

Prophecy and Conspiracy in Early Modern England



Selected Papers
from the “Shakespeare and His Contemporaries”
Graduate Conference
The British Institute of Florence
Florence, 22 April 2016

Edited by
Giuliana Iannaccaro and Massimiliano Morini

THE BRITISH INSTITUTE OF FLORENCE



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Preface

Alessandra Petrina

The construction on the part of the Tudor dynasty of a mythical genealogy that would connect them directly with King Arthur (as highlighted by the choice of the name of Arthur for Henry VII's first-born and heir presumptive) is nowhere more evident than in the prophetic and sibylline discourse articulated around the ascent to the throne and coronation of each sixteenth-century monarch. No sovereign more than Queen Elizabeth surrounded him/herself with an aura of prophetic utterance and apocalyptic discourse, in the attempt to exorcise the sense of impending disaster that dominated English political life in the second half of the sixteenth century, as the preoccupations about Elizabeth's possibilities to conceive a legitimate heir became more and more pressing (Malay 2011). A few years after Elizabeth's death, we find this discourse crystallized in literary matter: in his Jacobean play *All is True, or Henry VIII*, written in collaboration with John Fletcher, Shakespeare gives voice to prophetic utterance by having Archbishop Cranmer, inspired by Elizabeth's baptism, foretell her future greatness (Act V, scene iv). Staged at a moment in which the Queen was already a memory, this extraordinary scene resonates with the topics discussed in this book in a number of ways: on the one hand, it reaffirms the close links between prophecy and politics, which form the focus of the majority of contributions in the present volume; on the other, it exploits the literary function of the above-mentioned prophecy, which becomes simply a proleptic statement based on the readers' or listeners' own propensity to anagnorisis, and creates an occasion for dramatic irony (Cave 1988; Boitani 2014). Finally, that specific prophecy is strategically situated at the unfolding of Elizabeth's baptism, a key moment in the public representation of early modern political life, as shown by the baptismal celebrations staged by James VI/I for his son Henry. The rite of baptism consecrates the continuation of the monarchical dynasty while ensuring both present and future stability, with the King irrevocably made into a father of his own children and of his subjects (McManus 2000).

The baptismal prophecy in *Henry VIII* can thus function as a *mise-en-abîme* of the whole concept as it is investigated and exploited in early modern England. Unlike sibylline prophecy, which hints at near apocalypse and imminent doom, early modern political prophecy generally works to alleviate the burden of time, and is thus often the outcome of propaganda. Once again, the Tudors excelled in this strategy: just as they used the mythical, Arthurian past to legitimize their role, so would they employ eschatological narrative (tapping into the restlessness and anxiety generated by Reformation and Counter Reformation) in order to locate their own succession into an inevitable sequence of God-ordained governments. Their mythical genealogy harked back to the fabled King Arthur; analogously, their use of prophecy echoes what we witness in the early centuries of the Christian era, in which prophecy established, in political terms, the continuity between pagan and Christian times.

Prophecy had also been explored by English writers of the previous centuries at a more personal, intimate level, and elaborated into a complex poetic system: "God turne us every drem to goode!", exclaims the narrator in the opening line of Chaucer's *House of Fame*, and the exclamation opens up a space of exploration that turns the poem into a progress of self-discovery, involving the reader in this search with its use of *us* (Benson 1987: 348). As shown

by late medieval poets such as Geoffrey Chaucer and John Lydgate, prophecy finds its ideal literary utterance in the dream vision, a poem in which the dream encapsulates and solves the courtly love debate, opening up a space for the exploration of the lover's inner life. Dream literature is functional, and in fact may be considered a genre at the service of the prophetic mode; the proliferation of this form in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century poetry allows for great experimentation and even for parody, thus handing to the English Renaissance a sophisticated modality that could be turned to a public or a political purpose (Kruger 1992; Spearing 1976). We must therefore suppose a much more sophisticated early modern reader than we are, a reader who would recognize in the modality of prophecy the establishment of a special triangulation between author, character and reader, a triangulation that finds its solution in anagnorisis. Unlike what happens with real-life prophecies, literary utterances are not simply verifiable thanks to the passage of time: the reader, or spectator, can immediately test them by relying on the discrepancy between his/her own time and literary time. The future of the characters is often the recent past of the audience (as is obviously the case with Shakespeare and Fletcher's *Henry VIII*), and by catching up with the audience, the character experiences a moment of self-awareness. Inevitably, Shakespeare recognizes the inherent irony of this game of time, and plays on the old/new value of the prophecy at the end of *The Winter's Tale*: "This news, which is called true, is so like an *old* tale that the verity of it is in strong suspicion" (Pafford 1963: 147; italics mine). But many of Shakespeare's contemporaries saw in literary prophecy a political instrument rather than simply an elegant narrative game: they drew prophecy away from love, and closer to conspiracy.

A number of texts written in Tudor and Stuart England feature sibyls, prophets, holy men and women, or soothsayers and magicians; on the other hand, conspiracy is often at the heart of early modern narratives and dramatic actions. Such themes are to be understood in their wider connotations: they can be investigated in the political, religious, social, or literary context, taking into account all literary genres. If the link with the literature of the previous two centuries is highlighted by the level of rhetorical awareness shown by the writer in the use of prophecy, the relation with prophetic utterances in classical antiquity underlines a different theme, that is the relevance of prophecy for the community, rather than simply for the individual. The political value of prophecy and conspiracy is also shown by their respective etymologies: if the word *conspiracy* underlines the sense of a community *breathing together*, and together giving utterance to a pact that will give substance to an evil purpose, the word *prophecy* rather highlights the idea of a pronouncement anticipating events: communication precedes and therefore predetermines action. The relation of prophecy with politics is almost inevitable: the moment in which you try to pre-determine the future, you are also acting not simply on the individual but on the community. Prophecy, especially self-fulfilling prophecy (here discussed by Melissa Pullara), thus contains an element of political manipulation.

As is the case with all the volumes publishing the proceedings of the IASEMS Graduate Conference, held every year at the British Institute in Florence, this collection welcomes the double contribution of linguistic and literary studies to early modern scholarship. The volume opens with Massimiliano Morini's linguistic investigation, which focuses on the use of words associated with perception in *Much Ado about Nothing*. Through an analysis of key words, Morini subtly teases out the relationship between fashion and appearance in this play – a relationship that is crucial, of course, to early modern England, as shown by Stephen Greenblatt *et al.* (Greenblatt 1980), but, as Morini highlights, is expressed in the comedy in outright condemnatory terms. Shakespeare uses the reiteration of the concept of fashion to stress its link with deception, and as such turns it into the prime mover of a play based on seeming, deceiving, counterfeiting. The essay also suggests an interesting development of the communicative function of prophecy: by inserting allusions to *fashion* in the play,

Shakespeare implicitly suggests the role of words as fashioners, and by implication their role in the complex mechanics of make-believe, which are given shape and articulated by conspiracy.

Close reading is a rewarding practice throughout this book. If Morini uses the rather unpredictable frequency of the word *fashion* to shed light on the text's sophisticated interplay between appearing and constructing one's own and others' appearance, Melissa Pullara focuses on an often overlooked detail in Sidney's *Arcadia*: the intervention of the Delphic oracle, the prophetic instrument by definition in classical antiquity, within the atmosphere of romance. If prophecy is an attempt to subvert the natural order of the cosmos (as it develops in time) by the pre-determination of events, then it finds its downfall in that very same natural order – and this is clearly shown in *Arcadia* by having Basilius move to the country. The Arcadian setting thus becomes the acid test. The harmony that needs to be established between body politic and body natural, so important not only to the king's successful rule but also to the welfare of the kingdom, is disrupted by the attempt, on the part of the body politic, to usurp the role and functions of the body natural. The allusion to the Delphic oracle thus works in two directions: on the one hand, it highlights the classical authority underlying the concept of prophecy; on the other, it works in conjunction with the Arcadian setting to make explicit the prophetic potential inherent in a classical context. *Arcadia* is therefore linked to its classical aura, while the connection with medieval romance is less strongly felt. Pullara suggests that this might also have implications for the development of Sidney's political reflection, as he himself endured a forced, "Arcadian" exile. Philip Sidney's literary output is central to the prophetic issue, as clearly shown in *An Apology for Poetry*:

Among the Romans a poet was called *vates*, which is as much as a diviner, foreseer, or prophet, as by his conjoined words *vaticinium* and *vaticinari* is manifest: so heavenly a title did that excellent people bestow upon this heart-ravishing knowledge. And so far were they carried into the admiration thereof, that they thought in the chanceable hitting upon any such verses great foretokens of their following fortunes were placed (Sidney 1973: 98).

Thus, it is not only the poet who is possessed with prophetic power; the poetic text itself, unbeknownst to its author and even to its reader, can deliver portentous omens. Sidney is instrumental in linking poetry and prophecy in a way that, being offered in a poetical treatise, becomes prescriptive. Pullara also suggests a link between the Arcadian setting, the classical allusions, and the Oedipus myth; the role of prophecy thus becomes that of a *machine infernale*, to quote Jean Cocteau. Pullara's analysis allows us to look at the cultural background against which Elizabethan prophecies flourished.

We come back to Shakespeare with Michela Compagnoni's analysis of the prophetic witches in *Macbeth*. Here Compagnoni deals with the thorny issue of the identity of the witches, who have been often categorised very simply among the women persecuted in the infamous witch-trials in early modern England. Although such a categorisation makes good historical sense, it tells us little about the poetic elaboration of the witches in Shakespeare's Scottish tragedy and in other texts, from James I's *Daemonologie* to Rowley, Dekker and Ford's *The Witch of Edmonton*. Compagnoni, instead, aligns her view with the reading that sees the witches as a projection of the protagonist's tortured mind. In her contribution, they are rather seen within the context of the play as an objectified representation of the hallucinations generated by Macbeth's brain – visible to Banquo (and to the spectators), and thus possessed of independent identity, yet uncannily voicing Macbeth's inmost thoughts and even anticipating his very words. The whole play is thus a monstrous echoing chamber, in which Macbeth can hear his resolutions before he dares give them shape. In thus working between past and future, the prophecies in *Macbeth* also work as a powerful commentary on time, in a cultural moment in which different conceptions of time were clashing: as

Compagnoni notes in the closing sentences of her contribution, in the play “time is chased, jumped, felt, and grasped”. Thus prophecy is not only a revelation of the future: it also becomes a pronouncement on the present.

Shakespeare’s later plays transcend the notion of time and history by subsuming prophecy within a higher order of things, symbolically represented in *The Winter’s Tale* by the recurring alchemical metaphors. Martina Zamparo, working on this late play, establishes a correlation between the use of alchemical imagery and the exploitation of prophecy: the play is read in parallel with contemporary alchemical texts, offering the background that Shakespeare’s audience would probably have been familiar with. This reading allows Paulina to emerge as the figure of prophecy, thus underlining the close relationship between prophecy and the art of healing – both, as Zamparo reminds us, symbolised by Apollo, but here intriguingly incarnated by a woman, and thus recalling the Delphic oracle alluded to earlier. At the same time, Paulina’s role becomes powerfully connected with the *opus alchymicum* she symbolises, bringing to completion a cycle of redemption and final harmony.

Finally, Shakespeare is also at the centre of Carmen Gallo’s contribution, dedicated to *All is True, or Henry VIII*, the history play alluded to in the opening lines of this Preface. *Henry VIII* is a play in which prophecy creates an effective bridge between past and future, annihilating all distance in a millenarian envisioning of an eternally happy present. This eternal recurrence is symbolised, as Gallo aptly notes, by the image of the phoenix, evoked in Thomas Cranmer’s final prophecy: the present King, James I, as the mystical descendant of Elizabeth, perpetuates the latter’s benevolent aura. At the same time, however, Shakespeare has unmasked for us the distorted, propaganda-driven use of prophecy by implicitly comparing the true vision of Archbishop Cranmer and the conspiratorial machinations of Cardinal Wolsey and Bishop Gardiner. The manipulation of prophetic discourse showcases the powerful role of rhetoric in this play, and by implication in all political discourse.

Giuliana Iannaccaro, in her concluding essay, neatly opens with a quotation from Oscar Wilde, reminding us of the inextricable links between prophecy and writing. This is evident in the case of non-religious texts, such as the ones hitherto examined; Iannaccaro, however, explores these links by looking at more explicitly religious literature, chosen among seventeenth-century radical tracts, the result of the so-called “pamphlet wars” of the English Revolution. In so doing, she shows how often the dividing line between prophecy and conspiracy simply depends on the reader.

Literary prophecy thus turns into a form of conspiracy between author and reader, at the characters’ expense. By then, the printing revolution had become an established fact in early modern Europe, and the word had acquired a hitherto unknown power, making the far-ranging consequences of a prophecy uttered within a printed text impossible to sound, even for its author, given the uncontrollable distribution of publications. Chaucer had given prophetic glimpses to his musing lovers in order to allow them a step forward in the progress towards self-knowledge; Shakespeare had staged prophecy as manipulation, a process of political persuasion. By the mid-seventeenth century, prophecies in England are indissolubly bound to the development of political life at large; they often ‘conspire’ against institutions, and aim at the regeneration of a whole nation. That is why they are no longer addressed only to the chosen few, to authorities and policy makers, but are meant to affect also the life of the middle and low sorts of people, dangerously urging their political action.

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“Out on thee, seeming!”

Fashioning Plots in *Much Ado About Nothing*

Massimiliano Morini

Introduction: historical, Shakespearean, computational stylistics

One of the main difficulties of literary stylistics is disentangling the stylistician’s “subjective” stance from the “objective” methods of linguistic research. Geoffrey Leech and Mick Short defined the question by making reference to Spitzer’s *Zirkel im Verstehen*, or “philological circle”, as they called it: the researcher’s insight is guided by linguistic observation, but the latter depends on the researcher’s habits and prejudices. Spitzer (1962: 19), Leech and Short (2007: 12) actually regarded the circle as virtuous, a method for guiding and enhancing the analyst’s intuitions: but the stylistician can also be seen as trapped into a *vicious* circle of understanding, unable to find anything that he/she did not set out looking for in the beginning (Morini 2009: 62).

This is all the more true in relation to Shakespeare, for two reasons related to the massive weight of previous scholarship. On the one hand, the abundance of studies on every portion of the Shakespearean canon limits the stylistician’s insight even more: if the topic of one’s article is the centrality of appearances in *Much Ado About Nothing*, it becomes all but impossible to ignore the works that have been written on the subject (Lewalski 1968; Henze 1971; Dawson 1982; Dobranski 1998). On the other hand, and conversely, that abundance of studies will force him/her to choose a limited, previously unexplored linguistic aspect of the work under scrutiny: in the present case, the distribution of words of perception like “seem” and “appear” in *Much Ado About Nothing*. Guided and limited in this way, the analyst will end up demonstrating very little that was not inscribed in the terms of his/her research: words of perception, he/she will inevitably conclude, are crucial to the linguistic texture of the play.

To escape this double bind, at least partly, recourse is made here to some of the methods of computational stylistics, a sub-discipline with rather a long history but a limited number of adherents (see Mahlberg 2016 for a recent overview of the field). In the following analysis, the text of *Much Ado About Nothing* is sifted through by means of the concordancing program AntConc¹ – again, with a view to observing the behaviour of the words listed above. But since any preliminary selection on the analyst’s part runs the risk of skewing the results, one computational tool is used (the keyness table) whose workings are only marginally influenced by human agency. The ensuing keyword list thereby created contains at least one surprising term (“fashion”) which somewhat shifts the balance of the study, and has made its way into the title.

¹ Version 3.4.4.0: developed by Laurence Anthony at Waseda University, Tokyo, and freely available online. The results of all searches are included in the article not in the rather unwieldy form in which they appear, but as reformulated electronic tables. For quickness of reference, I also used the concordances of the excellent opensource-shakespeare.org site.

Two preliminary things remain to be said about, respectively, the nature of the analysis and the texts used here for computational purposes. Firstly, this article is a brief essay in historical stylistics, and as such it intends to contribute to this growing field (for an overview, see Busse 2016), as well as to a small but growing body of work on Shakespearean stylistics (see for instance Ravassat and Culpeper 2011). While no reference is made to the work of Shakespeare's contemporaries, the analysis of *Much Ado About Nothing* is conducted with an eye to the rest of his dramatic corpus: thus, any linguistic traits thought to be significant are measured against similar traits in other plays, in order to verify whether they are really foregrounded or just habitual in the writer's style.

Secondly, when one is working on texts that are several centuries old, and with complex editorial vicissitudes, the question is: what is one analyzing exactly – and what is one feeding into one's concordancing program? In this case, the texts for both *Much Ado About Nothing* and the rest of Shakespeare's dramatic corpus are those provided by World Library, Inc. for Project Gutenberg (1990-1993), for the very simple reason that these are available in various formats including .txt, which is the one on which AntConc runs.² However, since the World Library edition does not take into account all the variants and alternative versions, a philological edition has been checked for all the searches conducted below, and used for line references (Jowett, Montgomery, Taylor and Wells 2005). As regards *Much Ado About Nothing*, this comedy is fortunately one of the least problematic in the Shakespearean corpus: but both the Quarto and the Folio versions have been consulted for all the relevant passages and searches, and annotations have been added whenever necessary.

The analysis: fashionable appearances

Everything that takes place within the dramatic space of *Much Ado About Nothing* does so because somebody is plotting against (or in favour of, as the plotter may see it) somebody else. Beatrice and Benedick's friends hatch a conspiracy to convince the two "merry warriors" that they are really in love with each other. Don John and his henchmen work their dramatic tricks to make Claudio and Don Pedro believe that Hero, Claudio's betrothed, is unfaithful. Friar Francis talks Hero's family and Benedick into pretending that the young lady is dead, so as to discover the truth and inspire repentance in the princes.

Since all these plots are based on some kind of metatheatrical representation, it comes as no surprise to learn that *Much Ado About Nothing* is one of the plays in which the main verbs of perception, setting up the basic contrast between appearance and reality, occur most frequently. "Appear", for instance (declined in all its forms), is used seventeen times – a figure matched only by *Antony and Cleopatra* in the whole Shakespearean corpus (Table 1). "Seem" in all its forms is repeated thirteen times – a result that is matched or exceeded by a number of plays, most of them, however, being tragedies or problem comedies (Table 2). If one adds to these findings that nouns signifying appearance and perception – such as "appearance" (one occurrence), "semblance" (three), and "sign" (four) – can only be found in *Much Ado About Nothing* and in more or less selected groups of plays, one has to conclude that this comedy is very interested in (false) appearances and (erroneous) interpretations of reality.

² Also, the standardised spelling of this edition makes it easier and more profitable to feed into a concordancing program.

#	Play	Appear*
1.	<i>Much Ado About Nothing</i>	17
2.	<i>The Tragedy of Antony and Cleopatra</i>	17
3.	<i>The Winter's Tale</i>	15
4.	<i>The Life of Henry the Fifth</i>	14
5.	<i>The Tragedy/History of King Lear</i> ³	12

Table 1 – Appear

#	Play	Seem*
1.	<i>The Winter's Tale</i>	26
2.	<i>The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark</i>	22
3.	<i>The Tragedy/History of King Lear</i>	21
4.	<i>Measure for Measure</i>	20
5.	<i>The Tragedy of Macbeth</i>	19
6.	<i>The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice</i>	19
7.	<i>Coriolanus</i>	18
8.	<i>Pericles, Prince of Tyre</i>	17
9.	<i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i>	15
10.	<i>Cymbeline, King of Britain</i>	15
11.	<i>The Tragedy of King Richard the Second</i>	14
12.	<i>Much Ado About Nothing</i>	13

Table 2 – Seem

So far so good – but also, as anticipated in section one, so self-explanatory: it is, after all, hardly surprising that a play whose title puns on the phonetic closeness of “nothing” and “noting” (Hockey 1957), and whose plot is made up of multiple plots the nature of which is theatrical, should be obsessed with appearances. One notices, for instance, the presence of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in Table 2 as the only other “unproblematic” comedy that is centred on the illusory nature of human perceptions; and in both Tables, the high percentage of tragedies is a reminder that *Much Ado About Nothing* differs from, say, *Hamlet* only in that the evil plotting characters do not succeed in their schemes.

A more interesting way of using technology to investigate the text is running a keyness search to compare the lexicon of this particular play with that of all the others. Keyness, in corpus linguistics, is the quality certain words possess that makes them more central than others in a certain text or corpus. “Key words are not necessarily the most frequent words [...]”, in Jane Evison’s definition (2010: 127; see also O’Halloran 2010), “but they are those words which are identified by statistical comparison of a ‘target’ corpus with another, larger corpus, which is referred to as the ‘reference’ or ‘benchmark’ corpus”. In this case, the target corpus is obviously *Much Ado About Nothing*, while the reference corpus is all the other Shakespearean plays.

³ There is no difference in the count between the Quartos and the Folio, either for Table 1 or Table 2.

1. cousin	11. love	21. toothache	31. innocent	41. sad
2. man	12. orchard	22. wooed	32. excellent	42. wear
3. god	13. sex	23. marriage	33. unmasks	43. examination ⁴
4. fashion	14. write	24. cupid	34. wise	44. hear
5. niece	15. window	25. examine	35. possible	45. accusation
6. wit	16. arbour	26. flout	36. sigh	46. bestowed
7. villainy	17. deformed	27. neighbour	37. heavily	47. swore
8. brother	18. bull	28. affection	38. visor	48. moral
9. marry	19. slander	29. truly	39. think	49. worship
10. daughter	20. belied	30. curst	40. wedding	50. husband

Table 3 – Keyness

Table 3 shows the first 50 key terms after function words have been pruned from the list. Again, the presence of many of these terms is only to be expected in a play about thwarted weddings, plots, false appearances and evil discoveries. There are words which belong to the semantic fields of love, marriage and the battle of the sexes (“man”, “marry”, “sex”, “wooed”, “marriage”, “cupid”, “husband”); of family ties (“cousin” in pride of place; and then “niece”, “brother”, “daughter”); of moral and legal accusation and defence (“villainy”, “slander”, “examine”, “innocent”, “examination”, “accusation”). Some of the items in the list confirm that understanding and misunderstanding what happens is indeed a crucial concern: “belied”, “unmasks”, “visor”, “think”, “hear”. Other words relate to the merry war between Benedick and Beatrice, or to the tricks played to make them fall in love with each other and to the places in which these tricks are played: “wit”, “orchard”, “window”, “arbour”, “curst”, “wise”. Finally, the presence of “god” in third position is mostly due to the classical allusions in the text.

There is, however, at least one term which stands very high in the table whose connection with the rest is not immediately evident: this is “fashion”, in fourth position. A concordance recognition of all the plays reveals that this word is used seventeen times in *Much Ado About Nothing*, a figure which more than doubles the occurrences in *Hamlet*, the next play in these particular standings. Furthermore, if the list is widened to include all words that contain “fashion” as a noun or inflect it as a verb, the number increases to twenty-one: the four extra forms are “fashion’d”, “fashions”, “fashioning”, and “fashion-monging”, all of them very rare in the Shakespearean corpus. “Fashion-monging”, in fact, is a nonce-compound, only nearly matched by a “fashion-mongers” in a play that displays many similarities of plot to *Much Ado About Nothing*, i.e., *The Most Excellent and Lamentable Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet*.

As seen with these inflected and compound versions, of course, the concordancing program does not make any distinctions between different morphological forms of a term, the corpus in question having been left completely clean and un-marked up (Sinclair 1991: 21). In the case of “fashion”, the uninflected form can be used either as a verb or a noun – and when used as a noun, then included in such adjectival participles as “fashion-monging”, and never uttered with a positive connotation. The latter compound, in point of fact, is a good example of the bad semantic prosody that “fashion”, as a noun and a concept, acquires in this play: it is included by Antonio in his list of contumelies against Claudio and Don Pedro, when he is

⁴ While there are three occurrences of “examination” in the Quarto (and in the e-text used for the keyness table), the editors of the 1623 Folio lose one of them by amending Dogberry’s comic use of the term as a verb in III, 5, 56 (“examination these men”).

convinced that his niece has been slandered by these “boys, apes, braggarts, jacks, milksops!” (V, 1, 91; and the fact that it is not clear whether he is acting or not is another confirmation of the play’s concern with appearances):

[...] What, man, I know them, yea,
 And what they weigh, even to the utmost scruple.
 Scrambling, outfacing, fashion-monging boys,
 That lie, and cog, and flout, deprave, and slander,
 And speak off half a dozen dangerous words,
 How they might hurt their enemies, if they durst,
 And this is all. (V, 1, 93-100)

The idea of fashion is here associated with slandering falseness and braggadocio – as if people who cover their true image with the latest articles of clothing were bound to also cover their cowardice and their moral turpitude beneath the veneer of wordy self-assurance. Elsewhere, the impression that “fashion” is mostly used with its pejorative connotations is confirmed when Beatrice accuses Benedick of changing his allegiances as easily “as the fashion of his hat” (I, 1, 72), and when Benedick privately berates the lovelorn Claudio for having become more interested in the garb of his peacetime clothes than in the efficacy of his warlike accoutrements (“now will he lie ten nights awake carving the fashion of a new doublet”; II, 3, 16-17). But the most surprising and sustained attack against “fashion” is to be found in Borachio’s drunken confession of his crime (i.e., falsely staging Hero’s unfaithfulness) in the presence of his associate, Conrad, and of the overhearing watch. The passage must be quoted at some length for all its associations to be fully appreciated:

BORACHIO. [...] Thou knowest that the *fashion* of a doublet, or a hat, or a cloak, is nothing to a man.

CONRAD. Yes, it is apparel.

BORACHIO. I mean the *fashion*.

CONRAD. Yes, the *fashion* is the *fashion*.

BORACHIO. Tush, I may as well say the fool’s the fool. But seest thou not what a deformed thief this *fashion* is? [...] Sees thou not, I say, what a deformed thief this *fashion* is, how giddily it turns about all the hot-bloods between fourteen and five-and-thirty, sometimes *fashioning* them like Pharaoh’s soldiers in the reechy painting, sometime like god Bel’s priest in the old church window [...]

CONRAD. All this I see, and I see that the *fashion* wears out more apparel than the man. But art not thou giddy with the *fashion*, too, that thou hast shifted out of thy tale into telling me of the *fashion*?

BORACHIO. Not so, neither. But know that I have tonight wooed Margaret, the Lady Hero’s gentlewoman, by the name of Hero. [...] I tell this tale vilely, I should first tell thee how the Prince, Claudio, and my master, planted and placed and possessed by my master, Don John, saw afar off in the orchard this amiable encounter.

CONRAD. And thought they Margaret was Hero?

BORACHIO. Two of them did, the Prince and Claudio, but the devil my master knew she was Margaret, and partly by his oaths, which first possessed them, partly by the dark night, which did deceive them, but chiefly by my villainy, which did confirm any slander that Don John had made, away went Claudio enraged, swore he would meet her [...] shame her with what he saw o’ernight, and send her home again without a husband. (III, 5, 113-156; italics mine).

Apart from accounting for almost half of the occurrences of “fashion” and derivatives in the whole play (but even without this scene, *Much Ado About Nothing* would still be the most fashion-obsessed work in the entire corpus), this passage is very interesting for the firm parallel it establishes between the way people dress and how they occasionally dress up

reality in order to deceive others. After opening the exchange by boasting that he got a thousand ducats off Don John, Borachio appears to go off on a conversational tangent – so much so that Conrad reprimands him at least three times: twice by confirming, rather irritably, that he knows what his interlocutor is talking about (“Yes, it is apparel”; “Yes, the fashion is the fashion”); and another time by asking him if he is not himself “giddy with the fashion, too, that thou hast shifted out of thy tale into telling me of the fashion”. Borachio, however, repeatedly veers the exchange back towards the topic he seems so interested in (“I mean the fashion”; “But seest thou not what a deformed thief this fashion is?”); and then, when Conrad accuses him of drifting off, insists that what may appear as a digression is really crucial to the story he is going to tell (“Not so, neither. But know that I have tonight wooed Margaret [...]).

In linguistic terms, Conrad is protesting against what he sees as a breach of the maxim of relevance, while Borachio insists that all his talk about fashion is actually, if not evidently, relevant (Grice 1991: 22-57; Sperber and Wilson 1986). Any inferential work on the reader’s part, here, must involve some extended, figurative meaning of the word “fashion”: the most immediate implicature being that staging a false adultery is like dressing up to seem what one is not; that apparel has deceptive qualities which are analogous to those of low-like theatrical tricksters.⁵

Interestingly, when Borachio finally tells his story, he is not so much describing a scene as relating how the spectators of that scene reacted to it, how they experienced it through the conduit of their senses. The passage is filled with verbs of perception: the teller himself introduces it by inviting his hearer to “know”; Claudio and Don Pedro “saw afar off” the “amiable encounter” between Margaret and himself; they “thought” that Margaret was Hero; and Claudio, enraged, “swore he would [...] shame her with what he *saw*” (italics mine). The two noblemen are “possessed” by Don John’s “oaths” and Borachio’s “villainy” – i.e., they are deceived by their ears and eyes, and by the poor rational use they make of their fallacious sensory evidence. The only mental-process verb that expresses certainty (“knew”) is attributed to Don John, who, as the master-puppeteer of the whole scene (though the initiative is Borachio’s), does not need to rely on mere appearances.

If Borachio’s implicative logic is followed throughout the passage, it appears that this sensory “slander”, leading to false rational conclusions on the part of the prince and the count, has to do with the “fashion” in which the whole scene has been presented. And in point of fact, though of course the success of this plot is also due to Don John’s preparation and the “dark night”, a great part of its efficacy is a matter of dressing up – not only of reality, but also of the characters in the play. Later, when Borachio confesses his misdeed, he says that Claudio and Don Pedro “saw me court Margaret in Hero’s garments”. It seems, after all, that fashion has a literal as well as a metaphorical role to play.

A strong confirmation of the centrality of “fashion” to the concerns of the play is obtained by looking at the instances in which the word is used as a verb. Three out of four occurrences are to be found in scenes in which a set of characters is plotting to deceive another set, and are used to define the operation and ends of their trickery:⁶

1. DON PEDRO. Come, you shake the head at so long a breathing, but I warrant thee, Claudio, the time shall not go dully by us. I will in the interim undertake one of Hercules’ labours, which is to bring Signor Benedick and the Lady Beatrice into a mountain of affection th’one with th’other. I would fain have it a match, and I doubt not but to fashion it, if you three will but minister such assistance as I shall give you direction. (II, 1, 339-348)

⁵ On early modern anxieties about the deceptive, “disfiguring” properties of apparel, see Pugliatti 2003.

⁶ These four occurrences are of the infinitive “fashion”; another verb form, “fashioning”, has already been seen to appear in Borachio’s tale.

2. BORACHIO. Go then. Find me a meet hour to draw Don Pedro and the Count Claudio alone.⁷ Tell them that you *know* that Hero loves me. *Intend a kind of* zeal both to the Prince and Claudio *as in* love of your brother's honour who hath made this match, and his friend's reputation who is thus like to be cozened with the *semblance* of a maid, that you have *discovered* thus. They will scarcely *believe* this without *trial*. Offer them *instances*, which shall bear no less *likelihood* than to *see* me at her chamber window, *hear* me call Margaret Hero, *hear* Margaret term me Claudio. And bring them to *see* this the very night before the intended wedding, for in the mean time I will so fashion the matter that Hero shall be absent, and there shall *appear* such *seeming* truth of Hero's disloyalty that jealousy shall be called *assurance*, and all the preparation overthrown. (II, 2, 29-45; italics mine)

3. FRIAR.

Marry, this, well carried, shall on her behalf
Change slander to remorse. [...]
When [Claudio] shall *hear* she died upon his words,
Th'*idea* of her life shall sweetly creep
Into his *study of imagination*,
And every lovely organ of her life
Shall come *apparelled* in more precious *habit*,
More moving-delicate, and full of life,
Than when she lived indeed. [...]
Let this be so, and doubt not but success
Will fashion the event in better shape [...] (IV, 1, 212-237; italics mine)

It is at the very least striking that all the main plotters in the play – Don Pedro, Borachio, and Friar Francis – use the verb “fashion” to define their machinations. Whether they aim to make an unlikely match, ruin a young lady's reputation or restore it, none of them seems to feel any qualms about creating a false version of reality to “cozen” (Borachio's term) everybody that is not in on the secret. The language used by Don Pedro, for instance, is indicative of his disregard for people's real feelings. His main purpose appears to be that of passing the time between the present moment and Claudio's wedding (“the time shall not go dully by us”); and it is significant that he does not say that Beatrice and Benedick are really in love with each other (and that he merely wants to make them wake up to the fact): on the contrary, he aims to bring them “into a mountain of affection th'one with th'other” – a construction presupposing that they are not, at present, into that mountain.

The other two passages are even more interesting, in that they combine the use of “fashion” as a verb with the language of perception and false appearances. Friar Francis, in order to repair the damages to Hero's good name (“Change slander to remorse”), does not hesitate to spread further lies. The false news of the young lady's death will act deceptively on Claudio's senses, when he “shall hear she died upon his words”. The “idea” of Hero's life, then – not Hero herself, but a sort of imaginative double – will “creep” into his “imagination”, falsely stimulated by sensory perceptions (“hear”) just as it was by Borachio and Margaret's little play-acting. Claudio will, as a consequence, fall even more in love with Hero than he was when she was alive: but it will be mere appearances, a covering sheen of imagination (“every lovely organ [...] Shall come apparelled in more precious habit”) that will bring about this change.

Borachio's description of how he is going to represent Hero's disloyalty is even clearer in linking the idea of “fashioning” an alternative version of reality with the operation of the senses – and particularly of the “higher” senses, sight and hearing (Lockerd 2011: 5). The

⁷ In the 1623 Folio, this passage becomes “draw *on* Pedro and the Count Claudio” (italics mine); while in what follows, the bizarre addition of an indeterminate article makes Borachio's meaning slightly obscure (“as in a love”).

outcome of this plot is dependent on what Claudio and Don Pedro are made to perceive and believe (“Tell them that you know”; “Intend”; “They will scarcely believe”; “[They will] see me [...] hear me [...] hear Margaret”; “bring them to see”). But what the two noblemen will be led to perceive and believe is, rather than reality, a set of appearances which, allied with the plotters’ actions (their “fashioning” of the scene), will be made to count as if they were the truth. In this passage, the contrast between appearance and reality is set up by the use of such words as “semblance”, “appear”, and “seeming” (the latter ironically modifying “truth”), as well as other terminology implicitly setting up a distinction between pretence and actuality, or between multiple layers of perception and belief (“a *kind of zeal*”; “*as in love of your brother’s honour*”; “that you have *discovered thus*”; italics mine).

Of course, the success of such machinations also depends on the gullibility of the victims. Claudio’s readiness to believe everything that is set before his eyes and whispered in his ear, in particular, has been noted by several commentators. Richard Henze (1971: 193; but see also Dawson 1982: 219; Cook 1986) links this naivety to the shallowness of his love for Hero:

Claudio effectively shows what happens when superficial romance and selfish, suspicious social concern are combined. His “love” for Hero is much too shallow to preserve him from doubting both his friend Don Pedro and Hero. When told that Don Pedro loves Hero, Claudio instantly believes “’Tis certain so” (II, 1, 181). [...] With Hero, Claudio’s suspicion is again immediate and so much in control of Claudio that he decides on Hero’s punishment before he has witnessed her crime: “If I see anything tonight why I should not marry her to-morrow, in the congregation where I should wed, there will I shame her.” (III, 2, 126-128).

Beneath the slightly moralistic tone in which the critic’s judgment is couched, there lurks a very good definition of Claudio’s *modus operandi* – or, more appositely, *iudicandi*. As well as hasty, possibly blinded by jealousy and/or the fear of social disgrace, Claudio is literally “superficial” and “shallow”: he is guided by visual and aural appearances, and never pauses to ask himself whether these, or the interpretation put upon them by some interested counsellor, might be deceptive. In this, the character of the young Florentine count shows no development at all from beginning to end. His initial infatuation is entirely visual, as shown by the verb-form “note” in the question addressed to Benedick, and by the fact that not a single word has so far been spoken between the two young “lovers”:

Benedick, didst thou note the daughter of Signor Leonato? (I, 1, 154-155)

When he repudiates her at the altar, he still seems obsessed with the appearances that he now believes to be false, mere “covers” for the rotten orange that is his betrothed’s supposed chastity; also, he is very quick to interpret any outward signs of Hero’s discomfort as further evidence of her guilt. Advocating as he does the right to decide what *is* and what merely *seems*, he ends up inverting the meaning of all the signs he reads:

She’s but the *sign* and *semblance* of her honour.
Behold *how like* a maid she blushes here!
O, what authority and *show of truth*
Can cunning sin *cover* itself withal!
Comes not that lood as modest *evidence*
To *witness* simple virtue? Would you not swear,
All you that *see* her, that she were a maid,
By these *exterior shows*? But she *is* none.
[...]
Out on thee, *seeming*! I will write against it.
You *seem* to me as Dian in her orb,

[...] But you *are* more intemperate in your blood [...] (IV, 1, 32-40, 56-59; italics mine)

Finally, on learning that Borachio and Don John have slandered Hero, Claudio seems to repent of his hastiness, and prepares himself to receive any kind of retribution that the young lady's family might be willing to inflict (he still believes her dead). But despite these honourable intentions, it must be noted that the terms he uses for Hero's restored fame are strikingly similar to the ones with which he had berated her:

Sweet Hero, now thy *image* doth *appear*
In the rare *semblance* that I loved it first. (V, 1, 243-244; italics mine)

This two-line sentence is made up of a main and a relative clause – which seem, at first, perfectly balanced, because one is ostensibly about Hero's virtue, the other about Claudio's feelings. However, it is to be noted that though "Hero" is present as a vocative, the subject of the main clause is actually "thy image" – not Hero, but the way Hero looked, inevitably, to Claudio. This image is said to "appear" (a shadow of a shadow) in a "semblance" (a shadow of a shadow of a shadow). Grammatically, it is this three-layered appearance, and not Hero herself, that Claudio loves: this is confirmed both by the logic of the relative and by the inclusion of "it" (as opposed to "you") as an object.

It is particularly noteworthy that Claudio uses the word "semblance" both to accuse Hero and to reinstate her in his high opinion: again, the impression is that he is only interested in the outward signs of excellence. It is worth mentioning, in this context, that "semblance" is used three times in *Much Ado About Nothing* (more than in any other play), and that the third above-mentioned occurrence also has strong negative connotations:

who is thus like to be cozened with the semblance of a maid (II, 2, 34-35).

Finally, while in his wedding accusations Claudio contrasts a verb of perception ("seem") with the existential "be", in the later passage he does not insist that Hero "is" or "is not" something. Again, the only thing he can say about his feelings for Hero is that she "appears" to him as a "rare semblance". And though the verb "appear", in this case, does not imply a contrast with some hidden actuality, it still characterises Claudio's opinions as shallow and superficial – thus underlining the play's obsession with deceptive surfaces. Claudio is the perfect victim of the other characters' machinations: he is indeed, as Benedick suggests in II, 3, more interested in the "fashion" of things than in their actuality, and can be easily blinded by the false appearances "fashioned" by the associates of Don John.

Conclusion: much ado about apparel

As foreseen at the beginning of this article, it is fairly easy to demonstrate that a play whose title puns on the verb-form "noting" is strongly concerned with outward appearances, and the correct (or, more often, wrong) interpretation of the same. One of the above quotations from Claudio's speeches, for instance, finds him asking Benedick if he did "note the daughter of Signor Leonato". What sounds like a throwaway comment between young men recently returned from the wars is turned into whole reason for a marriage alliance – and it is no wonder, then, that the foundations of that intended marriage turn out to be very shaky.

If *Much Ado About Nothing* is obsessed with the correct reading of "sign", "semblances" and outward "evidence", it is also because most of the characters try to manipulate signs, semblances and evidence for their own purposes. Don Pedro, Borachio/Don John and Friar

Francis all use false appearances with the purpose of altering reality, with varying degrees of success. Don Pedro, with the help of his confederates, succeeds into convincing Beatrice and Benedick that they are secretly in love with each other. Borachio/Don John successfully play on Claudio's jealousy and Don Pedro's inflated sense of honour – though their plot is eventually discovered, by courtesy of Borachio's drunken talkativeness and the Watch's hapless "noting" of what he says. Friar Francis's attempt to reinstate Hero's good name by staging her death largely fails, though it certainly makes for a spectacular final unveiling of Hero as the new bride, brought back to life.

The verb that is most commonly used to describe the actions of these master-plotters is, as seen above, "fashion" – as if any kind of organised deceit, any conspiracy, involved some dressing up of a simple, unassuming actuality. As seen above, the many occurrences of "fashion" as a noun also betray a general uneasiness, a mistrust of dress as a false "cover" for a man's or woman's body – and therefore for his/her identity.⁸ Another fashion-related term that has been mentioned but not discussed so far is "apparel". There are four occurrences of the word in *Much Ado About Nothing*, amounting to more than one-tenth of the total for the plays (39) – the highest figure for any single work except *The Taming of the Shrew* (7). Even more importantly, this play contains one of only six total occurrences in the whole oeuvre of the adjectival participle "apparelled" (or apparell'd). It is Friar Francis that uses the word in the above-quoted counter-plotting scene: and it is significant that his use is metaphorical, categorizing clothes, once again, as false appearances covering an ugly (though, in this case, equally misleading) reality:

And every lovely organ of her life
Shall come *apparelled* in more precious *habit* (italics mine)

Much Ado About Nothing has been called, with a cross-linguistic pun on Derrida's "jeu de signification", a "play of signification" (Dawson 1982: 221): a game in which clear meanings are scarce, and signifiers are apt to deceive their interpreters. However, while much has indeed been made of the "noting" part of the play, far less has been said so far about the process of signification itself – the process whereby certain characters assign meaning to mere superficial appearances, and by so doing set the play of false signifiers in motion. If most characters misinterpret the "dress" covering the true nature of things, it is often because other characters have "fashioned" a deceptive garb for reality. And as shown by the computational evidence, "fashion" in *Much Ado About Nothing* is at least as important as its victims.

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⁸ If my deixis is masculine here, it is because women characters are the only ones who speak of fashion in neutral, largely factual terms (see III, 4).

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Oedipus in Arcadia: The Literary and Political Implications of Prophetic Inversion in Elizabethan England

Melissa Pullara

In the *Old Arcadia*, Sir Philip Sidney anchors his narrative in a classical prophetic image: the Delphic oracle. While several early modern writers, before and after Sidney, make use of oracles and prophecy in various ways, Sidney's inclusion of the oracle *at Delphi* specifically signals a return to ancient Greece that is very much in the spirit of the Renaissance. In the *Arcadia*, however, Sidney's classical reference serves a contemporary purpose. He links ancient Greece to sixteenth-century England through prophecy, as both periods see a widespread dissemination of prophetic language, but for different reasons. J.C. Kamerbeek notes that in classical Greece daily life was "inextricably bound up with prophecy" (Kamerbeek 1965: 29): it was part of the very fabric of their spiritual and social beliefs. In Sidney's time, prophecy undergoes critical scrutiny and becomes an issue of contention between common believers and the ruling aristocracy. This paper will explore how Sidney takes advantage of prophecy's controversial position, using the Delphic oracle as a catalyst for socio-political upheaval in his narrative, which, ironically, becomes a kind of prophetic parable for Elizabethan England. Sidney uses prophecy in *Arcadia* both to justify the Queen's fears about its potential threat to the order of the state, and to convey his own desire for advancement at her court. While Sidney ultimately fails to find favour with Elizabeth, his artful manipulation of contemporary socio-political issues exemplifies the kind of literary ingenuity and wit for which he will be remembered long after his lifetime.

The Greek origins of Elizabethan prophecy

Sidney's reference to classical prophecy in his sixteenth-century narrative is practical as well as poetic. In her article on "Prophets, Seers and Politics in Greece, Israel and Early Modern Europe", Jan Bremmer traces the evolution of prophecy from ancient to early modern times. Bremmer notes that the nature of prophecy in the early modern period stemmed from medieval beliefs in prophetesses like the Sibyls, whose oracles "enjoyed enormous popularity in the Middle Ages and afterwards, not least because they were thought to contain the original predictions of the Delphic oracle" (Bremmer 1993: 167). Bremmer points to an implicit connection between early modern prophecy and the ancient prominence of the Delphic oracle, which, as I will demonstrate in the sections that follow, Sidney elucidates and exploits in the *Arcadia* to further his own political agenda. Nevertheless, Sidney departs from more ancient views on prophecy in the actual content of his narrative. Despite its classical Greek setting, the *Arcadia* condemns archaic views of prophecy as directly related to pagan and otherwise antiquated religions (Catholicism included). Sidney draws a parallel between ancient Greece and Renaissance England in order to demonstrate their inverse relationship to prophecy. Basilius, the Duke of Arcadia, appears somewhat estranged from Sidney's setting because his investment in prophecy is outdated – and, as a result, it leads him to tragedy. However, unlike

that of Basilius, Oedipus' infamous encounter with Delphic prophecy is truly tragic, because the events that follow are beyond his control. To demonstrate the inverse relationship that Sidney establishes between his classical setting and sixteenth-century views on prophecy, I will compare Basilius' actions in the *Arcadia* to Sophocles' Oedipus. I aim to highlight how Basilius' irresponsibility and unnatural actions lead him to foolishly abandon his political post – a dereliction of duty that thrusts both his family and his realm into unnecessary chaos.

Prophetic inversion and self-fulfilling prophecy

The absurdity of Basilius' reaction to the oracle's prophecy can be best characterised as what I propose to call "prophetic inversion". This is not to be confused with self-fulfilling prophecy, though prophetic inversion is the action through which self-fulfilling prophecies occur. Robert Merton defines self-fulfilling prophecy as "a false definition of the situation, evoking a new behaviour which makes the originally false conception come true" (Merton 1948: 195). Merton's definition focuses on the narrative trajectory of self-fulfilling prophecy: the beginning, wherein a crucial misinterpretation is made; the middle, wherein a new behaviour changes the otherwise regular course of action; and the end, where the prophecy eventually comes true because of the change in behaviour that results from the original misinterpretation. Prophetic inversion fits into Merton's overall trajectory; specifically, it characterises the abnormality of the change in behaviour that occurs after the first "false definition of a situation". While a self-fulfilling prophecy highlights the change in action or disposition that one makes in order to prevent the fulfilment of an oracle, the term prophetic inversion refers to the *nature* of that change, which often goes against one's biological instincts and/or the concept of what is 'right' or expected in socio-political terms.

These changes in one's behaviour and rational thought are 'inverse' because they go against what is natural. In this paper, the term 'natural' will take on three primary meanings. First, it will signal the natural world – the greenery of the rural Arcadian countryside, as opposed to the urban life at court. Secondly, the term 'natural' will be used to describe biological reproductive instincts – the general human drive to transfer DNA to offspring in order to facilitate the survival of one's genetic traits. In particular, I will analyse how the encounter with the oracle complicates Basilius' relationship with those instinctual drives that would normally lead him to act in ways that ensure the continuance of his dynastic line, through the marriage of his daughters and their offspring. Finally, the term 'natural' will describe the order of things as dictated by the Great Chain of Being, a hierarchy which, early moderns believed, determined the class position of different social roles, each endowed with a specific code of expected conduct (moral, social, political) (Dana 1977: 47).

Prophecy and politics in Elizabethan England

Sidney writes his *Arcadia* at a time when prophecy and politics were inextricably entwined. Prophecy was one facet of a larger, more complex religious framework that, as Patrick Collinson aptly notes, informed England's political climate just as much as politics influenced religious affairs (Collinson 2009: 74).¹ Collinson argues that religion remained a political

¹ The link between politics and religion in sixteenth-century England is most evident in the tumultuous religious changes the country undergoes with the rapid succession of monarchs after the death of Henry VIII. After the premature death of her brother, Edward, Mary Tudor comes to the throne and realigns England with the Catholic Church. Having never converted to the Church of England, Mary reinstates the religion of her childhood and of her mother, Catherine of Aragon. However, her political demise gives way to the rise of Elizabeth, who returns

issue in Elizabethan England because “the state was unable [...] to enforce strict uniformity which it was supposed to obtain” (Collinson 2009: 76). Beliefs surrounding prophecy and divine inspiration became symptomatic of religious instability in the period. To quell any potential for widespread disturbance, the government issued legislation like the bills of 1559, 1563 and 1580, which made prophecy a punishable crime across the country (Smith 1958: 161); nonetheless, there remained “a steady stream of ephemera about prophetic infants and elderly oracles issued from late Tudor and Stuart presses” (Walsham 1999: 207). One such prophet was eleven-year-old William Withers who, ten days after falling into a coma, woke on Christmas Eve 1580 with numerous ominous predictions about the fate of England (Walsham 1999: 211). Intriguingly, Withers was visited by three of the most progressive reformers in the country at the time: Sir Robert Jermyn, Robert Ashfield and Sir William Spring (Walsham 1999: 211). This was not the first time that reformers demonstrated interest in the same prophetic activity that they verbally repudiated. Jonathan Van Patten notes that during the Reformation many government agents used prophetic discourse and circulated prophecies of their own to justify the break from the Catholic Church (Van Patten 1983: 13).

Elizabeth’s own relationship to prophecy was a complex one. Publicly, she made clear her disdain for the act of prophesying. She signed three legislative bills outlawing it, and increased the severity of penalty with each consecutive legislation.² One of the primary reasons for this was prophecy’s inherent association with socio-political instability. Bart Van Es observes that prophecy proliferated primarily in times of crisis: he cites Keith Thomas’ claim that “prophecies of one kind or another were employed in virtually every rebellion or popular rising which disturbed the Tudor state” (Van Es 2000: 11). As an aging female monarch who had yet to produce an heir, Elizabeth was in a particularly precarious position. At a time when the monarch was unable to secure the future of the nation, the people looked instead to higher forces, choosing to place faith in prophet-figures who, regardless of the degree of truth in their prophecies, could offer what those in power could not: assurance (or hope at the very least) of England’s continued prosperity. Elizabeth’s need to suppress any predictions about the fate of her line was therefore necessary to maintain authority at a time of uncertain succession (Dobin 1990: 25; Van Es 2000: 10). Despite the dangerous threat of alleged prophets, however, some of them had positive predictions to offer for the Queen’s future and for the future of England (Van Es 2000: 12). Although she publicly discouraged people from engaging in prophecy, Elizabeth embraced their predictions as useful propaganda. She also employed astrologist John Dee who, despite being a known prophet, became her personal “philosopher” (Dobin 1990: 3), although, as Warren Smith notes, Elizabeth recognised Dee as more of a natural scientist than a seer (Smith 1958: 164). Elizabeth’s reign saw an unprecedented explosion of political prophecy “at its most dangerous and controversial” (Van Es 2000: 22), because prophecy served a pragmatic function for various members of the social strata. In the section that follows, I will explore how Sidney recognises the potential for prophecy and prophetic discourse to further his own political and literary goals.

Sir Philip Sidney: poet-prophet and statesman

England to Protestantism. The fate of England’s national religion becomes dependent on the faith of the monarch.

² Elizabeth’s final legislation against prophecy came in 1580. This final bill likened prophecy to witchcraft, and made it illegal not only to predict the death of the monarch, but also to predict his/her successor. This was especially significant for Elizabeth at the time, as Mary Queen of Scots was still a prisoner in England, and while she lived Catholic factions continued to fight for the legitimacy of her claim to the throne of England over Elizabeth’s (Smith 1958: 162).

Sidney was known to be “more engaged in the political life of the Elizabethan court than any other major contemporary poet” (Stillman 1985: 796). From a young age, before ever entertaining thoughts of a literary career, Sidney was bred for a political life at court. In his study of Sidney’s life and works, Albert Charles Hamilton divides Sidney’s political and literary journey into four stages. The first stage ranges from Sidney’s birth in 1554 until 1575, during which time he was being groomed for high office. The second stage, from 1575 to 1577, sees Sidney hoping to be employed as an international envoy for the Queen. The third stage, from 1577 to 1579, marks the beginning of Sidney’s doubts about the possible success of his political career: as a result, he spends much time in self-exile from the court, at his sister Mary’s home in Wilton. The final stage, from 1580 onwards, represents a turning point for Sidney towards a literary career, though he was still hoping for political appointment (Hamilton 1977: 17). Dorothy Connell similarly describes the period between 1578 and 1580 as the time when Sidney was “moving into, rather than within, the poet’s vocation” (Connell 1977: 91). Indeed, Hamilton notes that *The Old Arcadia* is a product of Sidney’s “enforced leisure” (Hamilton 1977: 32), and that his increasing alienation from court occurs as a consequence of his political aspiration to earn a position among the Queen’s most trusted advisors.

Evidently, Sidney writes the *Arcadia* with his own ambition in mind, as the political bond between Basilius and his counsellor, Philanax, reflects the kind of relationship that Sidney imagined for Elizabeth and himself. Seeking to fashion himself as a permanent member of the Queen’s advisory body, Sidney takes up the task presented to him by his uncle Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, and writes an open letter to Elizabeth to dissuade her from pursuing a marriage alliance with the French Catholic Duke of Anjou (Warren 1936: 104). In the letter, Sidney argues that the Catholic marriage would not only call into question Elizabeth’s own religious devotion, but that it would also compromise her reputation among the English people (especially those Protestant believers who had faced persecution under the rule of her Catholic sister and royal predecessor, Mary). He encourages Elizabeth, instead, to stand on her natural strengths: virtue, God, and the love of her subjects (Worden 1996: 135). These are the elements of successful rule that Basilius forsakes in the *Arcadia*: he sacrifices his virtue to placate his anxieties, his belief in God to superstition, and the concern for his subjects to personal interest. Basilius becomes a mirror-image (that is, the reverse) of the version of Elizabeth that Sidney encourages: he urges her to be a leader who forsakes individual anxiety to focus on the needs of her people, who rely on the wisdom of their ruler for peace and order.

Sidney was a loyal reformer who was dedicated to advancing the Protestant cause across Europe (Hamilton 1977: 19). Like other reformers before him, Sidney manipulates popular beliefs on prophecy to achieve his own ends. I said above that reformers, despite associating prophecy with Papal superstition, were nonetheless known to use prophecy to justify their faith. Sidney, aware as he was of the socio-political controversy surrounding prophecy in Elizabethan England, uses Elizabeth’s opposition to it as a way to advance his own political interests: ironically, he attempts this by means of prophetic discourse. Sidney’s use of prophecy for his own self-promotion occurs not only in the *Arcadia*: Roger E. Moore observes that Sidney employs a similar strategy in *A Defense of Poesy*, establishing a clear link between the prophet and the poet in order to lend credibility to poetic inspiration and vocation. Such a link was not unheard of, and Moore also cites the common belief at the time that poetry had its origins in ancient prophecy (Moore 2010: 36). In the *Defense*, Sidney directly compares the poet to the “oracle of Delphos” (Moore 2010: 36). This comparison will become particularly relevant in later sections, when I explore how Sidney uses the Delphic oracle in the *Arcadia* to serve his own poetic-political interests.

According to Moore, Sidney links the poet and the prophet by way of spiritual freedom and an “inward divine authority” that is unsought for, highly imaginative and unrestricted by earthly institutions (Moore 2010: 37, 48-51). However, Moore also argues that “in speaking pointedly of the poet’s prophetic task, Sidney questions the pervasive cultural animosity towards prophetic speech and inspired utterance” (Moore 2010: 38). Moore implies that Sidney’s defense of poetry is also an act of resistance against contemporary prohibitions concerning prophecy; but Sidney only defends certain aspects of prophecy – i.e., those that justify the poet’s right to free expression. Moore implicitly highlights that much of Sidney’s comparison centres on a sense of elevated inspiration beyond what an ordinary person can obtain or comprehend. At the same time, Sidney distances himself from the more “ecstatic” prophetic discourse of classical extremists like Plato (Moore 2010: 55), instead emphasizing poetry’s prophetic ability to “make accessible the moral truths that philosophy or theology offers in such a difficult form” (Moore 2010: 55). In doing so, Sidney uses the discourse of prophetic, divine inspiration to demonstrate the enlightened status of the poet, while downplaying prophecy’s more dangerous potential for social upheaval. Sidney does this explicitly in the *Defense*, where he criticises those who claim to be able to foretell the future; Moore observes that Sidney seems to purposefully rank political prophecy below the form of prophecy that he praises in the poet (Moore 2010: 46). Sidney’s criticism is evident throughout the *Arcadia*, as the oracle offers Basilius a prophecy with significant political implications for both the continuance of his dynasty and the rule of his realm. Basilius’ impulsive reaction to the oracle results in a series of actions that invert the natural course of succession and precipitate the chaos and disorder at the climax of the narrative. Sidney uses the oracle’s prophecy to condemn the worry that drives Basilius to act against his better judgment, and to emphasize his own role as a poet-prophet worthy of belonging to Elizabeth’s private council.

The Queen’s potential French marriage was at the forefront of Sidney’s political concern; as Elizabeth neared the age of biological infertility, her marriage prospects became significantly more important. However, Sidney was bewildered by Elizabeth’s consideration of a French Catholic suitor, despite the fact that a Catholic alliance could only strengthen England’s global position. As part of his attempt to encourage Elizabeth to do what was best for Protestant England, Sidney writes that fears about succession were “no reason for rooting England out of that peace and prosperity which Elizabeth’s long reign had secured for them” (Warren 1936: 107). Sidney shifts the focus from the crucial need to produce heirs to the importance of engendering loyal subjects, by claiming that “the queen’s metaphoric children [are her] subjects” (Hagar 1991: 54). Sidney also uses the language of prophecy to further dissuade Elizabeth from the French alliance, reiterating that “the causes that should drive you to this are either fears of that which cannot happen or by this means cannot be prevented” (Connell 1977: 105). With a prophetic tone of his own, Sidney warns Elizabeth against betraying her subjects by entering into a marriage which, like Basilius’ move to the country, would chart an unnatural course with the same potential for socio-political unrest.³

Oedipus in Arcadia

Howard Dobin credits Sidney’s distinct focus on achieving historical verisimilitude in depicting the *Arcadia*’s classical rural setting (Dobin 1990: 86); it is in the natural setting that Sidney’s readers realise the ‘unnaturalness’ of Basilius’ situation as it unfolds. This inversion

³ As Bremmer points out, the Greek word for “king” is *basilius*. Therefore, Sidney’s choice to name the ruler in his narrative Basilius further implies a direct comparison between the Duke and Queen Elizabeth I (Bremmer 1993: 155).

of what can be defined as ‘natural’ in the spheres of government and biology – both the understanding of Basilius’ duties as an aristocratic leader and the biological desire to reproduce his genetic line – commences at the moment in which he tries to decipher the oracle. He falls victim to the obscurity of prophecy, the multiple meanings of which have the potential to subvert authority through the act of interpretation. By giving individuals the power to decipher meaning for themselves, prophecy not only diminishes the univocal authority of the Crown, but can also mislead rulers into betraying their civil responsibility (Dobin 1990: 22). Basilius represents the danger of misrule by retreating from the centre of his civic duties to pastoral solitude, creating what Margaret Dana calls “an ironically reversed, upside-down world” that is “shockingly at odds with Elizabethan notions of kingship” (Dana 1977: 43, 45). He abdicates his position of strength in light of a personal threat, thereby demonstrating cowardice rather than concern for the protection of his people. In doing so, Basilius inverts the socio-political hierarchy, displacing himself from his high position to a lesser rural life. His anxiety over the prophecy prompts a physical and a symbolic inversion which in turn creates an absurd situation: a wealthy duke who seeks refuge from danger by entering the natural world, that no man can control. The unfortunate result of his cowardice is that Basilius chooses to abandon his position and, consequently, the people for whom he is responsible. By comparison, the oracle in *Oedipus the King* prompts the eponymous protagonist to depart twice: once to avoid murder and regicide – fated to murder Laius, Oedipus laments that he leaves his adopted home because “I did not wish to kill my father” (Sophocles 2013: 1001) – and then again to rid the kingdom of the plague caused by his unnatural relations, thus determining to “cast himself / out of the land [...] and not remain / to bring a curse upon his house” (Sophocles 2013: 1290-92). On both occasions, Oedipus leaves to ensure the good of the people; his second departure, in particular, serves to restore natural rule and health to the kingdom. By contrast, Basilius’ departure for the country enacts, according to Blair Worden, a potentially dangerous and irresponsible “change of course”, that engenders a diseased realm susceptible to chaos and rebellion (Worden 1999: 173).

Basilius’ move to the country constitutes a perversion of his natural duty to exercise his prerogatives. Dana notes that there is “a natural order of things which Basilius has violated” (Dana 1977: 46), and this is evident both in his tainting the natural world to which he retreats, and in his lack of concern for the continuance of his lineage. Whereas the young prince, Dorus, describes the “sweet woods” of Arcadia as the place “where man’s mind hath a freed consideration / of goodness to receive lovely direction / where the senses doth behold th’order of the heavn’ly host” (Sidney 1973: 166), Basilius admits that “the high conceits [that] heavn’ly wisdom breed / my thoughts forget” (Sidney 1973: 177). The natural world, which is supposed to bring mental clarity and closeness to the divine, exacerbates Basilius’ delusion. Rather than bringing him closer to his authentic self, Basilius’ retreat inverts nature’s purpose and turns a site of “heavn’ly wisdom” into one of “vain prophetic”. His need for wisdom becomes evident in the flawed reasoning that results from his misinterpretation of the oracle, which states that his “elder care” would “by princely mean be stolen, and yet not lost” (Sidney 1973: 5). There are two significant aspects of this prophecy that Basilius fails to consider: the “princely mean” of the supposed thief, which implies nobility and so a potentially suitable match for his daughter, and the fact that she will “not [be] lost” to him. Moreover, Basilius forgets that all daughters must eventually be “stolen” from their fathers; by being the one who steals his own daughters away, Basilius prevents the customary transaction of women in marriage. Rather ironically, he would let them wither in the natural world, isolated from their socio-biological purpose as future wives and mothers. In doing so, Basilius brings about the “loss of children and crown” that he so fears, leaving his land and people vulnerable to foreign takeover. This politico-familial inversion appears all the more bizarre in comparison with Oedipus’ concern for his daughters: even as he realises they may

be tainted because of his actions, Sophocles' protagonist does not doom their futures. He pleads with Creon to "not allow them to wander / like beggars, poor and husbandless" (Sophocles 2013: 1505-06), while this is precisely the miserable situation into which Basilius leads Pamela and Philoclea.

Basilius becomes an anomaly even among his own people: from the very first lines, Sidney describes Arcadians as "moderate and well-tempered" (Sidney 1973: 4); Basilius, instead, represents the negative effects of allowing one's passions to rule reason, as he becomes "not so much stirred with the care for his country and children as with the vanity which possesseth many who [...] are desirous to know that certainty of things to come" (Sidney 1973: 5). By relying on prophecy for personal gain only, Basilius inverts his place in the traditional social hierarchy and implicitly undermines the dominant role of the aristocracy (based on a sense of their superior intellect and virtue).⁴ Basilius' foolish, irrational actions not only place him in the physical realm of the lower classes; they also lower him to their supposedly inferior intellectual level. This behaviour prompts the people to doubt his ability to fulfil his duties, and results in the popular rebellion that follows. Oedipus, by comparison, appears to be more concerned with the well-being of his people, as he sends Creon to the oracle at the priest's request to "raise up our city / save it and set it straight" (Sophocles 2013: 51-52). By contrast, Basilius prioritises his passions above rational rule, not only in the vanity that prompts him to seek out the oracle, but also in his obsession for Cleophila, which keeps him in the country even after he considers returning to the palace. Sidney's narrator notes that Basilius "used much dukely sophistry to deceive himself, and making his will wisdom [...] resolutely he stood upon his determination" (Sidney 1973: 9). In the narrator's estimate, there is a notable difference between will and wisdom. Will is personal, and therefore functions to appease individual desire only; wisdom, instead, is universal, and it looks beyond the subjective needs of the one in favour of what is objectively best for the many. In succumbing to his personal will, Basilius forsakes the wisdom and virtue that his counsellor, Philanax, claims are "the only destinies appointed to man to follow, wherein one ought to place all his knowledge since they be guides as cannot fail" (Sidney 1973: 7). Philanax pleads with Basilius to turn away from his personal fears about the oracle, and to base his conduct on the universal Good, thus exhorting him to remember his place at the head of the body politic. However, Basilius inverts the hierarchy between a ruler's body politic and body natural:⁵ while the body natural metaphorically expands outward to become a body politic that encompasses all of a ruler's subjects, Basilius performs an inward turn that leaves the body politic vulnerable. A very different balance of personal and political interests is at the heart of *Oedipus the King*: Oedipus recognises that "when I drive pollution from the land / [...] I act in my own interest" (Sophocles 2013: 137-39), thus linking his well-being to the land's and the people's in a way that unites the body politic and the body natural.⁶ By contrast, when Basilius chooses his body natural over the body politic for which he is also responsible, he abandons the public interest in favour of his private needs, and the result is public unrest that comes to bear not only on his person, but on his family and countrymen.

⁴ In his book *Reputation and Defamation*, Lawrence McNamara argues that certain sixteenth-century activities were predicated on the supposed superiority of the upper classes. Duelling was one such activity, taking place largely among the aristocracy because they were believed to have a deeper understanding of and commitment to honour, upon which proper duelling decorum was based (McNamara 2007: 47).

⁵ For further discussion of the idea of the King's Two Bodies, see Kantorowicz 1957.

⁶ Oedipus' conscientious concern for his people manifests itself in the implications of the oracle, as Jean-Pierre Vernant observes: the result of the reversal of fortune in the play comes to bear only on Oedipus, without significantly impacting his subjects (Vernant 1978: 479). Oedipus differs from Basilius, whose investment in the oracle blinds him to the negative implications that his belief, and his consequent actions, have for the entire realm.

Early in the narrative, Philanax cautions Basilius about the political consequences of his personal retreat, asking the Duke: “for who will stick to him that abandons himself?” (Sidney 1973: 7). Philanax warns him of the rebellion that inevitably rises from the unstable rule of one who roots authority in prophetic uncertainties. As David Norbrook notes:

When a group of rebels unexpectedly storms his retreat, Basilius is made to remember that a commonwealth is made up of more people than just the prince, that his personal well-being is not necessarily identical with the well-being of his subjects (Norbrook 2002: 85).

Among those subjects is his eldest daughter and heir, whose security is again put at risk on account of her father’s passions. Caring for Cleophila after the lion’s attack, Basilius suddenly “remembered [his] forgetfulness” that Pamela is still in the forest, now prey to a “monstrous she-bear” (Sidney 1973: 50). Here, Basilius acts against his own self-interest. He moves to the country to prevent his “elder care” (Pamela) from being “stolen” (presumably, abducted). He is protecting his daughter and heir, who will bear children and continue his line. However, by allowing his obsession with the prophecy to overtake his rational judgment, he puts her at greater risk of death. Gynecia identifies the consequences of Basilius’ unruly behaviour when, on discovering her husband’s adulterous passions, she says:

Remember the wrong you do me is not only to me, but to your children [...] your country, when they shall find they are commanded by him that cannot command his own undecent appetites (Sidney 1973: 277).

Gynecia notes that Basilius’ obsession with the oracle has resulted in his inability to rule, both as the head of his family and as head of state. Moreover, she implies that the oracle has made him increasingly effeminate – a further biological inversion. The subjugation of reason by “undecent appetites” was stereotypically attributed to women, who were accused of being overly sensitive and emotional, while men were thought to be in command of their rational faculties (Calbi 2005: 5).⁷

By means of the Arcadian rebellion, Sidney emphasises the dangers of prophecy not only in spreading misbehaviour and bad policy among the sovereign and the ruling class, but, perhaps more significantly, in encouraging the commoners’ “opposition to the reigning secular and sacred authorities [...] [as] a challenge to the dominant order” (Dobin 1990: 28). However, in *The Old Arcadia*, the threat of disorder stems from the dominant order itself, because “disrupting the rightful order of the commonwealth at the very top of the hierarchy is bound to lead to chaos in Arcadia” (Dana 1977: 47). By moving to the country, Basilius sets a precedent for abandoning one’s station and virtue to satisfy personal desires. Following his example, also the Arcadians ‘forget’ their social places, setting aside their duties as farmers, millers and blacksmiths in order to challenge their aristocratic superiors. Without order and structure, “rebellion be[comes] the only possible consequence of the ignorance of a raging mob” (Stillman 1985: 798). The rebels’ lack of organisation mirrors the lack of rule in the realm. Sidney emphasises that the rebellion has its origin in the actions (or inaction) of the ruler, whose judgment can be easily compromised by unreliable sources. The Arcadians do not rebel in order to overthrow the Duke, but rather because they are in “*want* of a prince” (Sidney 1973: 127, emphasis mine). Furthermore, the rebels “descended to a direct dislike of the Duke’s living from among them [...] the sum was he disdained them” (Sidney 1973: 127).

⁷ This gender inversion of Basilius’ masculine traits had significant implications for Elizabeth, who, being a sole female monarch, had to combat such unfavourable female stereotypes and assume the ‘rational’ disposition of a male in order to sustain the confidence of the people, who may have been skeptical of a woman as the head of State otherwise (Calbi 2005: vi).

Basilus' retreat from his duties leads his subjects to falsely interpret the political situation: his 'lacking presence' means there is no one to explain the reason for his departure, no powerful leader to tell the people what they should believe. The result is an unrestricted and widespread mob mentality which assumes the worst about its leader and so initiates a rebellion. By leaving the people to their own devices, Basilus allows them to construct their own truth, one which ultimately disrupts the socio-political order Basilus himself is charged with preserving.

Basilus' 'death' only exacerbates the confusion in the realm, and due to his own unconcern for the security of his line, the final part of the prophecy is fulfilled ("in thy [Basilus'] throne a foreign state shall sit"; Sidney 1973: 5). Overseeing the trial of the princes, Euarchus, the King of Macedon, occupies Basilus' seat by the end of the narrative, and the narrator explicitly notes that the Duke's death:

Measured by the minds of most princes [...] would have been thought a sufficient cause (where such opportunity should offer so great a prey into their hands) to have sought the enlarging of their dominions (Sidney 1973: 358).

Because of his obsession with the prophecy, Basilus leaves his realm vulnerable to invasion; using Euarchus as his mouthpiece, Sidney cautions against the premature desertion of one's rule. Upon his arrival in Arcadia, Euarchus says he was hoping "to see whether by his authority he might withdraw Basilus from this burying himself alive and to return again to employ his old years in doing good" (Sidney 1973: 359). He thus establishes a connection between ruling properly and "doing good" (i.e. acting in the service of one's realm) which constitutes an implicit rebuke of Basilus' move to the country. The Duke has failed in his duty, and so he becomes a cautionary tale for Elizabethan leaders, particularly for Elizabeth herself.

Sidney's poetic use of prophecy and the pastoral

Sidney draws a connection between the foreign and domestic pressure Elizabeth faces to find a husband and produce an heir, and the reason for the extreme action Basilus takes to evade the oracle's prophecy: the common denominator is anxiety. Anxiety can often propel an individual outside his/her more rational faculties into a realm of desperate action – which placates immediate worry without consideration for wider, more objective consequences. Basilus' anxiety over losing his daughters and his title leads him to act irrationally, unnaturally, to avoid his predicted fate; the irony is, of course, that his actions lead to the fulfilment of the prophecy he fears. Analogously, the Queen might be led to accept a Catholic marriage to quell her anxieties about potential foreign invasions – but Sidney argues that such a union would ultimately harm England's position, because it would endanger the Protestant values that Elizabeth has championed for so long.⁸

Prophecy, in Elizabethan England, was banned largely because of the danger it posed to Protestant ideas. Protestants maintained that the age of miracles was over, and denied that the Holy Spirit still spoke directly to certain individuals (Moore 2010: 42); if prophets were allowed to roam and preach freely, they would discredit the elements of Protestant doctrine that denied divine inspiration. By connecting the letter with his *Arcadia*, Sidney implicitly warns Elizabeth to avoid playing the part of a hypocrite: if she took such strong measures to

⁸ Connell (1977: 105) draws an intriguing parallel between the language and ideas of Sidney's letter to Elizabeth and those used to describe Basilus in the *Arcadia*. It is worth noting, however, that Sidney's letter to Elizabeth circulated in 1580, around the time when the bulk of the *Arcadia* was composed – so the linguistic and rhetorical closeness does not necessarily prove a similarity of purpose (Worden 1999: 127).

prevent the spread of prophecy in England in order to uphold Protestant values, would she dare forsake those same values by entering into a marital contract with Anjou? Sidney uses Basilius to caution Elizabeth against giving in to individual fear, which often sacrifices the good of the nation and of the people. In Basilius' case, his anxiety overtakes his reason in the face of a threatening prophecy and results in what I have termed prophetic inversion – the act of turning away from what is biologically and socially 'natural'. The absurd effect of this inversion in Arcadia is all the more poignant in comparison to Oedipus, who, unlike Basilius, does not act in conscious accordance with or avoidance of any prophecy: instead, he becomes the victim of "unknowing" (Sophocles 2013: 415) in the "unintelligible world order" that Sophocles depicts (Kamerbeek 1965: 38). Basilius, by contrast, forsakes his duty knowingly, refusing to heed Philanax's advice. Casting himself as a similar voice of reason, Sidney advises his Queen to consider the needs of her Protestant subjects to prevent England from falling into Arcadian disorder.

Unfortunately for Sidney, his attempts to curb prophetic discourse to promote his own literary and political influence did not prove as successful as he might have hoped. The more politically outspoken he became, particularly after the unexpected stagnancy of Elizabeth's proposed European Protestant League in 1577, the further alienated from court he ended up being (Hamilton 1977: 26). It is during this period that Sidney retreats to his sister's home and begins to write the *Arcadia*. Hamilton sees Sidney's depiction of the Arcadian countryside as a critique of his own rural exile, claiming that in the narrative "the pastoral life is opposed to the active life" (Hamilton 1977: 33). In a letter to his mentor Sir Henry Languet, Sidney similarly writes that his time away from court has caused his once-active mind "imperceptibly to lose its strength" (Montrose 1977: 11). But, unlike Basilius, Sidney does not allow his time in the country to take him from work. Louis A. Montrose convincingly claims that by writing the *Arcadia*, Sidney "is not merely utilizing enforced idleness [...] he is transforming it into the environment for mental action" (Montrose 1977: 23). Sidney thus uses the country setting for two purposes: to guide his sovereign towards good rule, and to demonstrate the influential power of writing. The result of this political pastime was a revival of a significant classical genre: as Montrose notes, "Elizabethan pastoral literature was largely created by the enforced idleness of a courtier who sought the role of an Elizabethan hero in his life" (Montrose 1977: 32). It was his poetry, not his prophecy, which allowed Sir Philip Sidney to fulfil his ambitions for greatness.

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Deceitful Prophecies: Knots of Time in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*

Michela Compagnoni

The fact that, in their prediction of the future, prophecies should address the issue of time is of course a truism. Yet the Weird Sisters' uncanny prophecies in *Macbeth* do so in ways that shed light on the momentous transition between two competing notions of time in early modern England. What follows is a tentative inquiry into the ways in which the Sisters' prophetic utterances tie together both contradictory perceptions and anxieties about time which had been seeping through popular fantasies affecting subjective imagination and collective behaviour throughout the sixteenth century.¹

It is worth pointing out, for a start, that the predictions famously delivered in Act I, Scene 3 and Act IV, Scene 1 can be easily traced back to the thriving tradition of vernacular prophecies, if anything because their provenance is most evidently unauthoritative. Meant for oral and manuscript culture (Curry 1989), non-biblical prophecies unsurprisingly appealed to the mass, but were nonetheless relevant to elite politics, given the empowerment they granted to men *and* women² from the lowest strata of society.³ Because of their dissemination and endless renegotiation, vernacular prophecies could be actually said to belong to the people. As Thornton remarks, they were "strands to the political culture which did not simply trickle down to the people but were more fundamentally of their making and under their control" (Thornton 2006: 7).

It should also be emphasized that the supernatural trio in *Macbeth* confronts the audience, well before Macbeth and Banquo, at the very outset of the play, in an impressive scene of thunder and lightning which is, in its own way, prophetically and/or proleptically allusive to forthcoming events, as well as strongly evocative of witchery conjurations. As often noted, the drumming style of the three Sisters – interspersed with references to ritual meetings ("When shall we three meet again?", I, 1,1),⁴ to characteristic animal figures ("Grimalkin",

¹ This complex issue has been amply treated and discussed, and is beyond the scope of this essay. In the light of my argument, suffice it to say that, under the pressure of Protestant beliefs paving the way for new possibilities for self-definition, towards the end of the sixteenth century the medieval notion of time, focused upon the circularity of life beginning and ending with God, was slowly withering, and a new linear, directional sense of time was emerging. It was a momentous turn with far-reaching effects, whereby early modern subjects were gradually deprived of the consolation originating from the perception of their lives as circular, and of their daily time as God-oriented. Earthly life started, instead, to be perceived as a linear progression of past, present, and future events, and each day was charged with the threat of the approach of an incumbent demise. For further accounts on the ways in which the issue of time was problematized in early modern England and in Shakespeare's theatre, refer to: Dohrn-van Rossum 1996, Fletcher 2007, Wood 2009, and Arcangeli 2017.

² In early modern culture, the successful female prophet was usually thought to be a dumb vessel of God, a mute, passive receptacle, empty of everything but divine energy. There were times in which prophetesses were nevertheless accorded a certain degree of public authority (see Mack 1992).

³ For a discussion on prophecy and popular culture in early modern times, see Curry 1989; Thornton 2006; Green 2012; Green 2015.

⁴ All references to Shakespeare are from *The Norton Shakespeare* (Greenblatt, Cohen, Gossett, Howard, Maus, and McMullan 2016).

“Paddock”, I, 1, 9-10), and riddled with oxymoronic equivocations⁵ (“When the hurly-burly’s done, / When the battle’s lost and won”, I, 1, 3-4) – was designed to make the audience believe they were confronting proper witches, i.e. human beings (mainly female) accused of worshipping the Devil and increasingly persecuted in trials.⁶ *Macbeth* is in fact famously remembered as a play that engages with the issue of witchcraft, which, on account of its topicality at the time, would appeal to popular and elite audiences – and would, above all, enthuse King James I, in whose honour the play was supposedly conceived.⁷

And yet, no matter how witchlike they might have looked on their first apparition on stage, the figures that Macbeth and his loyal companion-in-arms, Banquo, come across soon after in I, 3 do not clearly match the characteristic profile of contemporary witches, i.e. “women which be commonly old, lame, blear-eyed, pale, fowle, and full of wrinckles; poor, sullen, superstitious, and papists; or such as know no religion: in whose drousie minds the devill hath gotten a fine seat” (Scot 1584: 5). Judging from Banquo’s and Macbeth’s responses to their mute apparition, they retain instead an aura of uncanny mysteriousness which defies recognition and interpretation. Although they seem to come from outer, marginal spaces, the Weird Sisters ultimately challenge spatio-temporal locations. In fact, they oscillate on the threshold between opposite poles. They look both fantastic and real (“BANQUO. Are ye fantastical or that indeed / Which outwardly ye show?”, I, 3, 54-55; “MACBETH. [...] What seemed corporal / Melted as breath into the wind”, I, 3, 82-83), natural and supernatural, alive and dead (“BANQUO. Live you?”, I, 3, 43), feminine and masculine (“BANQUO. You should be women, / And yet your beards forbid me to interpret / That you are so”, I, 3, 46-48). The sight of these eerie creatures is actually so disconcerting that both Banquo and Macbeth initially refer to them as if they were ‘things’: “BANQUO. What are *these*, / So withered and so wild in their attire, / That look not like th’inhabitants o’th’ earth, / And yet are on’t? [...] Are you *ought*/ That man may question?” (I, 3, 40-44, my emphasis). Banquo’s question is immediately echoed by Macbeth’s inquiry: “Speak, if you can. *What* are you?” (I, 3, 48; my emphasis).

As soon as they pronounce their famous prophetic salutations (I, 3, 49-51; I, 3, 63-70), however, these ‘things’ become superhuman beings endowed with “strange intelligence” (I, 3, 77), and their “imperfect” (I, 1, 71) speech stands out as an enigmatic prophecy of vital relevance to their interlocutors:

MACBETH. Stay, you imperfect speakers, tell me more.
 [...] Say from whence
 You owe this strange intelligence, or why
 Upon this blasted heath you stop our way
 With such prophetic greeting. Speak, I charge you. (I, 3, 71-79)

Macbeth’s eagerness to find out more marks a sharp turning point in the tragedy. It marks the time when the desire to know about the future is about to overlap with his fantasies of power, and when the outward figures of the prophetic Sisters start merging with Macbeth’s inward ghosts. It is not surprising, in fact, that the Weird Sisters’ prophecies should be interpreted as hallucinated projections of Macbeth’s mind. These delirious voices and/or images from Macbeth’s own anxieties about time and power come from within the subjectivity whose future they are foretelling. According to several critical interpretations, the Weird Sisters in

⁵ It is well known that the issue of equivocation in *Macbeth* also refers to the art which “enabled Catholics to tell partial truths or to deceive interrogators and thereby survive persecution” (Miola 2004: 159).

⁶ The critical production on the topic of witchcraft and witch-hunting in early modern England is vast. For comprehensive overviews, see, among others: Sharpe 2001; Bevers 2008; Elmer 2016.

⁷ King James’s keen interest in the subject led him to write a treatise on witchcraft, *Daemonologie* (James I 1597). See Normand and Roberts 2000.

the play may be seen as springing from Macbeth's inwardness, from that side of his consciousness which is slowly germinating and cannot be reconciled with the image of the valorous general he used to be. The Weird Sisters are outside Macbeth, or Banquo would not see them. At the same time, they also bear the traces of something which is inside him, to the point that they even anticipate his own words: "THREE WITCHES. Fair is foul, and foul is fair. [...] MACBETH. So foul and fair a day I have not seen" (I, 1, 11; I, 3, 39)."

The reason why Macbeth immediately believes the witches' prophecies, notwithstanding the unreliability and indeterminacy of their utterers, lies in the fact that what they tell him gives shape to his latent ambitions and desires. In a visionary play strewn with hallucinations,⁸ the Weird Sisters' prophesying, therefore, stands out as much more than the mere prediction of the future of popular culture: it actually emerges as the ultimate stage where things that are not there, but which are the product of Macbeth's mind, can be seen and have a propelling impact on his actions.

Voicing fantasies which are both alluring *and* horrific, the Weird Sisters' words inevitably engender Macbeth's anxieties about time: the time for waiting, the time for acting, the time for guilt. According to several critics, the anxieties recorded in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* can be traced back to the major changes in the social perception of time taking place in the early modern period: as soon as the two competing paradigms of time clashed (cyclical-regenerative and horizontal-productive), they in fact produced the widespread anxieties about life, death, and the yearning for salvation which can, in turn, be observed in Macbeth's fantasies about power and timelessness throughout the tragedy.⁹

Shakespeare's play intercepts and stages this very moment of passage between contrasting epistemes. The echo of such a cultural earthquake has particularly unsettling consequences on Macbeth, since he finds himself unable to come to terms either with cyclical or with linear time. The medieval time of redemption is, in fact, manifestly violated when Macbeth kills Duncan, who can be considered the epitome of cyclical time, the last bulwark of the medieval order on the wane (Serpieri 1986: 214). The King in *Macbeth* is an "icon of kingliness rather than an executive head of state" (Grene 1992: 195): he is the embodiment of medieval kings as *figurae Christi* (Kantorowicz 1957).¹⁰ When heroic Macbeth – "valor's minion" (I, 2, 19), loyal to his sovereign and in perfect accordance with all medieval codes of honour – murders the King, he disrupts the former 'natural' order of things, bringing about terror and a cosmic disorder which the post-regicide storm aptly symbolizes.

LENNOX. The night has been unruly. Where we lay,
Our chimneys were blown down and, as they say,
Lamentings heard i'th' air, strange screams of death,
And prophesying with accents terrible
Of dire combustion and confused events,
New hatched to th' woeful time. The obscure bird
Clamored the livelong night. Some say the earth
Was feverous and did shake. (II, 3, 48-55)

⁸ Hallucinations are frequent in *Macbeth*. See for instance the apparition of a dagger ("Is this a dagger which I see before me, / The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee", II, 1, 33-34) and of Banquo's ghost at the banquet (III, 4); the inerascable spots of blood on Lady Macbeth's hands (V, 1).

⁹ Macbeth's renowned monologue before killing King Duncan is relevant in this respect: "If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well / It were done quickly. If th' assassination / Could trammel up the consequence and catch / With his surcease success – that but this blow / Might be the be-all and the end-all! – here, / But here, upon this bank and shoal of time, / We'd jump the life to come" (I, 7, 1-7).

¹⁰ As reported in Kantorowicz's seminal volume, in the Middle Ages kings were considered as angelic intermediaries between God and human beings, between eternity and the *aevum*, the spirit of time (Kantorowicz 1957: 47).

At the same time, Macbeth is also incapable of dealing with linear time and, therefore, transforms it into a time which denies death, guilt, and the consequences of his actions. Considering Macbeth's inability to find a way to feel safe *within* time, what I would like to argue here is that the Weird Sisters' prophecies (as projections which simultaneously come from and soothe Macbeth's anxieties) are so effective because they no longer put forward the two competing notions of time as mutually exclusive. On the contrary, these prophetic utterances show them as coexisting, even colliding, as they temporarily efface each other. The prophecies are in fact rhetorically orchestrated on knots of time which blur neat distinctions between past, present, and future.

The temporal knots in the Sisters' compelling words lead Macbeth to believe that the worst threats for himself and for his throne either come from the past or belong to the future as distinct temporal dimensions. However, they also intertwine the past, the present, and the future to such an extent that clear demarcations no longer seem conceivable. These ambiguous representations of time coming from Macbeth's inwardness also testify to his modernity as a tragic hero, who struggles to make sense of time itself.

My argument is therefore that the prophecies in Shakespeare's shortest play do not merely suggest a different way of experiencing time: they also point to a temporal stasis by projecting the chimerical, crystallized image of a timeless time and of a "pure present unhaunted by past or future" (Greene 1992: 211). The suppression of time evoked by the three witches is, in fact, envisioned by Macbeth as a way to overcome his own caducity, to defeat death. More importantly, Macbeth embraces the obliteration of time as a fantasy whereby he exorcises his own eternal damnation, as if his sins could be confined to a time with no history, within the span of a frozen moment. It is as if the knots of time which mould the witches' prophecies had put to the fore Macbeth's own fantasies about the possibility of being crowned just by annihilating time: kingship becomes a fantasy of transgression, both of the divine order embodied by Duncan and of commonplace temporal constraints.¹¹

What the Weird sisters' prophesying seems to suggest is that, as long as Macbeth lives in an eternal, all-encompassing present, he will be king and "safely thus" (III, 1, 48). The witches also imply that, on the one hand, he should no longer conform to the codes of the cyclical order epitomized by Duncan, if he wants to be the King of Scotland. On the other hand, Macbeth should not perceive time as linear just yet, or he will fall prey to the fear of failure and death, and will eventually be shattered by his own choices.

The salvific promise heralded by this eradication of time is immediately visible in the first prophecy delivered by the witches in the third scene of Act I. The scene is predicated on the symmetrical alternation of past and future tenses (Plescia 2009: 137). However, when, on their way back from battle, Macbeth and Banquo meet the Weird Sisters for the first time, the witches' prophetic words mingle past, present, and future to an unprecedented extent.

The supernatural creatures salute Macbeth with three different titles:

All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of Glamis!
All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of Cawdor!
All hail, Macbeth, that shalt¹² be king hereafter! (I, 3, 49-51)

Then they foretell the future of Banquo and of his descendants:

Lesser than Macbeth, and greater.

¹¹ The subject of Macbeth's imagination is addressed, for instance, in Greene 1992, Bates 2010, and Raspa (2016: 77-94).

¹² A painstaking reading of the occurrences of the modal verbs 'will' and 'shall' in *Macbeth* can be found in Plescia 2009.

Not so happy, yet much happier.
Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none. (I, 3, 66-68)

Although Macbeth is hailed with “present grace and great prediction / Of noble having and of royal hope” (I, 3, 56-57), he unpredictably responds by yielding to fear. The reason for Macbeth's fearful reaction to the first prophecy of the play – and his subsequent tormented dithering – is a highly contentious issue which cannot be discussed in the limited space of this essay. What is worth considering here is the prophesying language of the Sisters, since it provides us with textual clues to the tragedy's knots of time and to their blurring of neat distinctions between temporal dimensions.

When they address Macbeth, the three witches seem in fact to refer to a present state – Macbeth as the Thane of Glamis – and two future ones – Macbeth as the Thane of Cawdor and as King of Scotland. However, in I, 3, Macbeth is and is not or no longer the Thane of Glamis, because he has already been appointed Thane of Cawdor: unlike Macbeth, we and the audience know from Act I, Scene 2 that his predecessor has been sentenced for treason by Duncan and that the King has bestowed the title upon Macbeth. We should bear in mind that these knots of time in the prophecy are a typical example of dramatic irony, whereby members of the audience are allowed to know more than characters on stage. Truth and prediction then become a mere matter of perspective and of access to information: time for Macbeth works differently from the way it works for us, in the sense that we recognize as actually present what he perceives as future (“But how of Cawdor? The Thane of Cawdor lives, / A prosperous gentleman, and to be king / Stands not within the prospect of belief, / No more than to be Cawdor”; I, 3, 73-76). The same applies to the second prophecy in Act IV, in which the projections summoned by the Weird Sisters acquire different nuances of meaning according to different degrees of knowledge.

In their last salutation (I, 3, 51), the Weird Sisters eventually foretell that Macbeth will be king in a time to come (“hereafter”).¹³ In this context, this adverb means ‘in the future’, ‘at a time other than that in which Macbeth is living now’. Unlike other temporal adverbs pointing to an indefinite future moment, “hereafter”, placed in the last utterance of the prediction, stands out as its core and puts forth a distorted picture in which temporal demarcations are effaced: Macbeth, who is already the King of Scotland in the *hic et nunc* of the scene (*here-*), is also projected into a boundless future of sovereignty (*-after*).

The Sisters' prophecy therefore implies that Macbeth should be Thane of Glamis *and* Thane of Cawdor *and* King at the same time. Only a perpetual state of “present grace” (I, 3, 56) could actually safeguard him from the dangers posed by the past and the future: Macbeth's past as Duncan's devout and valiant servant could in fact paralyse his power of action, whereas, no matter how glorious, the future forecast by the witches is charged with threats and haunted by Banquo's progeny. If Macbeth could linger in an endless present, Banquo – who is “lesser than Macbeth” and “not so happy” – would not endanger his throne. It is, however, by letting the future worm its way into Macbeth's extremely uncertain present that Banquo might become “greater” than him, “much happier”, and could “get kings”.

In the renowned soliloquy that follows the vanishing of the Weird Sisters into thin air, Macbeth's fears about his own thoughts and desires unsurprisingly overlap with anxieties about time:

[...] Why do I yield to that suggestion
Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair

¹³ The same adverb of time will be repeated in Macbeth's famous last monologue in Act V, Scene 5. For an extensive and detailed analysis of the occurrence, see Muir's footnote in the Arden Edition (Shakespeare 1951: 152-153).

And make my seated heart knock at my ribs
Against the use of nature? Present fears
Are less than horrible imaginings. (I, 3, 136-140)

In the extract quoted above, the multifarious prospects disclosed by the Sisters' prophetic words thin down to a horrid suggestion: nothing good could be awaiting. The triumphant future envisioned in the prophecy only shapes "horrible imaginings", while "things forgotten" belonging to the past agitate Macbeth's mind:

Give me your favor. My dull brain was wrought
With things forgotten. (I, 3, 152-153)

These lines show Macbeth as either lying in order to conceal his terrifying thoughts (Shakespeare 1951: 22) or bringing dormant royal ambitions back to the surface of his own conscience. No matter how we interpret them, these thoughts coming from Macbeth's past are disturbing to the point of dulling his mind.

Being as unforeseen and sudden as it is, the first encounter with the Weird Sisters has the power to obfuscate Macbeth's thoughts and to temporarily paralyse him, just as it arouses lurking longings. It is instead an utterly different narrative background that opens Act IV, when Macbeth returns to the place where the Weird Sisters had first appeared to him and to Banquo in order to consult them again. The second prophecy in Shakespeare's tragedy comes towards the end of a play in the course of which Macbeth has ascended the throne of Scotland by means of an abominable regicide (II, 2), has had Banquo killed by three murderers (III,3), and has been haunted both by Banquo's ghost (III, 4) and by his own guilty feelings.

Macbeth's undaunted courage has given way to fear, doubt, and hallucinations. Yearning as he is for supernatural corroborations – which are nothing but self-reassurances needed to overcome his own fears – Macbeth unsurprisingly feels the need to summon the Sisters, actually to "conjure" them: "I conjure you by that which you profess, / Howe'er you come to know it, answer me" (IV, 1, 49-50). "Conjure", possibly employed here with the meaning "to invoke by supernatural power",¹⁴ has another meaning which belongs to the semantic field of conspiracy. It adds to the general atmosphere of restless anxiety.

The three prophetic visions put on show in response by the Weird Sisters, empty vessels of their "masters" (IV, 1, 62), are relevant to our discussion, since the ways in which these are phrased are invariably enmeshed in what we have been calling knots of time. The first apparition comes in the shape of an "*armed head*" (IV, 1, S.D. 67-68):

Macbeth, Macbeth, Macbeth. Beware Macduff,
Beware the Thane of Fife. Dismiss me. Enough. (IV, 1, 70-71)

Commonly regarded as a foreshadowing of Macbeth's future decapitation by Macduff (Miola 2004: 54), the "*armed head*" also stands for the brave warrior Macbeth used to be in the past and for the warring king he is at present. Moreover, the apparition evokes the severed head of the rebel Macdonald,¹⁵ who, as reported early in Act I, was quartered and beheaded by Macbeth himself in the closing battle against Norway and Ireland. The words spoken by the helmeted head of the apparition, however, warn Macbeth against Macduff, who is thus designated as his future enemy.

¹⁴ The OED entry for "conjure" as a verb is as follows: I. (1382) To swear together; to conspire. [...] II. (c1290) To constrain by oath, to charge or appeal to solemnly. [...] (a1500) To entreat (a person) by something for which he has a strong regard; to appeal solemnly or earnestly to; to beseech, implore. III. (c1290) To invoke by supernatural power, to effect by magic or jugglery.

¹⁵ Both Muir (in Shakespeare 1951) and Miola 2004 refer to Macdonald as Macdonwald.

The second apparition summoned by the three witches promptly provides the reason why Macduff should be regarded as a horrific threat to the King – and should therefore be murdered, as Macbeth immediately resolves to do.¹⁶ A “*bloody child*” (IV,1, S.D. 75-76) advises Macbeth to:

Be bloody, bold, and resolute; laugh to scorn
The power of man, for none of woman born
Shall harm Macbeth. (IV, 1, 78-80)

It appears that Macduff will stand as a *future* threat, as a “retribution” (Miola 2004: 55), only if he fulfils the seemingly preposterous *past* condition of not being born of woman: no matter how unlikely this condition might sound, we will soon learn that Macduff was in fact untimely ripped from his mother’s womb through a Caesarean delivery. Once again, temporal knots show that Macbeth’s entrenchment in his precarious present is threatened by the distinct time dimensions of the past and the future: the main cause of his eventual defeat will be an image that is true in Macduff’s past but inconceivable in Macbeth’s present.

Finally, the third apparition, a “*child crowned, with a tree in his hand*” (IV, 1, S.D. 85), prompting Macbeth to fear no enemy, is usually regarded as a representation of royal Malcolm. Duncan’s eldest son and legitimate heir to the throne of Scotland will be king once Macbeth has been deposed and killed, and will therefore rule in the peaceful future envisaged at the end of the play:

Be lion-mettled, proud, and take no care
Who chafes, who frets, or where conspirers are.
Macbeth shall never vanquished be until
Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane Hill
Shall come against him. (IV, 1, 89-93)

In their characteristically equivocating language, the Weird Sisters dissemble the fatal destiny that the apparition conjures up: the fantasy of a moveable wood, albeit implausible, prefigures the catastrophe that will eventually overcome Macbeth as soon as Malcolm bids his soldiers to disguise themselves with wooden boughs, as they move against Macbeth’s army on the hill of Dunsinane.

After all the horrible crimes he has committed, Macbeth, who once mistrusted the misleading language of the “imperfect speakers” (I, 3, 71), implores them to speak further. He cannot choose whether to trust what the apparitions show him or not, because they are in fact offering the only truth he wants and is able to hear. Subsequent events will, however, soon prove him wrong. As previously argued, the witches’ prophecy in Act I foretold a triumphant future upheld by time dimensions that could no longer be distinguished: a future in which time would be erased and reduced to an all-encompassing present. On the contrary, the deceitful apparitions produced by the “unknown power” (IV, 1, 68) at this point in the tragedy do not repress, but feed on images from the past and the future threateningly impending over Macbeth’s present – which is safe only in appearance. That is why the future they prophesy is actually ruinous, and foreshadows Macbeth’s looming destruction.

In the last apparition, summoned to quench Macbeth’s eagerness to know – “*A show of eight kings, and BANQUO last; [the eighth king] with a glass in his hand*” (IV, 1, S.D. 110-111) – the spirits confirm that Macbeth’s former companion-in-arms will father a glorious

¹⁶ It is in a fit of fear and of fickle resolution that Macbeth decides to kill Macduff: “Then live, Macduff. What need I fear of thee? / But yet I’ll make assurance double sure / And take a bond of fate. Thou shalt not live, / That I may tell pale-hearted fear it lies, / And sleep in spite of thunder” (IV, 1, 81-85).

issue, as the Weird Sisters had initially foretold. Once he is confronted with the threat of an endless, devouring future signified by the glass held by the last king in the line, Macbeth yields to fear, as if overwhelmed by a future he can no longer tame:

Thou art too like the spirit of Banquo. Down!
Thy crown does sear mine eyeballs! And thy heir,
Thou other gold-bound brow, is like the first.
A third is like the former. – Filthy hags,
Why do you show me this? – A fourth! Start, eyes!
What, will the line stretch out to th' crack of doom?
Another yet? A seventh! I'll see no more.
And yet the eighth appears, who bears a glass
Which shows me many more; and some I see
That two-fold balls and treble scepters carry.
Horrible sight! Now, I see 'tis true,
For the blood-boltered Banquo smiles upon me,
And points at them for his. (IV, 1, 111-123)

The scenario of confused and delirious fantasies, as well as of glorious *and* appalling prospects, disclosed by the workings of the temporal knots in the Weird Sisters' prophecies, is rich in significance. More importantly, it testifies to the crucial prominence given to the issue of time in *Macbeth*: time is chased, jumped, felt, and grasped. It is silenced through actions, defeated, won, and eventually freed from the tyranny of Macbeth's visionary mind. In a play that stages such a momentous epistemic change as a shift in the notion of time – and, consequently, in the perception of life and death – the Weird Sisters' prophecies shine forth as interims, where time no longer follows the laws of nature. Distorted, twisted, dismantled, and drained, such an emptied time withstands pliability and cannot be regimented. It is precisely this representation of time that voices the moment of passage towards a new episteme and the inexhaustible search for a limbo, a safety zone to make up for the loss of Eden.

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“Great Apollo, turn all to the best!” An Alchemical Journey Through Conspiracy, Prophecy, and Holiness in *The Winter’s Tale*

Martina Zamparo

The aim of these pages is to offer a reading of *The Winter’s Tale* (1610-11) as an alchemical journey which, from the conspiracy that opens the play, and through the gift of prophecy, leads to a final state of peace and harmony, symbolised by the reconciliation – in alchemical terms a “chemical wedding” (Abraham 1998: 35) – between the King and the Queen of Sicily, Leontes and Hermione. In this cycle of death and rebirth, loss and recovery, division and reunion, Paulina seems to perform the role of alchemical art, often referred to as “Lady Alchimia”¹ and portrayed in the shape of a woman standing between the opposites of Sol and Luna, male and female, king and queen (see plates 1 and 2).

The key role of alchemical imagery and language in the years when Shakespeare’s so-called romances were composed has been widely acknowledged.² As Linden (1996: 1) argues, the height of interest in alchemy and Hermeticism, characterising the span of time from the mid-sixteenth to the mid-seventeenth centuries, corresponds to the flourishing of English literature under the reigns of Elizabeth I and James I. This point of contact between alchemical philosophy and the literary production of Renaissance England might open up important perspectives, thus allowing scholars to recreate the now remote cultural framework that was familiar to Shakespeare’s audiences. Moving from Marcello Pagnini’s theories (1980: 49), alchemy could legitimately be included within the “style” of the Renaissance, i.e. that system of values, motifs, and ideologies that marks the ethos of a given age and inevitably flows into the works of art composed in that specific epoch. The performance of Ben Jonson’s *The Alchemist* by Shakespeare’s theatre company, the King’s Men, in the same year in which *The Winter’s Tale* was composed (late 1610) further testifies to the remarkable diffusion of alchemical beliefs at the beginning of the seventeenth century. As the editors of the recent Cambridge edition of *The Alchemist* have remarked, Jonson’s awareness of alchemical theories and language was so vast that “it is often difficult to be sure when quotation is happening or where Jonson has inadvertently repeated an alchemical commonplace” (Jonson 2012: 551). Considering that a dramatist counts upon the public’s ability to immediately understand potential allusions to the coeval social and cultural milieu, it could be claimed that Jonson’s precise knowledge of alchemical issues was shared by his audience, that was very likely also the audience of Shakespeare’s last plays.

¹ On the representation of alchemical art as a lady, see Archer 2007.

² The pioneers of the study of Renaissance Hermeticism were Eugenio Garin, in the 1950s, and, a decade later, Frances Amelia Yates, whose works opened the way to previously neglected areas of research. See Garin 1955 and Yates 1964. In this line of research, Paolo Rossi (2006: 1) has recently remarked that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, alchemy, natural magic, kabbalah, and astrology were at the centre, not on the fringes, of English and European culture. For an overview of the hermetic and alchemical background of early modern England, see, among others, Mebane 1989, Linden 1996 and 2007, and the thorough introduction to Abraham 1998. On the impact of hermetic and alchemical knowledge on Shakespeare’s dramatic and poetic production, see, among others, Gray 2011, Healy 2011, Nicholl 1980, and Simonds 1998.

It should be noted that alchemical literature developed a prodigious set of illustrations, metaphors, and allegories that depict the phases of the *opus alchymicum* “in human terms” (Nicholl 1980: 141), with kings and queens figuring as the main protagonists of a journey of transformation, healing, and re-creation. This theatrical trait of alchemical literary production, deeply intertwined with the Renaissance passion for the visual power of emblems, contributed to making alchemical symbolism familiar to the imaginative consciousness. Alchemical emblems and engravings clearly convey a humanised version of the alchemical work, whose characters are not metals but people. For instance, one of the central symbols of alchemy is the chemical wedding, or *coniunctio*, between a king and his queen (see plate 4): the royal couple has to be separated before being harmoniously reconciled – a progression mirroring the paradoxical rhythm of the alchemical process known as *solve et coagula*. In particular, the figure of the king is constantly employed by alchemists as an emblem of gold (see plate 4):³ as shown below, several alchemical parables draw on the metaphor of the healing of a king who, first sick and corrupt, has to be restored to “fortune, health, life, and strength” (Waite 1893: 162).

“If you can bring Tincture or lustre in her lip, her eye, Heat outwardly or breath within”. Leontes’s purgatorial journey

The purgatorial features of *The Winter’s Tale* – whose protagonist, King Leontes, experiences a process of expiation, forgiveness, and spiritual rebirth – have led some critics to read the play as evidence of Shakespeare’s hidden conversion to Catholicism.⁴ Another kind of language and imagery, as widespread as its Christian counterpart and deeply intertwined with it, was available in Elizabethan and Jacobean times to interpret Leontes’s journey of atonement and self-growth: the language of alchemy. The late medieval alchemist George Ripley, in his *Compound of Alchymie* (1591), explicitly presents the *opus alchymicum* as an inward journey of redemption, leading the human soul from “Purgatory” to “paradyce”:

For lyke as sowles after paynes transytory
Be brought into paradyce [...];
So shall our Stone after hys darknes in Purgatory
Be purged and joynynd in Elements wythoute stryfe,
[...] And passe from darknes of Purgatory to lyght
Of paradyce.
(Ashmole 1652: 151)

In the above-quoted lines, the alchemical work is described as a process of soul refinement, aimed at restoring man to his Adamic, prelapsarian condition, when the human and the divine dimensions were fully integrated. Without denying the more practical and proto-chemical aspects of these practices, alchemy is also conceived of as a way to cure “all things inwardly and outwardly”, as argued by Giovanni Baptista Agnello (1623: 6), a Venetian alchemist who was hired by Queen Elizabeth. As is claimed in the introduction to Trismosin’s *Splendor Solis* (1582: 8), what alchemists call gold “stands both for Gold Splendour and Soul Splendour”. It is exactly because the significance of alchemical art goes beyond the transmutation of base metals that alchemists feel the need to express their beliefs in symbolical terms. In a number of alchemical treatises, the *opus alchymicum* is actually described as a journey that makes real characters undergo a process of expiation, suffering, and rebirth. The sixteenth-century

³ Alchemists usually employ the term ‘gold’ as a metaphor to indicate a condition of perfection.

⁴ See, among others, Richmond 2015.

alchemist Thomas Charnock developed an alchemical parable that recounts the story of two men who ask God to assist them in their sea expedition, on which they will purge their sins in order to be exalted and spiritualised. Like Ripley, Charnock equally focuses on the concept of purgatory:

And we are now ready to the Sea prest,
 Where we must abide three moneths at the least;
 [...] But shortly we shall passe into another Clymate,
 Where we shall receive a more purer estate;
 For this our Sinns we make our Purgatory,
 For the which we shall receive a Spirituall body.
 (Ashmole 1652: 292)

Allegories of this kind, also taking the form of visions or dreams, have existed since the time of the Greek philosopher Zosimos (third century AD). They demonstrate that alchemical writers do not exclusively dwell on the transformation of metals, but consider the alchemical work as a way to purify both physical matter and man.⁵

The Winter's Tale presents a pattern of death and rebirth, where “things newborn” spring from “things dying” (III, 3, 110-11), and where conspiracy is gradually replaced by a new, harmonious condition. The protagonist, king Leontes, unable to distinguish between truth and falsehood, has become a prisoner of his own deluded imagination, as he unconsciously confesses to his wife Hermione, whom he believes has betrayed him with his brotherly friend, the king of Bohemia Polixenes: “Your actions are my dreams. / You had a bastard by Polixenes, / And I but dreamed it” (III, 2, 80-82). The first two acts display a situation of total barrenness, consequent upon the development of Leontes’s conspiracy against the most virtuous characters, i.e. queen Hermione, king Polixenes, and Camillo, lord at the court of Sicily. Driven by his “folly” (I, 2, 425) and “unsafe lunes” (II, 2, 29), Leontes, convinced of his wife’s infidelity, resolves to condemn her to prison, put Polixenes to death, and send his new-born daughter, whom he considers a “bastard” (II, 3, 72), to Bohemia. Refusing as he does every form of goodness, the king of Sicily is sick and “unsettled” (I, 2, 333);⁶ there is “an infection” (I, 2, 418) at court and, as noted by Camillo, Leontes needs to “be cured / Of this diseased opinion, and betimes, / For ‘tis most dangerous” (I, 2, 294-96). Hostility, division, and strife undoubtedly characterise the first, tragic half of the play, that culminates with the deaths of the young prince Mamilius and of his mother, Queen Hermione, seemingly struck by the loss of her eldest son and by the undeserved accusations raised against her by Leontes.

Preparing the audience for Hermione’s final ‘resurrection’, Paulina, wife to the lord of Sicily Antigonus, convinces Leontes that the Queen is truly dead: “I say she’s dead – I’ll swear’t” (III, 2, 200). After persuading the King, and all bystanders, of the actual death of Hermione, Paulina adds a few, enigmatic lines that will turn out to be fundamental for the alchemical reading of the play: “If you can bring / Tincture or lustre in her lip, her eye, / Heat

⁵ Zosimos started a tradition that would develop in late medieval and Renaissance alchemical literature: the description of the phases of the *opus* in the form of visions. As Linden (2003: 9) remarks, “Intent on setting forth alchemy’s spiritual aspects, Zosimos’s works often take the form of arcane allegorical visions or utilize highly cryptic symbols that appear to set forth instructions for the alchemical work”. Zosimos, Linden concludes, gave a great contribution to the transformation of alchemy from “what was essentially a metallurgical craft to a secret and mysterious hermetic art”.

⁶ The references to Leontes’s sickness recur throughout the first half of the play: for instance, Camillo points out that “There is a sickness / Which puts some of us in distemper” (I, 2, 380-81). All quotations from *The Winter's Tale* are from Pitcher’s 2010 edition. Quotations from other plays by Shakespeare are from Wells and Taylor’s complete edition (2005).

outwardly or breath within, I'll serve you / As I would do the gods" (III, 2, 201-14). The term "tincture" would no doubt have prompted Shakespeare's audience to place the events within an alchemical context: the so-called tincture denotes the Philosopher's Stone, or Elixir, believed to possess the power to transmute, change, and heal matter, purging it from its imperfections and, therefore, leading it to the perfect state of 'gold'. As might be expected, this notion is often used metaphorically by poets and playwrights; Shakespeare himself employs it in *Antony and Cleopatra*, when the Egyptian queen, addressing Alexas, praises the healing and restorative virtues of his beloved: "How much unlike art thou Mark Antony! / Yet, coming from him, that great med'cine hath / *With his tinct gilded thee*" (I, 5, 34-36; italics mine).⁷ Shakespeare uses this peculiar alchemical concept to highlight the inner excellence of Mark Antony, who is able to transfer his goodness to others, thus 'tincting' them. Leontes, conversely, has no tincture within himself because he is still corrupt and infected and, therefore, he is not able to heal either Hermione or himself. At this point, it is worth mentioning an alchemical text by George Ripley, known as *Cantilena*. The poem, originally composed in Latin and translated into English "earlier than 1581" (Taylor 1946: 177), recounts the story of a king who, first "Barren" (l. 9) and "Infoecund" (l. 27), experiences a process of death and rebirth. This "Barren king by birth" (l. 9), whose reign is sterile, acknowledges his ill condition and exclaims: "my Nature is so much Restrained, / No Tincture from my Body can be gain'd" (ll. 25-26). In order to purge himself, the king clearly dies before being reborn in a healthier form: "Death me Assail'd, even in my Strength of yeares, / But yet Christ's voice did penetrate the Sphaeres, / And [...] told me from above / I should Revive" (ll. 41-44). The chemical king embodies "the raw matter for the Stone" that has to "undergo a death and resurrection" in order to be turned into alchemical, tingeing gold (Abraham 1998: 110). As Mino Gabriele argues, the parable of the king is intended as an allegory of "alchemical soteriology" (1986: 31), since he stands for the golden, royal state hidden within matter. It follows that the alchemist's task is to free the king's body and soul from the corruption of the sublunary world, thus mirroring the action of turning base metals into gold in order to extract the so-called *tinctura rubea* (De Jong 1969: 300).

As in the King of Ripley's *Cantilena* and in other alchemical allegories, Leontes's sickness is the cause of the barrenness, both real and metaphorical, that surrounds him. Since Leontes refuses his newborn daughter, Perdita, and causes the death of Mamilius, his reign, like his mind, is made sterile, as the King himself realizes: "I cannot forget / [...] The wrong I did myself, which was so much / That heirless it hath made my kingdom" (V, 1, 7 and 9-10). Leontes's "issueless"⁸ condition, reflected in the setting of the first two acts of the play in winter,⁹ culminates in the protagonist's reflection on the idea of nothingness:

Is this nothing?
 Why then the world and all that's in't is nothing,
 The covering sky is nothing, Bohemia nothing,
 My wife is nothing, nor nothing have these nothings,
 If this be nothing.
 (I, 2, 290-94)

This concept of nothingness is essential in alchemical language because it is believed that re-creation is possible only if the previous, corrupt state is brought to nothing, as the following lines from *Turba philosophorum* illustrate: "Nature is ruled by Nature, which destroys it,

⁷ On the hermetic, Neoplatonic, and alchemical imagery in *Antony and Cleopatra*, see also Sacerdoti (1990).

⁸ Leontes: "I have done sin, / For which the heavens, taking angry note / Have left me issueless" (V, 1, 171-73).

⁹ According to alchemical symbolism, winter denotes the beginning of the *opus alchymicum*, the stage known as 'putrefaction' or *nigredo*.

turns it into dust, *reduces to nothing*, and finally herself renews it" (Waite 1896: 32-3; italics mine).

It is only in the third act of *The Winter's Tale* that Leontes acknowledges his faults and repents, comparing himself to a base metal that has to submit to purification: "How he [Camillo] glisters / Through my rust! And how his piety / Does my deeds make the blacker!" (III, 2, 167-69). "Rust" is a term that appears in alchemical writings to indicate "the infection [...] of the base metal before purification" (Abraham 1998: 175): matter actually first "falls into sickness, and dies by rust and putrefaction" (Waite 1896: 113). Leontes becomes aware of his inner blackness, previously invisible to him, and realizes that Camillo's goodness glistens as gold if compared to a rusty metal. As argued by the alchemist Thomas Norton, "Grace on that King shall descend, / When he ould Manners shall amende" (Ashmole 1652: 53): the amendment of the king's "ould Manners" corresponds to the alchemical phase known as *nigredo*, a stage of blackness and suffering during which the old form of the metal or human soul symbolically dies in order to be created anew. Following the alchemical precept according to which "by the Gate of Blacknes thou must cum in / To lyght of Paradyce" (Ashmole 1652: 150), Paulina actually condemns Leontes to "winter in storm perpetual" (III, 2, 209-10), to "nothing but despair. A thousand knees / Ten thousand years together, naked, fasting, / Upon a barren mountain" (III, 2, 207-209), thus paving the way for the King's imminent rebirth. It is worth noticing that winter is actually only one of the several epithets given by alchemists to the melancholic phase of *nigredo*, as pointed out by Ripley: "hyt [*nigredo*] hath Names [...] / after each thyng that Blacke ys to syght" (Ashmole 1652: 134). If the seamen of Charnock's alchemical parable purge themselves by becoming "as black as men of *Inde*" (Ashmole 1652: 292), the priest at the centre of one of Zosimos's visions performs a *descensus ad inferos*, plunging into the darkness of *nigredo* and then ascending in a purer state: "I have performed the act of descending the fifteen steps into the darkness, and of ascending" (Nicholl 1980: 136).

"Does not the Stone rebuke me / For being more stone than it?" Alchemical 're-creation' at the court of Sicily

The conspiracy Leontes plots in the first three acts of the play is a consequence of the infected state of his mind that prevents him from seeing clearly, somehow recalling old Lear, with whom the king of Sicily shares striking similarities.¹⁰ It is worth noting that the *opus alchymicum* is also read by alchemists as a process of "peace and strife", during which the elements are said to be "warring conflicting foes until reconciled and united in peace" (Abraham 1998: 24). As suggested by the Elizabethan alchemist Benjamin Lock, possibly one of John Dee's disciples, the initial stage of contention is the source of the final, everlasting reunion: "after long strife [the elements] are made frendes, concluding in such a perfect unity as can not be broken" (Abraham 1998: 141). An engraving showing three birds fighting within a flask (see plate 3), whose antagonism is also a fusion, is actually included among the twenty-two plates of *Splendor Solis*.¹¹ As a matter of fact, the cycle of *solve et coagula* is always depicted as a paradoxical process in which harmony is created out of a state of barrenness, strife, or death. With conspiracy symbolising the initial condition of chaos, contention, and nothingness, and prophecy being the climactic moment of enlightenment that

¹⁰ Considering that a revised version of *King Lear* appeared in 1610, in the period of the last plays, it can be inferred that the analogies between the two works – for instance, the alchemical patterns identified by Nicholl (1980) in *Lear* and those presented here for *The Winter's Tale* – were possibly evident to Shakespeare and his audiences.

¹¹ According to Simonds (1998: 151), Shakespeare hints at alchemical bird imagery in *Venus and Adonis*.

paves the way to the final rebirth and reunion of all previously opposing “foes”, the tragicomic structure of *The Winter’s Tale* seems to retrace the redemptive path of the alchemical *opus*, defined by Simonds (1998: 156) as “tragi-comic” itself. Ripley describes the alchemical work as a wheel, or *rota alchemica*:

Ageyne then must thow turne thy Whele,
Fyrst Blacknesse abydyng ys thow wylt do well,
Then into Whytenes congele yt up [...]
And by Rednes [...]
Then hast thou brought thy Base unto an end.
(Ashmole 1652: 168)

The alchemical *rota* has first to pass through blackness, symbolising the stage of death and disagreement, then through whiteness, indicating a moment of “dawning of consciousness” (Abraham 1998: 5), and finally through redness, standing for the healing of all divisions.

As already noted, no tincture can come from Leontes’s diseased self, since his blackness needs to be purged and turned into whiteness, a step that usually signals the phase of *albedo*, when matter, be it soul or metal, is “purely made spirituall” (Ashmole 1652: 172). In the alchemical allegories of the time, the *rex chymicus* has to be cured in order to restore health to himself and to his realm, so that inner transformation will be mirrored in outward healing. In a similar way, the sickness that has stricken Leontes afflicts the whole court of Sicily: as Camillo says to Polixenes, “There is a sickness / Which puts some of us in distemper” and “it is caught / Of you that yet are well” (I, 2, 380-83). The references to sickness and disease are numerous in the first half of the play and, considering the close association between alchemy and medicine, the presence of Apollo, god of physical and spiritual healing, and of order over chaos, is significant for the alchemical reading of the play. Discussing “our Stone, our Medicine, our Elixir” (Ashmole 1652: 297), alchemists constantly refer to themselves as physicians – an association that is made apparent by the title-page to Andreas Libavius’s *Alchymia* (1606), where alchemy and medicine are practised together. It is only in the third act that Leontes, thanks to Apollo, is freed from his diseased opinion: Apollo’s prophecy clearly marks a turning point, a moment of enlightenment and awakening. Truth is distilled, Leontes’s corrupt soul is purged, and the process towards the final re-establishment of truth and order begins: “Hermione is chaste, Polixenes blameless, / Camillo a true subject, Leontes a jealous tyrant” (III, 2, 130-31). Apollo’s prophecy can be identified with the central moment of the *opus alchymicum*, known as *albedo*, when matter receives “illumination” and is “endowed with the potentiality of life and growth” (Dobbs 1990: 15). Light, indeed, assumes a significant meaning in alchemical imagery, as pointed out by the alchemist Thomas Norton: “Light is cause thereof within matter of Clereness” (Ashmole 1652: 64). Moreover, Apollo, traditionally associated to light, to the sun, and to alchemical gold, brings the gift of healing and somehow predicts the final rebirth, claiming that “the king shall live without an heir if that which is lost is not found” (III, 2, 132-33).

The healing virtues of Apollo are celebrated in the alchemical parable known as *The Hermet’s Tale*,¹² one of the first examples of “allegorisation” (Kahn 2010: 268). Even though most alchemical allegories are obscure, it is fairly evident that the unknown author of this text depicts the *opus alchymicum* in terms of the healing of a “Patyent” who, first dead, is restored to health by Phoebus Apollo, “Disguis’d in habitt of a shining light” (Ashmole 1652: 416-18). Arrived to “bring some comfortable ayd”, Apollo is summoned to assist “Some dyeing Soule” (417) calling for help from a “Christall founteine” (415) and to “raise to life yonder dead thing” (417). When restored to life, the “Patyent” goes away for three weeks, after which he

¹² *The Hermet’s Tale* is included in Elias Ashmole’s compendium, *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum* (1652).

comes back with a Stone that he offers to Apollo with the following words: “by curing one th’ hast saved three: / [...] Be our Physitian, and as we growe old, / Wee’le bring enough to make new world of Gold” (419). Highlighting the restorative faculties of Apollo and his role as a guide throughout the alchemical work, the parable draws on the concept of the *opus alchymicum* as a healing process, during which the matter within the alembic, be it metal, body, or soul, is purged from its infirmities and finally revived.

In his journey of expiation, growth, and re-creation, Leontes is guided by Paulina. The King himself, soon after announcing his daily pilgrimage to the grave of his son and wife, acknowledges Paulina as his guide: “Come, and lead me / To these sorrows” (III, 3, 239-40). In like manner, after behaving as a “penitent king” (IV, 2, 6-7) for sixteen years, Leontes praises the woman for the comfort she provided: “O grave and good Paulina, the great comfort / That I have had of thee” (V, 2, 1-2). Paulina is the only character in the play who shares Apollo’s prophetic knowledge and seems to behave as a helper of the god and, therefore, as a mediator between the earthly and the divine dimensions. Fully aware that goodness and truth will finally be restored and that “the gods / Will have fulfilled their secret purposes” (V, 1, 35-36), Paulina foreshadows the recovery of the King’s seemingly lost daughter, Perdita, somehow expressing herself in near-prophetic language: “Care not for issue, / The Crown will find an heir” (V, 1, 46-47). At first condemning Leontes to “nothing but despair” (III, 2, 207), Paulina actually leads the King on his path of renewal, thus fulfilling Apollo’s oracle according to which “the king shall live / Without an heir if that which is lost be not found” (III, 2, 132-33): “that which is lost” does not only allude to Perdita, but also to Leontes’s inner self, that is finally restored thanks to Paulina’s healing art.

As Pilgrim (1983: 62) has noticed, Paulina is moved throughout the play by the “definite intention of preparing [Leontes] for Hermione’s return”. Strongly influencing the course of events and highlighting the restorative pattern of the play, in the third act Paulina establishes that Hermione is dead in order to reunite her with her husband and daughter only when Leontes’s cleansing journey has come to a successful end: “This news is mortal to the queen. Look down / And see what death is doing” (III, 2, 145-46). Faced with Leontes’s certainty that the Queen’s “heart is but o’ercharged” and with his request to “apply to her some remedies for life” (III, 2, 148-49), Paulina strongly replies: “I say she’s dead – I’ll swear’t” (III, 2, 200). According to alchemical literature, man and woman, usually represented as a king and a queen, first have to be separated and their union has to be dissolved before the royal couple is finally reunited in a chemical wedding. Alchemists believed that “When there is made a Seperacion [...] Then there schalbe a glad Coniunccion” (Ashmole 1652: 258). The culmination of the *opus alchymicum* is actually conceived of as “Gold wythouten stryfe”, as “a matrymony pure: / Betweene the husband and the wyfe” so that “none dyvysion / Be there, in the coniunccion” (Ashmole 1652: 275). Paulina is perfectly aware that Leontes has to be given time to repent before the wheel can be turned towards the final reunion, so that the cycle of *solve et coagula* can be closed. A plate from the treatise *Buch von Vunderverken* (Abraham 1998: 138) shows a man, symbol of the matter that has to be transmuted, tortured on the alchemical wheel – an image alluding to the notion of the *opus alchymicum* as a cycle of suffering that leads towards renewal. In the vision of the fourteenth-century alchemist John Dastin, the author clearly focuses on the need for the *rota alchemica* to pass through affliction and torment before attaining the final rebirth: “he that is not sad will not be merry. Nor is he worth an empire that will not fight for it” (Theisen 1999: 70).

It is now worth recalling the lines addressed by Paulina to Leontes soon after the presumed death of Hermione: “If you can bring / Tincture or lustre in her lip, her eye, / *Heat outwardly or breath within*” (III, 2, 201-203; italics mine). The alchemical “Tincture”, or Stone, is produced out of a process, known as ‘fixation’, that presupposes the reintegration of the volatile spirit within the purified body by means of external fire: “so that there be Fixacion, /

With temperate hetes of the fyer” (Ashmole 1652: 370). As a matter of fact, the alchemical *coniunctio* does not only stand for the reunion of male and female, but also for the “marriage of Body and Spirit” (Ashmole 1652: 115). Alchemists believed that the spirit of life flies from the body during the stage of *nigredo*, and descends again at the end of the alchemical process. When there is ‘spiritualisation’ of the dead body, life is restored and the Stone is created: “by receiving this Aetheriall Medicine consisting of heavenly virtues [...] [the body] is delivered from all Impediments and [...] consequently life Prorogued”. It is by means of “the Application of things *inward* and *outward*” (italics mine) that “the Spirit hath been renewed, the Body strenghtened [...], & Life enlarged” (Ashmole 1652: 448). Shakespeare proves that he is aware of the alchemical theory of fixation in *All’s Well That Ends Well*, when lord Lafeu, discussing the medical skills of the celebrated physician Gerard de Narbon (whose art seems to rest on Paracelsian beliefs), argues that the latter has produced a kind of “medicine / That’s able to breathe life into a stone” (II, 1, 71-72). Considering that *All’s Well* is the only Shakespearean play where Paracelsus is mentioned, the connections with the theories of the Swiss alchemist, well known in late sixteenth-century England because of the ongoing controversy between Paracelsians and Galenists, might have been even more evident to the audience.¹³ According to Paracelsus, the divine breath which vivifies all bodies corresponds to the “universal fire” by means of which nature operates:

[Nature] is not visible, though it operates visibly; for it is simply a volatile spirit, fulfilling its office in bodies, and animated by the universal spirit – the divine breath, the central and universal fire, which vivifies all things. (Paracelsus 1894: 289)

Paulina’s cryptic lines are therefore highly significant if considered in an alchemical context, and are even more meaningful and prophetic if interpreted in the light of the statue-scene, which displays the restoration of the spirit of life within Hermione’s body.

At the end of Leontes’s healing journey, when sixteen years have passed and he is reunited with his daughter Perdita, Paulina shows the King a statue of his ‘dead’ wife. Further echoing the alchemical notion of fixation, Paulina warns the King that “The statue is but newly *fixed*” (V, 3, 46-48; italics mine). Interestingly enough, a few lines above, Leontes addresses his wife’s statue with the term “stone”, thus drawing again on alchemical vocabulary: “Chide me, dear stone, that I may say indeed / Thou art Hermione” (V, 3, 24-25). Later on, gazing at the sculptural work of art, Leontes, “Standing like stone” (V, iii, 42), exclaims: “I am ashamed. Does not the stone rebuke me / For being more stone than it?” (V, 3, 37-38). Also Paulina employs the term “stone” referring to the statue: “for the stone is mine” (V, 3, 57). As pointed out by Marcello Pagnini (1976: 48), it is by means of the constant reiteration of concepts, words, and semantic units that Shakespeare builds the meaning of his works. It is the critic’s task, Pagnini asserts, to decide whether these semantic patterns fulfil a mere decorative function or are endowed with a specific significance congruent with the semantic structure of the text. In my opinion, the five occurrences of the word “stone” within a few lines may be connected with the coming scene showing the re-creation of Hermione, an emblem of the attainment of the final stage of the *opus alchymicum*. The completion of the *rota alchemica* actually consists in the “rejoining of the united soul/spirit with the purified body of the

¹³ See *All’s Well That Ends Well*, II, 3, 11. As pointed out, among others, by De Jong (1969: 39) and Webster (1979: 323, 330), Latin editions of Paracelsus’s writings had been readily available since the 1560s in England, and had fostered a renewed interest in alchemy and a new faith in the possibility to cure all sorts of diseases. Shakespeare, in particular, might have been in contact with the new Paracelsian theories via his son-in-law, doctor John Hall, in whose casebook of diseases and correspondent treatments there is an explicit reference to the so-called *Laudanum Paracelsi* (Hall 1657: 169).

Stone's matter" (Abraham 1998: 188), a conjunction that is also reflected in the chemical wedding between the king and the queen.

In the anonymous treatise known as *The Golden Tract*,¹⁴ fixation is described not only as the union of body and spirit but also as the conjunction of male and female:

[...] our prepared material is also called male and female [...]. The male rejoices when the female is brought to it, and the female receives from the male a tinging seed, and is colored thereby. (Waite 1893: 5)

This "tinging seed" is of course the alchemical tincture: it should be recalled that in the third act Paulina prophetically tells the King that Hermione will be restored to life only if he "can bring Tincture" to her. However, it is only after Leontes has been regenerated that he can transmute his Queen, 'tingeing' and, therefore, reviving her, so that his inner re-creation is reflected in the outer re-creation of Hermione and in the healing of all divisions. In the alchemical text entitled *The Magistery* (collected in Ashmole 1652), the *rex chymicus*, after being submitted to a cycle of death and rebirth, is said to be able to revive the dead thanks to his newly acquired tincture: "So shall the king by his new-byrth, / Be ten time stronger just. / [...] The dead he will revive" (Ashmole 1652: 343). In a similar way, the king of Ripley's *Cantilena* finally becomes "Of Body's sick the only Grand Reliefe" (l. 142). These lines seem to function as an appropriate context for the final scene of *The Winter's Tale* since, after Leontes is purged from his sickness, he is able to awake "the sleeping spirit which lyes bound up in the straight Prison of the Body" (Ashmole 1652: 465) of his wife Hermione. If, in the third act, no tincture would come from Leontes's barren self, at the end of the play, conversely, the King defines himself as "more stone than it" (V, 3, 38), possibly alluding to his new virtue that allows him to project his "tinging seed" on Hermione's false stone. Alchemists define as "projection" the moment when the tincture is thrown over matter in order to transmute it: in an alchemical illustration from *Coronatio naturae* (Abraham 1998: 158), a king, after being himself transmuted, projects his tincture upon the other metals.

Guiding Leontes in his journey and somehow instructing him on alchemical procedures, Paulina can be read as a personification of alchemical art, which is often depicted by alchemists as a lady, and usually represented while appearing between the opposites of king and queen or sun and moon. Her role in leading the purifying process of Leontes in the second part of the play matches the definition of the alchemical work of cleansing impure matter as "women's work" (Abraham 1998: 219-20): emblems of women washing sheets as a symbol of the stage of ablution abound in alchemical literature, and images of alembics in the shape of a womb further emphasise the centrality of women's role. It should also be pointed out that in Shakespeare's England there was a close link between women and hermetic knowledge: renowned personalities such as Queen Elizabeth I, Mary Sidney, Queen Anne of Denmark, and princess Elizabeth Stuart were in different ways associated with hermetic and alchemical studies. As both "occult objects and instruments of occult knowledge" (Floyd-Wilson 2013: 15), women were thought to be endowed with the ability to understand and unveil the secrets of nature. Moreover, the art of distillation, along with the art of making medicines, was viewed as an essential part of a woman's education (Long 2010: 191-216). Alchemy, depicted and described as a lady in contemporary emblems and writings, was viewed as the art that allowed man to delve into the obscure operations of nature. Discussing the relationship between alchemy and prophecy, Crisciani (2008: 23) defines the former as a form of "concrete prophecy" because the alchemist, thanks to his prophetic knowledge of natural

¹⁴ *The Golden Tract* appeared in the collection *Musaeum Hermeticum*, a compendium of alchemical texts first published in Frankfurt in 1625.

operations, actively “collaborates in the perfecting of nature and matter”, as Paulina does in *The Winter’s Tale*.¹⁵ As seen above, Paulina seems to be perfectly aware of the different stages of the *opus alchymicum*; it is not by chance that, before making Hermione’s statue move, she acknowledges that the exact time for the final reunion has come and exclaims: “’Tis time; descend” (V, 3, 99). Alchemists constantly argue that “Each thing hath his Tyme” (Ashmole 1652: 305) and, therefore, “No fruit can grow from a flower that has been plucked before the time” (Waite 1893: 174). Even more significant is the text *Bloomfields Blossoms* (collected in Ashmole 1652), in which the alchemist is led in his journey by Father Tyme: “With thee take Tyme to guide thee in the way” (Ashmole 1652: 308). Alchemy is actually conceived of as “Gods created handmaid” (Tymme 1605),¹⁶ or as a *ministra naturae*, that is to say a nurse or helper of nature. Thanks to her healing art, Paulina – who invokes “good goddess nature” (II, 3, 102) – allows the hidden spirit of nature, the “divine breath” and “universal fire”, to be reintegrated within Hermione’s body, thus fulfilling that synthesis of art and nature that is central in alchemical symbolism and that is also evoked by Polixenes in a debate with Perdita.¹⁷

It should be recalled that Leontes and Polixenes remark that “the fixure of her [Hermione’s] eye has motion in it” and that “the very life seems warm upon her lip” (V, 3, 66-67), somehow alluding to the spirit breathing within her. In *The Golden Tract*, the phase of fixation, or sublimation, is described in terms of the rebirth of a queen: “so they [spirit and soul] were at length compelled to return to the clarified body of the Queen, which (to my great joy) was straightaway restored to life” (Waite 1893: 23). Hermione herself, just before being sent to prison, defines the suffering caused by her husband’s conspiracy against her as a necessary path leading to regeneration: “this action I now go on / Is for my better grace” (II, 1, 121-22). In a similar way, the queen in *The Golden Tract* says: “I was great, and was brought low; but now, having been humbled, I have been made Queen of many more kingdoms” (Waite 1893: 23). Hermione, defined as “one so great and so forlorn” (III, 2, 21), is equally tormented on the alchemical wheel before being symbolically restored to life.

When Leontes is confronted with Hermione’s ‘stone’, he exclaims: “O royal piece! / There’s *magic* in thy majesty” (V, 3, 38-39; italics mine). What happens in the statue-scene is indeed a “true Magicall Operation”, as the *opus alchymicum* is usually defined:

[...] it is no ordinary speculation to awaken the sleeping spirit which lyes bound up in the straight Prison of the Body; to invite and allure that propitious spirit to descend from Heaven, and unite itself with that which is Internall [...] and fix the Celestial Influences. This is the series and Order of *Nature conjoy’nd with Art*: [...] *one true Magicall Operation*. (Ashmole 1652: 465; italics mine)

Paulina, whose art is defined by Leontes as “lawful as eating” (V, 3, 111) and, therefore, natural, functions as a co-creator, a prophetic and holy figure who performs the alchemical work of distilling goodness out of evil, somehow recalling Shakespeare’s lines according to which “There is some soul of goodness in things evill, / Would men observingly distill it out” (*Henry V*, IV, 1, 4-5). Thanks to her art that “mends Nature” (IV, 4, 96), thus matching

¹⁵ On the complex relationships of prophecy with astrology, hermetic knowledge and new science in early modern England, see Curry (1989). Curry sees Elias Ashmole, astrologer and alchemist, as a perfect example of the interconnection between natural philosophy and magic: “A founding member of the Royal Society, he was a representative figure of those (a not inconsiderable number) who saw no necessary conflict between magical knowledge and natural philosophy” (Curry 1989: 35).

¹⁶ The quotation is from the dedication to Sir Charles Blunt, “Earle of Deuonshire”; the page is unnumbered.

¹⁷ Polixenes: “So over that art / Which you say adds to Nature, is an art / That Nature makes” (IV, 4, 90-92). It is interesting to note that in his discussion concerning the alchemical conception of the relationship between art and nature, Linden (2003: 12) quotes the dialogue between Polixenes and Perdita.

Polixenes's conception of art expressed in the fourth act, Paulina brings to completion the redemptive cycle of the play, ending where it begins, at the court of Sicily – thus perfectly retracing the *rota*, the circular course of the *opus alchymicum* and of nature.



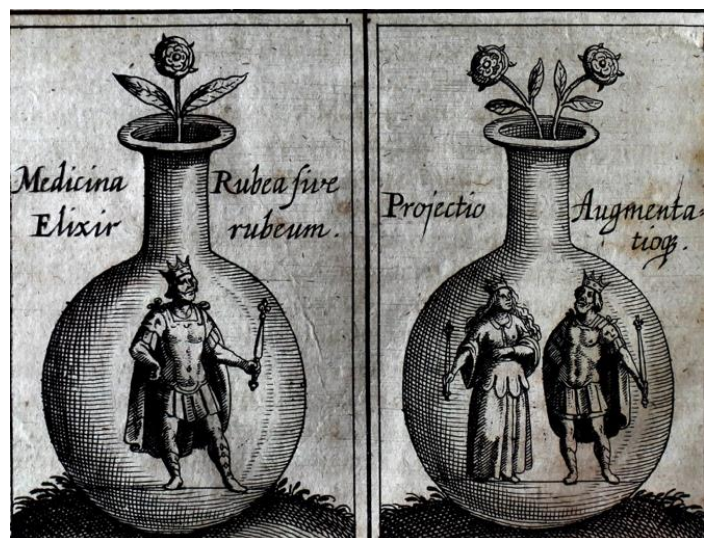
1. Thurneysser's *Quinta Essentia*, 1570
Reproduced from Taylor (1949)



2. Mylius's *Philosophia reformata*, 1622
Reproduced from Taylor (1949)



3. Trismosin's *Splendor Solis*, 1582.
Courtesy of the British Library



4. Mylius's *Anatomia auri*, 1628
Courtesy of the Warburg Institute

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The Manipulation of Truth: Prophecies and Conspiracies in Shakespeare and Fletcher's *All is True, or Henry VIII*

Carmen Gallo

Prophecy has always played a crucial role in literature as a plot device whose purpose is to anticipate some of the main events of the story, as well as to disclose in advance some key aspects: the desires, expectations, rivalries, and even the ignorance of the characters involved. In a Christian outlook, the reliability of prophecy is connected to the framework of Providence as a shared religious horizon capable of giving a supernatural justification to events. However, as shown in most modern literature, the belief in this providential pattern was profoundly reshaped by the Protestant Reformers' denial of Christ's real presence in the Eucharistic ceremony, which ultimately suggested the idea of a world abandoned by the physical presence of God (Schwartz 2008; Bertram 2004). As for the early modern conception of history, although the idea of a supposed supernatural intelligence governing human fate was to be dismissed, the belief that a "godly man might have supernatural knowledge of the future was widely disseminated among English Protestants" (Thomas 1971: 155) and it might also serve a variety of political purposes.

This is most evident if we compare Shakespeare's history plays dealing with the Wars of the Roses – which evoke a martial, medieval society founded on shared principles and values – with the last of his history plays, *All is True, or Henry VIII*, written in collaboration with the younger Protestant John Fletcher (Vickers 2004: 333-432).¹ In the latter, Shakespeare and Fletcher depict a morally degraded world where prophecies, as well as all the words uttered on stage, are no longer reliable, since they appear to be manipulated to serve private interests, state propaganda and above all court politics. Pointing as it does to a pervasive yet empty truth, the original title of the play, *All is True*, is particularly telling in this regard.²

¹ The play was included in the section of the history plays printed in the 1623 Folio with the title *The Famous History of the Life of King Henry the Eighth*. Nonetheless, the definition of its genre is still being debated: different critics insist on the play's relationship with the *histories* on the one hand, and with the contemporaneous *romances* on the other. Whilst it is indeed hard to establish a strong affinity with the romances (Felperin 1972; Schoenbaum in Shakespeare 1967), it is likewise problematic to determine what kind of conclusion *Henry VIII* presents for the history plays that punctuated Shakespeare's entire career. Overall, it is worth remembering that, despite its great success on the stage since the Restoration, the play's critical reception in the twentieth century was negatively affected by perplexities over its apparent lack of stylistic coherence (Maxwell 1939; Leech 1958).

² This title can be found in letters and diaries reporting on one of the first performances of the play at the Globe (on 29 June 1613), during which a fire completely destroyed the theatre. An anonymous ballad entitled *A Sonnet upon the pittifull burneing of the Globe-playhowse in London* circulated in the seventeenth century, with the one-line refrain "Oh sorrow, pittifull sorrow, and yett all this is true". In a letter written on 30 June 1613 and reporting on the fire, the play is instead referred to as "the play of Hen: 8". The word *truth* appears 25 times in the play, while there are six occurrences of *truly* and eighteen of *true*. Generally speaking, about 43 instances can be assigned to the semantic sphere of truthfulness. Though this evidence could be dismissed as fairly irrelevant, "it acquires considerable significance in that all the major characters (especially Henry VIII) invoke these terms in a way that allows the characters (especially Henry) to be tested by these touchstones of their own choice" (Wegemer 2000: 74).

Shakespeare's ambiguous treatment of royal power in the history plays has been variously labelled as nationalistic, subversive or cynical. In *All is True*, this ambiguity, which often relies on narrative devices like prophecies, explicitly aims to question and demystify every pretence of truth and power itself (Rudnystky 1991: 46). The period of national history that the play rewrites and stages, drawing heavily on chronicle sources like Holinshed (itself a collaborative text; Patterson 1996), was very close to the present of the audience (indeed, the closest of all the history plays). In dynastic terms, the purpose of the play was to conclude Shakespeare's historical narration of England with the celebration and justification of James I's royal power.³ But does the play succeed in this? Is it the climax of a providential scheme of English history? Are prophecies and conspiracies, which profoundly characterized the narration of English kingship in Shakespeare's plays, still presented as effective? What sort of attitude towards the narration of history does the play embody/perform?

The dynastic wars are over; the play mirrors the definitive transition from a medieval military conception of power (pervading the previous history plays but already in crisis in *Richard III*) to an early modern world of court politics where rhetoric and the manipulation of information and of the past are the main weapons for the negotiation of one's personal power (Worden 1992). The role of prophecies as political and diegetic devices is thus re-functionalized within the context of the Renaissance court, where these tools are used to shape a new future coherently subsumed within the human perspective of the authority of law, replacing the lost divine framework. Significantly, in *All is True* the entire plot relies heavily on a juridical framework, resulting in the play's episodic structure and its edifying *de casibus* pattern (Kermode 1948). It also entails the public (and usually vain) performance of trials aiming at evaluating words and facts concerning mysterious prophecies (like that involving the Duke of Buckingham) and intricate conspiracies (most of which are organized by the two Machiavellian Catholic figures, Wolsey and Gardiner).

From the very first lines of the Prologue, the play's stated obsession is with the presentation of truth ("Such as give / Their money out of hope they may believe, / May here find truth, too", 7-9), and namely with the representation of the true history of King Henry VIII, as against the comic portrait offered by Rowley in his *When You See Me You Know Me* (1604, staged again in 1613):

[...] For, gentle hearers, know
 To rank our chosen truth with such a show
 As fool and fight is, beside forfeiting
 Our own brains, and the opinion that we bring
 To make that only true we now intend,
 Will leave us never an understanding friend. (*All is True*, Prologue, 17-22).

The Prologue's appeals to truth will soon prove central to the characters' own rhetorical strategies and to the play's general intention, i.e., to emphasise the ambiguities of discourse revolving around public interest and private conscience. The centrality of the latter is reflected in the recurrence of the word "conscience" itself, used both as a kind of oath to seal one's own truth, and to question the truthfulness of others (Anderson 1984; Slight 1991; Brietz Monta 2000; Wegemer 2000).⁴ Indeed, truth and individual conscience were among the religious obsessions of the time: the Protestant Reformation wanted the Church to restore the

³ As is well known, he had abandoned the history play as a genre more than ten years before with *Henry V* (1598), to take it up again only in 1612-1613, with *All is True*, or *Henry VIII*.

⁴ The word "conscience" appears 24 times, more than in any other Shakespearean play (there are eight instances in *Hamlet*, thirteen in *Richard III* and *Henry V*; see McMullan in Shakespeare 2000; Wegemer 2000). It is worth mentioning that McMullan analyses the semantic shift of the word "conscience" from a psychological/moral connotation to an explicitly sexual one in Henry VIII's speeches (in Shakespeare 2000: 80-85).

truth of the Holy Scriptures, so that they could be read without any institutional mediation. Conscience was a key issue in the construction and legitimization of the English Church, especially after the abolition of confession as a sacrament (Thomas 1971: 179-188). During the years of Elizabeth I's "fierce persecution" of Catholics, controlling the *inwardness* of the English people and monitoring the religious conscience of the Queen's subjects was also a crucial political matter.⁵ The impossibility of achieving such goals soon led to a juridical solution, the *Act of Uniformity* (1559), a law intended to impose liturgical conformity, as well as political and social order. The best illustration of how truth and conscience on the one hand, and law and history on the other, intermingle in *All is True* is Buckingham's fall, which takes place in the first act, but whose echoes reverberate throughout the play. The first scene opens with Norfolk reporting to Buckingham on the Field of the Cloth of Gold in France, the lavish spectacle of Henry VIII's meeting with the King of France in the village of Andres, in June 1520. Initially, he describes its magnificence in admiring tones, but soon the conversation turns to its excesses, costs and hollowness. This is an opportunity for the aristocratic Buckingham, a representative of the old political order, to express his hatred of cardinal Wolsey, the humbly born and ambitious prelate who had organized the expedition and drawn up the conditions of the pact between the monarchs of France and England. Buckingham also reports a prophecy – the first in the play – foretelling the breaking of the pact: Norfolk immediately confirms that this breach has already happened.

BUCKINGHAM. Every man,
After the hideous storm that followed, was
A thing inspired, and, not consulting, broke
Into a general prophecy – that this tempest,
Dashing the garment of this peace, aboded
The sudden breach on't.

NORFOLK. Which is budded out –
For France hath flawed the league, and hath attached
Our merchants' goods at Bordeaux. (*All is True*, I, 1, 89-95)

By alluding to men "inspired" by the storm to utter a prophecy, the play exploits the conventional topos of *inspiration* represented by the raging wind: both a natural event with apocalyptic allure, and an image of the divine spirit that allows for prophesying. The reference to this "general prophecy" seems to suggest that, if inspired by God, humans are effectively able to foretell the truth.⁶ After this passage, Buckingham openly accuses Wolsey of having treacherously conspired with the Emperor to break the peace with France, thus damaging the interests of the Crown. Norfolk invites him to be more moderate, but the Duke speaks rashly, declaring his intention to denounce Wolsey to the King. Instead, by the end of the scene, he and his son-in-law Abergavenny are under arrest and sent to the Tower of London. Before being taken away, Buckingham overhears something about the "limbs of the plot" (I, 1, 220) – that "a monk o'th' Chartreux" (221) is involved, and that his name is Nicholas Hopkins. The Duke soon realizes that he is a victim of Wolsey's conspiracy, and says: "My surveyor is false. The o'er-great Cardinal / Hath showed him gold. My life is spanned already" (223-224). In the following scene (I, 2), Henry VIII appears on the stage for the first time, leaning on Wolsey's shoulder and showing his psychological and political dependence on the cardinal. His passivity and unawareness of state affairs are immediately highlighted by Katherine's appeal to the king on behalf of his subjects, whose loyalty is

⁵ Ramie Targoff (1997) has convincingly identified the tension of this period in a dichotomy between *sincerity* and *theatricality*, *inwardness* and *outwardness*.

⁶ I am indebted to Patrick Austin Waldron for the interpretation and analysis of this passage of the play.

degenerating into open rebellion because of Wolsey's exorbitant taxes (55-68). Wolsey defends himself; Henry repeals the taxes and pardons his opponents, but in an aside we see Wolsey spreading the rumour that the amnesty is due to his intercession. Wolsey, therefore, exploits the situation to his own advantage. This is the first representation of the manipulation of truth in the play.

Katherine then expresses her pity for the disgrace that has befallen the Duke of Buckingham, but the King invites her to listen to the deposition of the Duke's surveyor. This is not yet the trial, which will be indirectly reported in Act II.⁷ Nonetheless, the juridical framework of the play is established by the public evaluation of Buckingham's words as reported by his surveyor: "First, it was usual with him, every day / It would infect his speech, that if the King / Should without issue die, he'll carry it so / To make the sceptre his. [...]" (I, 2, 133-136). The surveyor also reports Buckingham's desire to take revenge upon the Cardinal, who immediately intervenes to say that the duke's "will is most malignant" (142). Queen Katherine asks Wolsey to "deliver all with charity" (144), but everyone ignores her. The Cardinal, with his rhetorical skills, reinforces the persuasive power of the surveyor's words, thus invalidating the Queen's appeal to religion. King Henry asks how the Duke grounded his "title to crown" (145), and the surveyor answers: "He was brought to this / By a vain prophecy of Nicholas Hopkins" (147-148), his confessor, who "fed him every minute / With words of sovereignty" (150-151). Eventually, after a syntactical labyrinth of reported speeches (152-169), the monk's words are also given:

[...] "neither the King nor's heirs",
Tell you the Duke, "shall prosper. Bid him strive
To win the love o'th' commonalty. The Duke
Shall govern England." (*All is True*, I, 2, 169-172)

At this point Katherine intrudes again to discredit the surveyor's reliability, reminding the audience and the King that the man had recently lost his office because of his tenants' complaints (173-174). Once more, her religious appeal to the truth ("Take good heed / You charge not in your spleen a noble person / And spoil your nobler soul", 174-176) is ignored, and the surveyor resumes his deposition by saying: "On my soul I'll speak but truth" (178). He reports more compromising words spoken by the Duke, proving that prophecy has affected his mind and encouraged his conspiratorial imagination, though not (as far as we know) his actual behaviour. Buckingham's guilt resides only in these reported words and supposed intentions: no deed, no attempt to kill the king ever took place, no evidence of a plan exists (Kreps 1999). In Holinshed's *Chronicles*, from which the account of Buckingham's fall is drawn, incriminating letters sent by the Duke to the monk justify his trial and condemn him (Bullough 1962, 458-463); however, in Shakespeare and Fletcher's play, there is no proof of any kind apart from the surveyor's testimony. Katherine's suspicion concerning the reliability of the witness is another dramatic aspect that is absent in Holinshed, while the Duke's ambiguous words on the matter ("My surveyor is false", I, 1, 223) neither confirm nor dispel these doubts. They allow for at least two readings: the surveyor is false because he lies, having been bribed by Wolsey's gold; or he is false simply because he is a servant who has betrayed his master's confidence. The play carefully avoids offering any decisive clue as to Buckingham's guilt. This is the "only instance in any of the history plays in which conspiracy and the guilt of treason are left in doubt" (Kreps 1999: 176). Despite all the questions addressed to the surveyor, truth is not restored. The process of "evaluation of fact" is therefore a process of "evaluation of words", and namely of the reported words of

⁷ "We apprehend history largely through other people's interpretations of it" and "we repeatedly eavesdrop on reports of events rather than witnessing the events themselves" (Dean 1986: 177). See also Sahel 1985.

Hopkins' prophecy and Buckingham's plot. The supposed truth offered by the surveyor's testimony suffices to achieve what both Wolsey and the King desire: Buckingham's death and the safeguarding of royal power.

In Act II, Scene 1, the Gentleman recounting Buckingham's trial (which takes place off-stage) immediately insinuates that Wolsey arranged the whole thing (40-41), and alludes to the Cardinal's malicious strategies to rid himself of his enemies at court. Then Buckingham himself reappears on stage, and declares his innocence in a final speech stating his loyalty, but without offering any defence against the surveyor's charges. He admits that he was luckier than his father in having a just trial, but still has strong words for his accusers ("That never knew what truth meant", 106), and a final warning for his enemies: "I now seal it, / And with that blood will make 'em one day groan for't" (106-107). The King is not present, as he had already declared that no mercy would come from him. Nor does mercy come from the law: Buckingham is led away to his execution. He shall not govern England. The supposed conspirator-in-words is killed by the true conspirator-in-deeds, Wolsey, and the King is very far from the truth, if there is any truth to be found. More significantly, the prophecy proves wrong although it comes from a supposedly religious man. In spite of his conventional status as a man in conversation with God and at the service of providential plans, the monk Hopkins appears to be a morally degraded conspirator – like most members of the Catholic Church to which he belongs, at least in the eyes of the play's Jacobean audience. Hopkins exploits Buckingham's desire to become king to foster political turmoil, an accusation systematically associated with Catholics. More than that, as it proves false, the function of his prophecy in the play is to reveal the logic of Reason of State: political power – represented here by the Machiavellian Wolsey more than by Henry VIII – will preserve itself by any means. Buckingham's fall is the most important event in the play, representing as it does the unifying thread of the conflict between law and royal power (Foakes 1957; Richmond 1994). It also shows that prophecy and conspiracy are simply diegetic alibis used to invoke and perform legal procedures whose outcome depends on Henry VIII's strong (personal) interest.⁸

After Buckingham's fall – his name remains as a ghostly invocation in the characters' words – it is time for his enemy, Wolsey, to fall in the most unexpected way. While Katherine is repudiated to save the king's conscience from his religious scruples,⁹ Wolsey falls victim to negligence or to a trap (we do not know which), because his letters urging the Pope to delay his decision on the divorce have reached the king's hands (III, 2). The revelation of his conspiracy does not come as a surprise to the audience, but seems to deeply affect Henry's awareness of his royal power as well as his intention to exploit this new situation to his advantage.

The King we meet at the beginning of the fifth act is more conscious of his role and has learned how to bend court dynamics to his own private interests and desires. Most of all, he shows he is fully aware of the hiatus between law and justice. In the first scene of the final act, the King has been informed that some members of the Privy Council, led by the Catholic Bishop Stephen Gardiner, are conspiring against the newly appointed Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer, the man who helped Henry VIII with the divorce by gathering favourable opinions from all over Europe. The audience has already seen Gardiner's

⁸ See Kamps 1996; Wegemer 2000: 74ff; on justice in *Henry VIII*, see also Bliss 1975, Cespedes 1980, Rudnytsky 1991.

⁹ Catherine of Aragon married Arthur Prince of Wales in 1501, but he died five months later. In 1509 she married his younger brother, the recently crowned Henry VIII, thanks to a special authorization from the Pope which allowed the King to marry his brother's widow. Around 1530, after the beginning of his affair with Anne Boleyn, Henry started to question the legitimacy of this marriage, appealing to a passage from *Leviticus* 20:21: "If a man shall take his brother's wife, it is an unclean thing [...] they shall be childless". In fact they were not childless, as the future Mary I had already been born, but Catherine was unable to have any more children and Henry wanted a male heir to ensure a future for the Tudor crown.

manoeuvring in V, 1, 1-55, and knows the fears Gardiner aroused in the Privy Council about Cranmer's heretical propaganda for the ideas of the Reformation. The King has allowed the Council, to which both Gardiner and Cranmer belong, to hold a preliminary trial.

While the King is awaiting news of the birth of his child from Anne Boleyn, he warns Cranmer of the "grievous" "complaints" against him, but also of the power of his enemies. Unexpectedly, the Archbishop reads this difficult situation as an opportunity to test his own conscience:

CRANMER (*kneeling*). I humbly thank your highness,
And am right glad to catch this good occasion
Most thoroughly to be winnowed, where my chaff
And corn shall fly asunder. For I know
There's none stands under more calumnious tongues
Than I myself, poor man.
[...]
CRANMER. Most dread liege,
The good I stand on is my truth and honesty.
If they shall fail, I with mine enemies
Will triumph o'er my person, which I weigh not,
Being of those virtues vacant. I fear nothing
What can be said against me. (*All is True*, V, 1, 109-114; 122-127)

Once again a character is called to answer one of the "calumnious tongue[s]" that are everywhere in the play, and are often right, too. This trial of his own conscience is welcomed by Cranmer with a religious attitude that Henry VIII immediately labels as political inexperience. He decides to instruct Cranmer on the ways of the world, that is to say the ways of politics and law at court. As Rudnytsky aptly summarizes, "Henry VIII gives Cranmer a stern lecture on political life and on how malicious and powerful people can easily corrupt the legal process" (Rudnytsky 1991: 83). The King reminds him of what he himself has learned from the Buckingham affair:

KING HENRY. Know you not
How your state stands i'th' world, with the whole world?
Your enemies are many, and not small; their practices
Must bear the same proportion, and not ever
The justice and the truth o'th' question carries
The dew o'th' verdict with it. At what ease
Might corrupt minds procure knaves as corrupt
To swear against you? Such things have been done.
You are potently opposed, and with a malice
Of as great size. Ween you of better luck,
I mean in perjured witness, than your master,
Whose minister you are, whiles here he lived
Upon this naughty earth? Go to, go to.
You take a precipice for no leap of danger,
And woo your own destruction. (*All is True*, V, 1, 127-141)

Henry VIII probably alludes here to the surveyor's testimony in the first act, although he suggests an even loftier example, that of Christ's trial in the Scriptures. By resorting to these examples, the King convinces Cranmer (and the audience) that trials do not constitute a procedure for re-establishing the truth, nor are they places for investigating it, as Cranmer naïvely thinks. This is especially true at court, where the web of conspiracies and counter-conspiracies is so dense that the truth is never sufficient to defend an honest man.

In the second scene (V, 2), the pre-trial at the Council is staged.¹⁰ Cranmer tries to defend himself with eloquence, and asks for mercy; but his enemies are rhetorically more skilful, and the Council votes unanimously for his arrest. Cranmer shows the ring given to him by the King as a symbol of protection, thus putting an end to the trial (V, 2, 131-135). The King achieves what he wanted all along: to ensure Cranmer's complete fidelity. This is the reason why he did not stop Gardiner's conspiracy from the very outset (Kyle 2008), and decided to help Cranmer, though the accusations against him – his being a sectary (V, 2, 104) – are founded. The conspiracy is over and order is restored; royal power, rather than truth, wins over the political use of the law (as in Katherine's trial).

Cranmer is welcomed back into the Council, and the King asks him to be the godfather at the baptism of his daughter Elizabeth. At the end of the christening scene, Cranmer pronounces the final prophecy of the play. Once again it is a prophecy from a religious man, but while the first forecast (from the Catholic Nicholas Hopkins) was of a future that would never happen, this second and final prophecy reveals a future that is obviously true, as it foreshadows the playwrights' and the audience's recent past. After celebrating the sacrament, which follows the *Book of Common Prayer* ritual,¹¹ Cranmer pronounces on the future of the child:

CRANMER. Let me speak, sir,
For heaven now bids me, and the words I utter
Let none think flattery, for they'll find 'em truth.
This royal infant – heaven still move about her –
Though in her cradle, yet now promises
Upon this land a thousand thousand blessings
Which time shall bring to ripeness. She shall be –
But few now living can behold that goodness –
A pattern to all princes living with her,
And all that shall succeed. [...]

[...] Truth shall nurse her,
Holy and heavenly thoughts still counsel her.
She shall be loved and feared. Her own shall bless her;
Her foes shake like a field of beaten corn,
And hang their heads with sorrow. Good grows with her.
In her days every man shall eat in safety
Under his own vine what he plants, and sing
The merry songs of peace to all his neighbours.
God shall be truly known, and those about her
From her shall read the perfect ways of honour,
And by those claim their greatness, not by blood.
Nor shall this peace sleep with her, but, as when
The bird of wonder dies – the maiden phoenix –
Her ashes new create another heir
As great in admiration as herself,
So shall she leave her blessedness to one,
When heaven shall call her from this cloud of darkness,
Who from the sacred ashes of her honour
Shall star-like rise as great in fame as she was,

¹⁰ Here the playwrights manipulate the historical facts rather heavy-handedly: Cranmer's actual trial took place in 1543, when some of the characters in the play had already been executed (Thomas More in 1535, Anne Boleyn in 1536), and Henry had already obtained his third divorce (1540).

¹¹ *The Book of Common Prayer* was the English prayer book edited by Cranmer in 1549 to replace the Catholic Roman Missal in the liturgy of the new English Church.

And so stand fixed. Peace, plenty, love, truth, terror,
That were the servants to this chosen infant,
Shall then be his, and, like a vine, grow to him.
Wherever the bright sun of heaven shall shine,
His honour and the greatness of his name
Shall be, and make new nations. He shall flourish,
And like a mountain cedar reach his branches
To all the plains about him. Our children's children
Shall see this, and bless heaven. (*All is True*, V, 4, 14-23; 28-55)

The account of Elizabeth I's greatness is characterized by an insistence on truth ("Truth shall nurse her", 28), and particularly on religious truth ("God shall be truly known", 36); its climax is the figure of the phoenix announcing the rise of James I as the symbolic descendant of this wisest of queens. The instrument of political prophecy is here used for merely laudatory purposes, without any diegetic function: the future it shapes does not contain any subversive imagery, any divergent possibility of the plot or of history. Its truth agrees with facts, or with the official interpretation of facts. Cranmer's speech reveals a political use of prophecy that functions as historical confirmation of a providential plan. Given the gratitude that now binds him to the King, the suspicion is that Cranmer resorts to the weakened instrument of prophecy to re-functionalize it as a mere instrument of power, exploiting the allure of honesty and virtue shown during the trial, and implicitly guaranteed by his Protestant faith. The play stages a sort of clash between the truth of competing Christian Churches: the Catholic monk who forecasted Buckingham's royal future had to be proved wrong, because only Protestants know the plans of God and can interpret his will. Going beyond John Foxe's illustration of God's plan for the victory of the Reformation in *The Book of Martyrs*,¹² Cranmer attempts to construct the myth of the Stuart dynasty by projecting the propagandistic Tudor horizon of the text onto the world of the audience outside the text.¹³ The scrupulous representation of truth as always bordering on ambiguity and counterfeiting culminates in Cranmer's legitimation of a historical 'official truth', where history itself is represented as a discourse that ceaselessly manipulates the past in order to influence the present and the future. Truth, so often invoked in the play, does not lie in history, just as justice does not lie in the law, as Henry VIII himself admitted in V, 1 ("not ever / The justice and the truth o'th' question carries / The dew o'th' verdict with it", 130-132). 'Truths', and the historical or religious discourses built on them, are shown to be dependent on one's rhetorical abilities (since potentially *all is true*) and on the characters' desires (for example Buckingham's, as reflected in the monk's prophecy) or fears (as in Gardiner's conspiracy against the reformers), or again on political interest (as with Henry's protection of Cranmer). The last of Shakespeare's history plays thus seems ultimately to state, by re-configuring prophecy and conspiracy as narrative devices, the unreliability of every statement and the interestedness of every judgment, especially in public discourses concerning one's own private conscience. As some twentieth-century theatrical productions of *Henry VIII* have fittingly highlighted,¹⁴ the

¹² The main source for the final act of *All is True* is John Foxe's 1596 edition of *The Actes and Monuments*, more commonly known as *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* (first edition 1563). See Bullough 1962: 485-489 for the comparison of excerpts from this work with passages from the play.

¹³ The play was probably performed on the occasion of the marriage of James I's daughter, Princess Elizabeth, to Frederick, the Elector Palatine, one of the most important figures of continental Protestantism. Their marriage aroused many expectations in Britain about a more radical reform of the English Church, since the religious policies of both James I (generally more interested in his role as a builder of European peace), and his predecessor Henry VIII (who recanted on many of the reforms previously approved) had disappointed most Protestants.

¹⁴ See Davies' 1983 production of *Henry VIII*, or Doran's 1996 *All is True (or Henry VIII)*. See also Shaughnessy 2002 and O'Connor-Goodland 2007.

play offers a chance to reflect upon political rhetoric and its power to change reality and modify the past, as well as the present, in a world that can no longer rely on a stable supernatural framework. Accordingly, rhetorical chaos prevails, and truth becomes one discourse among many, which people can use, construct and manipulate in order to fight for their own interests and desires.

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Prophecy as Conspiracy in Revolutionary England

Giuliana Iannaccaro

Every single work of art is the fulfilment of a prophecy:
for every work of art is the conversion of an idea into an image.
(Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis*, 2005: 178)

Prophecy—divinely inspired speech or writing, revelatory of the deity's message and/or of future events—interacts with the literary work at a deep, functional level: once uttered, it conditions the further development of the text, which is necessarily brought to confirm the oracle, to disavow it, or to leave the question undecided, beyond the interpretative faculties of both listeners and readers. The chapters that precede my own in this collection of essays deal with specific issues regarding prophecy and conspiracy in late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century literary works; the majority of contributions interrogate Shakespeare's plays (*Much Ado About Nothing*, *Macbeth*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *Henry VIII*), the only exception being the chapter on Sir Philip Sidney's *Old Arcadia*. Undeniably, the more complex and multi-layered the literary work, the more rewarding is its critical analysis; therefore, the choice of Shakespeare's mature plays for an inquiry on the literary use of prophecy in early modern England is both predictable and justified.

My aim in this last chapter is to make some brief and necessarily incomplete remarks on the presence of prophecy in the textuality of a slightly later period, the mid-seventeenth century, and on the ways in which the prophetic text could be read and interpreted. Instead of focussing on fictional literary works, I will take into consideration a few examples among the myriad of politico-religious pamphlets and tracts that flooded England between 1640 and 1660. The religious, political and military upheaval still called by historians the "English Revolution", and the parallel revolution in writing that it brought about, are well-known and widely researched fields in early modern studies. Confronted with an unprecedented subversion of the traditional pillars of social order—monarchy and the national religious institution—an impressive number of partakers in the ideological revolution in England chose the written page to contribute to the discussion, the demolition, and the ensuing reconstruction of the principles upon which a political and religious community had to be based. In most cases, the literary form chosen to provide descriptions, commentaries, and critical statements upon past and present events—and of course to utter prophecies about the future—is prose.¹ My intention is to take into consideration a selection of radical religious writings (mainly Quaker and Ranter texts) ranging from the end of the 1640s to the end of the 1650s, which,

¹ George Thomason's collection of more than 22,000 books and pamphlets published during the English Civil Wars and the Interregnum is a well-known and essential resource for the study of the revolutionary period. After several attempts to find a suitable collocation for the collection (and after it remained inaccessible for almost a century), it was finally presented to the British Museum in 1762 in King George III's name, and moved to the British Library in 1973.

predictably, were read as ‘prophecies’ by some and as ‘conspiracies’ by others, according to the social, political, religious, and cultural provenance of the readers in question. Although the limited space of an essay does not permit a thorough examination of texts which are all but plain and univocal, I also mean to hint at some aspects of their literary features and at their unstable, provocatively unsettled status as far as questions of authority, authoriality and interpretation are concerned.²

The prophetic mode in writing tends to challenge its readers and to stimulate their participation in the literary event: in the case of fictional texts, a prophecy uttered towards the beginning of a story fulfils the function of setting it in motion, because it represents the specific element in the plot to which the narrative responds,³ as shown in the preceding contributions investigating Sidney’s and Shakespeare’s works. In the case of non-fictional prophetic writings, meant to interpret and possibly to direct the course of human events, the challenge to the reader regards both the provenance of the prophetic utterance (its divine or human source) and its interpretation. Religious prophecy asks to be understood as an indisputable kind of discourse, justified by a source of truth which is situated at the same time within the prophet and beyond the human realm. Besides, the location of prophetic discourse in a liminal space between the earthly and the unearthly, and between the present (of the utterance) and the future (of the signified condition), is a further element of complexity, which renders the readers’ interpretative process even harder. In fact, prophecies are expected to hide at least as much as they disclose, since only the elect individual – the one who, for whatever reason, is set apart from the common sort of people – will be allowed to read and comprehend the message of the ‘deity’. To rephrase this into more secular language, prophecies ultimately rely on the hermeneutic abilities of (spiritually) gifted readers to disclose their real meaning and their epistemological value. This often cryptic, but, at the same time, fully significant nature of prophetic writing is the reason for its literary relevance: the language of prophecy is the outcome of linguistic research, because it must find the means to express the verbal encounter of a physical medium and a metaphysical source of ultimate signification. It is precisely that encounter – founded both on the notion of the incommensurability of medium and source, and on their seemingly paradoxical coincidence in an earthly form (the human prophet) – that also renders prophetic utterances daring and potentially dangerous political acts. When the readers of the alleged divination do not acknowledge the metaphysical nature of the prediction, and instead identify the source of signification as merely human, the utterance ceases to be interpreted as a ‘prophecy’: the most extreme versions of seventeenth-century prophetic messages, those which were meant to propose alternative readings of history and foster radical political and religious changes, were read as conspiracies against God and the State by the upholders of more traditional views of society and of their structures of power, seen as bulwarks of social order against anarchy.

It is therefore to the literary polyphony of the revolutionary period that we now turn. James Holstun refers to the so-called “pamphlet wars” of the 1640s and 1650s in terms of “a staggering output of more than 20,000 books, pamphlets, broadsides and newspapers;

² The bibliography regarding the revolutionary period is of course impressive; studies on the writings of the religious extremists first appeared in the 1950s, and still constitute a dynamic field of research to this day. The literary investigation of ‘radical’ publications began around the 1970s and exploded in the 1980s and, above all, in the 1990s; towards the end of that decade, revisionist work started to appear. Instead of compiling a lengthy bibliographic note, I refer the reader to the Bibliographic Appendix, which offers an overview of literary studies on religious radicalism, with a specific focus on Quaker and Ranter writings, taken into consideration here. Far from being complete, the select bibliography is meant to provide suggestions for further reading, and it is chronologically arranged according to decades, in order to draw attention to the progression of research. To facilitate reference, though, within each section records are listed in alphabetical order.

³ On the subject of literary prophecy and its narrative function, and in particular on the narrative expectations created by the “oracle”, see Marengo 2013.

sermons and scriptural commentaries mixed with satires and fictions, political theory and manifestoes – a polyglot Babel of print [...] and almost all of it prose” (Holstun 1992: 1). Nigel Smith speaks of a “media revolution”, “a ‘downwards dissemination’ of print – a democratising of its availability. And there was still a sense – from all quarters – that the world had been destabilised by a printing surfeit. [...] The effect of the expansion of the means of communication and the great variety of forms it took was a sense of living in a kind of public confusion.” (Smith 1994: 24-25). That sense of confusion was possibly perceived by all those who took active part, or were passively involved, in the general debate about the way in which the country had to be organised and ruled: social and political stances were strictly bound to religious claims, and practical issues were connected with the philosophical and theological conception of man, his individual nature, and his social identity. The bulk of writings commenting upon the political situation of the nation before and after the execution of King Charles I in 1649 (a sort of *annus mirabilis*, which also saw the abolition of monarchy and of the House of Lords, and the proclamation of the Commonwealth of England) ranged from pro-Royalist defence of the Stuart family, to more or less moderate proposals for the reorganisation of public life, and finally to the negation of the very principle of institutional authority – a position mainly held by individual writers who often did not envisage any alternative political settings, but claimed instead the absolute spiritual and political independence of the regenerate believer, the true prophet of God’s holy message.

There were of course different shades of enthusiasm, and, consequently, more or less threatening principles, disseminated orally and in print by those who envisioned alternative possibilities of life on earth. The religious extremists, whom we conveniently group under the term ‘radicals’,⁴ were labelled by their detractors as sectaries, schismatics, enthusiasts, heretics, atheists, blasphemous and barbarous people, devils, villains, and, in short, dangerous conspirators against God’s ordinances and human laws.⁵ Predictably, they were associated with disruptive social practices like roaring, swearing, drinking, whoring, and fighting. The institutional reactions to their prophesying were often violent and were directed both at the prophets themselves and, when present, at their printed texts: agitators could be punished with flogging, torture, and public humiliation, besides being often incarcerated and left to pine away in prison even for years; their publications, when it was feasible, were seized and burnt.

⁴ The use of the terms ‘radicals’ and ‘radicalism’ to refer to the religious extremists of the revolutionary period and their ideas dates back to the 1970s, with the pioneer studies of A. L. Morton (*The World of the Ranters. Religious Radicalism in the English Revolution*, 1970) and Christopher Hill (*The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas During the English Revolution*, 1972). Hill wrote about “seventeenth-century radicals” (Preface, p. 7) and “religious radicals” (p. 32) in his 1972 book, and defended his choice twenty years later, in *The English Bible and the Seventeenth-Century Revolution*: “I do not know how otherwise than as radicals to describe people who in the mid-seventeenth century (and earlier) held unorthodox views on religion and politics which set them beyond the pale of the respectable groups which we call Anglicans, Presbyterians or Independents” (1993: 196-97). In 1994 Conal Condren would address the issue with a monograph on *The Language of Politics in Seventeenth-Century England*, basically warning researchers of the anachronistic use of the word ‘radical’ if applied to the seventeenth-century political domain, given that it became a political term only with the French Revolution. The debate went on in the following years, and has been recently resumed by Hessayon and Finnegan in 2011 (*Varieties of Seventeenth- and Early Eighteenth-Century English Radicalism in Context*). In their introduction to the volume they acknowledge the seminal work by Condren, but defend their use of the problematic terms (‘radical’, ‘radicals’ and their –isms): “Indeed, effacing the term radical from our analyses does not seem a practicable solution. In its absence there would be silence, while finding a universally agreed substitute would be equally problematic.” (2011: 4). As I argued in my book *Ombre e Sostanza* (2003: 18-19), I use the term ‘radicals’ to refer to religious extremists, who may or may not have belonged to a specific group or political organization.

⁵ See for instance John Taylor, *A Swarme of Sectaries and Schismatiques* (1641); see also the well-known ‘catalogue’ by Thomas Edwards, *Gangraena, or A Catalogue and Discovery of many of the Errors, Heresies, Blasphemies and Pernicious Practices of the Sectaries of this time* (1646), and Henry More’s *Enthusiasmus Triumphatus* (1656).

Reading prophecies as conspiracies, as well as conspiring through prophecies, was a widespread literary activity during the revolutionary period, and the textual material at the disposal of the researcher is extensive. The limited exploration of a few prophetic writings between the late 1640s and the end of the 1650s will hopefully suffice to give a general idea of the threat they posed to political, religious, and literary power in the midst of the seventeenth-century turmoil. As twenty-first-century readers, we can only imagine the scenario of orally delivered prophecies – improvised pulpits, bodily performances, silences and shouts, elation and fear. What we have materially in front of us almost four hundred years later are the multifarious literary forms in which revolutionary prophecies were delivered on the printed page.

The Spirit of the Lord not limited

Here all may see the Spirit of the Lord not limited, but upon the handmaids & the servants is the Lords Spirit poures, & to be poures, & many thousands of servants & handmaids witness the Spirit of the Lord poured upon them, the word of the Lord fulfills, & upon the sons and daughters will the Lord pour out his spirit, & they shall prophesie, and many daughters and sons, and young men, and old men witness the spirit of the Lord upon them poured out, that visions are seen, old men dream dreams, & young men see visions, & their sons and their daughters do prophesy, Ioel 2.28. (Fox 1656: 3).

Thus George Fox, the historical leader of what came to be known as the Quaker movement, announces the descent of God's spirit upon all pure, regenerate believers. The first Quakers believed in what might be called, as it were, a 'democratisation' of the gift of prophecy, in the sense that even the humblest in the social ladder could be literally inhabited by the Spirit, provided that they were pure of heart and righteous. Divine inspiration was a prerequisite to preaching for the members of the *Religious Society of Friends*, who would wait in silence for the manifestation of the voice of God inside the believer before giving vent to His message; the nickname of 'Quakers', given to the members of the congregation by its early detractors, stems from the sudden convulsions which apparently seized the preacher once inhabited by the Holy Spirit, and therefore ready to speak.

The Quaker movement was not overtly political, in spite of the fact that it appeared in the aftermath of the first Civil War, when Fox started preaching and proselytising in the late 1640s; the *Society of Friends* grew constantly during the 1650s, eventually numbering thousands of members despite persecutions. One may wonder why seemingly pacific humble people who aimed at spiritual regeneration should be persecuted so fiercely by the new Puritan government; the reason must be sought for in the deeply subversive practices of the early Quakers, who, besides refusing to comply with many social and sociolinguistic conventions of their time,⁶ did not forbear from openly attacking the presumption and corruption of the professional clergy, both in their oral preaching and in their published texts. Quakers were perceived as politically dangerous also because their literary production, aimed

⁶ Early Quakers relied on the Bible, but believed in the primacy of the Spirit within the regenerate believer; they disparaged both institutional clergy and their churches (called "steeplehouses" to signify that they were mere buildings, destitute of the Spirit). Fox started very early to preach against the payment of tithes to the church and to refuse oath-taking as practices not justified by the Scriptures. Quakers also refused to perform politeness ceremonies like bowing, taking off one's hat in salutation, using titles and honorific pronouns, using the 'you' form. Thus, they inevitably came into conflict with Church, State, and their own social communities. Critical studies on the early Quakers and their social and linguistic practices are copious (see bibliographic appendix for reading suggestions); I'll just mention Bauman 1983 as the first comprehensive literary study of seventeenth-century English Quakers.

at proselytising, was growing at a very fast pace during the 1650s, and proved essential for both the spread and the survival of the movement: it helped to propagate the principal tenets held by the first leaders, and “to keep the coherence of a denomination that seemingly lacked all the infrastructural advantages of more orthodox denominations, such as church buildings and a beneficed ministry” (Corns 2001: 83). Confronted with such a rapid dissemination of subversive tracts and pamphlets, distributed both in England and abroad by very efficient itinerant preachers, it is no wonder that the Puritan government tried to contain the threat to social hierarchies and public order. Prophets of both genders would challenge religious authorities in the ‘roaring’ 1650s, stigmatising their greed, their corruption, and even their doctrinal incompetence, as testified by this lengthy invective by the Quaker prophetess Sarah Blackborrow in *A Visit to the Spirit in Prison* (1658):

And to all you who own yourselves to be Ministers and Teachers of the people, who preach for money, and though yee have it not, yet do forbear to cast into prison; yet it is plainly made minifest, you both are guided by one spirit, and ‘tis your own, and while you are following on in that to know, you can know nothing, and the woe is pronounced against it; you are all bound up together in one, who is the earthly, and his work you bring forth, and his wisdom you are in, and it appears by your practices, for if any of the children of the Lord, be moved to come into your Steeple-houses to ask you a question, or to declare what they can witness of that which leads to Christ, how wrathful are you and impatient, and cry to the people, carry them away or suffer the people to hail them away without reproving them? (Blackborrow 1658: A2v-A3).

The fact that lower social classes and women could take the liberty to prophesy and openly inveigh against institutional authorities was of course considered a threat to morals and to social stability, both by the new regime and by its royalist opponents. The presence of women in the Quaker movement was pervasive from the very beginning, and their importance has been widely documented and discussed. Women were pivotal in disseminating the Quaker message as preachers and missionaries, as well as in the role of writers and workers in the printing presses. Their proselytism is recorded in numerous seventeenth-century publications, which highlight the sufferings and persecutions endured by the “Daughters of Abraham” in their missionary activity.⁷ Predictably, such relations contributed to the spreading of Quakerism both in England and abroad, in the wake of the literary tradition of the Protestant books of martyrs.

If early Quakers firmly believed that the prophetic Spirit could manifest itself in “handmaids” and “servants”, in “sons” as well as in “daughters” (Fox 1656: 3),⁸ they did not go as far as to claim the possibility for human beings to achieve Christ’s perfection on earth, and to become totally regenerate individuals in full conjunction with God before bodily death and resurrection. It is true that in the 1650s the movement was very young, and that it was difficult to control the way in which leaders and affiliates chose to interpret and convey the Quaker message; actually, it was not unusual to run across prophets belonging to the *Society of Friends* who would stage public performances without providing any interpretation of their actions for the assembly. What did the Quaker leader and prophet James Nayler (a prominent figure in the Fifties) mean when he entered the town of Bristol in 1656 riding a donkey and surrounded by an adoring crowd, who affirmed that he was “King of Israel” and could raise

⁷ “Daughters of Abraham” is the way in which two (by now) famous Quaker missionaries called themselves in the title of their report concerning their missionary voyage towards Egypt, which was hindered by their detention on the Isle of Malta at the hands of the Inquisition. See Evans and Chevers 1662, frontispiece (bibliography, primary sources). On women prophets in general, see the bibliographic appendix; for a very recent monograph on the subject see Font Paz 2017.

⁸ Paul *I Corinthians* 1:27 and 4:10 were of course often quoted to justify the subversion of values and codes of behaviour, as well as of social hierarchies.

the dead? Was he claiming perfection by showing that he was fully regenerate and had literally ‘assumed’ Christ, or was he simply imitating Christ’s entrance into Jerusalem in order to ‘represent’ perfection? Once arrested and examined on that particular point, Nayler apparently answered in an ambivalent way, on the one hand trying to avoid the charge of blasphemy, and on the other never really disclaiming his own alleged divine identity.⁹

Nevertheless, apart from isolated cases, the basic creed of the early Quakers held that God could speak ‘from within’, but it did not contemplate the blending of human and divine identities; similarly, although they denied that the Lord had spoken to men once and for all in the Scriptures – and maintained instead that he still spoke to believers through the inner, silent voice (see Bauman 1983: 25-26) – they never went as far as to disclaim the authority of the Bible. There were other alleged prophets in the religious and political turmoil of those years who declared in their writings that they had already reached, in the ‘here and now’ of the earthly dimension, the full communion with God, and that, given their glorified state, they no longer needed to base their prophecies on the authority of the Scriptures, since the Truth appeared to them by revelation. Such totally unorthodox and provocative individuals were execrated by their contemporaries and denounced even by the leaders of other radical groups, because they were perceived as extremely dangerous for those who were trying to bring about a less offensive (albeit not necessarily less *radical*) spiritual and social revolution.¹⁰ Called ranters, atheists, blasphemers, devils and by similar epithets, the people who claimed perfection and, consequently, full authority in all fields, were persecuted as reckless conspirators against God and men. The nickname “Ranters” has reached us in the myriad of tracts and pamphlets denouncing their practices: anti-Ranter propaganda that often relied on gossip and scandal to enliven the narration of their excesses, which was thus rendered much more appealing to the reading public, as the following title of an anonymous writing testifies:

The Ranters Ranting: With the apprehending, examinations, and confession of Iohn Collins, I. Shakespear, Tho. Wiberton, and five more which are to answer the next Sessions. And severall songs or catches, which were sung at their meetings. Also their several kinds of mirth, and dancing. Their blasphemous opinions. Their belief concerning heaven and hell. And the reason why one of the same opinion cut off the heads of his own mother and brother. Set forth for the further discovery of this ungodly crew, London, Printed by B. Aslop, 1650.

*Howle, You Great Ones*¹¹

Thus saith the Lord, *I inform you, that I overturn, overturn, overturn.* And as the Bishops, Charles, and the Lords, have had their turn, overturn, so your turn shall be next (ye surviving great ones) by what Name or Title soever dignified or distinguished) [*sic*] who ever you are, that oppose me, the Eternall God, who am UNIVERSALL Love, and whose service is perfect freedome, and pure Libertinisme. (Coppe 1649b: 21-22).

⁹ The episode is reported both in an anonymous, sympathetic account of Nayler’s examination – published in London in 1657 under the title: *A True Narrative of the Examination, Tryall, and Sufferings of James Nayler* – and in George Fox’s *Journal*, published posthumously in 1694. I have discussed the semiotic implications of Nayler’s public performance in *Ombre e Sostanza* (2003: 79-83).

¹⁰ The Quakers, for instance, struggled to differentiate themselves from extreme radicalism on many occasions. In 1655 Richard Farnsworth published *The Ranters Principles & Deceits discovered and declared against, denied and disowned by us whom the world calls Quakers*. In his address to the reader, Farnsworth writes: “[...] I was moved to write something to lay open their deceits, false Rests, and false liberties for the truths sake and the simple ones sakes, that it may go abroad as a testimoniall of our deniall of them [...]” (1655: Av.).

¹¹ Coppe 1649b: 30.

Abiezer Coppe was one the most notorious and execrated Ranters in the period under consideration, and he is still well-known today to historians and literary critics, although for different reasons. His troubled life and wavering religious affiliations have provided historians with many clues concerning the life-conditions and socio-political affiliations of the radical fringes of the English revolution; at the same time, the complexity, richness, and allusiveness of his language have fascinated literary critics since the early 1970s, when the first historical and literary works on the religious radicals of the period appeared (see Morton 1970 and Hill 1972). Coppe's writings are particularly interesting in the light of an analysis of a highly messianic prophetic mode, which blends scriptural and classical sources in an experimental prose that is also personal and creative. That is why, among other writers who published similarly unorthodox philosophical conceptions of man's relationship with God and his fellow-creatures,¹² I have chosen to rely on Coppe in my brief investigation of the link between prophecy and conspiracy, which becomes inevitable when the prophetic utterance openly challenges institutional powers.

In the quotation above, taken from *A Fiery Flying Roll* (1649b), Coppe inveighs against both old and new representatives of political power: those who "have had their turn" are the high ministers of the Church of England, the beheaded Stuart King Charles I, and more generally the "Lords" of a country in which their parliamentary stronghold, the House of Lords, had just been abolished; those who are about to taste divine vengeance are the "surviving great ones" of the nation, soon to be defeated and reduced to nothing by an "Eternall God" who is at the same time the Scriptural God of the Old Testament¹³ and the prophet himself. Actually, Coppe's unmistakably prophetic writings, *A Fiery Flying Roll* and *A Second Fiery Flying Roule*, appeared towards the end of 1649, when the royalist faction had finally lost the Civil War and the immediate future was open to speculation.

The very title *A Fiery Flying Roll* introduces the reader to the prophetic mode widely employed by its author throughout both pamphlets; political and religious powers must tremble because the day of Judgement is at hand:

A Fiery Flying Roll: A Word from the Lord to all the Great Ones of the Earth, whom this may concerne: Being the last warning piece at the dreadfull day of Judgement. For now the Lord is come to {1. *Informe* 2. *Advise and warne* 3. *Charge* 4. *Judge and Sentence*} the Great Ones. As also most compassionately informing, and most lovingly and pathetically advising and warning *London*. With a terrible Word, and fatall Blow from the Lord, upon the Gathered Churches. [...] (Coppe 1649b: 15)

Old Testament prophetic books, and, in the New Testament, James and the Book of Revelation, provide much of Coppe's imagery. The vision in the title – the message of God thrust in the mouth of the prophet in the form of a roll – comes from Ezekiel 2 and 3; Coppe identifies himself with the Old Testament prophet and tells the story of his own visitation by the Spirit of God in the Preface to the first "Roll" (1649b: 17). The prophet Isaiah's invectives against the lofty ones (Isaiah 2 and 23) and his levelling, impending apocalypse (Isaiah 13:6) are at the basis of Coppe's message to the powerful leaders of his time, whose lofty condition shall be overturned by the vengeance of the biblical Lord of Hosts. The prophecy is all the more urgent since the exceptional events of 1649 have clearly shown that human, historical

¹² Nigel Smith, in his pioneering *Collection of Ranter Writings from the 17th Century* (1983), gathers selected writings by Abiezer Coppe, Lawrence Clarkson, Joseph Salmon, and Jacob Bauthumely. They were all outstanding prose writers, even if Coppe is by far the most linguistically inventive.

¹³ The whole passage recalls Isaiah 2 and 23. See also, in the New Testament, James's invective against rich men (James 5:1-6).

time is almost at an end: “Never was there such a time since the world stood, as now is” (Coppe 1649b: 38).

The two Rolls are also filled with claims for social justice. Social radicalism in Coppe’s texts was predictably a highly disturbing subject for both old and new powers. In his uncompromising attacks against private property, the writer combines the evangelical message of charity towards the poor with the violence of Old Testament prophecies against the rich, who deprive their fellow beings of the very means of subsistence. Private property, in the *Second Roule*, is deemed as theft, since the only rightful owner of the earth’s riches is the Lord. Not only those who claim property on gold and silver, but also the people who “dare to say, your ox, or your ass is your own” are called “thieves” and “Appropriators”, and are warned: the Lord – “I the Lord”, writes Coppe, who speaks both *in the name* of God and *in the person* of God – has come to redistribute wealth according to justice, and to punish “those that (impudently and wickedly, theevishly and hoggishly) stile themselves the owners of the Land” (Coppe 1649c: 48).

Coppe goes as far as to redefine the meaning of the Holy Communion, which is not to be understood as an occasional eating and drinking of bread and wine, but must be fully appreciated (and put in practice) according to its etymological significance:

Why after a consecration in a new forme, eating a bit of bread, and drinking a sip of wine perhaps once a moneth, why mother of mischief is this Communion? O thou flattering and deceitfull tongue, God shall root thee out of the Land of the living, is this Communion? no, no mother of witchcrafts! The true Communion amongst men, is to have all things common, and to call nothing one hath, ones own. And the true externall breaking of bread, is to eat bread together in singleness of heart, and to break thy bread to the hungry, and tell them its their own bread &c. els your Religion is in vain. (Coppe 1649c: 52)

Indissolubly linked with his attacks against power and social injustice is Coppe’s provocative self-fashioning as both human prophet *and* divine essence.¹⁴ The writer’s enthusiastic mode is ‘radical’, in the sense that the ultimate knowledge concerning man’s destiny is both revealed to his frail, human frame by the Holy Spirit, and announced to the world by an eternal Majesty residing in him, which coincides with his glorified, new self (see Preface to the first *Roll*). Actually, Coppe brings Paul’s words to extreme consequences: both I Corinthians 2:4 (“And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man’s wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and power”) and the well-known *omnia munda mundis* (Titus 1:15) can be used to exalt inner knowledge and to justify the subversion of moral values on the part of the regenerate individual: “Well! To the pure all things are pure. God hath so cleared cursing, swearing, in some, that that which goes for swearing and cursing in them, is more glorious then praying and preaching in others” (Coppe 1649b: 27; see also 1649c: 44). Similarly, his claim that “I can if it be my will, kisse and hug Ladies, and love my neighbours wife as my selfe, without sin” (1649c: 44) provocatively challenges God’s very commandments, and presupposes a total disregard for the principles on which social life was – and largely is – regulated.

A man who announced the impending overthrow of social structures and the end of private property, who openly defied those in power, and who declared his total independence from moral codes could not easily escape the charge of conspiring against God’s ordinances and men’s laws. After the publication of the Rolls, Abiezer Coppe was charged with blasphemy and imprisoned in Warwick (soon to be moved to Coventry gaol) by an ordinance of the Council of State. Shortly after, the House of Commons established that all copies of *A Fiery*

¹⁴ The identification of the indwelling Spirit with the regenerate prophet is anticipated in the first important work written by Coppe, *Some Sweet Sips of Some Spirituall Wine*, also published in 1649.

Flying Roll “be burnt by the Hand of the Hangman, at the *New Palace Yard*, at *Westminster*; the *Exchange*, in *Cheapside*; and at the *Market Place*, in *Southwark*”.¹⁵ In March 1650 Coppe was moved to Newgate, and languished in the prison of London for more than one year before being finally released.

Coppe’s writings stand out from other radical texts of the period because of their linguistic and even typographical creativity. It would be impossible to deal with such a complex and fascinating issue here, for obvious reasons of limited space; suffice it to say that recent literary studies on the radical prose of the English Revolution have contributed to an increasingly sophisticated analysis of Coppe’s language – an analysis which requires a thorough research of his cultural milieu and of the literary sources of his writings. Just to give a couple of examples, Nicholas McDowell, in *The English Radical Imagination. Culture, Religion, and Revolution, 1630-1660* (2003), dedicates a whole chapter to Coppe’s “Lunatick Moode”, and demonstrates that the writer – “a star pupil at Warwick School in the early 1630s” (2003: 18) and later a student at All Souls and Merton Colleges in Oxford – was fully in command of his advanced humanist education when he started his writing activity in 1649. Throughout chapter four, McDowell explores the ways in which Coppe exploited his sophisticated educational training in order to parody hegemonic discourses and to reject their epistemological value, paradoxically subverting “the basis of the charge of ignorance by rejecting the relevance of formal education to religious knowledge” (2003: 110).¹⁶ Thus, Coppe’s ‘conspiracy’ against power also manifests itself in his attacks to the literary aspects of social control. Noam Flinker in “The Poetics of Biblical Prophecy” investigates the ways in which Coppe made use of Hebrew orthography and of Judaic materials in *Some Sweet Sips of Some Spirituall Wine* (1649a), and highlights the lyrical quality of his prose, “based to a large extent on references to biblical texts that function as lyric in the Hebrew Bible” (2011: 117).

Judging from his words in the Rolls and elsewhere, Coppe himself was very much committed to his writing. In the *Second Roule* he exalts his own literary mission by remarking that “The Word of the Lord came expressly to me, saying, write, write, write” (1649c: 36). After all, if we are so much acquainted with the theological and philosophical debate of the English Revolution – as well as with the more and less sensationalist propaganda which developed around religious radicals – it is because revolutionary prophets fully understood the importance and the expediency of relying on the printed word. We have already hinted at the restless publishing activity of the early Quakers, even though they were, in the main, much less intellectually trained than ‘university wits’ like Abiezer Coppe. Even when the deliverer of the message was illiterate, or unable to write because fallen into a trance, there were amanuenses ready to take down the prophet’s words as soon as they were uttered in order to ensure their publication; at any rate, these are the kind of stories that the texts themselves tell us in their prefaces or in the addresses to the reader.¹⁷ Undoubtedly, these people were also conscious of the fact that entrusting one’s prophetic message to the printed page meant risking

¹⁵ See Hessayon, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, “Abiezer Coppe”.

¹⁶ See for instance McDowell’s analysis of Coppe’s parody of Lily’s Grammar in both the language and the typographical design of *Some Sweet Sips, of Some Spirituall Wine* (1649a). The Latin *Regia grammatica*, composed by William Lily and John Colet in the early sixteenth century, was still the officially authorised Latin grammar in use when Coppe was a pupil at Warwick (see McDowell 2003: 100ff.).

¹⁷ It is often impossible to tell whether the text is the faithful transcription of a prophecy or whether it was (totally or partially) made up to convince the believers of the authenticity of God’s message. The well-known long prophetic vision delivered by the Fifth Monarchist Anna Trapnel in a state of trance was written down by a scribe: *The Cry of a Stone, Or a Relation of Something Spoken in Whitehall, by Anna Trapnel, Being in the Visions of God*, [...], London, 1654. See also a less cited (although not less problematic) text published in the same year: Elinor Channel’s *A Message from God, [By a Dumb Woman] To his Highness the Lord Protector. Together with A Word of Advice to the Commons of England and Wales, for the Electing of a Parliament. By Elinor Channel. Published according to her desire, by ARISE EVANS*, 1654.

one's life, not only at the moment of its oral delivery, as happens in spoken prophecies, but also in an indefinite future time, because a signed pamphlet or treatise can be tracked down, or occasionally discovered, even months after its publication. Unorthodox writers were never safe in revolutionary England, because their printed material could betray their literary activity and turn it from a divine prophecy into a vicious conspiracy against God and the State.

Fully conscious of both the disruptive power and the intrinsic frailty of his *Fiery Flying Roll[s]*, Coppe had voiced a prophetic invective against those who would dare to destroy his papers:

Wherefore in the Name and Power of the eternall God, I charge thee burn it not, tear it not, for if thou dost, I will tear thee to peices (saith the Lord) and none shall be able to deliver thee; for (as I live) it is the day of my vengeange. (Coppe 1649c: 36)

The incriminated pamphlets were actually seized and burnt shortly after publication, and their author temporarily silenced in prison. Yet, in the long run, if it was not the force of the prophecy to ensure their survival for the next four hundred years, it was at least the force of what proved to be the unrestrainable power of print.

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A number of texts written in Tudor and Stuart England feature sibyls, prophets, holy men and women, or soothsayers and magicians; on the other hand, conspiracy is often at the heart of early modern narratives and dramatic actions. Such themes are to be understood in their wider connotations: they can be investigated in the political, religious, social, or literary context, taking into account all literary genres. The contributors to *Prophecy and Conspiracy in Early Modern England* bring a vast array of analytical tools to this complex task, investigating the twin topics of this collection in their literary manifestations and in their linguistic aspects.

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