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## 6 Prophecy and the supernatural: Shakespeare's challenges to performativity

Yan Brailowsky

A lioness hath whelped in the streets,  
And graves have yawn'd and yielded up their dead;  
Fierce fiery warriors fight upon the clouds [...]  
And ghosts did shriek and squeal about the streets. (*Julius Caesar*, 2.2.17 –19,  
24)<sup>1</sup>

Supernatural phenomena in Shakespeare's plays are frequently embodied: they take a physical shape onstage with characters such as the Weird Sisters in *Macbeth* or Ariel in *The Tempest*, or with apparitions and ghosts, as in *Richard III*, *Hamlet* or *Julius Caesar*, or they appear through portentous signs which work like props, either through staging effects (thunder and lightning), or by oral reports, with talk of 'horrid sights seen by the watch' (*Julius Caesar*, 2.2.16) as those recounted by Calphurnia in my epigraph. Despite their uncertain origins, these supernatural elements seemingly take a material form onstage, and are given meaning by the characters and the audience alike, contributing to making the supernatural tangible.

The supernatural can also be embodied in a different manner, however, and this chapter will analyse how it can be produced through *language*, notably through prophetic utterances. Prophecies, particularly in plays with a well-known historical background, foreshadow events, helping audiences to orientate their interpretation of the characters' — often tragic — choices. In so doing, the prophecies add a teleological dimension to a play, giving it a pre-ordained purpose and meaning.<sup>2</sup> Whatever will

be, will be... Omens, divinatory practices, amphibological warnings or predictions: all seem to partake in producing the dramatic tension which fuels a play. Prophetic warnings are justified by what ensues, suggesting that prophecies have a performative function, capable of *making* things *happen*. In the words of linguist J. L. Austin, prophecies seem to be 'performative' utterances; they have both an 'illocutionary' force (characters make prophecies through speech) and a 'perlocutionary' effect (these speeches have an effect on the audience, for instance persuading them of an impending doom).<sup>3</sup>

This chapter explores the language of prophecies to understand and question early modern conceptions of the supernatural from a linguistic perspective. Can language produce supernatural effects? How is the supernatural expressed through language? Does the language of prophecy work differently from ordinary language? In what follows, I firstly consider the context of early modern theatre in which the preternatural, or supernatural, power of prophecies was highly problematic, in a context in which Church and State endeavoured to counteract prophetic practices in Elizabethan and Jacobean England in the hope of avoiding the spread of seditious rumours. The evocative power of the language of prophecy resisted these regulatory efforts, however, and even monarchs such as James I could not help but recognise the close link between prophecies and poetry. This link dated back to the figure of the poet-prophet in Antiquity, a relationship that may explain why Shakespeare's plays so frequently draw on prophecies to fuel a dramatic narrative. In the second part, I will discuss how the language of prophecy could trick audiences into *believing* in the supernatural power of prophecies, despite the fact that the language used to utter such prophecies turns out to be, paradoxically, *non* performative. Instead, to borrow a concept taken from Gilles Deleuze, I will argue in the third part that prophecies make language 'stutter', rather than actually serving to advance the plot.<sup>4</sup> As we shall see, prophecies ultimately posit a number of hypothetical futures, perennially questioning our interpretation of historical narratives and supernatural phenomena. By producing

the supernatural through language, rather than through characters or special effects, prophecies challenge our interpretations of the plays and all 'the things that we have heard and seen' (*Julius Caesar*, 2.1.15).

### **Kings and Queens, prophets and poets**

As religious reformists in England attempted to implement key Protestant ideas to purify the Church of England from Popish customs and to extirpate superstitious practices from the populace, Elizabethan and Jacobean authorities exercised a parallel effort to maintain the royal supremacy in matters of religion, prosecuting attempts at dabbling in witchcraft and unlicensed prognostications, which could sow the seeds of heresy and sedition amongst parishioners. In England, Elizabeth I had talk of prophecies closely monitored, and acts against such practices were revived in 1563, early in her reign, with *An Act against Fond and Phantastical Prophetes*, first passed under Henry VIII and Edward VI, or *An Act against Conjurations, Enchantments and Witchcrafts*, which promised to punish with one year's imprisonment all who 'advance, publish and set forth by writing, printing, signing or any other open speech or deed, to any person or persons, any fond, fantastical or false prophecy' liable to concern the monarch and trouble peace in the realm.<sup>5</sup> In Scotland, similar measures were taken, and James had another *Act against Conjuratioun* passed in 1604 shortly upon his accession to the English throne, suggesting the urgency of these matters for newly-crowned monarchs.<sup>6</sup>

Of the two English monarchs, James was no doubt the most enthralled by talk of prophecies and witchcraft, having witnessed witch trials first-hand in the early 1590s, and having penned a treatise on *Daemonologie* in 1597.<sup>7</sup> Now on the throne of England, the king went one step further: not only was he the Supreme Governor of the Church of England, and thus responsible for the spiritual well-being and orthodoxy of his people, he was actually divinely inspired. According to the official historiography, it

was James himself who discovered the Gunpowder Plot by deciphering the true import of a treasonous letter that had been intercepted by his secret police. In a sermon marking the first anniversary of the discovery of the Plot on 5 November 1606, bishop Lancelot Andrewes compared James to Joseph in *Genesis*:

But then commeth *God* againe (God most certainly) and (as in the *Prov* 16.10) puts [...], a very *divination*, a very *oracle*, in the Kings lips, and his mouth missed not the matter; made him, as *Joseph*, the revealer of secrets, to read the riddle: giving him wisdome to make both explication, what they would doe and application, where it was they would doe it. This was God certainly. This, *Pharaoh* would say, none could, unless he were *filled with the Spirit of the holy God*. It was *A domino factum*.<sup>8</sup>

That Andrewes should consider the king to be ‘filled with the Spirit of the holy God’ would have come as no surprise: in the monarch’s own estimation, James was king by divine right.<sup>9</sup> More interestingly, he was also a professed poetry enthusiast, having authored several poetic works, including a small booklet on Scottish verse, several translations of French and Latin poems, as well as a number of palindrome poems and acrostics in his *Essays of a Prentise, in the Divine art of Poesie* published in Edinburgh in 1585.<sup>10</sup> The term ‘Divine’ used in the title was to be taken literally, conflating poetry and divination, echoing what Sir Philip Sidney argued when recalling the etymology of ‘poets’ in Antiquity. Poets, Sidney noted, were the augurs and divines of yore:

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 altogether not without ground, since both the oracles of Delphos and Sibylla’s prophecies were wholly delivered in verses. For that same exquisite observing of number and measure in words, and that high flying liberty of conceit proper to the poet, did seem to have some divine force in it.

And may not I presume a little further, to shew the reasonableness of this worde *vates*, and say that the holy David’s Psalms are a divine poem? If I do, I shall not do it without the testimony of great learned men, both ancient and modern. But even the name psalms will speak for me, which being interpreted, is nothing but songs.<sup>11</sup>

The Scottish king's poetic production betrayed his interest in secret messages, buttressing claims that he was a modern-day *vates*, a poet-prophet, in the tradition of Apollo's sibyls to whom he regularly referred in his writings.<sup>12</sup>

### **Supernatural and ordinary language**

The king claimed a divinely-inspired, poetic interpretive dexterity. In the fictional world of the stage, Shakespeare was also a poet-prophet as he portrayed characters who appeal to spirits to divine their future or that of their country. The playwright's inclusion of a great number of prophecies in his plays suggests that, contrary to other public venues, the stage afforded a greater degree of liberty concerning political prophecies, otherwise viewed with suspicion by the authorities. This suggests that theatrical prophecies could have a political use, underlining either their perniciousness, or their heuristic qualities, furthering the views and myths of the prevailing regime.

In *Richard III*, for instance, the play famously begins with 'a prophecy which says that G / Of Edward's heirs the murderer shall be' (1.1.39–40), a ruse which Richard himself calls 'subtle, false, and treacherous' (37). The series of synonyms imitated the redundant style of legal jargon, while recalling the epithet applied to the snake in the Garden of Eden ('the serpent was more subtil than any beast of the field', Genesis 3:1).<sup>13</sup> Richard's use of this 'false' prophecy, with its religious and political underpinnings, prepares the audience for the scene of his supposed coronation by popular acclaim, when he appears before the assembled populace in religious garb with a 'book of prayer' (3.7.98), stressing the intimate links between Church and Crown in the period.

Despite Richard's assertion that the prophecy is 'false', the audience quickly realises that the prophecy is true, as it is Richard of Gloucester who kills Edward's children, not Edward's brother George, Duke of Clarence. Richard's prophecy in G can be tuned

to another key, revealing other 'secret' names in 'G' in the play, notably Richmond, later crowned as Henry VII, whose name is, 'rightly sounded,' *Rougemont*.<sup>14</sup> The two names are distinguished by the only two affricates used in English: /tʃ/ and /dʒ/, thus making Richmond a 'G' name by paronomasia. The aural confusion was credible as they are hardly distinguishable when pronounced by an Irishman, as Richard says it is.<sup>15</sup> For Howard Dobin, such 'misnomer prophecies rely for their polysemy on the random play of proper names.'<sup>16</sup> Shakespeare's *Richard III* thus suggests the double-edged nature of prophecies, which may be 'false', but prove true to those that utter them, as Richard is eventually defeated by a man whose name contains, in effect, the fateful letter 'G'.<sup>17</sup>

The ambiguous nature of prophecies is also illustrated by other characters in the play, notably Margaret of Anjou, whose 'curses' (act 1, scenes 3 and 4) rightly ought to be considered prophetic, although the others believe them to be the product of her incipient madness. As argued by Jessica L. Malay, in *Richard III*, prophecies turn out to be true, but the playwright 'expresses grave doubts that prophecy can actually benefit those to whom it pertains [...] Shakespeare plainly sees prophecy as more likely to mislead and cause harm', a point shared by other early modern writers critical of prophetic practices.<sup>18</sup>

The ambivalent, yet prescient manner in which prophecies are used in *Richard III*, which portrays the last episode of the Wars of the Roses, is echoed by a host of other examples in the tetralogies, depicting earlier episodes of these wars. In *Richard II*, for example, written after *Richard III* but depicting the *beginning* of the feud between the houses of York and Lancaster, the Bishop of Carlisle promises fire and brimstone to all those who participate in the downfall of the legitimate monarch. This betrayal, he warns, will ignite a civil war, depicted in the other plays of the tetralogies:

And if you crown him [Henry Bolingbroke], let me prophesy,

The blood of English shall manure the ground,  
And future ages groan for this foul act.  
Peace shall go sleep with Turks and infidels [...]  
Prevent it, resist it, let it not be so,  
Lest child, child's children, cry against you 'woe!' (4.1.136–9, 148–9)

Similar prophecies are uttered in the *Henry VI* plays performed in the early 1590s, and Margaret's curses partake in this eschatological vision of history, one that critics have often interpreted as contributing to the so-called 'Tudor myth', glorifying the Elizabethan regime by depicting events leading up to the victory of her illustrious grand-father over Richard III, putting an end to the Wars of the Roses.<sup>19</sup> According to this reading, the prophecies included in Shakespeare's historical plays are 'efficacious' in the religious sense (as when one speaks of 'efficacious grace' which grants the faithful eternal salvation). The characters' prophecies are true — or become so in due time — betraying a supposed divine plan that oversaw the crowning of Elizabeth and a Golden Age for England with half a century of peace and prosperity.

A closer analysis of the wording of some of these prophecies suggests that they are far more fragile than one might believe, however. Carlisle's speech quoted earlier, for instance, is not meant to predict the future, as the bishop speaks in hypotheticals: 'if you crown him...'. As he himself suggests, his 'prophecy' is not destined to divine the future but to 'Prevent it, [to] resist it'. The prophecy, in other words, is not meant to be efficacious. The term can be taken in its theological sense as well as in its linguistic sense in terms of performative utterance. From a pragmatist perspective, the bishop's statement sounds like a warning ('the blood *shall* manure the ground ... Peace *shall* go sleep with Turks'), which endows his speech with a strong perlocutionary effect, as he threatens his listeners with civil war. From a different perspective, however, his speech may be considered as *non* performative. As J.L. Austin argues, a performative utterance is 'felicitous' when certain 'conditions' are met.<sup>20</sup> If audiences did not recognise the bishop of Carlisle's religious stature, his apocalyptic prophecy would be



seen as fraudulent and infelicitous. Given that audiences know how English history unfolded and can recognise the messianic nature of the bishop's speech (entitled as a man of God to speak in religiously-charged terms), Carlisle's prophecy may well appear to be a performative utterance. However, its conditional formulation ('if you crown him') can mark the speech as *unperformative* in Austinian terms, in the same manner as a change of tense makes a warning necessarily infelicitous ('I prophesied' or 'I warned them' are not performative utterances; neither are they promises).<sup>21</sup> In this case, Carlisle's utterance is not meant to immediately 'do' something 'with words' (unlike when a minister declares 'I now proclaim you husband and wife' in a church wedding). Even examples of conjuration of spirits, such as those found in Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* and analysed by Andrew Sofer, at least *seem* to provoke the appearance of devils, although the play 'probes the uncertain boundary between hollow performance and magical performativity.'<sup>22</sup> In *Richard II*, however, virtually *nothing* occurs immediately as a consequence of the bishop of Carlisle's speech; the other characters may not even feel threatened by his words, which can therefore be void of perlocutionary power. If anything, his warning will eventually prove true... in *other* plays from the tetralogies.<sup>23</sup>

The distinction between a prophecy and the moment of its accomplishment is of the essence, a point noted by Francis Bacon in *The Advancement of Learning*:

History of Prophecy, consisteth of two relatives, the prophecy and the accomplishment; [...] being of the nature of their author [God], with whom a thousand years are but as one day; and therefore are not fulfilled punctually at once, but have springing and germinant accomplishment throughout many ages, though the height or fulness of them may refer to some one age.<sup>24</sup>

According to this reasoning, which distinguishes prophecies and their 'germinant accomplishments,' one could argue that some Shakespearean prophecies survived the Elizabethan era in which they were written, becoming true post facto, as when one

suggests that the late tragedies of the *sixteenth* century may have announced the tribulations of the Civil War in the *seventeenth* century — an argument made by Richard Wilson in an analysis of *Julius Caesar*.<sup>25</sup> The same reasoning also highlights the cultural and historical difficulties in analysing speech acts from previous eras, as argued by Dawn Archer and others, for whom defining context is key to ‘capture participants’ mental representations’.<sup>26</sup> Trying to understand how the language of prophecies works in early modern plays thus rests on a number of interpretive and linguistic assumptions, although we could also argue that an interpretation of Shakespeare’s language from a contemporary perspective is also valid, as the plays are still being successfully performed today.

Unlike the example quoted earlier from *Richard II*, which uses a conditional form, other prophecies in the tetralogies can appear to have a more straightforward performative wording, but they too can be equally infelicitous — proof that so-called prophecies do not have, *ipso facto*, performative qualities, even if the playwright’s resort to ambiguity and supernatural powers makes the prophecies *seem* to be effective. Unlike a king such as James, who claimed he was God’s representative on earth, possessing God’s prophetic gifts, and whose word was law — ‘such is the breath of kings’, marvelled Bolingbroke (*Richard II*, 1.3.215) — several characters in Shakespeare’s plays, such as Eleanor, Suffolk, Somerset and Macbeth, had no such direct link to God, depending on the words of Satan to further their ambitions, generally to ill effect.

In *2 Henry VI*, for instance, Eleanor is said to have ordered a witch, Margery Jordan, along with Roger Bolingbrook, a conjurer, to divine the future of the realm. A priest, Hume, begins the conjuration scene by implicating her and promising a performative utterance, one capable of actually raising a Spirit through words: ‘Come, my masters, the Duchess [Eleanor, Duchess of Gloucester], I tell you expects *performance* of your promises’ (1.4.1–2, emphasis added). The conjuration scene is discovered moments later by the Duke of York, however, who proceeds to read aloud the prophecy uttered by the conjured Spirit, allowing the audience a second chance to reflect on the meaning

of the supposed prophecy, and affording York an opportunity to point out its ambiguous structure:

[YORK.] Now pray, my lord, let's see the devil's writ.

What have we here? (*Reads.*)

"The duke yet lives that Henry shall depose;

But him out-live, and die a violent death."

Why, this is just

"*Aio te, Aecida, Romanos vincere posse.*" (1.4.57–62)

York's comment on the 'devil's writ' is a Latin quotation that refers to a famous prophecy quoted by Cicero, who recalled that the Oracle of Delphi promised Pyrrhus that he would vanquish Rome... or that Rome would vanquish him — an amphibological structure which spelled Pyrrhus' eventual demise after a few promising victories.

The ambiguous structure of the Pythia's Apollonian prophecy is an interpretive key that allows audiences to realise the ambivalent nature of prophecies as a whole, and the troubled minds of the characters who rely on them — Satan works through devious means.<sup>27</sup> By eschewing divine Providence and listening to the ambiguous words of the Devil in the hope of quickly reaching their goals, characters such as Eleanor unknowingly fall prey to doubt and despair which, in turn, ultimately precipitates their downfall.

To illustrate this point, it is instructive to compare speeches from two plays which contain several ominous prophecies: *Julius Caesar* and *Macbeth*. While the Soothsayer's prophecies in the Roman tragedy are fairly straightforward and repeated (notably with his warning: 'Beware the ides of March', 1.1.18, 23), other visions are not so clear-cut, such as the extraordinary natural phenomena observed by Casca in Act 1, scene 3, or Calphurnia's dream, which is interpreted as either threatening or hopeful in Act 2,

scene 2. In the Scottish play, the prophecies are all uttered by decidedly strange characters, the Weird Sisters, who systematically speak in memorable riddles, a fact compounded by their use of trochaic tetrameters, which could be deemed a prosodic sign of the supernatural.<sup>28</sup>

Both plays highlight the problematic nature of interpretation, the difficulty in performing bloody deeds, and consequently, the difficulty in making prophecies come true. This is suggested by the manner in which Brutus and Macbeth share similar misgivings before deciding to commit cataclysmic murders. The speeches could almost be interchangeable:

BRUTUS. Between the acting of a dreadful thing,  
And the first motion, all the interim is  
Like a phantasma or a hideous dream.  
The Genius and the mortal instruments  
Are then in council, and the state of a man,  
Like to a little kingdom, suffers then  
The nature of an insurrection. (*Julius Caesar*, 2.1.63–9)

MACBETH. Present fears  
Are less than horrible imaginings:  
My thought, whose murther yet is but fantastical,  
Shakes so my single state of man that function  
Is smother'd in surmise, and nothing is  
But what is not. (*Macbeth*, 1.3.137–42)

In addition to expressing the same doubts about the route they are to embark on, the two characters have a common destiny: they murder their ruler by treacherous means; their victims come back to haunt them; and they both perish without reaching their avowed goal — preserving the Republic for one, planting a new dynasty on the Scottish throne for the other.

What distinguishes the speeches is their rhetorical and theological underpinnings. Whereas Brutus develops a political metaphor, Macbeth concludes his existential disquisitions with an antithesis ('nothing is but what is not') that betrays the amphibological basis of his doubts — an antithesis which echoes the Weird Sisters' words moments earlier, 'Fair is foul, and foul is fair' (1.1.11), or his own reformulation, 'So foul and fair a day I have not seen' (1.3.38). Although both Brutus and Macbeth speak of the 'state of [a] man', Macbeth speaks of 'my *single* state of man', inscribing his doubts in a more Christian perspective, as his expression can recall several passages from the Gospels in which duplicity and honesty are discussed, notably in Matthew 6:22 and Luke 11:34.<sup>29</sup> While both characters apparently use the same lexical field of dreams ('phantasma [...] hideous dream', or 'horrible imaginings [...] [thought] fantastical'), it is only Macbeth's speech which contains the seeds of Satan, whose name in Hebrew means the Adversary, the Accuser, or the Enemy, symbolising the existential contradiction Macbeth suffers from. Thus, when Macbeth reflects on '[his] single state of man', he betrays his willingness to serve Satan, rather than God, a choice between the 'two truths' (1.3.128) he spoke of moments earlier. In choosing Mammon, he reveals the demonic nature of his treachery. In contrast, Brutus' betrayal partakes in a political choice that excludes the individual's personal wishes.

Thus, although Brutus is as doubt-ridden as Macbeth, his objective is unwavering: defending the Republic. What occurs *after* his death is of no concern to the Roman warrior, unlike Macbeth who becomes obsessed with his lack of progeny — an obsession that pushes him to commit monstrous acts, which will, in turn, precipitate his downfall. If, according to Young Siwain, Macbeth is the Devil incarnate, it is because Macbeth has become his own worst enemy, an instrument of his own end.

In this demonic context, Macbeth's obsession for an enemy 'none of woman born' (4.1.80), following the witches' prophecy describing his Nemesis, unravels into a Messianic parable or, rather, a story prefiguring the Antichrist, as Macbeth refuses to believe in the performative nature of divine language capable of breathing life through

speech ('the Word was made flesh', John 1:14). According to the Gospels, the faithful or 'sons of God' are 'born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God' (John 1:13). In this context, Macduff, 'not born of woman' (5.7.3) because he 'was from his mother's womb / Untimely ripp'd' (5.8.15-6), may be the prime example of the true believer, the Saviour come to rid Scotland of tyrannous Macbeth, 'this fiend of Scotland' (4.3.233).<sup>30</sup> If Macduff is the Saviour, Macbeth is akin to the Antichrist. The latter's refusal to believe that Macduff was 'not of woman born' turns the tyrant into a representative of the Devil, 'For many deceivers are entered into the world, who confess not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist' (2 John 7). In other words, by refusing to believe in the possibility of a 'miraculous' birth, Macbeth refuses to believe in the miracle of Christ. Instead, Macbeth prefers to believe in the power of spirits, whose language has been shown to be ambiguous, as well as in ghostly apparitions, whose meaning is equally unclear. Knowing his soul to be devoted to 'the common enemy of man' (3.1.68), i.e. Satan, Macbeth takes fate to task, ultimately betraying his tragic *hubris* when he promises to embrace his fate: 'come, fate, into the list / And champion me to th' utterance!' (3.1.70–1). Alas, this battle to the bitter end, 'to th' utterance', which echoes the French origin of 'utterance' as '*à outrance*' (i.e. outrageously), is not only a duel, it is also a battle of words, of outrageous *utterance*.

### **Prophetic 'utterances' and the 'stuttering' of language**

The term used by Macbeth recalls a line by Mark Antony in *Julius Caesar* as he bemoans the death of Caesar whose body lies at his feet. Mark Antony calls on the gods 'To beg the voice and utterance of my tongue' (3.1.261) in order to 'prophesy' to the bitter end, announcing his intent to seek 'revenge' against Caesar's murderers: 'Over thy wounds now do I prophesy [...] / A curse shall light upon the limbs of men [...] / And Caesar's spirit, ranging for revenge, [...] / [Shall] Cry "Havoc!" and let slip the dogs of war' (3.1.259, 262, 270, 273).

Macbeth does not address the gods. Instead, he lurches into a battle that he cannot win without divine assistance. The 'list' he 'champion[s] to th' utterance' is both an armed battle and a verbal joust. Contrary to the Apostles, to whom 'the Spirit [gave] utterance' (Acts 2:4) on the day of the Pentecost, Macbeth cannot properly decipher the Weird Sisters' prophecies. Lacking divine inspiration from the Holy Ghost, which would have enabled him to speak another language, that of the spirits, Macbeth is bound to lose despite a promising start, not unlike Pyrrhus. After losing the verbal joust, he will succumb in the armed duel.

The antithesis of Macbeth, James I, performed the opposite: inspired by the Holy Ghost, the king successfully deciphered the letters of the Gunpowder plotters, vanquishing the most diabolical plot of his enemies — without even needing to take up arms. The example of the spirits in Macbeth point to the theological issues posed by divine 'possession', such as when the Apostles spoke in tongues on the Pentecost. Unlike the language of divine inspiration, the language of demonic spirits rests on equivocation, where appearances and apparitions are deceitful, uttering words which are false or half-truths, contradicting one of Austin's conditions for a 'felicitous' utterance (i.e. to believe in what one is saying). Supernatural beings such as demons act on language in a manner that voids univocal meaning, in the same manner as dramatic prophecies do in these plays.

One could thus reinterpret Mark Antony's promise 'To beg the voice and utterance of my tongue' as a promise to make language stutter, a notion first developed by Gilles Deleuze in *Critique et clinique* (1993). Deleuze also spoke of 'inclusive' or 'included disjunctions', i.e. moments when more than one meaning is possible, mapping out a range of possible, yet conflicting, interpretations in literature which makes language stutter. Arguably, such disjunctions are characteristic of prophecies and, more generally, divinatory practices: disjunctions can be temporal, as prophecies become true after a period of latency; they can also be spatial, as there are unstable, prophetic spaces; lastly, they can be verbal, as disjunctions affect language. For Deleuze,

As long as language is considered as a system in equilibrium, the disjunctions are necessarily exclusive (we do not say “passion,” “ration,” “nation” at the same time, but must choose between them), and the connections, progressive (we do not combine a word with its own elements, in a kind of stop-start or forward-backward jerk). But far from the equilibrium, *the disjunctions become included or inclusive, and the connections, reflexive*, following a rolling gait that concerns the process of language and no longer the flow of speech.<sup>31</sup>

The conjunction *if*, which serves as a linguistic marker of the type of ‘inclusive disjunction’ Deleuze is discussing, famously served as a motto decorating the temple of Apollo in Delphos. In Plutarch’s *On the E in Delphi* (c 1 BCE), the Greek letter *E* could refer to Apollo (the deity is synonymous with permanence: ‘you are’), or to the conditional, as well as to the dialectical or logical. In Plutarch’s dialogue, Theon thus recalls that dialectics is the Apollonian art par excellence: ‘when the god gives out ambiguous oracles, he is promoting and organizing logical reasoning as indispensable for those who are to apprehend his meaning aright.’<sup>32</sup> Thanks to logic promoted by Apollo, men can divine what links objects between them, deriving causal links where there used to be only incomprehensible correlations. The dialogue goes on to say that logical reasoning will allow men to prophesy: ‘What now is, and in future shall be, and has been of aforesaid.’<sup>33</sup> This quotation, which Plutarch takes from Homer’s *Illiad* (I.70), comes moments before Agamemnon rails against Calchas, the prophet. Calchas had divined what was needed to appease the ire of Apollo, much to the king’s chagrin — kings rarely appreciate the recommendations of their prophets. The story is well-known: forced to separate from his captive, Chryseis, Agamemnon takes Briseis, Achilles’ captive, for himself, thus provoking his fellow warrior’s anger.

One may well wonder what would have happened with the Greek army had Agamemnon refused to follow Calchas’ advice. After all, the Homeric epic provides ample examples of the gods’ anger subsiding, and patience often helps to triumph over ‘ambiguous oracles’ by the power of a ‘revelation’. In Shakespeare’s theatre, such



'revelations' are generally reserved for prophets, augurs and Apollo's priests, the divinely-inspired sick and dying, or to certain exiled characters — in short, to a series of marginal (or marginalised) characters whose prophecies make language stutter 'to th' utterance'. The language stutters with prophecies because the sibylline dictums survive throughout the ages: they are rediscovered, given new currency; their meaning is revived. They are, in the words of Bacon, 'germinant accomplishments'.

The underlying question is whether prophetic language in Shakespeare's plays is somehow *supra naturam*, 'above nature' or 'extra-ordinary', a uniqueness and difference that may even mimic the extra-mural location of Elizabethan theatre.<sup>34</sup> How else should one understand the link between the two roots of the word 'utterance'? One refers to a verbal statement, in the sense put forward by ordinary language philosophy; the other refers to quite the opposite, to that which is outrageous, excessive, what in French is (still) called *outrance*.

How, then, could one describe prophetic utterances, as opposed to a regular statement? In his introduction to *Speech Acts*, John R. Searle opposed meaningful and meaningless speeches:

What is the difference between a meaningful string of words and a meaningless one? What is it for something to be true? or false? [...] in some form or other some such questions must make sense; for we do know that people communicate, [...] that people's utterances do relate to the world in ways we can describe by characterizing the utterances as being true or false or meaningless, stupid, exaggerated or what-not. And if these things do happen it follows that it is possible for them to happen, and if it is possible for them to happen it ought to be possible to pose and answer the questions which examine that possibility.<sup>35</sup>

Searle took after J. L. Austin's work when he reflected on how 'things... happen'. In the context of prophetic utterances, Searle's remarks could be reformulated as follows: if events occur, must they *necessarily* occur? When does an 'ordinary' statement become 'prophetic'? What is a *real* prophecy? Or what does it mean for a prophecy to

be *false*? In Deleuze's analysis, the French philosopher implicitly refers to Austin when he wonders what a writer can 'do' or '[say] without doing', before offering 'a third possibility: *when saying is doing*.'<sup>36</sup> If making language stutter corresponds to this third option, which in Austinian terms recalls the notion of 'illocution', one could believe that prophetic utterances are performative only insofar as prophetic words *do* things by circuitous routes.

This is what seems to occur in *Julius Caesar*. The Soothsayer's warning to 'beware the ides of March' works through the stuttering of language with the use of paronomasia. As I argued elsewhere, the warning may be interpreted as alluding to sides, tides or tidings, as well as Mars (Caesar's tutelary god).<sup>37</sup> As suggested earlier, the same process occurs with the 'G' prophecy in *Richard III*, where the phoneme reappears in several guises, or in *2 Henry VI* and *Macbeth*, in which the prophecies are repeated as if the characters were stammering, as when Macbeth meets every foe in his last scene by recalling that he cannot be vanquished 'by man that's of a woman born' (5.7.14; echoed 5.7.3-4, 5.8.12-3). The fact that these prophecies are structured amphibologically further contributes to this stuttering effect, interrupting the flow of meaning, if not of sound. This also explains why characters stop at the first acceptance of prophecies uttered by supernatural spirits, just as when a stutterer is at pains to go beyond the first syllables of a word. In the words of Macbeth, the demonic language of prophecy is like haggling, and tug of war of promises and deception: 'And be these juggling fiends no more believ'd, / That palter with us in a double sense, / That keep the word of promise to our ear, / And break it to our hope.' (5.8.19-22)

In these plays, prophetic language may *appear* to be performative, as when the Soothsayer's and the Bishop of Carlisle's warnings in *Julius Caesar* or *Richard II* go unheeded, only to be proven right, like latter-day Cassandras. However, as I have tried to argue, a closer analysis shows that these prophecies are *not* models of performative utterances. Establishing a correlation between an utterance and its 'realisation' does not suffice to determine a *causal link*, particularly when cause is not *immediately*

followed by effect. For performative utterances, as well as for prophecies, *temporality* is of the essence, but with opposing requirements — realisation must be proximate in the first instance, and remote in the second.

Rather than playing a performative role, I would argue that prophecies in these plays serve as lessons in interpretation.<sup>38</sup> Saying that one will prophesy invites the audience to reflect on what it means to write history and consequently to think about a different past, or a different future. The linguistic marker of such reflections falls on the conjunction *if*, one which is closely linked to the history of prophecy in the Apollonian tradition. In the comedies, to quote Touchstone, ‘Your If is the only peacemaker; much virtue in If’ (*As You Like It*, 5.4.102–3). In the tragedies and the histories, the conjunction serves the opposite purpose, as the Bishop of Carlisle uses *if* to prophesy the Wars of the Roses (*‘If you crown him... let me prophesy...’*). This conditional use is also an invitation for the *audience* to prophesy as well, that is, to think about what *could* have been, or what *could* be — what *if* Bolingbroke had relented, what *if* Henry VIII had not broken with Rome, what *if* Elizabeth were to be toppled, what *if* the Armada had managed to invade England or Jesuits succeeded in blowing up Parliament? The lack of definitive answer to these questions subtly produces the required anxiety among the audience to make prophecies *dramatically* efficacious onstage, if not actually *performative*. If anything, they become performative because they are afterwards rehearsed by the audience, who can recall the prophecy’s message and connect the dots.<sup>39</sup> Hence, while Shakespeare’s prophecies are paradoxically non-performative on stage because they are never properly presented, nor even perhaps acknowledged as such, they become efficacious *offstage* and assert the powers of the poet-*Vates* to fashion history. In this sense, one can assert that Shakespeare succeeded, as a Poet-Prophet, to produce the supernatural through language.

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## Notes

- 1 All quotations from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, George Blakemore Evans (ed), (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2nd edn, 1997). The author thanks Urszula Kizelbach for her helpful suggestions, along with those from anonymous reviewers.
- 2 Marjorie Garber, “‘What’s Past Is Prologue’”: Temporality and Prophecy in Shakespeare’s History Plays’, in Barbara Kiefer Lewalski (ed), *Renaissance Genres: Essays on Theory, History, and Interpretation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp. 301–31.
- 3 John L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962).
- 4 Gilles Deleuze, *Critique et Clinique* (Paris: Minuit, 1993). In English: “He Stuttered”, *Gilles Deleuze, Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (London and New York: Verso, 1998), pp. 107–14. The French philosopher spoke of “bégaiement de la langue” in his analysis of the style of three Russian writers: Biely, Mandelstam and Khlebnikov.
- 5 These acts posit the particular notion that words themselves, rather than acts, could constitute treason, which flew in the face of customary legal thought. This said, this new definition of treason was rarely, if ever, used by government authorities. See Jonathan K. van Patten, ‘Magic, Prophecy, and the Law of Treason in Reformation England’, *The American Journal of Legal History*, 27:1 (1983), 1–32. The history of the Elizabethan 1563 legislation is described in Michael Devine, ‘Treasonous Catholic Magic and the 1563 Witchcraft Legislation: The English State’s Response to Catholic Conjuring in the Early Years of Elizabeth I’s Reign’, Marcus Harmes and Victoria Bladen (eds), *Supernatural and Secular Power in Early Modern England*, (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), pp. 67–91. Despite Elizabeth’s wary attitude regarding such practices, this did not prevent her from seeking the advice of people like John Dee. See Benjamin Woolley, *The Queen’s Conjurer: The Science and Magic of Dr. John Dee, Adviser to Queen Elizabeth I* (New York: Henry Holt, 2001).
- 6 Arguably, Elizabeth and James’ obsession was itself the direct by-product of Henry VII’s own dynastic preoccupations at the beginning of his reign, positing a structural link between dynastic politics and interest in (political) prophecies. See Tim Thornton, *Prophecy, Politics and the People in Early Modern England* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer Ltd, 2006).
- 7 James VI, *Daemonologie in Forme of a Dialogue, Diuided into Three Bookes* (Edinburgh: Printed by Robert Walde-graue printer to the Kings Majestie, 1597).
- 8 Lancelot Andrewes, *Ninety-Six Sermons*, J. P. Wilson and J. Bliss (eds) (Oxford: Library of Anglo-Catholic Theology, 1841), vol. IV, p. 217. See also Garry Wills, *Witches and Jesuits: Shakespeare’s Macbeth* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press / NYPL, 1995).

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- 9 See, for instance, James VI, *A Trew Law of Free Monarchs, or the Reciproock and Mutuall Duetie Betwixt A Free King and His Naturall Subiects* (Edinburgh: Printed by Robert Walde-graue printer to the Kings Majestie, 1598).
- 10 James VI, *The Essayes of a Prentise, in the Divine Art of Poesie* (Edinburgh: Thomas Vautrouillier, 1585).
- 11 Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry, Or the Defence of Poesy*, eds. R. W. Maslen and Geoffrey Shepherd, 3rd edn (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), pp. 83–4. On the link between poetry and prophecy, see the introductory chapter in *Poetry and Prophecy: The Beginnings of a Literary Tradition*, James L. Kugel (ed) (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990).
- 12 The opening lines of “Ane metaphorically invention of a tragedie called Phoenix” conclude thus: “From Delphos syne Apollo cum with speid, / Whose shining light by cairis will dim in deid.” James VI, *The Essayes of a Prentise*, p. 41. In another section, entitled, A Table of Some Obscure Wordis With Their Significations, efter the ordour of the Alphabet, James VI speaks of “Delphien Songs: Pomes, and verses, drawn from the Oracle of Apollo at Delphos. [...] Phœmonoe: A woman who pronounced the Oracles of Apollo” *Ibid.*, pp. 76–7.
- 13 Biblical quotations are taken from the 1611 Authorised Version.
- 14 In 2 Henry VI, Suffolk says to his Nemesis, Walter Whitmore, ‘Thy name is Gualtier, being rightly sounded’ (4.1.37).
- 15 Henry’s name may also have recalled the red (*rouge*) castle of Exeter from whence he came. For an analysis of the ‘G’ prophecy in the play, see my paper: “‘What’s in a name?’ The “G” prophecy and the Voice of God in Shakespeare’s Richard III’, Line Cottagnies and others (eds), *Les Voix de Dieu: Littérature et prophétie en Angleterre et en France à l’âge baroque* (Paris: Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2008), pp. 35–46.
- 16 Howard Dobin, *Merlin’s Disciples: Prophecy, Poetry, and Power in Renaissance England* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), p. 166. Dobin approaches the issue of prophecies from a post-structuralist perspective, arguing that they reveal ‘texts as products of human, conventional systems of meaning rather than of God’s absolute truth.’
- 17 From a historical perspective, political prophecies related to the early Tudor reigns could actually use to exculpate Richard, as suggested by Lesley Coote and Tim Thornton, ‘Richard, Son of Richard: Richard III and Political Prophecy’, *Historical Research*, 73:182 (2000), 321–30. For a contextual analysis on early Tudor prophecy, see Sharon L. Jansen, *Political Protest and Prophecy Under Henry VIII* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1991).
- 18 Jessica L. Malay, ‘Shakespeare’s Tudor Sibyl: Sibylline Discourse in the Portrayal of Queen Margaret in Richard III’, in *Représentations et identités sexuelles dans le théâtre de Shakespeare* :

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*Mises en scène du genre, écritures de l'histoire*, ed. by Delphine Lemonnier-Textier (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2010), p. 73. On sibyls in early modern drama, and Shakespeare's disdain for what he believed were 'true' yet 'demonic' and dangerous prognostications, see Jessica L. Malay, *Prophecy and Sibylline Imagery in the Renaissance: Shakespeare's Sibyls* (London: Routledge, 2010).

19 E. M. W. Tillyard, *Shakespeare's History Plays* (Chatto & Windus, 1944). A different version of the myth was later proposed by Henry Ansgar Kelly, *Divine Providence in the England of Shakespeare's Histories* (Eugene, Or.: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1970). For a critique of these readings, see Phyllis Rackin, *Stages of History: Shakespeare's English Chronicles* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), in particular pp. 40–45.

20 Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, pp. 14–15, for instance. I disagree with Austin's argument that theatre cannot provide 'real' performative utterances because they are 'in a peculiar way hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem, or spoken in soliloquy. [...] Language in such circumstances is in special ways — intelligibly — used not seriously, but in ways parasitic upon its normal use — ways which fall under the doctrine of the etiolations of language. All this we are excluding from consideration.' Austin, p. 22. This argument has been cogently dismissed by critics who have pointed out that Austin's example of a marriage ceremony can well be termed theatrical. 'Marriage is "like a play" to the extent that it is like modern realistic theater, a theater whose conventional "relations of visibility and spectatorship," as Brecht long ago recognized, mask the ideological labor behind its claims to versimilar representation.' W. B. Worthen, 'Drama, Performativity, and Performance', *PMLA*, 113:5 (1998), 1097. John Searle, in *Expression and Meaning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), also challenged Austin's taxonomy and presented his own, more flexible, taxonomy of illocutionary acts which can be used to analyse dramatic dialogue, as has been done by Shakespearean scholars such as Manfred Pfister and Keir Elam.

21 Austin, *How To Do Things With Words*, pp. 63, 98.

22 Andrew Sofer, 'How to Do Things with Demons: Conjuring Performatives in Doctor Faustus', *Theatre Journal*, 61.1 (2009), p. 20. See also Eric Byville, 'How to Do Witchcraft Tragedy with Speech Acts', *Comparative Drama*, 45:2 (2011), 1–33.

23 The issue of temporality may also serve to highlight the cultural and historical difficulties in analysing speech acts from previous eras. See Dawn Archer, 'Speech Acts', Andreas H. Jucker and Irma Taavitsainen (eds), *Historical Pragmatics*, (Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton, 2010), pp. 379–417.

24 Francis Bacon, *The Major Works*, ed. Brian Vickers, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 184–5.

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- 25 Richard Wilson, 'A Savage Spectacle: Julius Caesar and the English Revolution', François Laroque and Franck Lessay (eds), *Histoire et secret à la Renaissance: Études sur la représentation de la vie publique, la mémoire et l'intimité dans l'Angleterre et l'Europe des XVIe et XVIIe siècles* (Paris: Presses de la Sorbonne Nouvelle, 1997), pp. 41–55.
- 26 See Dawn Archer, 'Speech Acts', Andreas H. Jucker and Irma Taavitsainen (eds), *Historical Pragmatics*, (Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton, 2010), p. 405; Jonathan Culpeper and Dawn Archer, 'Requests and directness in Early Modern English trial proceedings and play texts, 1640-1760', *Speech Acts in the History of English*, Andreas H. Jucker and Irma Taavitsainen (eds) (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2008), pp. 45-85.
- 27 On the notion that prophecies were intrinsically corrupt and proof of Satan's use of "perverted syllogisms", see Armando Maggi, *Satan's Rhetoric: A Study of Renaissance Demonology* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2001). On prophecies and amphibology in Shakespeare, see my paper: 'Amphibologie et parole jésuitique à la Renaissance: entre poétique et politique', *Bulletin de la Société de Stylistique Anglaise*, 27 (2006), 11–26.
- 28 The prosodic sign of the supernatural could also be the seven-syllable lines. See Robert Stagg, 'Shakespeare's bewitching line', Peter Holland (ed), *Shakespeare Survey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), volume 71, pp. 232–241.
- 29 'The light of the body is the eye: if therefore thine eye be *single*, thy whole body shall be full of light. / But if thine eye be evil, thy whole body shall be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is that darkness! / No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and Mammon.' Matthew 6:22–4, emphasis mine. See also: 'The light of the body is the eye: therefore when thine eye is *single*, thy whole body also is full of light; but when thine eye is evil, thy body also is full of darkness.' Luke 11:34, emphasis mine.
- 30 Macbeth's order for the massacre of Macduff's wife and children is thus aptly turned into a Scottish equivalent of Herod's Massacre of the Innocents.
- 31 Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, p. 110.
- 32 Plutarch, *Moralia*, trans. Frank Cole Babbitt (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1936), vol. V, p. 212.
- 33 *Ibid.*, p. 213.
- 34 Steven Mullaney, *The Place of the Stage: License, Play, and Power in Renaissance England* (Ann Arbor / Chicago: University of Michigan Press / University of Chicago Press, 1995).
- 35 John R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), p. 3.



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36 Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, p. 107. Emphasis in the original.

37 Ides may evoke the bruised or bloodied sides of dogs in bear-bating (to which Caesar's dead body is compared), or it may recall the ominous tides or tidings that abound throughout the play; whereas March may evoke Caesar's tutelary god, Mars, which the general both honored and desecrated during Lupercalia a month earlier, when the feast meant to honor the god of war was interrupted by Mark Antony's attempt to crown Caesar thrice (that is, by repetition, as if it were a stuttering gesture); finally, beware may announce the upcoming civil war by sundering in half the word to produce be war. Yan Brailowsky, 'Du détournement au délire interprétatif: les figures de l'excès dans Julius Caesar de Shakespeare', *Actes des congrès de la Société française Shakespeare*, 25 (2007), 3–23.

38 Yan Brailowsky, 'Let me prophesy': Apocalypse et inspiration prophétique dans Richard II de Shakespeare', Michel Naumann and Dominique Daniel (eds), *L'Autre: Journée d'étude sur les auteurs et sujets des concours 2006*, GRAAT (Tours: Presses universitaires François-Rabelais, 2017), pp. 81–99.

39 The participation of an audience is a key element to make an utterance performative in the Austinian sense, as something that is 'spoken in soliloquy' does not succeed in become performative: it requires an audience. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words*, p. 18.

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