across from Moon Lake." However, when "boll weevil and army-worm struck his cotton awful three times straight," David left Myra and "married into the Delta Planters' Bank" (196). Having nowhere to turn, Myra married Jabe, a "man who could take care of me," but whom she never loved (235). When *Battle of Angels* opens, Jabe is on his deathbed; Myra, who has been unhappy and "barren" in her marriage, revives as Val enters her life (264). In a symbolic revolt against Jabe, who has oppressed her vitality, Myra redecorates her store's confectionery "to achieve a striking effect of an orchard in full bloom," thus recreating the orchard of her youth where she first experienced love with David (242). A further sign of Myra's rejuvenation is her pregnancy, which she announces by establishing a connection to nature. Myra compares herself to a fig tree she had in her garden as a child, a tree which, after many years of bearing no fruit, unexpectedly produced figs one spring. However, Myra's sudden resurgence of life comes to an end when Jabe descends on the store from his sickbed, enters the confectionery, and discovers his wife's affair. Val's phrase "Death's in the orchard" metaphorically describes Jabe's effect on Myra's newfound life and foretells Jabe's eventual murder of his wife, a killing he will blame on Val (268).

¶13 In Williams's initial version of the script, which he submitted to Audrey Wood as a draft in late 1939, acts one and two are set in Myra's store, and Myra's death marks the end of act two. Act three takes place in Vee's living room and in the town's jail, with Val being killed at the close of the play. In the last scene of the original script, Vee visits Val in prison after he has been arrested for Myra's murder. Val uses the opportunity to charm Vee, in hopes that she will help him escape from jail. Insisting that they both have "visions" and that "fate brought us together," Val draws parallels between Vee, the artist, and himself, an aspiring writer, and manipulates her to unlock his cell door (*Battle of Angels*, Nov. 1939 version; 3:39). While Williams certainly saw a metaphysical connection between Vee and Val, two outsiders with mystical and sexual sides to their characters (T. Williams, Letter to John Gassner), Val's plea to Vee seems rather phony. Although we have learned earlier in the play that Val has spiritual yearnings—he believes he is "going to receive some kind of a—revelation"—and that he is writing a book that he hopes will "revolutionize—Science—philosophy—art!" we have also seen him mock Vee's spirituality and her artistic work (Nov. 1939 version; 2:16–19). In act one, Val laughs at Vee when, by touching her legs and observing her reaction, he exposes the sexual yearning that is

hidden beneath her cloak of religiosity, and in act two, Val removes from view one of Vee's religious paintings that she hoped would be displayed in Myra's store (Nov. 1939 version; 1:23–24, 2:9).

¶14 Although Williams may have wanted Val's claim to signify a sincere confession of affection—"ever since I first seen you I've wanted you"—it strikes the reader more as Val's effort to exploit the secret longing he has recognized in Vee (Nov. 1939 version; 3:41). From his locked cell, Val tempts Vee to let him touch her hands and tells her, "I'll take you away with me, Vee. A long ways off," to a place where "there's room to make love!"—a promise he never even makes to Myra in this early version of the play (Nov. 1939 version; 3:44). Vee does not trust Val, since she has witnessed Myra's phone call and believes Val may have killed Myra. However, she does not succeed in resisting his snare. When Val repeatedly demands, "Unlock—the door—Vee," she breaks down and exclaims, "Oh, Val—I want love . . ." (Nov. 1939 version; 3:42, 46). But by the time Vee manages to unlock the prison door to set Val free, a mob with burning torches has arrived on the scene, and Val realizes he has no way out. In a sacrificial manner, Val "retreats back into the cell and flattens himself against the back wall—arms outstretched as though pinioned or nailed to a cross" (Nov. 1939 version; 3:48).

¶15 While Williams valued the spiritual and sexual connection he saw between Val and Vee, the Theatre Guild feared that *Battle of Angels*, with its two strong female protagonists, lacked dramaturgical focus. As Williams told his mother, Theresa Helburn suggested so many changes that "his original script was covered with red ink" (E. Williams 119). In consultation with Williams in April 1940, Helburn and Langner told him they "felt that the play lost unity after the second act, since the emphasis shifts from Myra to Vee" and cautioned, "the play is practically over when Myra is killed" ("Report"). To bring the third act together with the rest of the play and to shift its focus towards Myra—as well as to save money on sets—Helburn suggested that Williams cut the scene in Vee's living room in which Vee is painting her vision of Jesus/Val and transfer the jailhouse scene to Myra's store. With those changes, Helburn hoped the play would "retain the presence of Myra at least in spirit to the very end." To make it plausible that the entire play could be set in the store, Helburn and Langner proposed that instead of being hunted down and taken to jail for Myra's murder, "Val might return to the scene of her death voluntarily while a posse is out searching for him; and he might be arrested there and then, while many townspeople are present for a 'wake' or for some other reason, and he might be locked up in the room where he and Myra had consummated their relationship" ("Report").

¶16 But Williams resisted the Guild's suggestion to remove the last scene from the prison and assign greater importance to Myra's part in the play. "The author is apparently decidedly in favor of giving the chief feminine role to Vee. He would like to build her up in the first two acts," John Gassner reported after the Guild's conference with Williams ("Note on Mr. Williams's Notes"). Rather than focusing more on Myra, Williams hoped *Battle of Angels* could be "integrated by the continuous emotional drives of Vee and Val"; he thought the lack of focus resulted from the fact that "the first two acts do not emphasize or dramatize those emotional drives clearly enough, such as Val's cosmic consciousness and Vee's sexual religiosity" (Letter to John Gassner). For Williams, the connection between Vee and Val was a crucial element of *Battle of Angels*, as was "the 'locked door' theme" that illustrates the relationship of these characters in the early version of the script. Williams argued that "one of most powerful things in the play is [Val's] passionate exhortation to Vee to release him by unlocking the door, which is a symbol of her own dammed-up passion," and he also saw Vee's unlocking of the prison door as a symbol of her "power to set Val free." Williams feared that these symbols would be diluted

should he follow the Guild's advice and have Val locked up in the store instead of the jail ("Notes for Revisions").

¶17 Gassner's notes on the Guild's conference with Williams show Gassner was "confused" by "the theme of release by Vee" and worried, "it may be much too mystical or subtle for an audience, and . . . it will lead the play into a tenuous psychoanalytic direction which it is extremely difficult to convey on the stage." In the end, the Theatre Guild succeeded in persuading Williams to confine the action of his play to one locale. Although he had difficulty letting go of the prison setting, Williams reasoned, "I am not going to be obstinate about a thing like this with a possible production by the Theatre Guild impinging upon it," and declared, "I shall make every human effort to transfer the action to the store without sacrificing anything essential or making the whole thing implausible or false" (Letter to John Gassner).

¶18 A few weeks after Williams had agreed to adjust the setting of *Battle of Angels*, the Theatre Guild, now preparing to cast the play, made further demands for revision. Helburn and Langner, who had previously expressed their reservations about the Val/Vee plot and their desire to see Myra's part enlarged, now asked Williams to keep Myra alive until the end of the play. While the request grew out of the producers' original concern that the play lost focus after the second act, it was also strongly motivated by Langner and Helburn's hope to attract a star to the role of Myra, specifically Joan Crawford, an actress whom Williams did not admire. In a letter to his grandparents, Williams told of "many stormy sessions" at the Guild offices where Helburn and Langner asked him to make "some changes I didn't approve." He complained, "They want everything to be subordinated to [Crawford's] part," and he acutely sensed the tension between his own concern for "[preserving] the artistic value of the play" and the profit-oriented goals of the Theatre Guild producers, who had told him it was "possible to make a fortune touring on the road with a big movie star, and of course the film sale might be something colossal" (Letter to Rosina and Walter Dakin). Williams, who had early on touted *Battle of Angels* for its commercial potential, now wrote to his mother, "You would think the Theatre Guild would be interested primarily in an artistic production. But no! They are really commercial at heart." He courageously asserted, "I am determined, however, not to cheapen the play, as my reputation is more important right now than making quick money" (Letter to Edwina Williams, [May 1940]).

¶19 Ultimately, however, Williams did make compromises to prepare *Battle of Angels* for a Theatre Guild production. He spent the summer of 1940 working on the play at Lawrence Langner's Westport, Connecticut, home where he made "many radical changes such as eliminating the whole 3rd act and writing a new first scene" (T. Williams, Letter to Audrey Wood, 5 July 1940). By composing an introductory scene showing Val's arrival at Myra's store and by cutting the third act, Williams enlarged Myra's importance and put Myra and Val's relationship at the center of the plot. As a result of these changes, Williams abandoned his detailed exploration of Val's relationship with Vee and relegated Vee to a secondary role. The revised version of *Battle of Angels* ends with a mob setting fire to the store and with the sacrifice of Myra, Val, and Cassandra among flames, as Vee mourns the scene of their deaths. Although Williams was initially reluctant to restructure the play as drastically as the Theatre Guild had requested, it is crucial to note that in all of his later versions of *Battle of Angels*, he never reversed any of the changes. Both the 1945 published version of *Battle of Angels* and his 1957 play *Orpheus Descending* maintain the primary focus on Myra and end with her death.

¶20 With the desired script changes in place by the late summer of 1940, the Theatre Guild began planning its production of *Battle of Angels*. After Joan Crawford had dismissed the part as "low and common" (qtd. in T.

Williams, Letter to Bertha Case), the Guild considered Katharine Cornell, Tallulah Bankhead, and Miriam Hopkins for the role of Myra (Theatre Guild, Letter to Tennessee Williams, 31 July 1940). By fall, Helburn and Langner had gotten Hopkins interested in starring in *Battle of Angels* (Theatre Guild, Letter to Tennessee Williams, 9 Oct. 1940). After spending seven years exclusively on Hollywood movie sets, the actress hoped that the play would mark her return to the Broadway stage and decided to invest money in the production (Leverich 385). Williams was pleased with the Guild's choice; upon seeing Hopkins perform in another play, he mused, "Now here is a woman who could take my frequently over-written speeches and match them with an emotional opulence of her own that would make them not only natural but tremendously moving as well!" (Letter to Theresa Helburn).

¶21 If Miriam Hopkins was ostensibly well suited to Williams's work, Margaret Webster, whom Langner and Helburn had picked to direct the play, was not. An Englishwoman known primarily for her productions of Shakespeare, Webster had little experience with new plays and less with the culture of the American South (Barranger 109). While Webster appreciated Williams's "obvious potential" as a writer, she did not consider *Battle of Angels* a good play (Webster, *Don't* 66). Before rehearsals began, Williams accompanied Webster on a whirlwind tour of the Mississippi Delta to get her acquainted with the local color of the area and to prepare her for the strange southern world of his play. According to Williams, the fast-paced journey was "a bit too much" for Webster, who "in twenty-four hours" saw "just enough of this extraordinary country and its people to make them more mysterious than they were before" ("History" 280). Armed with "a large number of recordings of bird cries, the humming of cotton mills, . . . [and] the street cries of Southern hucksters," Webster returned to New York with more enthusiasm for, but still little understanding of, the setting of *Battle of Angels* (Langner, *Magic* 332).

¶22 With Hopkins confirmed for the role of Myra, rehearsals began on December 3, 1940, with an incomplete cast.¹ Finding actors for the other leads "who seemed anything better than arbitrarily thrust into the parts" had turned out to be difficult (T. Williams, "History" 281), and the casting process became chaotic when performers were added to and fired from the show as late as mid-December. On the twelfth, the Theatre Guild signed Doris Dudley for the role of Cassandra, a choice both Williams and Webster disliked ("Doris Dudley"; T. Williams, "History" 281; Webster, *Don't* 68). A few days later, the producers replaced Robert Allen with Wesley Addy to play the part of Val; Allen had already stepped in as a substitute for Larry Sothern (*New York Times* clipping 17 Dec. 1940). In a November 1940 letter to his family, Williams outlined the complications of casting a leading man, stating that Hopkins "won't have anybody not attractive to her and is very hard to please." In order to perform in *Battle of Angels*, Addy quit the Theatre Guild's production of *Twelfth Night*, which had just opened under Webster's direction. This development meant that Webster had to find and rehearse a new Orsino and simultaneously bring Addy up to speed in *Battle of Angels* (Webster, *Don't* 70). Miriam Hopkins not only influenced the casting of Williams's play, but reportedly kept asking Williams and the Guild for changes in the script that would result in an even greater focus on the character of Myra (Langner, *Magic* 332; T. Williams, Letter to Edwina and Cornelius Williams, [3 Jan. 1941]). As the Theatre Guild was scrambling to get *Battle of Angels* into opening-night shape, Langner and Helburn cancelled the play's New Haven performances, scheduled to begin on December 27, and decided to open the play in Boston on December 30 instead (*New York Times* clipping 18 Dec. 1940). Even a December 30 opening, however, meant that *Battle of Angels* would not get much more than two weeks of rehearsal with a complete cast.

¶23

In retrospect, puritanical Boston was not the ideal place to open an untried play that frankly examines delicate issues of sexuality and religion, but neither Williams nor the Guild suspected at the time that *Battle of Angels* “might be attacked on grounds of morality” (T. Williams, “History” 280). In preparation for the Boston run and the customary scrutiny of script and production by the local censor’s office, Margaret Webster had compiled a list of “Censorable Lines” and had asked Helburn and Langner to let her know “which of these lines should be cut or altered ahead of the Boston dress rehearsal, and which should remain until actual objections may be raised by the authorities.” The lines in question were characterized mainly by profane use of language and references to sexuality, but there is no evidence that the Theatre Guild actually eliminated any of them prior to the first Boston performance. Helburn and Langner’s lack of concern seemed to be justified, since the censors—so eager to ban the Guild’s production of Eugene O’Neill’s *Strange Interlude* a decade earlier—were conspicuously absent from Boston’s Wilbur Theater at the opening of *Battle of Angels*. That occurrence led a *New York World-Telegram* reporter to speculate whether the city might have changed its morals:

What’s all this nonsense about a “squeamish” Boston? Don’t give it another thought. Days when the censors up that way and Broadway showfolk fought over censorship seem to be over. The authorities of that city had plenty of opportunity to look at the Miriam Hopkins play, *Battle of Angels*, which is a play about sex with a capital S, before permitting it to come there—and didn’t even seem shocked when they read the script. (Ross)

¶24

Yet Boston had not changed as much as it first appeared. Once *Battle of Angels* had opened, the play attracted the attention of Boston’s city council—which, based on reports from enraged spectators that “a picture of Christ was being torn up,” passed a resolution to close the play if it were to be found morally offensive (Wheildon). On January 6, John Spencer, Boston’s City Censor, sent two of his deputies to the Wilbur Theater to investigate. In the version of the play that had opened in Boston, Vee leaves her painting of “Jesus” at the store—and Myra, who jealously realizes that Vee’s sexual interest in Val must have led her to paint him as Jesus, “smashes the canvas stretcher over her knee and stuffs the picture into the stove’s red belly” (T. Williams, *Battle of Angels*, 1940 promptbook; 2:35). It was this part of the performance that upset some members of the audience, who did not necessarily understand that it was not a painting of Jesus, but a painting of one of the characters in the play, that was being destroyed. However, by the time the censor’s office decided to examine *Battle of Angels*, the circumspect Theatre Guild had already taken its own steps to modify the treatment of Vee’s painting onstage (Wheildon).

¶25

By January 6, Williams, Webster, Helburn, and Langner had long left Boston, and the show’s stage manager, John Haggott, took it upon himself to eliminate all potentially upsetting religious references in anticipation of the arrival of the censors. He telegraphed Helburn that the performers had “cut all references to [the] deity and Christ,” used a picture that did not represent “Jesus,” and “cut [the] reference to [the] stigmatae” on Vee’s hands. While deleting profanity was a common measure to appease the censor, substituting a different picture for Vee’s painting of “Jesus” compromised Williams’s characterization of Vee as a religious fanatic with sexually inspired illusory visions, as well as his characterization of Val as a spiritual/sexual being.

¶26

The preventative cuts, as it turned out, were not enough to satisfy the censors, who, after viewing the performance, classified *Battle of Angels* as “a play about cheap, white trash.” They found many of its lines “indecent and improper” (“Make Play Clean”), “lascivious and immoral” (“Clean Up”), and were scandalized by the “double meaning” of some of Val’s and Myra’s lines and by the frankness of others (“Make Play Clean”).

The censors ordered that the Guild strike Myra's comment to Val, "I can feel the weight of your body bearing me backwards," and demanded that two entire scenes they considered too suggestive be deleted (Webster, *Don't* 72). One of the scenes in question was the "bayou scene" in act one of the promptbook in which Val tells of his first sexual experience with a Cajun girl, a part of the plot that is crucial to the understanding of Val's character as being torn between physical and spiritual pursuits—seducing women and pondering the meaning of life ("Make Play Clean"). The other scene to which the censors objected shows Myra in act three bursting forth with resentment for her dying husband Jabe and admitting to him that she committed adultery and is carrying Val's child ("Clean Up"). The latter passage is important because it conveys the symbolic difference between Jabe, who represents death, and Val, who represents life, to Myra.

¶27 Miriam Hopkins defended *Battle of Angels* against the censors' accusation that it was "a dirty play," insisting, "That's an insult to the fine young man who wrote it." She argued, "The dirt is something in the minds of some of the people who have seen it. They read meanings into it according to their own suppressed feelings" ("Play Must Have Lines Taken Out"). Despite Hopkin's stance, the Boston papers reported that the Theatre Guild "agreed to make the changes" requested by the censors ("Changes Ordered"). Although those changes were drastic and cut away passages that conveyed important themes of the play, John Haggott stated publicly that the censors found "nothing particularly objectionable" and declared, "We may have to alter a few lines, but there will be no important changes" (Wheildon). *Battle of Angels* had been badly received in Boston, and it seems the Guild quickly conceded to the censors' demands in a desperate effort to avoid any more negative publicity. When Margaret Webster returned to Boston from a lecture assignment in Minnesota, she "found a castrated and largely incomprehensible edition of the play dying an inevitable death at the Wilbur Theatre" (Webster, *Don't* 72).

¶28 As produced in Boston, *Battle of Angels* ended with an onstage fire that consumes Myra, Val, and Cassandra. Williams planted hints at Val's almost paranoid fear of fire throughout the 1939 version of the script and the promptbook, and it comes as no surprise that Val perishes amidst flames. Having heard that Val has robbed and killed Myra, a mob arrives with torches and throws them through the windows of the store, where Val, Myra, and Cassandra are trapped. In a ritualistic spectacle, the town's three "prodigals" die together (T. Williams, *Battle of Angels*, 1940 promptbook; 2:43). Cassandra, clairvoyant like her Greek namesake, had prophesied that she, Val, and Myra would be killed because they understand that the "passion" of their bodies signifies the "freedom" of their spirits (2:42). As they die, a "tragic purgation" takes place which, according to Cassandra, enables them "to be free of the flesh that confused our purpose" (2:73). As a religious metaphor, the scene suggests the biblical image of the deaths of Jesus and the two thieves on the cross. Vee enters, and, "with her arms upraised in a gesture of grief and adoration, she stumbles and kneels at the foot of the stairs," resembling the biblical Mary who kneels before the cross. The "white brilliance" that "floods down upon her face from above" signifies a divine light that brings about the purification of Myra, Val, and Cassandra (2:75).

¶29 Williams intended for the deaths of his characters by fire to symbolize their liberation from the worldly obsessions of the flesh. However, the desired effect of "the all-important scene," which, in the author's view, "lifted the play to katharsis," was drowned out by the elements of production at the premiere (T. Williams, "History" 283). After the fire effects had failed during the one-and-only Boston dress rehearsal, Webster had encouraged the stagehands to augment the pyrotechnics for the opening. As Williams reports, this proved to be a fatal mistake:

[On] opening night when it came time for the store to burn down it was like the burning of Rome. Great sulphurous billows rolled chokingly onto the stage and coiled over the foot-lights. To an already antagonistic audience this was sufficient to excite something in the way of pandemonium. Outraged squawks, gabbling, spluttering spread through all the front rows of the theatre. Nothing that happened on the stage from then on was of any importance. Indeed the scene was nearly eclipsed by the fumes. Voices were lost in the banging up of seats as the front rows were evacuated. (“History” 285)

¶30

If the audience was horrified, the Boston reviewers were not pleased with *Battle of Angels* either. While the critics praised the acting of Miriam Hopkins, the direction of Margaret Webster, and the expressionistic set design of Cleon Throckmorton, few had kind words for the play itself.² The reviewer for the *Boston Transcript* called *Battle of Angels*, “a stumbling pointless affair” (“Miriam Hopkins Returns”), and the *Boston Globe*’s critic referred to it as an “embarrassment” for the actors who appeared in it (“Plays Here”). Although the play’s “symbolic implications” were lost on most reviewers, a couple of critics recognized Williams’s raw genius. “Given a few years in the theatre,” Elinor Hughes noted in the *Boston Herald*, “and Tennessee Williams should add craftsmanship to imagination and produce important work.” In a similar fashion, Elliot Norton commented in the *Boston Post*, “If he can learn to walk with the theatre’s craftsmen, he may find himself riding the clouds with the theatre’s dramatists. His talent is most interesting” (qtd. in Leverich 396).

¶31

In the end, it was not the Boston censors’ investigation of the play’s profane and salacious content, but rather the Theatre Guild’s reservations about Williams’s abilities as a playwright that shut down *Battle of Angels*. As early as January 2, 1941, three days after the play opened and long before the censors ever visited the Wilbur, Helburn and Langner had come to the decision that *Battle of Angels* would have to close for revisions at the end of its scheduled two-week Boston engagement. Still a relatively inexperienced writer, Williams, who later pondered he might have “fooled” the Theatre Guild in the beginning into believing he was “an accomplished playwright,” ultimately could not meet the Guild’s expectation to revise *Battle of Angels* while the play was running, and he became defensive to save face (T. Williams, “History” 280). His various tactics were avoidance, as expressed in “his routine of lying down on the nearest suitable piece of furniture, putting his feet up on the cushions and closing his eyes” whenever he was asked to make changes during rehearsals, or flat-out denial (Webster, *Don’t* 69). During an emergency meeting after the show’s disastrous opening, Williams reportedly told the producers and cast, “I put it down this-a way, and that’s the only way I know how to put it down” (Leverich 392). As Margaret Webster points out, “We were deceived by the maturity of the play into misjudging the immaturity of the author” (*Don’t* 69), and it soon became clear that Williams would have to “get away” for a while in order to accomplish the necessary revisions (T. Williams, “History” 282).

¶32

The Theatre Guild initially postponed, then cancelled a Washington, D.C., engagement that was supposed to follow the play’s Boston showing and abandoned the proposed Broadway run. In a letter Langner and Helburn sent to the Guild’s Boston subscribers and published in the *Boston Herald* on January 26, they apologized to audiences for the “disappointment” that *Battle of Angels* had been. But the producers, true to their mission to support new American playwriting, also defended Williams’s work in the same letter, on the terms that “we should be able to expect our members to be indulgent towards an occasional experimental play and even bear with its failure, since it is only by this experimentation that we can feed new authors into the American theatre.”

Moreover, Helburn and Langner praised Tennessee Williams as a writer with “genuine poetic gifts and an interesting insight into a particular American scene” (Langner and Helburn).

¶133 Williams left Boston and, with the Guild’s financial support, rewrote *Battle of Angels* a few months later in Florida, creating the manuscript that would become the 1945 published version of the play. Williams framed the revised play with a prologue and an epilogue, adjusted the characterizations of his protagonists, added a few minor characters to the plot, and altered the ending.

¶134 The prologue and epilogue are set a year after the events of the play have concluded and add expository material to the main plot. In the new framework, we see Myra’s store turned into a museum, which serves as a testament to the period of upheaval the town went through with the arrival of Val. The familiar Temple Sisters and a new character, the Conjure Man, guard the museum and recount the tragic story of Val, Myra, and Cassandra to a couple of tourists as they point out the various artifacts on display—most importantly Val’s snakeskin jacket. With the prologue and epilogue set at a later time than the action of the play, the viewer is prepared for and thus becomes detached from the events of the plot. Seen from a distance and filtered through the narration of the Temple Sisters, the action is removed from the realm of realism and no longer constitutes a set of events that can be immediately experienced. Instead, the play emerges as a parable performed to instruct the audience about the fate of three outsiders in an intolerant community.

¶135 Apparently, the Theatre Guild had criticized Val’s character as too weak in comparison to the female parts in the play, taking particular exception to his paranoid fear of fire (T. Williams, Letter to Audrey Wood, 15 Mar. 1941). While revising *Battle of Angels*, Williams asserted that he was giving Val “daily injections of iron and beef extracts” to build up his masculinity and strengthen his presence in the play (T. Williams, Letter to Audrey Wood, 27 Feb. 1941). Moreover, Williams clarified Val’s characterization as a man who is torn between the desires of his body and his spirit, his instinct and his intellect. While Val’s ambition is to write a book, which he believes will be of philosophical merit, he is time and again attracted and trapped by women, only to attempt to break free to follow his intellectual pursuits. In the revised *Battle of Angels*, the addition of a new character, the Woman from Waco, reinforces this pattern, which was previously only addressed in Val’s relationship with Myra and in the bayou scene, a scene that was subject to censorship in the Boston production. The new character, along with some adjustments to Williams’s portrayal of Myra, help make Val’s intense sexuality his predominant conflict in the revised version of the play.

¶136 The appearance of the Woman from Waco gives a palpable reason for Val’s peripatetic life. We learn that she seduced Val when he was drunk, that Val “was disgusted with her” and with himself, and that he left town as a result of the affair. The possessive and vengeful Woman, however, insists that Val pay a price for leaving her. In his revision, Williams lets similarities emerge between the Woman from Waco and Myra, who grows more and more overbearing as the plot moves along. “You’re like the woman from Waco,” Val finally says, and Myra does not deny it (T. Williams, *Battle of Angels, Plays* 266). She, like the woman, is now portrayed as selfish in her desire to possess Val and as utterly desperate to hold him. In the end, Myra’s familiar telephone call to the sheriff, in which she falsely accuses Val of robbing the store, mirrors a rape allegation that the Woman from Waco had phoned in to the police after Val left her. By making these small adjustments, Williams changed Myra from an individual (with whom the audience can empathize) into a type: the sort of aggressively possessive woman Val has encountered before.

¶137

When Williams rewrote *Battle of Angels*, he added a couple of African American characters to reinforce the theme of the outsider at odds with the community. One of those characters is the Conjure Man, a mysterious and magical figure who haunts and frightens the town. The Conjure Man is an outsider who represents rural folk beliefs and superstitions. The audience never hears him speak but sees him offer a talisman to Val and Myra. He eventually guards Val's memory in the "museum" that Myra's store becomes. By inserting a magical figure and linking him to Val, Williams augments the distancing effect of the new prologue and epilogue and further removes the play from the strictures of realism.

¶138 Loon, another new African American character, is a hobo Val rescues from the grasp of the racist sheriff by handing him money to pay a fine for vagrancy and by pretending to hire him for a job. The desperate situation of the "dispossessed" African American prompts Val to display a new aspect of his character that evokes a theme manifested in many American plays of the 1930s, including such earlier Williams pieces as *Candles to the Sun* and *Not About Nightingales*: a concern for social justice. As Val sees Loon confronted by the sheriff, he speaks out against racial inequalities, which makes the townspeople wonder what Val's political affiliations are. Bystanders suspect him of "red talk" and tell him to "go back to Rooshuh!" (237). In the segregated South, Val feels a connection to Loon, since they are both uprooted and vulnerable. Speaking to Myra, Val outlines his economic situation and explains that his family "never owned a single inch of the earth, but all their lives they gave to working on it," and describes his family's alienation and displacement: "[the] land got poor, it wouldn't produce no more, and so my folks were thrown off it" (224–25). The addition of Loon and of Val's revelations about his background show that Williams was eager to add a social and political dimension to the play—and to balance the depiction of Val as a sexual being with that of Val as an intellectual who displays a keen understanding of issues of class and race.

¶139 A figure who is only alluded to in previous versions of *Battle of Angels*, Myra's former lover David Anderson, appears in act 2 of Williams's revised script. Putting David onstage creates a concrete image of Myra's happiness before her marriage to Jabe. David's arrival on the scene upsets Myra, and it becomes clear that she has never forgiven him for leaving her. David's physical presence and his confrontation with Myra suggest that Myra's affair with Val is her attempt to recreate the love she experienced and lost in her youth. New details reinforce this interpretation: Myra accidentally calls Val "David" after her old lover's visit and later exclaims, after Jabe shoots her, that she wanted "[not] death, but David—the orchard across from Moon Lake!" (270).

¶140 For his new ending, Williams cut the fire effects that had proven so problematic in the Boston production.³ In the revised *Battle of Angels*, Val manages to slip away from the crowd that descends on the store to burn him, leaving only his snakeskin jacket behind as the curtain falls on act three. Although Val's discarded jacket could be interpreted as a symbol of his escape—the escape of a snake that has shed its skin—Williams explains in the epilogue that the jacket signifies Val's "capture." We learn that Val ran away from the angry crowd closing in on the store only to be lynched offstage by a group of angry mill workers. The epilogue also reports that Cassandra has died in a suicidal accident, having driven her car into the river, and that Vee has "lost her mind" (272–273). The fates of Williams's protagonists thus do not change much in the revised *Battle of Angels*, although these fates are no longer depicted onstage. The author's reliance on the epilogue to convey this information feels awkward and lacks the dramatic engagement of his previous version of the play. Williams called his addition of a prologue and an epilogue "a defensive gesture" prompted by "the appalling memory of Boston," where the

fire effects had ruined his original ending and where “many people in the audience . . . did not understand the play [and] were terribly shocked” (“History” 286; Letter to Edwina and Cornelius Williams). However, commenting on his revision as he submitted it for publication, Williams pointed out that, should the play be done again, he would “probably prepare still another version, omitting the present prologue and epilogue” (“History” 286). In *Orpheus Descending*, he did just that and once again relied on the play itself to relate and resolve its story in an unmitigated fashion.

¶141 When Williams submitted his revision of *Battle of Angels* to the Theatre Guild in the spring of 1941, Lawrence Langner, who had contemplated a new production at his Westport Country Playhouse for that summer and had stored the Boston scenery there, expressed his dissatisfaction with the work (T. Williams, Letter to Lawrence Langner, 3 July 1941). Yet Langner promised Williams as late as 1945 that the Guild would restage *Battle of Angels* if Williams rewrote it further, a promise that by this time only amused Williams, considering his bad experiences with his Theatre Guild production, and given the success he had known in the meantime with *The Glass Menagerie* (Langner, Letter to Tennessee Williams; T. Williams, Letter to Audrey Wood, 20 June 1945).⁴

¶142 After the Theatre Guild had rejected his revised *Battle of Angels*, Williams discussed a possible production with Erwin Piscator at the New School’s experimental Dramatic Workshop. Pondering further changes in late 1941 and early 1942, Williams, perhaps under the German director’s pressure, once again reexamined the balance between the conflicting elements in Val’s nature and considered shifting Val’s characterization toward the intellectual and the spiritual. He told Piscator he had “suppressed as much of the sexuality as possible” in a new draft, especially Val’s “questionable actions” in his scenes with Vee (Letter to Erwin Piscator). An outline of the revised plot shows that, in order to emphasize Val’s spiritual side, Williams was now planning to transform the young vagabond into a follower of Jonathan West, a fictional African American preacher who was murdered for his progressive ideas. With the Conjure Man’s help, Val collects West’s lost sermons and leaves them as a legacy to society in the form of a book of “human teachings” (T. Williams, “*Battle of Angels* New Outline” and “Notes on New Ideas”). As he was considering ideas for revisions, Williams stopped short of what was probably the politically minded Piscator’s suggestion to have the Conjure Man use the museum from the prologue and epilogue “for sociological instruction.” As a southerner, Williams was convinced that “such a thing would not be tolerated by the white citizens of Mississippi, especially if the posters etc. had ‘radical’ implications” (“Notes on New Ideas”). Piscator’s insistence that the play carry a political message “representing the South as a fascist state” upset Williams, and he eventually abandoned the project (T. Williams, Letter to Edwina Williams, [ca. mid-Feb. 1942]). The version of *Battle of Angels* published in 1945 was Williams’s 1941 rewrite of the play.

¶143 During the late 1940s and early 1950s, Williams continued reworking the manuscript of *Battle of Angels*, and by 1957 a new play, *Orpheus Descending*, emerged from the revisions. *Orpheus* aligns the story of Val and Myra—now called Lady—with that of Orpheus and Eurydice. In *Orpheus Descending*, Williams discards the prologue and epilogue and their distancing effect, but indicates throughout the stage directions that he wants the play to leave a “nonrealistic” impression (9). The mysterious Conjure Man and Val are more directly linked in this version—Williams has the Conjure Man utter a Native American “Choctaw cry,” which announces Val’s arrival and contributes to the anti-realistic effect Williams desired (T. Williams, *Orpheus Descending* 19, 85–86). In the new script, Williams establishes tighter relationships between his other characters as well. He makes

Lady the tough-talking, business-minded daughter of an Italian immigrant who operated a wine garden and was killed when a group of local men set fire to his establishment because he sold alcohol to African Americans.

¶144 The economic aspect of Lady's marriage to Jabe is emphasized when it is revealed that he "bought" her "at a fire sale" after David left her and she aborted his baby (39, 54). The idea that Lady was pregnant in her youth makes her current pregnancy a repetition of the past and Val a direct substitute for David. When Lady finds out that Jabe was the leader of the gang who set her father's property on fire, her eagerness to redecorate the confectionery as an orchard acquires a concrete motive—revenge—in addition to symbolizing her renewed hope in life. Jabe, in this version, is also directly responsible for Val's murder, since it is he, not Myra/Lady, who cries out the lie that Val has robbed the store (74–75, 95).

¶145 By the time Williams rewrote *Battle of Angels* to create *Orpheus Descending*, he had grown as a writer. He cut some of his early ideas from the play, such as "the rather pompous stuff about [Val's] book," and eliminated Vee's picture of Val/Jesus, although he maintained the details of Vee's deceptive vision (T. Williams, Letter to Lawrence Langner, 20 June 1945). In a bold addition to the play, Lady openly asks Jabe's nurse about using morphine to make her husband die, a question that, much like the mention of abortion, would have been impossible to put in front of an audience seventeen years earlier. On the whole, *Orpheus Descending* preserves the main themes of *Battle of Angels* and represents an experienced writer's polished revision of one of his early plays. Still, neither *Orpheus* nor *The Fugitive Kind*, a 1960 film based on the play, was commercially successful. Even as Williams's skills developed, he was unable to harness successfully the romantic symbolism of what remains an immature work.

¶146 After his experience with *Battle of Angels* in Boston, Williams did not trust the Theatre Guild again with new plays. While he praised the Guild's "idealism" in staging *Battle of Angels* ("History" 278), he nevertheless complained that the Guild had "messed up" his first professional production (qtd. in Van Gelder) and accused Helburn and Langner of putting their "commercial" interests above "artistic" considerations (Letter to Edwina Williams, [Summer 1940]). The only significant way in which Williams collaborated with the Theatre Guild again was to let Helburn and Langner produce radio versions of *Summer and Smoke* in 1949 and *The Glass Menagerie* in 1951 and 1953.⁵ While *Battle of Angels* did not succeed when the Theatre Guild staged it, credit should go to Helburn and Langner for recognizing Tennessee Williams's potential as a playwright long before most other producers in the American theatre did. The Guild's producers also deserve recognition for providing Williams with notes on his early manuscript that guided his later revisions and suggested the basic plot pattern of *Orpheus Descending*.

Notes

¹ See handwritten notes in *Battle of Angels* Press Book, Theatre Guild Collection.

² For example: "Plays Here," *Boston Globe* 31 Dec. 1940; Alexander Williams, "Miriam Hopkins Opens in Theater Guild's New Drama of South, *Battle of Angels*," *Boston Herald* 31 Dec. 1940; Joyce Dana, "*Battle of Angels* Opens on Wilbur's Stage," *Boston Record* 31 Dec. 1940. All reviews are in the *Battle of Angels* Press Book, Theatre Guild Collection.

³ Williams had already tried unsuccessfully to change the fiery ending of *Battle of Angels* after the pre-opening-night dress rehearsal in Boston. He deemed his first attempt at revising the ending "dreadful" and pointed out that "nobody paid any attention to it" (T. Williams, "History" 283–84).

⁴ By 1948, Langner was ready to stage *Battle of Angels* at Westport "in any form that Tennessee wants it produced," but even this offer fell on deaf ears (Langner, Letter to Audrey Wood, 3 Nov. 1948).

⁵ In the 1950s, Williams also allowed members of the Theatre Guild to produce two of his one-acts. Langner produced *27 Wagons Full of Cotton* at the Westport Country Playhouse in 1956, and the Theatre Guild staged *Portrait of a Madonna* on Broadway in 1959.

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